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**SOME REMARKS ON EGYPTIAN  
RESERVE HEADS**

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The reserve heads are one of the unique phenomena in Egyptian art. Notwithstanding the fact that they happened to appear for a short time, only during the 4th and at the beginning of the 5th Dynasty, they left a durable impression on the sculpture of the Old Kingdom. Being of supreme artistic quality, they were probably the products of royal workshops, thus making a gallery of the most eminent people living in the times of Kheops and Khephren (Figs. 1 and 2). Although these heads, regarding their different character, attracted the attention of many scholars dealing with Egyptian art, they still await a scientific description adequate to their significance<sup>1</sup>.

The reserve heads, contrary to their appearing to be a statue part, are separate objects. They represent different facial types, indicating clearly an attempt to observe individual features of the person depicted. The majority of them were made of white limestone, with only two having been executed in well-processed mud. Intentionally severed at the neck base, they are resting on a smooth, polished face of cut. The face is executed in simple plans of the view with the details very carefully rendered, whereas the coiffure remains strongly

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Ne-user-re*, Leipzig 1907; H. Junker, *Giza I. Die Mastabas der IV. Dynastie auf dem Westfriedhof*, Wien 1929; G. A. Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis*, Vol. I, Cambridge, Mass. 1942; M. A. Shoukry, *Die Privargrabstatue im Alten Reich*, ASAE Cahier No. 15, 1951; W. S. Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, Boston 1946; and two articles concerned with only reserve heads: A. L. Kelley, *Reserve heads: a review of the evidence for their placement and function in Old Kingdom tombs*, NSSEA, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1974, pp. 6–12; N. B. Millet, *The reserve heads of the Old Kingdom*, [in:] W. K. Simpson, W. M. Davies (eds.), *Studies in Ancient Egypt, the Aegean and the Sudan. Essays in Honour of Dows Dunham on the occasion of his 90th birthday*, June 1, 1980, Boston 1981, pp. 122–131; see also R. Tefnin, *Entre art et magie: les tetes dites de remplacement sous l'Ancien Empire*, [in:] *Fifth International Congress of Egyptology, October 29 — November 3, Cairo 1988*.





1. Limestone head from the royal cemetery of Giza. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (Inv. No. 6003)

After K. Lange, M. Hirmer, *Egypt*, London 1961, Pl. 41

schematic. In some cases, all deficiencies ensuing both from stone flaws and sculptor's errors were masked by means of a thin layer of plaster<sup>2</sup>. Other heads seem to be unfinished, bearing the incised lines correcting the outline of the coiffure, or those horizontal parallel to the neck base, delimiting the latter's real length<sup>3</sup>. It is difficult to establish now whether they are the corrections

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the head from Museum of the Fine Arts in Boston, Inv. No. 21.329 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 56b); see also the head belonging actually to the Egyptian University (Hassan, *Giza VII*, Pls. III and IVa).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the head from Hildesheim, Inv. No. 2158 (Junker, *Giza I*, Pl. XIIIc, d) or correction of length of the neck of the head from the Cairo Museum, Inv. No. 44.974 (Junker, *Giza I*, Pl. XIVa, b).





2. Limestone head from the royal cemetery of Giza. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (Inv. No. 6005)

After K. Lange, M. Hirmer, *Egypt*, London 1961, Pl. 42

made by a sculptor who was too pressed for time to complete his work, or if these heads performed some additional function. Also, the incisions that appear in the rear part of some objects and run from skull apex down to its base are difficult to explain<sup>4</sup>, probably intentionally made for some ritual purpose. An equally absorbing fact is the absence of the ears in the all hitherto known reserve heads. Parts of them were simply not hewn. Made of some separate material fragment, they were later connected to the head with pins. But the majority, in spite of the fact that they made an integral statue part, were

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the heads from the Cairo Museum, Inv. No. 46.217 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 52b) and Inv. No. 46.215 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 53a).



secondarily chipped off and damaged<sup>5</sup>. When and why, is presently difficult to ascertain, but this phenomenon could indicate a double role performed by the reserve heads in the funerary ritual.

An important criterion differentiating between the objects of this group is the way of rendering the eyebrows. Part of them was carefully but conventionally carved in high relief<sup>6</sup>. In the order, the eyebrow is represented in a more impressionistic manner by anatomical transition of the forehead surface into eye-sockets with the rounding of their upper ridges, but without emphasizing the eyebrows' line<sup>7</sup>. A transitional form between these two types is a head from the Cairo Museum<sup>8</sup>, in which the eyebrows were rendered anatomically, but their lower ridge was additionally incised, or the eyebrows from Boston<sup>9</sup> where the incision is so deep that it results in a skin fold, particularly visible at the nose base.

These two different ways of eyebrow modelling cannot, unfortunately, constitute a dating criterion, although the relief-carved eyebrows appear only with the early heads, dated to the reign of Kheops or the beginning of the reign of Khephren. They may be the indications of the activity of two sculpture schools of Sculptor A and Sculptor B, distinguished by G. A. Reisner<sup>10</sup>. A feature characteristic of the majority of reserve heads is a specific arrangement of eyeballs which causes the feeling as if each of the persons depicted would stare into the space somewhere aloft. C. Vandersleyen concluded from it that this expresses the ancient belief in the participation of the human soul in a cyclic movement of stars, and the eyes of the deceased are especially directed to the circumpolar stars maintain the permanent link of the soul with the universe<sup>11</sup>.

An interesting trait of this group of objects is the way in which the coiffure is outlined. All the heads, both male and female, have very schematic coiffures, with the short hair covered either in low relief or marked by an engraved line delineating the forehead, ear area and rear part of a head. It is conceivable that the said line was a kind of rough drawing. It often proves to be not a single line, but a series of corrections, and the final effect was meant to be a coiffure in high relief. It could testify to the fact that these heads were modelled only

<sup>5</sup> The ears almost preserved in the head: Museum of the Fine Arts, Boston, Inv. No. 14.719 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 54b); and heads with places after the ears e.g.: the head from Cairo Museum, Inv. No. 46.218 and the head from Museum in Boston, Inv. No. 21.320 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 56b).

<sup>6</sup> The head from Museum in Cairo, Inv. No. 46.217 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 52b) or the head from Boston Museum, Inv. No. 14.717 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 52a).

<sup>7</sup> The head from Cairo Museum, Inv. No. 46.215 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 53a), or the head from Boston Museum, Inv. No. 14.718 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 54a).

<sup>8</sup> Museum of the Fine Arts in Boston, Inv. No. 46.218 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 53b).

<sup>9</sup> Museum of the Fine Arts in Boston, Inv. No. 21.328 (Reisner, *A History*, Pl. 55a).

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *A History*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> C. Vandersleyen, *Das Alte Ägypten* [Propyläen Kunstgeschichte], Berlin 1975, p. 223.



after a depicted person's death. Since they probably come from the royal workshops, they could have been a posthumous gift of a ruler and part of the funerary equipment.

Regrettably, in spite of the stylistic analysis of reserve heads, it is difficult to discern the elements and criteria dating, both relatively and absolutely, of the objects under investigation. Some stylistic trends can be observed, however too inconsistent to form definite styles. It can probably be ascribed to scarce comparative material or to the lack of direct access to most objects. It is possible that these heads were created by the artists belonging to one school and the same generation, so being contemporary, with the differences between them ensuing from artistic individuality.

There are several problems associated with the reserve heads which seem to be disputable and call for a renewed consideration. The first of those is their purpose and role in the funerary ritual. Three principal theories on the subject exist.

L. Borchardt is of the opinion that they were placed in a tomb to deceive evil spirits in case they wanted to capture an actual head<sup>12</sup>. H. Junker suggests that these heads were the substitute of real heads when these latter became destroyed, and served as a guide to an errant soul on its way to a proper tomb<sup>13</sup>. Thus, their purpose was similar to that of the statues placed in serdabs or open chapels. The third theory was forced by N. B. Millet, who maintains that the reserve heads were sculpting models<sup>14</sup>, as for instance the famous head of Nofretete and some of the heads or masks found at el-Amarna. They served as models for the artists to copy the facial features when executing funerary statues and reliefs. Perhaps they also made a basis for making death masks. According to the author of this theory, this can explain the specific incisions at the back of the some heads, corrections at neck base adjusting its length, incisions marking the outlines of the coiffure, ears etc. The destruction of the ears could have also taken place in the course of removing a plaster or mud mask from a stone mould.

The above theory is disputable. First of all, it seems illogical to execute the prototype in such a troublesome material as stone. It would be much simpler to shape it in such plastic, cheap and easily accessible Nile mud or plaster. An ostrakon sketch would be much easier for carving reliefs, as often used to be done. The purpose of these models also appear obscure. They are dated to the reign of Kheops and Khephren. In this period, around a funerary stela, a royal gift made in a royal workshop, exterior chapels were built most often of brick covered by lime mortar, consisting of one or several chambers. Except for the mastaba superstructure and the stela which were royal gifts, the remaining part of the tomb with its decoration were made at the tomb owner's expense. It can

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<sup>12</sup> Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal*, p. 129.

<sup>13</sup> Junker, *Giza I*, pp. 57–61.

<sup>14</sup> Millet, *The reserve heads*, p. 130.



be hardly believed that, regarding such a developed bureaucracy, the task of decorating the mastabas belonging to all most eminent state officials was undertaken by a royal workshop. This work must have been accomplished by the minor sculptors. Would the artist of the royal atelier have carved a prototype for other sculptors not connected with it?

We also cannot omit the role performed by the reserve heads in the development of the mummification process and the beliefs related to it<sup>15</sup>. It seems feasible that in the mastabas of more important courtiers of the 4th and 5th Dynasties, a stone model appeared as a more precious head substitute together with a linen-wrapped body. It had not displaced the linen modelling of face, but accompanied the latter. In the minor burials of the period plaster masks were found. In later times, the tombs of even the greatest courtiers were equipped only with plaster masks, and in the First Intermediate Period with cartonnage masks, to be subsequently transformed into inner anthropoid coffins. Thus, the reserve heads can be regarded as a prime example of the excellent art of the highly developed and flourishing state, whereas later masks are to be recognized as an indicator of looming deterioration of Egyptian art, with the resorting to the cheaper materials, simpler in treatment and less durable, and to less complicated technologies.

Another important problem connected with the reserve heads is their localization in the tomb. H. Junker locates these heads in the passage linking the shaft bottom with the burial chamber<sup>16</sup>. They were to be situated in a small niche executed in the blocking of the passage at its very end from the shaft's side. This niche was additionally blocked with a big, massive stone, the so-called portcullis, provided with one, two or even three holes at the level of the statues' eyes, meant to serve it in order to communicate with the exterior world. Such an explanation is supported by many arguments. First of all, most of the heads were found on the shaft's bottom close to the portcullis (15–16 of them). It appears, as a matter of fact, inconsistent that the Egyptians, so security conscious with regard to burials, should at the same time leave the blocking system in a part that is its weakest and most easily penetrable point. The blockade employed in the period in which the reserve heads occurred was constructed in two ways: the entire length of the passage linking the shaft with the burial chamber was filled with carefully dressed stone blocks fixed with lime mortar, or at the two ends of the passage, both from the chamber and the shaft side, solid walls of dressed, mortar-set limestone were erected, with the space between the walls being filled with debris. From the shaft's side a massive stone was sunken as an additional safeguard, and often in order to hamper its removal it was placed in a specially designed trough. The entrance to the chamber blocked and the portcullis stone in its place, the shaft was additionally filled with debris. The above-mentioned means of protection indicate ancient Egyptians utmost care for the earthly remains and their conviction that no safeguard was too excessive to protect them. Thus con-

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, *A History*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Junker, *Giza I*, p. 205 and *Giza III*, p. 22.



sidered, the presence of the niche being simply a breach in the blocking wall is strange. Another argument against this theory is the preserved remains of the blockade. Neither of them indicates the presence of any niche, with no traces of the latter surviving. Also the portcullis stones may both confirm and undermine Junker's theory. Some of them display holes in their upper parts, but their number does not correspond with the number of the reserve heads found. They could have served, for instance, to transport a huge stone into a shaft. Through the holes the ropes were pulled, and the slab was sunken. Despite the fact that most holes are in the upper part of the stone, simple resistance calculations prove that, notwithstanding the enormous weight of the slab, load distribution inside is adequate to retain its statics and prevent the slab's cracking along the holes. Junker's theory could be supported by a head found in Saqqara South<sup>17</sup>. It was probably discovered on the bottom of a 6th Dynasty tomb, pillaged not traditionally through a shaft, but by means of a drift made on the other side of the mastaba. The confirmation of the second view — that of G. A. Reisner<sup>18</sup>, locating the reserve heads within the precincts of the burial chamber — is the head from Cairo<sup>19</sup>. It was discovered, together with other gifts in a chamber destroyed by a flood, but otherwise intact. A. L. Kelley suggests<sup>20</sup> that the heads originally used as sculptural models were thrown into the tomb after the funerary ritual had been completed and the chamber was blocked. Considering the artistic level of the heads, their additional value as a probable royal gift and the ancient Egyptian's beliefs in the necessity of preserving facial features through their portrayal, it seems rather inconceivable that they should be thrown into a shaft among the debris and rock waste, and not placed inside the chamber or funerary chapel together with other valuable gifts.

It can be distinctly seen that, considering such an important problem as the localization of heads in tomb complexes, we are forced to rely on speculations rather than established principles. So, if possible, it should be aimed to verify this information and to find the data in unpublished field documentation (mainly those of the excavations of H. Junker and G. A. Reisner) and, depending on the results, to raise this problem again as an element in the consideration of the function performed by these said heads in the funerary ritual of the 4th and 5th Dynasties.

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<sup>17</sup> The head found probably in Saqqara South by A. Fakhry in the season 1952/1953, see J. Leclant, *Fouilles et travaux en Égypte, 1952/53*, *Orientalia* 23, 1954, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Reisner, *A History*, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> The head found 1935 in Giza by Selim Hassan in the grave of "Chefrens' daughter" (Hassan, *Giza VII*, pp. 4–5).

<sup>20</sup> Kelley, *Reserve heads*, pp. 6–12.