

THE THIRD DYNASTY : A CHRONOLOGICAL HYPOTHESIS

Ilaria Incordino

The aim of this paper is to expound the research results on the royal funerary monuments of the IIIrd dynasty, trying to recognize a possible chronological sequence of kings, for a better understanding of this period.

Studies on the third dynasty

In the past the third dynasty has been investigated not always in all its aspects by the scholars, who have often given only one direction to the research, for example studying only one monument or aspect of the dynasty evolution, especially the architectural one. Less frequently this period has been considered as an “unicum”, as, for example, in the case of the Egyptian archeologist Swelim, who has developed for the first time a systematical research on this field, with the publication “Some problems on the history of the third dynasty” (1983). His analysis has involved the problem of the historical sources, the chronologies proposed in the past, giving also his hypothesis of nine kings for 138 years of reign. Swelim has also studied some monuments that can be ascribed to the third dynasty, and till now are not yet dated (as the enclosures of Saqqara¹ and Hierakonpolis², the Brick Pyramid of Abu Rawash³, the north pyramid of Zawiyet el-Aryan⁴ and the seven small provincial pyramids⁵).

Also the work of Michael Baud is to be mentioned, “Djoser et la III^{eme} dinastie” (2002), in which the author includes all the studies till now carried out, the description of the three main monuments, and suggests a chronology of five kings for 50-60 years of reign, following the traditional interpretation. It is worth noticing also the work of Toby Wilkinson, “Early dynastic Egypt” (1999) that, even with the same conclusion of Baud, is more convincing. I would like to remember also two archaeological missions that have recently worked at Saqqara: the National Museum of Scotland Saqqara Survey Project, conducted by Ian Mathieson, who since the 1990 has analyzed the Gisir el-Moudir enclosure, dated not later than the fourth dynasty for the pottery founded in it, and although the lack of any construction inside the enclosure has been confirmed, it can be related to the architectural

¹ There are two enclosures at Saqqara: the so-called Ptah-hotep's enclosure and the Gisir el-Moudir. For the former see N. Swelim, “Some remarks on the Great Rectangular Monuments of Middle Saqqara”, *MDAIK* 47 (1991), pp. 389-402. For the latter see I. Mathieson and A. Tavares, “Preliminary report of the National Museums of Scotland Saqqara Survey Project”, *JEA* 79 (1993), pp.17-31.

² J.E. Quibell and F.W. Green, *Hierakonpolis II*, London, 1989, pp. 19-20; B.J. Kemp, “Excavations at Hierakonpolis fort, 1905: a preliminary note”, *JEA* 49 (1963), pp. 24-28.

³ N. Swelim, *The Brick Pyramid at Abu Rawash number “I” by Lepsius. A preliminary study*, Alexandria, 1987.

⁴ V. Maragioglio and C. Rinaldi, *L'architettura delle piramidi menfite IV*, Torino, 1963; J.P. Lauer, “Sur l'age et l'attribution possible de l'excavation monumentale de Zaouiet el-Aryan”, *RdE* 14 (1962), pp. 21-36; J. Cerny, “Name of king of the unfinished pyramid at Zawiyet el-Aryan”, *MDAIK* 16 (1958), pp. 25-29.

⁵ J.P.Lauer, “Les petites pyramides a degres de la III^{eme} dynastie”, *Revue archeologique* 2 (1961), pp. 5-15 ; C. Barocas, “Regum pecuniae otiosa ac stulta ostentatio”, in: *Hommages a Francois Dumas*, Montpellier, 1986, pp. 55-64; L.H. Lesko, “Seila 1981”, *JARCE* 25 (1988), pp. 215-235.

development begun with the Abidos enclosures and finished with the Neterykhet's Complex at Saqqara. The second mission is the Polish-Egyptian Archeological Mission at West Saqqara, which since the 1987 has worked for the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology in the west area of the Neterykhet's Complex and in the Dry Moat around it, where there were found some remains of a possible private cemetery of the third dynasty previous to the Neterykhet Complex, that probably enclosed its structures, as many scholars believe⁶.

Main historical problems and a chronological hypothesis

Another essential feature of this research is the identification of the main problems concerning the third dynasty, that can be summed up as follows:

- the kings' names mentioned in the historical sources are different from those on the archaeological reports, probably because in the last ones are present the Horus names while in the sources the "*nswt bity*" ones, from the beginning of the third dynasty;
- the historical sources disagree also for the king's number and names;
- only three royal funerary monuments of the third dynasty are known (Neterykhet's Pyramid Complex at Saqqara, Sekhemkhet's Unfinished Pyramid at Saqqara and Khaba's Layer Pyramid at Zawiyet el-Aryan), while at least five Horus names (six if we consider Huni) are preserved on the archaeological reports.

Considering the main problems and the studies carried out in the past, from which is to be mentioned the work of Lauer, Firth, Quibell, Garstang, Goneim, Sethe, Vandier and Barsanti, I have dealt with the study of the third dynasty with the aim first of all of collecting all the archaeological remains connected to this period in a catalogue, the real core of my graduation thesis⁷, and then of analysing them trying to suggest a chronological hypothesis.

My work has focused especially on a group of twelve reliefs that show four of the six kings known of the dynasty (Neterykhet, Sekhemkhet, Qahedjet and Sanakht), because in this group there is the most relevant concentration of kings and so is the most proper for a comparative analysis. The observation of these scenes, based above all on stylistic criteria, but also including the information from the historical sources and the funerary monuments of this period, allows me to suggest a relative chronology, which differs from the others considered more valid especially for the location of the Horus Sanakht at the beginning of the dynasty:

- Horus Sanakht
- Horus Neterykhet
- Horus Sekhemkhet
- Horus Khaba
- Horus Qahedjet
- (Horus ?) Huni

⁶ R. Stadelmann, "Origins and development of the funerary complex of Djoser", in: P. der Manuelian (ed) *Studies in honor of W.K.Simpson*, Boston, 1996, pp. 787-800.

⁷ I. Incordino, "Monumenti regali della III^a dinastia", Napoli, forthcoming.

For the succession Neterykhet-Sekhemkhet, the most part of the scholars agree on it, because of the clear likeness of the two funerary complex few meters the one far from the other, of a meaningful agreement of the historical sources and for a similitude found out by me between some underground reliefs in the Neterykhet Complex and two rock reliefs of Sekhemkhet in Sinai, where the two kings are wearing the same clothes and royal attributes (Fig.1).

The succession Sekhemkhet-Khaba is based on some likeness between the Sekhemkhet Complex and the Layer Pyramid of Zawiyet el-Aryan, ascribed to Khaba because this name was founded in a mastaba of the nearby cemetery⁸, even if it cannot fully justify this attribution. The two complex show many similitudes especially in the underground area, where we find a T-shaped descending passage and in the pattern of the stores (Fig.2). It is important to underline the high degree of development of these two complex in comparison with the Neterykhet one, above all in the underground level.

The position of Huni at the end of the dynasty is confirmed by many historical sources (Prisse Papyrus, Metjen inscriptions, Palermo Stone, Saqqara Kings List, Torino Papyrus) and so is indisputable according to the scholars, even if it's not yet clear which was the Horus name of Huni. Some believe that it can be Qahedjet, who surely had ruled at the end of the dynasty, out of many iconographical elements closer to the fourth dynasty of his unique report: a stele which today is kept in the Louvre Museum⁹, in which we can see a very careful rendering of the body and its proportions, a clear reference to the solar cult in the mentioned Heliopolis Temple, the presence of the anthropoid god Horus, of which the most ancient example known till now was in the Mortuary Temple of Sahura¹⁰ (fifth dynasty), and the king's embracing with the god, of which the most ancient example known till now was in the reliefs of the Sneferw Romboidal Pyramid at Dahshur (fourth dynasty). However I have considered Huni and Qahedjet as two different kings till when new convincing evidences of the contrary will be found.

So the most problematic part of the chronology is represented certainly by the beginning of the dynasty, and in particular by the Horus Sanakht's position. It is the source of many debates, and in my study I have placed it at the beginning of the dynasty, although a few scholars agree with it. In fact the most frequent objection on this hypothesis is represented first of all by the direct succession of Khasekhemuy and Neterykhet, supported by many scholars and confirmed according to them by some Neterykhet's seals in the Shunet el-Zebib at Abidos, then by some likeness between this enclosure and the Neterykhet Complex at Saqqara, and at last by the name of the Queen Nimaathap found in sites connected to both these kings, and considered as the Khasekhemuy's wife and the Neterykhet's mother. This strong connection between the two kings seems to me not very clearly proved, specially because it would imply so a fast architectural development of the funerary royal monuments in such a way to pass in only one generation from the pattern of mastaba and its enclosure the one far from the other about 1 km at Abydos, to the Neterykhet Complex at Saqqara, as supported also by Swelim¹¹. Moreover, the Neterykhet seals founded in the Shunet el-Zebib are the evidence of cultual rituals conducted by this king for Khasekhemuy, one of his forerunners. But it don't mean that Khasekhemuy was without any doubt his father or his direct ancestor.

On this purpose, Wilkinson remembers that the title referring to the "House of provisioning of the vineyards of Memphis" is present in the Neterykhet and Khasekhemuy's seals¹², but it

⁸ A.J. Arkell, "Stone bowls of Kha'ba (Third Dynasty)", *JEA* 44 (1958), p.120.

⁹ J. Vandier, "Una stele egyptienne portant un nouveau nom royal de la troisieme dynastie", *Compte-Rendus de l'Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1968), pp. 16-22.

¹⁰ L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Konigs Sahu-re. Band I: der Bau*, Leipzig, 1910, p.114.

¹¹ N. Swelim, *Some problems on the history of the third egyptian dynasty*, Alexandria, 1983, pp. 14-15.

¹² T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, London, 1999, p. 95.

only confirms a uniform administration of some royal domain from the second to the third dynasty. It has been also suggested that a Sanakht seal founded at Elefantina close to the small step pyramid dated to the end of the dynasty, is the evidence that this king belongs to the second half of the dynasty; but we have to remember that almost all the other kings of the dynasty have left seals at Elenfantina, as Huni, Khaba and Neterykhet, but their chronological position has never been contested for this reason. Moreover the finding of a Sanakht's seal nearby the Northern Temple of the Neterykhet Complex at Saqqara hasn't been considered as an evidence for the succession Sanakht-Neterykhet because this area of the complex has been the center of cult rituals even after the Neterykhet's death¹³. Nevertheless this objection doesn't leave out the opposite possibility, i.e. the Sanakht seal is the only one dated to the third dynasty in the seals assemblage of the Neterykhet ancestors of the first and second dynasty found in the underground galleries of his complex.

My research enables me to sum up some observations that can identify the chronological position of Sanakht at the beginning of the third dynasty, based most of all on the analysis of two rock reliefs (Fig.3) of this sovereign founded in the Wadi Maghara (Sinai).

In fact in the first relief a shrine is present, probably of Horus of Hierakonpolis, it is really important because in no other case this kind of building in the Sinai reliefs is present. The hypothesis that this shrine was really built in Sinai is very doubtful, because it would be dedicated to the god Thot "Lord of the mountain countries"¹⁴. So it has been suggested that this scene represents a king's visit to the dynastic shrine of the Upper Egypt to get the god's benevolence for the Sinai expedition¹⁵. This seems relevant if we consider that Sanakht could have been the first king to organize such Sinai expeditions, and for this reason he would have granted the god's will. It is worth while mentioning that in the second Sanakht relief appears for the first time the reference to the word "turquoise", and that these two reliefs were found lower than all the other ones of the third dynasty on the east slope-side of Gebel Maghara, maybe as evidence of a first mining activity.

To confirm such hypothesis, is to note that the Neterykhet relief is higher than the Sanakht one, and the two Sekhemkhet reliefs are located higher than the Neterykhet one and are further than 100 m, as they follow a chronological order toward the top. Moreover, if we compare all the other reliefs of the third dynasty with the Sanakht ones, the latter show a less careful style, the rendering of the royal figure is not well proportioned, without attention to the body musculature and the smallest details, that are instead well underlined in the Sekhemkhet, Neterykhet and Qahedjet reliefs.

Furthermore we have to remember that the presence of at least one king before Neterykhet is attested in almost all the historical sources (Palermo Stone, King List of Abidos, Turin Papyrus, Manetho's List), that record entirely the name "Nebka", who, according to Sethe, is to identify with Sanakht, because of the analysis of a seal found at Bet Khallaf (Abydos) in which this name is inside a fragmentary cartouche¹⁶. The Sethe hypothesis that suggests Nebka as "nswt bity" name of Horus Sanakht has been accepted by the most of the scholars, while many others still deny even the possibility that the cartouche has been in use before the fourth dynasty.

At last it is very important to draw attention to the fact that every site in which the Sanakht name has been found has preserved also the name of Neterykhet, as for example at Saqqara, Wadi Maghara, Elephantine¹⁷ and Bet Khallaf. Especially in this last site the presence in

¹³ C.M. Firth and J.E. Quibell, *The Step Pyramid I*, Cairo, 1936, p.141.

¹⁴ M. Baud, *Djeser et la III^e dynastie*, Paris, 2002, p.264.

¹⁵ I am very grateful for this helpful comment from Dott. Rosanna Pirelli, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale".

¹⁶ J.Garstang, *Mahâsna and Bêt Khallâf*, London, 1092, pp. 19-27.

¹⁷ For the Sanakht's seal of Elephantine see S.J. Seidlmayer, "Town and state in the early Old Kingdom. A view from Elephantine", in: J. Spencer (ed) *Aspects of early Egypt*, London, 1996, pp. 120-121. For the

some mastabas of the private cemetery of the Sanakht and Neterykhet names is very meaningful to confirm a strong connection, maybe a family tie, or at least a close chronological link between the two kings, in consideration of the first half of the dynasty dating of the cemetery.

In spite of this attempt to clear the chronology of the third dynasty, a much work is still to be done to achieve this goal, so I suggest some research directions of studies that I'm going to follow:

- the study on the original remains that could complete the work on the style and proportions in the reliefs of the Ancient Kingdom begun by Gay Robins¹⁸ in the year 1994;
- a more punctual examination on the rich epigraphical documents referring to the administral officials of the third dynasty, specially from the Bet Khallaf cemetery, that could clear the birth of some title or mention of buildings and royal institutions helpful to identify the burocratic development in the administration of the time, and give more evidence to draw up the chronology;
- a careful analysis of the site of Zawyiet el-Aryan¹⁹, second royal cemetery of the third dynasty, today unfortunatly part of a military area which is off-limits.

Neterykhet's seal of Elephantine see N. Kloth and U. Zimmermann, "Die Inschriften der dritten Dynastie", *AA* 56 (1996), pp. 8-9.

¹⁸ G. Robins, *Proportions and style in Ancient Egyptian Art*, London, 1994.

¹⁹ For the Layer Pyramid of Zawiyet el-Aryan see M. Lehner, "Z500 and the Layer Pyramid of Zawiyet el-Aryan", in: P. der Manuelian (ed), *Studies in honor of W.K. Simpson*, Boston, 1996, pp. 507-522; G.A. Reisner, "The work of the Harvard University Museum of Fine Arts Egyptian Expedition I. Pyramid of Zawiet el-Aryan", *BMFA* 9 (1911), pp. 54-59.

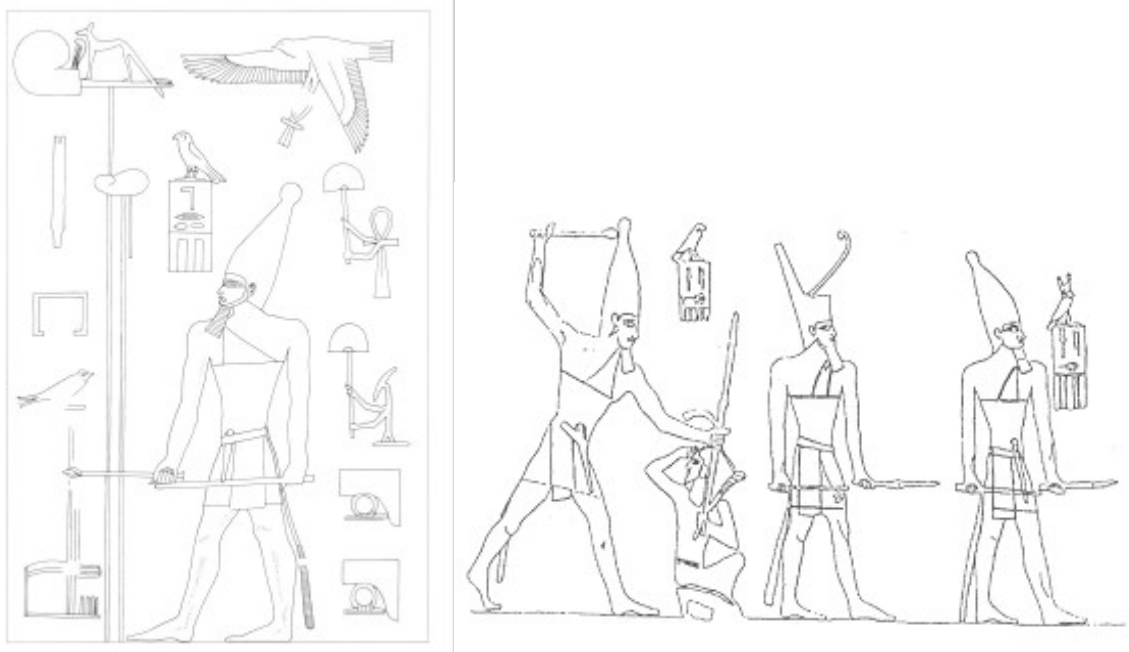


Fig. 1. Comparison between two reliefs of the Third Dynasty.

Left : Underground relief of Horus Neterykhet from the South Tomb of his funerary complex at Saqqara.

Right : Rock relief of Horus Sekhemkhet from Wadi Maghara (Sinai).

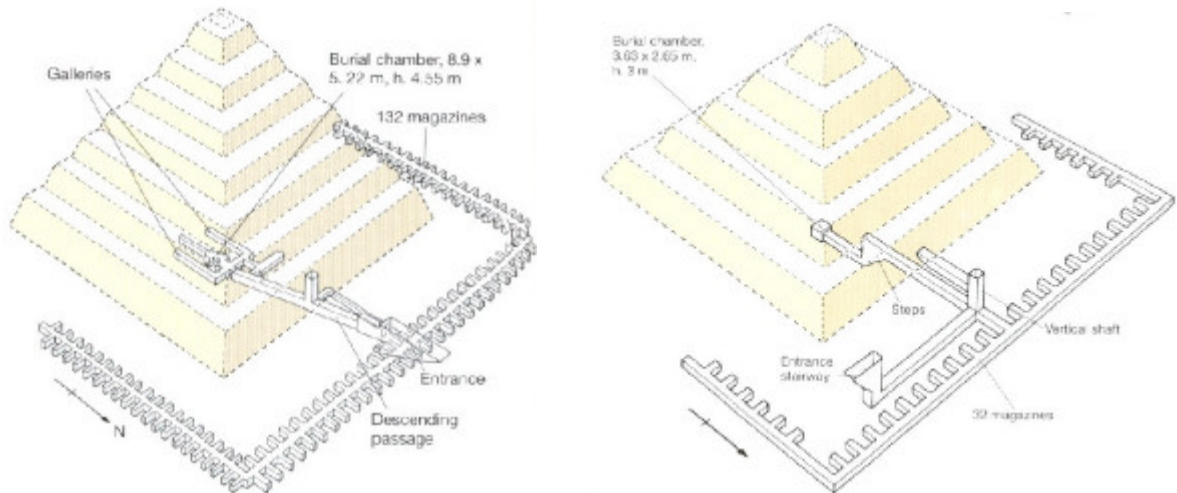


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of two unfinished pyramids of the Third Dynasty.

Left : Pyramid of Horus Sekhemkhet at Saqqara.

Right : Layer Pyramid of Horus Khaba at Zawiyet el-Aryan.

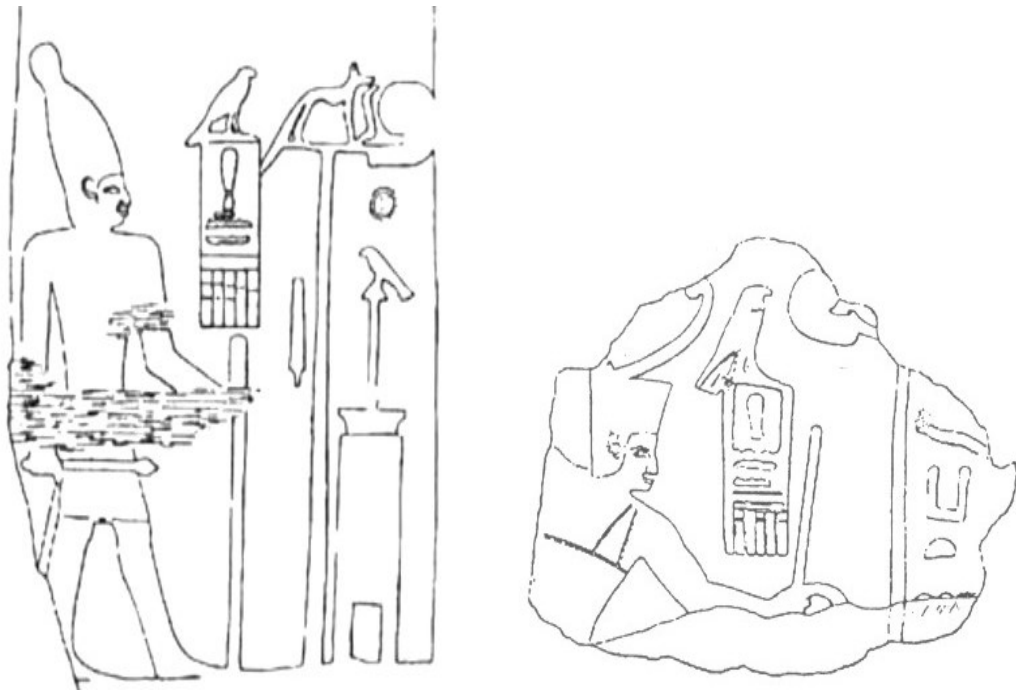


Fig. 3. Two rock reliefs of Horus Sanakht from Wadi Maghara (Sinai).

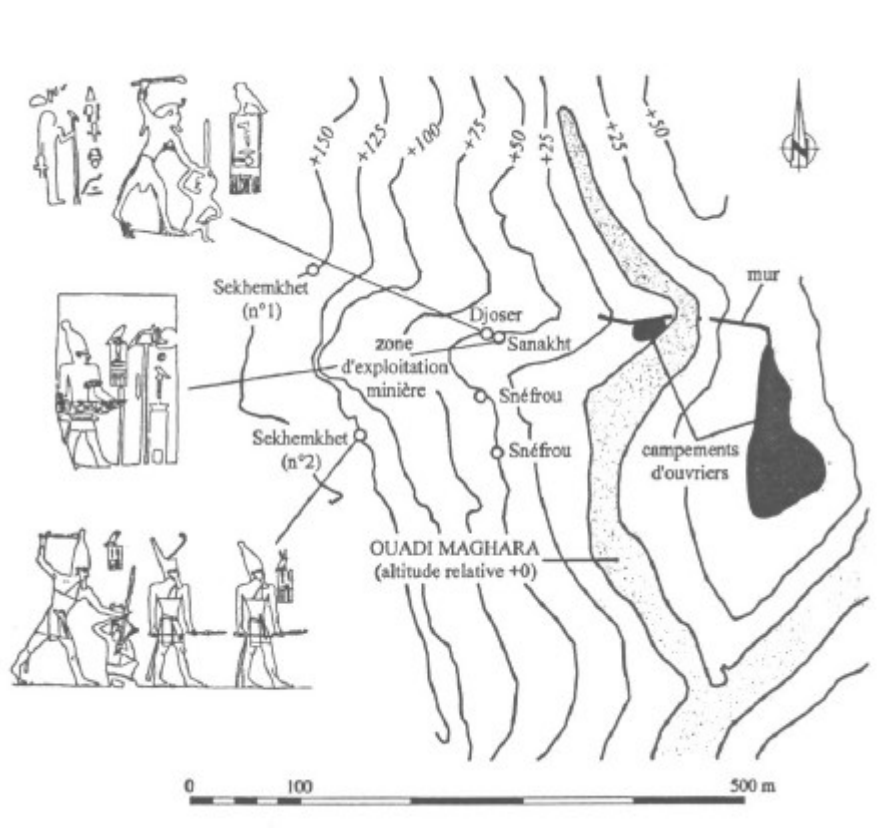


Fig. 4. Location of the Third Dynasty reliefs in Sinai (Wadi Maghara).