A Foreman of Stoneworkers and His Family

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In the later years of the Old Kingdom in ancient Egypt the royal privilege of equipping a “house of eternity” for the hereafter was extended to an increasing number of persons of relatively modest status. Besides the king and his immediate circle, craftsmen, minor priests, and low-ranking administrative officials could, on occasion, provide themselves with statues and stelae for their tombs. The same development carried over into the Middle Kingdom, when our knowledge of this class of people is augmented by their growing emphasis on tradition and ancestry.

While ancestral pride seldom led the Middle Kingdom Egyptians to include in their funerary inscriptions a comprehensive genealogy, they were much more apt to name one or both parents than their predecessors had been; they frequently mentioned other members of the parental family as well and, as on the earlier monuments, they continued to represent their wives and children. From the names and titles of these various relatives we can sometimes connect otherwise unassociated monuments belonging to members of the same family and by working out the relationships increase our knowledge of Egyptian history and art in general.

A sandstone triad statue recently added to our Egyptian collection—a Twelfth Dynasty piece from Elephantine that compares favorably with others of the same vintage—supplies such a link between two already known stelae, one in Berlin and one in Cairo. Its inscriptions have enabled us to construct a plausible family tree of five generations of master masons who handed on their craft according to the pattern of a traditional society in which, as the Egyptians themselves put it, “a son goes down in the place of his father.”

Although our statue may be characterized as a funerary monument, it is not certain whether it was designed to be placed at the tomb of the deceased, who is its principal figure, or whether it was to be installed in the forecourt of a temple so that he could share in the daily offerings of his local god. The custom of placing statues of nonroyal persons in temples probably had its beginning only at the very end of the Old Kingdom. In the Middle Kingdom it became more widespread and was extended to funerary stelae as well as statues, perhaps because the persons for whom such monuments were made frequently had no funerary cults of their own from which they could obtain offerings.

The central figure of our group, as the hieroglyphic inscriptions reproduced on page 146 tell us, was Senbebu, a gang foreman of stoneworkers and the son of a man named Sebekhotep. His relationship to the two women on either side of him is not stated explicitly, but the one on his right, named Abet-ib, seems to have borne the common wifely title “lady of the

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ON THE COVER: A selection of pottery from the Ceramic International exhibition (shown in brown) and the collections of The Metropolitan Museum (shown in black)
house." We do not know the title of the other, Peryt, for her inscription is effaced at the point where such a title would be expected. Presumably they are sisters, since a certain Henut is named as the mother of each. The likeliest assumption is that both are wives of Senbebu. The triad was dedicated by Senbebu's sonPtah-wer, who, like his father, was a gang foreman of stoneworkers.

Senbebu was probably a member of the civil service, for in his time, as at other periods, quarrying operations were generally undertaken by order of the king; to this extent both he and his subordinates were state employees. On occasion, however, some stoneworkers were free to contract work for private individuals. Thus an inscribed door lintel from the pyramid cemetery of Giza, dating to the Old Kingdom, proclaims, "The stoneworker Pepi is satisfied with the contract which I [the tomb owner] have made with him." There is reason to think this is a direct quotation from a legal document drawn up for the two parties concerned.

A literal translation of Senbebu's title is "overseer of a side of necropolis men." As the designation suggests, the "necropolis men" had to do with tombs and tomb equipment. Two Old Kingdom tomb reliefs show them shaping small blocks of stone with hammer and chisel, and in two rock-cut tombs of the late Middle Kingdom at Hierakonpolis and El Kab they are ingeniously made to chip away at the very walls on which they are represented. The skill of these craftsmen was intermediate between that of the sculptor and the quarryman and supplemented both. They finished stone not only at the cemetery, in preparation for the sculptors' work, but also at the quarries, in conjunction with its removal, to facilitate transport by trimming off unnecessary weight at the outset of the journey homeward.

To appreciate the artistic merits of our new triad one has only to compare it with the three other pieces of Middle Kingdom group statuary (see pages 147-149), that have until now been
Middle Kingdom group from Lisht. Red breccia. Height 3 3/8 inches
Rogers Fund, 1922

Below, upper: Old Kingdom tomb relief. Plate 16, N. Davies, Deir el Gebrâwi

Below, lower: Late Middle Kingdom tomb relief. Drawn from J. J. Tylor, Tomb of Sebeknekht, plate 11, with corrections based on Wreszinski, Bericht, plate 35
ABOVE, LEFT: Statue of Sit-snefru. Diorite. Height 15 inches. Rogers Fund, 1918

ABOVE, RIGHT: Middle Kingdom statuette of Se’n-Wosret from Lisht. Limestone. Height 7 3/8 inches
Rogers Fund

our only examples of this genre and period. For the most part, Middle Kingdom group statues are far less interesting than those of the Old Kingdom in every respect save the greater variety of their material. They typically consist of two or more standing figures of equal height, crowded together in a row. The three groups illustrated, of gabbro and red breccia as well as the traditional limestone, conform to this pattern.

The sandstone triad of Senbebu, although sufficiently characteristic to be approximately datable by style alone, is unusual in composition. The pose of the seated man, though well known from the end of the Old Kingdom onward, is by no means common; and one detail, the curious way in which an island of surface on the right

Middle Kingdom group from Lisht. Limestone. Height 4 3/4 inches  Rogers Fund
leg emerges beneath the kilt, is known nowhere else except in the sculpture shown at the left. In this second example we can see more clearly that the effect is due to an overlapping end of the kilt that projects forward and so covers part of the leg. Another curious and amusing detail is the neat angle of Abet-ib’s toes (see frontispiece); compare them with the more naturalistic representation of the feet in the similar and contemporary statue of page 148. Both these details, unusual though they are, remain in keeping with the stylized massiveness that characterizes late Twelfth Dynasty sculpture.

The Senbebu triad is only $8\frac{1}{4}$ by $11\frac{3}{8}$ inches wide, but this is relatively large as such groups go. Its workmanship is remarkably detailed and

*Middle Kingdom group. Gabbro. Height 5 inches*

*Purchase, 1944*

*The Senbebu triad*
good, taking into account the granular nature of the stone, and the susceptible surface shows little deterioration except at the lower right side.

From a number of stylistic indications it is clear that the date of our statue lies well within the Twelfth Dynasty: the alignment of the three heads at the same level; the relatively massive backing and base; the compactness of the group that results from those features and from the incomplete removal of the stone between the figures; and lastly, the inscriptions, which include a brief offering formula upon the lap of each figure. In all this the effect is much the same; the statuary gives the impression of not having quite emerged from the encasing stone, and the resultant emphasis on the material makes it seem less incongruous that part of the sculptured surface should be covered with inscription. In earlier times the artist had refrained from putting any inscription upon the figure itself unless there was a specific and logical place for it, as in the case of seated scribes whose titles and names appear on the sheets of papyrus unrolled in their laps. The tendency to impose the character of an inscribed stela upon a statue, in this case by inscribing it with funerary texts, is frequently carried much further in late Twelfth Dynasty statuary. A similarly abstract tendency is reflected in the stelae themselves, where the relief figures of the deceased and his family become increasingly smaller and more schematic, until they often serve merely as rubrics for the accompanying inscriptions.

Despite the careful workmanship of this triad, the sculptor has allowed the body of Peryt, the woman on Senbebu’s left, to tilt outward. Such irregularities are so frequent in late Twelfth Dynasty groups—the one on page 148, for instance—that one might almost consider them a characteristic of the period, a sort of happy accident that adds a touch of life to the usually stereotyped composition.

Taken with these stylistic points, the physiognomy of the three figures, particularly Senbebu himself, reveals at a glance the approximate date of the piece. During the Middle Kingdom, as in later times, royal sculpture had a decided influence on contemporary statuary in general. The portraiture of two kings of the later Twelfth Dynasty, Sesostris III and his son Amenemhet III, is distinctive enough so that their features are recognizable even in relatively small statues such as Senbebu’s. He resembles very closely the well-known Cairo statue of Amenemhet III from Hawara (shown at left), or the Louvre statue of...

Statue of Amenemhet III. Cairo Museum, No. 385
Amenemhet-ankh, a subordinate of that king. The family likeness between Amenemhet and Sesostis, however, is sufficiently marked to admit the possibility that some such statue of the latter as the youthful representation of him from Medamud, also in the Louvre, was the prototype for our group. The two kings between them reigned from 1878 to 1797 B.C., and we may safely judge that our triad was made sometime during that period.

We can narrow the range still further by linking our statue with a stela in Berlin (No. 1203) that is known to have been made in the reign of Amenemhet II (1929-1895 B.C.). This stela mentions a man of the same name as Senbebu's father, Sebek-hotep, whose title, gang foreman of stoneworkers, corresponds to Senbebu's own. The name, it must be admitted, is common, but the title is not. For this reason it seems fair to assume that the two Sebek-hoteps are the same and that Senbebu inherited his title from his father. We know the Berlin stela was inscribed within the lifetime of Sebek-hotep because it records an expedition in which he actively participated during Amenemhet II's reign. Since our statue was dedicated only after Senbebu's death, by a surviving son, two full generations presumably intervened between the manufacture of the two monuments. Allowing thirty years per generation, the probable earlier and later limits for our statue's date would be 1869 and 1835 B.C.

We can be fairly certain that the statue came from the island of Elephantine, adjacent to modern Aswan, since the offering formulas inscribed in the laps of Senbebu and his wives repeatedly invoke the goddess Satis, the local deity. It may have been placed either in the forecourt of Satis' temple, of which nothing now remains, or in a lofty rock tomb at Qubbet el Hawa, above the west bank of the Nile. Its material points to the same general area, for the desert cliffs in the neighborhood of Qubbet el Hawa are of sandstone rather than the limestone that predominates only a short distance northward. The same region also supplied Egypt with granite and, as the southernmost center of Egypt proper, was the starting point for expeditions southward to quarries that yielded other hard stones such as diorite. It would, therefore, have been a logical place for Senbebu to carry on his activities.

The Berlin stela, besides identifying Sebek-

_Elephantine Island. Plate 30 in Dominique Vivant Denon's Description de l'Egypte, published 1820_

Gift of E. Mary Ludlow, 1887
hotep, supports in two ways our idea of the statue’s provenance. It is known, in the first place, to have come from Dabod, a little to the south of Elephantine. In the second place, it tells us that Sebek-hotep’s father was a certain Heqa-ib. This individual, by our reasoning Senbebu’s grandfather, may well have been named for a famous Heqa-ib of the late Old Kingdom, an explorer and caravan leader who was increasingly revered after his death until, shortly before the Middle Kingdom, a chapel was built in his honor on the island of Elephantine.\(^2\)

The same sort of evidence that has led us to Senbebu’s grandfather takes us also to his grandchildren, who lived at the end of the Twelfth Dynasty. In the Cairo Museum there is a stela (No. 20731) made for a man who, like Senbebu’s son, bore the name Ptah-wer, and whose mother, like Senbebu’s wife, was called Abet-ib. His title, “fashioner of stone,” is different and of lesser rank than that of the Ptah-wer who dedicated the Senbebu group, but it pertains to the same occupation and may well be the title he held before he stepped into his father’s position. His wife, like the second woman of the Senbebu group, was called Peryt; this suggests that he married a first cousin or half sister. Since Ptah-wer’s children are also named on the Cairo stela, the association of the statue and the two stelae establishes a genealogy of five generations of this particular family.

An additional bit of information about the family is supplied by a graffito left by one of the quarrying expeditions in Sinai.\(^3\) It names another Ptah-wer who bore the same title “fashioner of stone,” but whose mother was named Henut. It is difficult to find a secure perch for this Ptah-wer on the family tree shown below, but since his mother’s name is the same as that of Senbebu’s mother-in-law, the likeliest possibility is that he was a maternal uncle of our first Ptah-wer.

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**OPPOSITE: The Senbebu triad**

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Ranke, *Personennamen*, I, 315-7, interprets the final sign 𓊨 (with a query) as an epithet “the Black.” This sign, a lock of hair, consistently appears in other occurrences, and therefore should be considered an integral element of the name Senbebu; for its presence compare two words for “wig,” nb and bbw.t/bbi.t.

1 Labib Habachi in *Archaeology*, IX (1956), 8-15.

2 Gardiner, Peet, Černý, *The Inscriptions of Sinai*, No. 36. The family connections detailed above speak against the suggestion that this graffito may belong to the Eighteenth Dynasty rather than the Middle Kingdom, as it was previously dated.