

## **The Phyles System in Ancient Egypt**

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### **Abstract**

The definition of the Phyles is a group of workers in the temples of Ancient Egypt. It was a Greek word; it was called *s3* in Ancient Egypt. This system dates back to the archaic period. It appeared also in the Old Kingdom and later. The best example of the Phyle system dates back to the fourth dynasty through inscribing their names on the mason marks and tools.

**KEY WORDS:** Phyles, Work crews, Gangs, Masons Marks, constructional marks, phyle texts, phyles crew names, Abusir crew names.

### **Introduction**

The Egyptologists began to use the term of the Phyles<sup>1</sup> as an indication to groups of people participating in the temples service and also the workforce. Firstly, they found these Phyle names in Canopus bilingual decree in 237 B.C, that Ptolemy III added the 5<sup>th</sup> Phyle to the 4 existing Phyles of the temples<sup>2</sup>. The Greek word *φυλή*, meaning phyles, equaling the Ancient Egyptian term *s3* which means troops, company, priests phyle and also *imy-r s3*<sup>3</sup> foremen  .

There is an indication to the Phyles system in the papyri of Lahun which dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty especially during Senuseret III, but of course changed later starting from the Middle Kingdom till Ptolemy III rule. It had 4 phyles named as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>. Noteworthy that the phyle was supposed to serve for a month with a rotation with the 3 other phyles<sup>4</sup>.

The Phyles was in use since the Archaic period and the Old Kingdom. During these early periods there were five Phyles, designated by adjectival names such as "green" and "little" rather than numbers. There are inscriptions dates back to the 1<sup>st</sup> dynasty on jars, having either the hieroglyphic sign *s3* of phyle or the phyle name. The Phyles were mentioned upon seals which are cylindrical which dates back to the Archaic period. Also, they were mentioned on the mason marks<sup>1</sup> and tools, giving us Ideas about the Phyles nature and their names.

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<sup>1</sup>Roth, A.M, "Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom: The Evolution of a System of Social Organization", in: *SAOC NO. 48*, Chicago, 1991, p. 2

<sup>2</sup>See also: Sethe, K., *Urkunden des Alten Reiches*, Urk 2, Leipzig, 1932, pp. 134-136.

<sup>3</sup>Faulkner, R. O, *Concise dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Oxford, 1962, P. 207.

<sup>4</sup> Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 3.

## 1. The Predynastic period and the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty

There is no evidence in the Predynastic period for phyles<sup>4</sup> as we know them; however, except for some motifs in the art of this period refer to the participation of the groups in rituals and hunting<sup>5</sup>. The earliest of the 5 Old kingdom phyles date to the reign of Den; *w3dtiw* and *nds* or *wr*. During the time of king *K3c3* there was a wide spreading and existence of the phyles. Some of earliest phyles disappeared during the Old Kingdom such as a *hn* phyle during the reign of king *K3c3* and also three indications to a *k3* phyle in the reign of Den<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasties

The indication to the 2<sup>nd</sup> dynasty phyles dates back to *Ny ntr*. The names of the *w3dt* and *st* phyles come with the officials' names of this reign. For instance; inscription on vessels are the references to phyles. Also, there is an indication to a phyle on a cylinder seal of king *h<sup>c</sup> shm wy* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> dynasty. Concerning the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty, there are inscriptions from Saqqara on two plates, mentioning 5 phyles.

## 3. The 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty

The Phyles of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty<sup>7</sup> were in work crews of the pyramids building and the funerary architectural monuments, the Pyramid building was a national project combining workers and builders from different areas of Egypt<sup>8</sup>. There is no proof on the Phyles existence in the mortuary temples or the palaces of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty<sup>9</sup>. During the reign of King Khafre, there is an architectural proof on their existence that according to the plans of the mortuary temples, there are 5 storeroom which were designed for the 5 Phyles.

In the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, there were many indications to the existence of the Phyles system in the work crews. This period was characterized with being a time of giant enterprises like the pyramid builders, so the use of the Phyles for the large amounts of blocks necessary for these great monuments. Noteworthy that the Phyles who were responsible for the pyramid construction of the Old Kingdom stayed even after the completion of these monuments for their cult.

In English, the term "crew" may describe the workmen in a part of a project or maybe a single project, but in Ancient Egyptian language there was no word equals to the word crew, but it means an administrative union, consisting of (  *prw* ) 2 gangs. The gangs' names could be found on a cartouche see (fig.1) or after the king's name (Horus name).

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<sup>1</sup>Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup>See: Nibbi, A, "The *stt* Sign" in: *JEA* 64, 1978, P. 62.

<sup>4</sup>Posner- Krieger, P., and de Cenival, J. L. de., *Abu Sir Papyri, Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, London, 1968, pl, 18.

<sup>5</sup>See: Ridley, R., T., *The unification of Egypt*, Australia, 1973, P. 34 and pl. 1

<sup>6</sup>Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, pp.209- 210.

<sup>7</sup>Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 210.

<sup>8</sup>Edwards, I.E.S., *The pyramids of Egypt*, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 270.

<sup>9</sup>Roth, A. M, *Egyptian Phyles*, p. 211.

The gang<sup>1</sup> itself consisted of Phyles like the 4 Phyles of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty which are (*wr ʿnd, wʾdt, nds*). These Phyles were divided as Roth mentioned into the so called “division”.

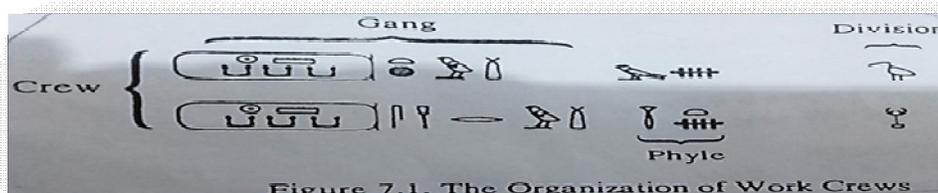


Figure 7.1. The Organization of Work Crews

Fig. (1) The organization of the work crews, two texts found on a separate block  
After, Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 120, Fig. 7.1.

Concerning the term “division” in the Ancient Egyptian language probably equivalent to the word “Tens”, clearly shown in the titles of the Old Kingdom as follows: overseer of ten “*imi-r 10*”<sup>2</sup> and “Great one of the tens of Upper Egypt” (*wr 10 šmʿw*)  .

### 3.1. Phyle names on the tools

The Phyles that were inscribed on the tools provided us with some ideas about their origin, nature and also tasks there were responsible for. Among the earliest tools was an adze with a gang name and a division mark  but with no name of Phyles<sup>3</sup>. A copper mallet was another example of tools, having the gang names: “beloved one of Userkare”<sup>4</sup>, *wʾdt* (the name of the phyle) and finally  (the division mark) (the emblem of the 10<sup>th</sup> nome of upper Egypt)<sup>5</sup>. There were also many other tools like a chisel, an adze and a mallet, all having the phyle names and their origin<sup>6</sup>.

### 3.2. Masons' Marks

Noteworthy that the information<sup>7</sup> which are found on the monumental sites give us more details than those of the tools. They had more details about their exact dating and locations, that datings are inscribed on the mason marks<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles*, p. 119-120.

<sup>2</sup>Erman, A., and Grapow, H., *Worterbuch der Aegptischen Sprache, vol II*, Leipzig, 1926, p. 182.

<sup>3</sup>see: Rowe, A., *A Catalogue of Egyptian Scarabs, Scaboids, seals and Amulets in the Palestine Archaeological Museum*, Cairo, 1936, PL. 36 and pp. 283-85.

<sup>4</sup> The reading of gang names as references to the gang members rather than to the king (i.e. “the beloved ones of X”, rather than “X is beloved”, “the drunks of Y”, rather than “Y is drunk”) was suggested to Roth independently by G. Kadish and K.Baer, who pointed out that the w ending doesn't occur with the masculine singular Old perfective from the Old Egyptian.

<sup>5</sup>Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup>Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 124.

<sup>7</sup>Eyre, C. J., “Work and the Organization of work”, in: *Labor in the Ancient Near East*, PP. 5-47, New Haven, 1987, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>Reisner, *Mycerinus: The temples of the Third Pyramid of Giza*, Cambridge, MA, 1931, p. 274.

The earliest indication to the phyles existence is on a monument, dating back to Snefru reign on the Pyramid of Meidum, that we found “*wr*” the Phyle name and probably *st*, providing us with the phyle name without gangs and division names<sup>1</sup>.

During Khufu’s reign, the gangs became the most prevalent among the all units. There were 3 gang names are inscribed upon the relieving chamber<sup>2</sup>. They are inscribed on 7 blocks upon the horus name of king Khufu *hr Mddw*, these texts have a name of a phyle and supposed to be followed by a division mark, but here the two signs  $\uparrow$  and  $\downarrow$  werenot division marks but may refer to the blocks oreintations. Each chamber of the relieving chambers had blocks on the northern side with one gang name , also the southern side with another gang<sup>3</sup>, see (fig. 2).

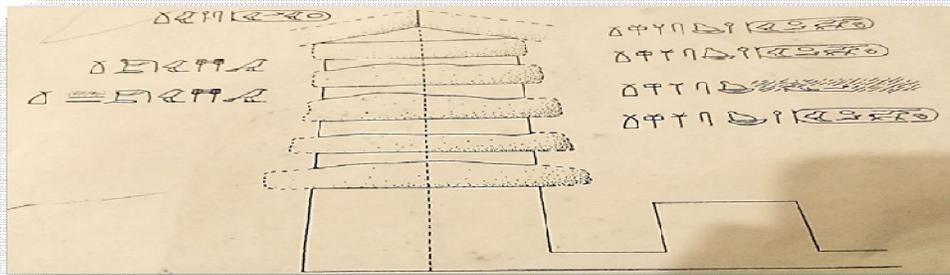


Fig. (2) Masons' mark in the relieving chambers of the Great Pyramid.  
After, Roth, Phyles, p. 126, Fig (7.2.)

There is also another evidence to the phyle system on a block was supposed to seal the pit of the boat of Khufu, having gang of Djedefre and a division mark with no mentioning of the Phyle names (fig.3). Another indication to the Phyles on the blocks of building was in Menkawre mortuary temple see (fig. 4), the text had a gang, a phyle and a division names. Another pattern can also be seen in (Fig. 5).



Fig. (3) Quarry mark found on the lower surface of one of the blocks.  
After, Nour, M. Z., Iskander, Z., Osman, M. S., *The Cheops Boat*, Cairo, 1960, PL. 11.

<sup>1</sup>Roth, A.M, *Egyptian Phyles in the Old Kingdom*, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>Roth, Phyles, p.127

<sup>3</sup>In 1982 only one of these texts remained visible to any extent.

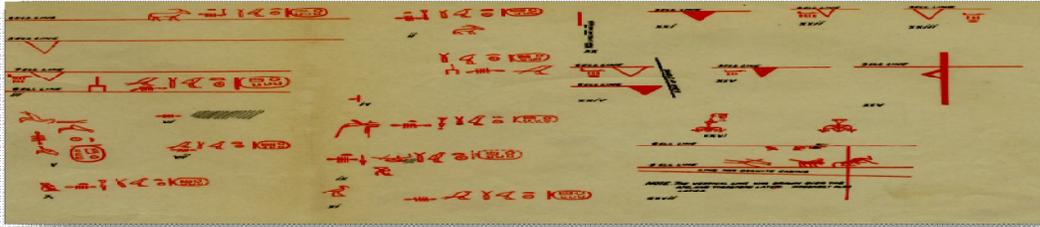


Fig. (4) Block of a building in the mortuary temple of Menkaure.  
After, Reisner, Mycerinus, pl.11.

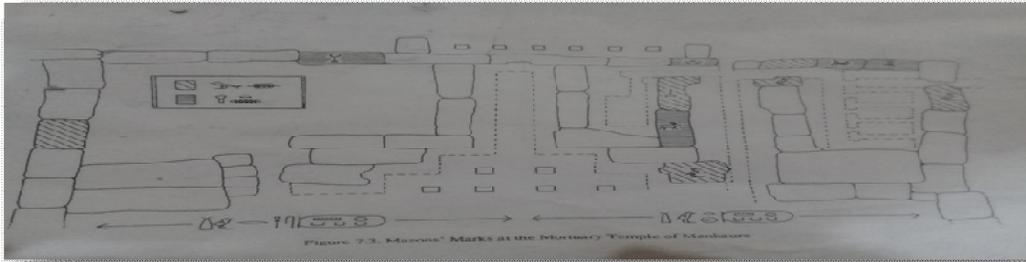


Fig. (5) Masons' marks at the Mortuary Temple of Menkaure  
After, Roth, Phyles, Fig. 7.3., P. 129.

#### 4. The Phyle system in the work crews toward the end of Old Kingdom

There is no mention of the Phyles on the masons' marks<sup>1</sup> from the mortuary temples of the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty. Many titles of high officials were inscribed upon some blocks, who were responsible for the gangs of the workmen. Other blocks had only one single sign, probably a division mark of a Phyle. Noteworthy that the mentioning of only the division name was enough to know the laborers' tasks without the mention of the Phyles name.

The last indication to Phyles name and the work crew were on 4 tablets of limestone at Abusir in the upper section of Userkaf Sun Temple. These tablets contain a date, a phyle name and also a division name with no gangs. The texts recorded the work<sup>2</sup>, see Fig. (6.7).

	Date	Direction	Phyle	
A	f ① III I IIII ②	↙	W IIII U	—
B	f ① IIII III ②	+ ↘	+ ① IIII III	○ ○ II
C	f ① III III III ②	↙	W IIII U	○ ○ III
D	f ① III ② IIII III ③	↘	W IIII ①	○ ○ ○ ○

Fig. (6) The four Tablets from Userkaf's Sun Temple.  
After, Roth, phyles, p. 135, Table.3.

<sup>1</sup>Roth, Phyles, p.133.

<sup>2</sup>Roth, Phyles, p.134, for further details see: Roth, Phyles, pp. 135-141.

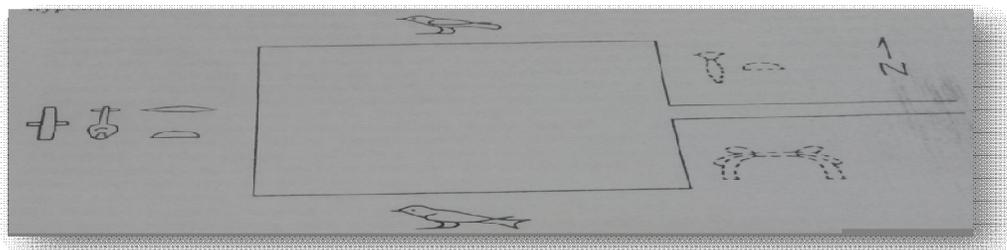


Fig. (7) The distribution of the Phyles Around the Sun Temple of Userkaf.  
After, Roth, Phyles, p. 136, fig. 7.4.

## 5. The Phyle texts and the Constructional marks and

### 5.1. Construction of a curve at the step Pyramid at Saqqara

A diagram on a flake of limestone found at Saqqara in the step Pyramid. it illustrates a way of working out a crude arc, supported by the remains of a curved saddleback construction in the same area. Now in Cairo, JE50036, presumably the 3<sup>rd</sup> dynasty, see: fig. (8).



Fig. (8) Construction of a curve at the step pyramid at saqqara  
After, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Ostracon-dating-to-the-3rd-dynasty-JE-50036-previously-in-the-Cairo-Museum-now-housed\\_fig2\\_318766933](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Ostracon-dating-to-the-3rd-dynasty-JE-50036-previously-in-the-Cairo-Museum-now-housed_fig2_318766933)

### 5.2. Giza Crew names

These texts were usually painted in red on blocks and probably indicate which blocks were being moved by which crews of workmen.

#### 5.2.1. Khufu (Horus Name Medjedu)

*The crew "The pure ones of Horus Medjedu"*

*The crew "Horus Medjedu is the one who purifies the two lands"*

*The crew "The companions of Horus Medjedu"*

*The crew: The pure ones of Khufu"*

*The crew" The white crown of Khnumkhufu is pure"*

Strudwick, N. C., *Texts from the pyramid Age*, Atlanta, 2005, pp. 153, see also: Gunn, B., "Inscription from the step pyramid site" in: *ASAE* 26, 1928, PP. 198.

### **5.2.2. Menkaure**

*The crew "The drunks of Menkaure", Phyle W3dt*

*The crew "The drunks of Menkaure", Phyle nds*

*The crew "The companions of Menkaure", Phyle W3dt.*

### **5.3. Crew Name and other related Texts from Abusir**

The following are among the better –preserved names.

#### **5.3.1. The pyramid complex of Sahure**

Men bending forward; context unclear but perhaps associated with scenes of receiving gold or the like

The crew "The beloved ones of Sahure"

Men are bending forward, some are possibly dancing

*The crew "The skilled ones of Sahure"*

*The crew "The companions of Sahure"*

*The crew "The noble ones of Sahure"*

*The crew "The followers of Sahure"*

*The crew "(Those engaged by [?]) the decree of Sahure."*

#### **5.3.2. Pyramid complex of Niuserre**

These crew are shown in the temple reliefs

*The crew "The companions of Niuserre", the crew "The beloved ones of Niuserre"*

### **5.4. Phyles texts from the Sun temple of Userkaf at Abusir**

As mentioned above, four small stone tablets were found in the debris around the Sun Temple of Userkaf (Nekheebre) at Abusir. They indicate such divisions of labor and were perhaps inscribed to mark various stages of progress in the work. It has been observed, as these tablets provide dates higher than otherwise known for Userkaf, that the building might have been continued or completed under one of his successors.

#### **5.4.1. Year of the fifth occasion, first month of the *3ht* season.**

Beginning of the work on the construction of the upper part of the temple of Re in Nekhenre, at the northern part on the part of the ka section of the *nds* phyle.

#### **B.**

*Year of the fifth occasion, third month of the peret season.*

*The western part for section *dd* of the imy- nfrt phyle 22 measures.*

#### **C.**

*Year of the fifth occasion, fourth month of the shemu season.*

*Construction at the north by the ka section of the *nds* phyle. 23 measures.*

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<sup>1</sup>Strudwick, N. C., *Texts from the pyramid Age*, p. 155.

<sup>2</sup>Strudwick, N. C., *Texts from the pyramid Age*, p. 158.

**D.**

*Year after the fifth occasion, second month of the peret season.*

*The nfr division of the wr phyle, at the south 40 measures.*

## **6. The Development of the Phyles in the Middle Kingdom**

There was a big difference between the Phyles system in the Old Kingdom and those of the Middle Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. The biggest change ever, was the disappearance of the 5 names of the Phyles. During the reign of Senuseret III, through Lahun Papyri, the kings depended on a new Phyles system, free from any restrictions, besides their number decreased from 5 to only 4.

## **7. Phyles and gangs in the New Kingdom**

The necropolis workmen of the Eighteenth Dynasty had 2 titles<sup>2</sup>: "the servant in the wonderful place of the powerful king" and "the servant in the Great place". Towards the middle of the Ramsside period they were entitled with "men of the gang". The gangs were of two sections: the left and right sides. Concerning the exact numbers of the gang; during Ramsses II time they are 48 workers, but towards the end of his reign, the crew decreased to 32, because there was no need to massive workforce<sup>3</sup>.

During Ramsses IV reign<sup>4</sup>, the number of the gang increased to 120 workers but was under the supervision of 2 foremen for the gang sides. These foremen were entitled with "the gang chief in the place of Truth" and the supervisor of the construction in the Great place". The relation between the 2 foremen were not good. The foreman *pꜣ nb* threatened his colleague Hay: "I will get you in the mountains and kill you". The post of the foreman was inherited.

Towards the beginning of the twenties Dynasty<sup>5</sup>, 2 scribes were appointed for the two gangs' sides. The main task of the scribes was to register their notes about the work and the absence of the laborers, so the scribe and the foremen were the captains. They observe the workers while removing the materials from the quarries to the construction sites and responsible for the workers' wages. Other workers were incorporated in the labor like: draughtsmen, carpenters and chief carpenters, stone- masons and sculptors. Each one of them had his own mission, also their jobs were inherited from fathers to their sons like pay "the draughtsman" who had 3 sons, having the same position of their father.

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<sup>1</sup>Roth, *Egyptian Phyles*, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup>Bierbrier, M., *The tomb builders of the pharaohs*, The American University in Cairo press, Egypt, 1997, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>Bierbrier, M., *The tomb builders of the pharaohs*, pp. 32.

<sup>4</sup>Bierbrier, M., *The tomb builders of the pharaohs*, pp. 36.

<sup>5</sup>Bierbrier, M., *The tomb builders of the pharaohs*, pp. 39.

## **Conclusion**

The word Phyle was a Greek word equals to the word *s3* in Ancient Egyptian language. There is no reference to the Phyle system in the Predynastic period except for clans, for Example the hunters' palette, recording the participation of the groups in hunts and rituals. There were indications to the Phyles during the reign of king Den & Qa'a. There are references to the phyle system during the 2<sup>nd</sup> dynasty dating back to the reign of *Ny ntr*. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> dynasty there were two inscriptions of two plates from the Step Pyramid complex, mentioning 5 Phyles. During the 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty, the phyles (work crews) served in the pyramid building and others, their constructions were a national enterprise required massive workforce from all over Egypt. During the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty there was a great prominence of phyle organization & reorganization of work crews, besides the appearance of the phyle system among builders of the private tombs. During the Middle Kingdom, there was a change in the phyle system represented in the disappearance of the five names attached to phyles, clearly shown in Lahun Papyri of Senuseret III reign, they changed the phyle number from 5 to 4.

During the New Kingdom, the title of the royal necropolis workers was "servant in the beautiful place of the mighty king".

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## الملخص العربي

### نظام أطقم العمل في مصر القديمة

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#### مصطلح (Phyles)

كلمة من أصل يوناني وتعني أطقم العمل كانت تسمى في اللغة المصرية القديمة *ḥ3*. هم مجموعة من العمال يعملون في مواقع الإنشاء. يرجع هذا النظام إلي العصر العتيق ثم ظهر بعد ذلك في الدولة القديمة والوسطى والحديثة وقد شهد تطورا كبيرا من حيث عددهم وأسمائهم ولكن أفضل النماذج الموجودة لدينا الآن تعود إلي الأسرة الرابعة حيث عصر بناء الأهرام حيث تم تسجيل أسماؤهم علي الأدوات وحجر البناء.

الكلمات الدالة: أطقم العمل، نظام العمالة، حجر البناء، أطقم العمل الخاصة بالأهرامات، أطقم العمل بأبو صير.