

AN ARCHAIC EGYPTIAN STATUE

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The ancient Egyptian's well-known aversion to innovation, experimentation, and what is generally termed "progress" is nowhere so clearly illustrated as in the statues which for three millennia he carved of his fellow human beings. Since most of these works were tomb or temple figures, and were therefore intended not only as accurate reproductions of the physical forms of their owners but also as eternal dwelling places for their immortal souls, naturalism and an air of complete permanence were the chief goals of the dynastic sculptor. A highly satisfactory combination of these not altogether compatible qualities was achieved under the pyramid-builders of the Fourth Dynasty, as is witnessed by the superb diorite statues of King Kha'ef-Ré' and by the figures of Princess Nofret and her husband, executed some forty years earlier (see ill. p. 115). Having, in these works, attained the formula for expressing all that he had to say or wished to say through the medium of figure sculpture, the Egyptian was wise enough—or stodgy enough—to adhere to this formula throughout the rest of his dynastic history. During the ensuing twenty-six dynasties Egyptian statues did, of course, show interesting minor variations in style, technique, proportions, and degree of naturalism attempted, but there was no real development in the sense of a continuous progress away from the Fourth Dynasty ideal or toward a new and different conception of the human figure.

It is therefore both interesting and refreshing to have an occasion for going back in the history of Egyptian art to a time before this admirable, if all too familiar, ideal had been established and to catch the figure sculpture of the Egyptians while it is still in a truly formative stage. Such an occasion has been provided us by the recent acquisition of a limestone statue of an Egyptian lady of the Early Dynastic period (acc. no. 45.2.12; ill. p. 114).

The statue, purchased in New York, is said to have been found many years ago at Abydos in Upper Egypt, the site of the ancestral home of the kings of the First and Second Dynasties. An exhausting, if not exhaustive, search through old sales catalogues and exploration accounts of the nineteenth century has failed to turn up any further scrap of information concerning the piece—anonymous through its lack of inscription and insufficiently glamorous to be noteworthy as a "collector's item." Since its discovery, perhaps by natives of Abydos, it has probably passed unostentatiously from one private collection to another.

The figure, almost certainly a tomb statue, comes presumably from one of the several Early Dynastic cemeteries in the region of Abydos, perhaps from one of the numerous small chambers surrounding the royal tombs, which were plundered of most of their contents before their excavation by Petrie in 1900. The owner we may assume to have been a woman of wealth and position. Private tomb statues were not common during the archaic period in Egypt, and for its time this was an ambitious and a highly successful work of sculpture.

The figure fits well into the series of twenty or so statues of the Second and Third Dynasties preserved in the museums of Cairo, London, Paris, Berlin, Leiden, Brussels, Turin, Bologna, and Naples. On the basis of its style, quality, iconography, and facial type it would seem to be approximately contemporary with the well-known granite figure of a kneeling man in the Cairo Museum, later in date than the crude limestone seated statue in Berlin, and certainly earlier than the statues of Ankh-tekhn in the Louvre and in Leiden (see ills. p. 115). This would place it in the later half of the Second Dynasty, between 2900 and 2800 B.C.

The lady of our statue wears the short, bobbed wig fashionable during the earliest dy-

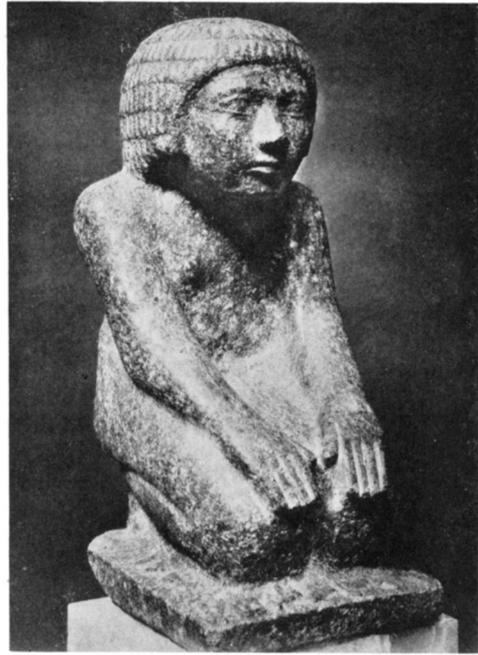


An Egyptian lady of about 2900-2800 B.C. Limestone, Early Dynastic period. Rogers Fund, 1945

nasties, the waves or braids in its heavy locks indicated by diagonal incisions in the surface of the stone. Her dress is a plain, sleeveless robe, probably of linen, reaching to her shins and rather more loosely fitting than the skin-tight garments of the women of the Old Kingdom.

In posing the figure, the sculptor has already abandoned the several archaic variations of posture (one of which is represented by the kneeling figure illustrated on p. 115), and has adopted the simple, compact, and completely static pose seen henceforth in nearly all Egyptian seated statues. Only the way in which the

body leans slightly forward reminds us that the early artist was not as yet concerned with the architectural verticality of the back of the statue, often accented in later dynastic figures by the addition of a vertical back pilaster (see the statue of Princess Nofret, ill. p. 115). The position of the hands, though usual in seated figures of later times, is uncommon in contemporary statues of this type, wherein the left hand, with fist clenched, is nearly always held against the breast or the left forearm passed across the front of the body. Another unusual feature is the absence of any attempt to repre-



Statues of the II to IV Dynasties. ABOVE: a seated man, limestone, in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin, and a kneeling official, dark red granite, in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. BELOW: Prince Ankh-tekh, gray granite, in the Rijksmuseum, Leiden, and Prince Ra-hotpe and Princess Nofret, painted limestone, in the Cairo Museum

sent or suggest the form of the chair on which the woman sits.

Our first general impression of the figure is that it is decidedly dumpy. The body is thick, squat, and heavy, and the head, especially the face, much too large. Egyptian sculptors never entirely freed themselves from the rectangularity of the blocks in which they worked, and in this case the block chosen was too broad and low for the production of a properly proportioned human figure. The slightly later statue of Ankh-tekh has already begun to draw away from this characteristic archaic squatness and to forecast the far more slender and anatomically correct proportions of the sculptured figures of the Old Kingdom.

The preoccupation of the archaic sculptor with the face of his subject, at the expense of the rest of the figure, is especially marked in this statue. The characteristically delicate nose, the wide, conventionally treated eyes, the full but sensitive mouth, and the softly rounded cheeks and chin are modeled with great care, and the result, though hardly a portrait, is both lively and pleasant. Lack of interest, quite as much as lack of technical ability, was undoubtedly responsible for the extremely summary and inept treatment of the figure, which, though an improvement over the forms of the earlier seated statues, is still crude, lumpy, and without significant structure.

In assessing the merit of this work due allowance must be made for its weather-beaten condition. The greater part of the original surface of the statue has been worn away by prolonged exposure, leaving the smooth stone roughened, pitted, and discolored. It is probable that the figure was once painted in bright, naturalistic colors, but of these there remains on the small areas of preserved surface only a dingy brown film.

In spite of its faulty proportions and other

shortcomings, the figure possesses that peculiar, indefinable quality of dignity and monumentality which has come to be associated with all Egyptian works of sculpture in the round. Rather than labor the point, we have allowed the reader to form his own impression of the size of the statue from the photograph alone. Those unacquainted with the average dimensions of such Early Dynastic figures will probably be mildly surprised to learn that, from the underside of the base to the crown of the head, our statue measures little more than eighteen inches.

Among the numerous discussions of the earliest Egyptian statues may be cited Georg Steindorff's excellent article in the Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache, 1920, pp. 96-98, and the more recent study by Alexander Scharff in the Journal of Egyptian Archaeology, 1940, pp. 41-50. A. Wiedemann's presentation of the statues in Leiden and Paris, in Orientalische Litteraturzeitung, 1898, cols. 269-273, and 1901, cols. 41-43, is most useful, as is also Raymond Weill's II^e et III^e Dynasties égyptiennes, pp. 143, 187, 255 ff. A number of figures are illustrated in Jean Capart's Primitive Art and Recueil de monuments, and in Fechheimer's Plastik and Kleinplastik.

The Berlin statuette illustrated here is dated by Steindorff in the beginning of the Second Dynasty. The granite figure in Cairo is inscribed with the names of the first three kings of the Second Dynasty. 'Ankh-tekh was a contemporary of Djoser, the first king of the Third Dynasty.

The illustrations on page 115 are reproduced from Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache, vol. 56 (1920), pl. vii; Grébaut, Musée égyptien, vol. 1, pl. xiii; Capart, Recueil de monuments, vol. 1, pl. iii; and a photograph by the late Harry Burton of the Museum's Egyptian Expedition.