

Shared adventure

I first met Maarten at Saqqara in January 1987, when I was a UCL student on the joint British-Dutch excavation to the New Kingdom Necropolis. Many seasons later, on a day trip to Dahshur with the team in 1996, we shared what for me is one of my most exciting memories – we climbed inside the Bent Pyramid and reached the burial chamber (fig. 39).

We were not alone, of course – the Egyptian inspector was with us, as well as Eugen Strouhal and Barbara Aston. We all arrived at the site in Demardesh's taxi, and Jaap van Dijk and Geoffrey Martin immediately set off around the back of the pyramid. The rest of us made a bee-line for the north entrance to the pyramid, not realising that going inside was an unplanned part of the trip. The inspector arranged for the key from the ghaffir, and the six of us, Maarten, me, Barbara, Eugen, the inspector and the ghaffir, headed into the pyramid. That was easier said than done because in those days there was no scaffolding up to the entrance, you had to scale the face of the pyramid. The ghaffir went first, and we all followed as best we could and reassembled just inside the entrance. Our first barrier at the end of the descending tunnel was a wall of about 3 metres in height, that we scaled with the help of a rope – Eugen decided then that he had had enough, and returned to the entrance to wait for us. Moving deeper into the pyramid, with only intermittent torchlight to break the stygian black, we made our



Fig. 39. Climbing the north face of the Bent Pyramid (1996). Photo: J. van Dijk.

way into a huge antechamber. Our torches were not strong enough to light the entire chamber, but they did illuminate a ladder... in fact two ladders tied together to make them long enough to reach a doorway 15 metres above our heads. One by one we made our way up the shaky ladders and through that doorway that led to a sloping passage, which also had a curve in it. On hands and knees we emerged out of the passage into a transverse hall, with huge blocks and deep pits, stretching to our left and right.

These huge blocks were the remains of the portcullises that had once protected this hall from illegal access. We turned left and clambered up and over them, giving each other a helping hand along the way – and I freely admit that most of the helping hands were for me, as I was significantly smaller than anyone else, except the inspector, and the blocks were thus that bit more challenging! Eventually we arrived at another 3-metre wall, which with each other's help again we scaled, and then moved forward to yet another. That was when I decided enough was enough, and I spent the next 10 minutes listening to Maarten relating to me what he could see in the burial chamber – he even took photos with my camera so that I did not have to miss anything.

And then we started on our return journey, back through and over all the huge blocks in the transverse hall, to the entrance to the tunnel that now led at a downward slope to that opening 15 metres above the floor of the antechamber... At a certain point along the rubble-strewn passageway I realised I would have to turn around and go

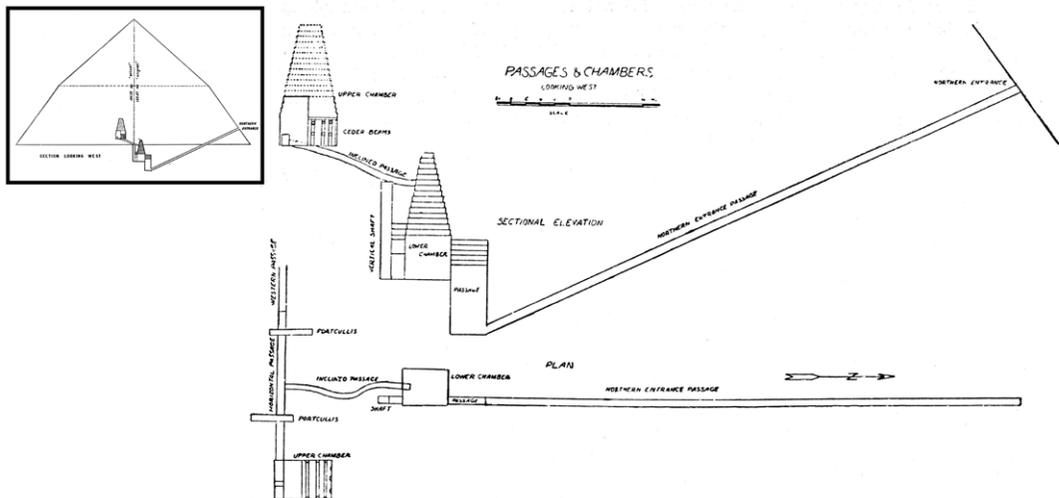


Fig. 40. Sections of the Bent Pyramid, after A. Fakhry, *The Monuments of Sneferu at Dahshur, I: The Bent Pyramid* (Cairo 1959), Figs. 33-34.

backwards, and feel for the top of the double ladder with my feet... in the dark... Well, we all managed it, thankfully, although that particular part of the journey recurred in my dreams rather often after that – with more slide/whoosh/fly effects than in reality.

Back at the entrance, we rejoined Eugen, who told us that we had been inside for an hour and a half, and the mudir was not happy with us. First, though, we had to retrace our steps to ground level across the face of the pyramid. The ghaffir, Eugen and Maarten went ahead, followed by Barbara, me and the inspector. However, my lack of inches again played a part, leaving me spread-eagled on the front at a point where I was simply not tall enough to reach the next point, and was too chicken – or too sensible – to simply take a leap of faith and slide to the next foothold. Maarten and the ghaffir came dashing to my rescue and helped me over that tricky bit. Back on terra firma I was suitably grateful. Not five minutes later, our poor inspector ended up stuck at exactly the same place – being the same height as me, he was faced with the same dilemma. Maarten and the ghaffir again rushed to the rescue.

The euphoria of our adventure was difficult to contain, but we did our best and were suitably contrite as Geoffrey read us the riot act – it turned out that we were not insured against accidents inside pyramids, and with hindsight it would have been all too easy to have put a foot wrong somewhere inside. However, I have never regretted our adventure for a moment!