Two Reliefs of The Early Old Kingdom

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During the last two or three years the Museum has acquired a number of Egyptian antiquities, some of major importance, many comparatively insignificant but helping to fill out some aspect of Egyptian civilization or art already represented in our collection. For although the Museum’s Egyptian department is incontestably the greatest in this hemisphere and among the half dozen greatest in the world, it can never be “complete,” but may always be rounded out and illuminated by such acquisitions.

Two pieces of relief are among our most important recent additions, not simply because they are outstanding examples of Egyptian sculpture of the early Old Kingdom but because they are the only well-preserved reliefs of their period of any size in our collection.

Figure 1 shows a projecting corner of the niche from the tomb of a palace official called Akhty-hotep; it was noted and illustrated in the Bulletin, October 1959, pages 34 and 35. Each of the two sculptured faces bears a standing figure of the owner and the lower part of an inscription giving his name and titles. Akhty-hotep’s tomb is one of a small group that lies near the north end of the great burial ground at Sakkâreh, between the archaic cemetery, in which the tombs were constructed of mud brick alone, and the cemetery of the Old Kingdom with its limestone tombs. It is a maṣṭabeh with a chapel of the type known as cruciform, the nave with the niche at the end being crossed by a transept. It is of mud brick, but the chapel was lined with fine white limestone. From its position in the cemetery, its type, and the partial limestone facing it was evidently built in the last years of the Third or the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty—that is, shortly before or after 2617 B.C.

The style of the relief is also transitional. Skilled craftsmen were now becoming available for the decoration of private tombs, and limestone slabs began to be used as facings for niches, then as linings for entire chapels as in Akhty-hotep’s maṣṭabeh, offering a surface on which portraits of the deceased, inscriptions, and various scenes with a symbolic meaning could be carved.

Reliefs of this transitional period like our corner set the style for those of succeeding generations. Monumental and dignified, they show the owner—or rather, his soul—appearing to partake of the offerings left for him in his chapel. These portraits were idealized: we see the deceased as he wished to appear throughout eternity. The figure makes a restrained, rather severe design in which, as in later Egyptian sculpture, the different parts of the body are represented as separate entities in their most characteristic aspects. Face and head are therefore shown in profile, shoulders from the front, torso and legs in profile again; the transitions between the varying points of view had already been worked out so as not to be disturbing or even noticeable. Details are simplified. Here the head, the most important part of the body, is modeled carefully and the muscles of the limbs are exaggerated, but the torso is quite flat. Even the collarbones—often an excuse for the introduction of design—are not indicated. The figures stand well out from the background as do the hieroglyphs of the inscription, much higher than those we find in private reliefs of the later periods.

At all times it was the usual custom to por-
tray private individuals with the face of the reigning pharaoh. Akhty-hotep’s face has the same rather striking peculiarities as that of Sneferu (the first king of the Fourth Dynasty): flaring nostrils, short upper lip, full, projecting lower lip with the mouth drooping at the corners, and a markedly retreating but full chin. As the style of carving also suggests the reign of Sneferu more than it does the Third or the later part of the Fourth Dynasty, it is to this time that we assign our corner.

Akhty-hotep wears a different costume on each panel. On the right he is clad in the simple short kilt with knotted belt; on the left he has donned his priestly leopard skin with its elaborate bow at the shoulder, though the tie of the kilt and its lower edge still show. His short wig with horizontal rows of corkscrew curls is the same in both portraits, as are the official staff and scepter. His feet are bare—two left feet on the left panel and two right feet on the right panel (it was to be over a thousand years before Egyptian artists decided to show the smaller toes of the near foot). Figures, accessories, and hieroglyphs were once brightly colored, only the black of the wigs to some extent remaining.

The complete list of Akhty-hotep’s titles and epithets included many sinecures commonly carried by intimates of the pharaoh. The inscription on the right side of our block reads, “The Overseer of the King’s Ḥarim, the Priest of (Iatet [the milk-goddess], Akhty)-hotep”; that on the left reads, “The Overseer of the King’s Ḥarim, the Priest of Bastet, (Akhty)-hotep,” the last two offices being the most important Akhty-hotep held.

The second relief (Figure 2), now on exhibition in the Recent Accessions Room, apparently also comes from the tomb of Akhty-hotep. We have been told that it was in the north end of the transept, but inasmuch as the margin at the left has a distinct batter it must actually be from an exterior chapel built against the sloping face of the maṣṭābāh. It shows three figures, two male and one female, and at the top the feet of a somewhat larger male figure. According to the label at the upper left they are personifications of “The Northern Estates” owned by the deceased; “The Southern Estates” presumably occupied a similar position on the south wall of

Fig. 1. Limestone reliefs. Egyptian (Saqqāra), early IV Dynasty. Height 38 inches
Funds from Various Donors, 1958
the chapel. The name of each estate is written above the head of the corresponding figure, the first being Bededjet and the second Wentishet. The first letters of the third, represented by the girl, are missing, but the name ends with the canal-sign followed by the circular hieroglyph depicting a village with crossroads, used to determine words for “town” and the like. It may be seen most clearly behind the feet of the figure in the upper register which, to judge by its larger size and the different position of the town-sign, may possibly have been a local divinity.

The figures carry offerings of local produce: baskets of loaves supported on their heads in the characteristic Near Eastern way, a duck, and a metal jug. The first man, we are told, has “its [Bededjet’s] bread for him.” The word between the labels of the second and third figures—a general term meaning “that which is brought”—may refer to the offerings carried by both or may apply specifically to the liquid in the jug, the former being the more likely as there are no traces of another label for the girl’s burden.

There seem to have been no further estates represented in this group: the spacing of the figures is quite subtle although it gives the impression of regularity, the bent elbow of the girl being much closer to the head of the preceding figure than his is to the first man’s head, to offset the fact that the girl’s legs take up less space than the men’s. In other words, if a fourth figure had been another girl her elbow would have been carved close behind our girl’s head; if it had been a man he would have been treated as our central figure is, the elbow on the next block with the head and shoulders, but the forward foot at the bottom right behind our girl.

Both figures and hieroglyphs are carved in high relief with well-rounded edges. All three faces are similar and attractive, the eyebrows and upper lids defined in relief, the noses rather long and sharp with high, thin bridges, full lower lips, and small chins which are, however, rather less fleshy than that of Akhty-hotep (and of Sneferu). The arms of the men are muscular, but apart from this the figures are represented with absolutely no detail; as usual, there is no attempt to differentiate between right and left feet. The men’s kilts are supported by knotted belts, but the details of the woman’s dress were indicated entirely in paint, now lost, except for one carved bracelet.

The boldness of the carving and the height of the relief from the background show that this scene was contemporary with the portraits of Akhty-hotep, if not from his tomb. Moreover, the fact that both male and female figures represent private estates shows that this relief does not antedate the reign of Sneferu: only female figures appear in such scenes before his time.

Fig. 2. Limestone relief. Egyptian (Sakkāreh), early IV Dynasty. Height 43 inches
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