AN OLD KINGDOM CAPTIVE

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One of the most important Egyptian accessions of recent years is a purchase from the income of the Fletcher Fund: a statue dating from the Old Kingdom (2780-2280 B.C.) and representing a prisoner of war, kneeling on the ground, his arms tied behind his back.

The foreign captive is less familiar to us as a subject in Old Kingdom sculpture than in temple reliefs of the time of the New Kingdom, when Egypt, extending her sway beyond the Nile, engaged in warfare with neighboring countries. Egypt was powerful during the Old Kingdom, but her contacts with foreign countries were commercial rather than imperialistic. And although the art of warfare was developed before history began, it was civil rather than foreign wars that had taught the early Egyptians the use of arms.

During the fourth millennium B.C. the practice of agriculture in the Nile valley had brought with it an increase in population, which in the course of time must have resulted in conflicts between neighboring settlements over claims to valuable land. That one community should dominate its neighbors by force of arms was a natural consequence, and this went on until eventually two great entities came into being: the Southland, extending from the first cataract to the apex of the Delta, and the Northland, the broad area enclosed by the branching river and the sea.

The people of the two lands differed considerably in character, for the southerners were, for the most part, a homogeneous native stock, while in the north there had been considerable infiltration from the Lybian tribesmen to the west and from Asians to the east. Strife between the two sections of the rich valley was inevitable and of long duration, but eventually the unifying influence of the great river forced the people whom it nourished to become one nation. For several centuries following the unification there seems to have been little civil strife, and the Egyptians might well have lost their warlike qualities had it not been for the constant threat of incursions from the inhabitants of the adjoining territories.

The guarding of their borders had indeed, from the beginning, been an ever present necessity. By the time our statue was made the valley dwellers had become highly civilized. They were no longer solely hunters, fishers, or herdsmen but had established settled abodes. Their dwellings, built on high ground near the fields which the Nile flooded and left fertile for cultivation, were permanent structures. Their granaries were filled after each harvest to carry them over the dry and flood seasons. Food, linen, and other staples were stocked in storerooms within the dwellings. Cattle were housed in stables when they were driven back from pasture at night. Such wealth was the envy of the less civilized nomadic tribes who gained their precarious living in the sparsely vegetated lands lying east and west of the river and in the undeveloped regions of its upper reaches.
Limestone statue of a foreign captive. Egyptian, VI Dynasty, about 2400 B.C. Height three feet. Fletcher Fund, 1947.
Head of the captive, a representative of the desert tribes east of the Nile valley
What the Egyptians had gained in comfort and security from want they had lost in mobility, and they often fell prey to the desert tribes. When the marauders descended on them they could either resist, if they were strong enough, or abandon their goods and flee. Protection against these raids had doubtless been an incentive to centralization of government during the centuries it took Egypt to unify, and safeguarding the population against such attacks had become a function of kingship.

The more dangerous of the neighbors of Egypt were the Lybians to the west, the Negroes to the south, and the Asiatics to the northeast. A fourth nation was called the Iuntiu, and this name seems to have covered the nomadic tribes in the districts east of the Nile from Nubia in the south to Sinai in the north. These and others who harassed the Egyptians came to be known as “the nine bows,” and although some of them became little more than names in later times, nine bows continued to be carved below the feet of the seated pharaoh’s statue as one of the traditional symbols of his power.

In the pyramid temples of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty kings, the decoration of the walls included scenes in which the king himself was shown smiting these foreigners. There have also been found, in the débris of two or three of these temples, fragments of statues of such enemies, bound and kneeling as though about to receive the coup de grâce at the hand of the pharaoh. It is to be presumed that rows of them were set in the temple court so that visitors might be impressed by this evidence of royal power as well as by the more specific wall pictures of the king slaying his enemies.

Our statue is such a figure and once stood in a pyramid temple of the Old Kingdom. The evidence for more exact dating is insufficient, for we do not know from which of the Memphite temples it came and, since a foreigner is represented, the usual criteria do not apply. The earliest of the dated figures of this type were found in the pyramid temple of Ny-woser-Reś of the Fifth Dynasty and the latest in that of Pepy II at the end of the Sixth. Ours may tentatively be given a date midway between the two, possibly in the reign of Pepy I (2404-2379 B.C.). Features and headdress, and the traces of a short square beard, are indications that the captive is a member, perhaps a chief-tain, of one of the tribes of Iuntiu—the troglo-dytes, or cave dwellers, as they were called in Greek times. His garment is a plain, short kilt such as the Egyptians themselves wore.

The work has by no means the finished quality that might be expected in sculpture of one of the best periods in the Old Kingdom. Except for the head the execution might well be described as summary. Yet so moving is the whole figure of the captive, and particularly the expression of his face, that we cannot escape the conclusion that the artist was a master sculptor. Since this is one of a number of similar statues made for the king’s mortuary temple, the royal sculptor would have done no more than supervise the carving of the bodies. But one feels sure that the head, at least, was done by one of the best artists of the time.

Perhaps it is our own imagination that sees in the figure a proud representative of his race, resigned to his fate but not groveling in the dirt or asking for mercy; yet, contemplation of the statue cannot fail to produce that impression. The unusual treatment of the eyes and the deep lines from the nose to the corners of the mouth are probably the sculptor’s way of distinguishing a Iuntiu tribesman from other foreigners, but these details enhance the effect of pain and distress that arises from the attitude of the figure and the firm bonds that tie one elbow to the other behind his back.

Royal power can be shown in several ways. One is the characteristic style of Egyptian sculpture, eminently suited to express kingly dignity, as is evident in nearly every statue of an Egyptian pharaoh. The traditional wall scene in which he grasps his enemies by the hair and raises his mace to bludgeon them to death is another, more likely to impress the beholder with the warlike qualities of the king. In this statue we have still a third statement of these attributes: in spite of its passivity, the emotional qualities in this sculpture give us, by a sort of dramatic inversion, a most vivid picture of might and majesty.