

A relief fragment from Saqqara

Maha Yehia

Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Meynofia University

Material: limestone
Dimensions: 17.5 x 25.5 cm
Date: uncertain
Provenance: Saqqara

This relief fragment was found by Mohamed Ibrahim Aly at Saqqara in 1986¹, and it is on display in the Al-Arish Museum No. 879 (Fig. 1). It is very finely carved in low raised and sunk relief, and shows the head and upper part of a female figure, facing to the right. She is wearing a wig adorned with a diadem with two open blossom of lotus. Over the figure's forehead there are two lotus flowers, one open and one closed. The woman holds a sistrum and the *menat* necklace in her left hand, and is wearing a broad collar with four rows of tubular beads and a row of drop-shaped beads carved in relief. The knots of the straps of her dress can be seen on her shoulders².

Despite recent discoveries in the necropolis at Saqqara, many tombs remain unallocated, and fragments from a number of Memphite tombs have been scattered across the world for at least the past three centuries³.

The fine-grained limestone was carved in low raised and sunk relief. Many areas were articulated with subtle sculptural relief and finely incised details. It seems that the relief was originally polychromed, but no traces of color survive.

Condition

The relief is in good condition overall. It consists of a single fragment with losses along the edges. Larger losses at the bottom edge. The surface is slightly polished, abraded and eroded, with some pittings; however many details of the carved surface are well preserved, including the face and the torso. Throughout, the carving is deeply incised, the lines are executed with exquisite finesse, and the details are carefully rendered. Particularly notable are the facial feature of the lady and the drilling of the individual thread of the wig.

1 Hawass, H., *Hidden Treasures of the Egyptian Museum*, (Cairo, 2002), 52

2 The dress appears to be in the typical Old Kingdom shift style see: Teeter, E., *Book Reviews and Notes - Ancient Egypt. Treasures from the Collection of the Oriental Institute University of Chicago*, (Praha, 2006), Fig. 6

3 For overall discussions and descriptions of the New Kingdom Memphite necropolis, see Raven, M. J. in: Barta, M; Krejci, J., *Abusir and Saqqara in the Year 2000, ArOr Suppl. 9* (2000), 133-144.

Provenance

During the past thirty years, several New Kingdom tombs have been discovered at Saqqara to the south of the Unas Causeway¹, and to the northeast of the Djoser complex on the edge of the escarpment². Parts of the tombs survive in good condition, but some stone blocks were reused in the nearby Coptic monastery of Saint Jeremiah, and some of the carved reliefs were taken to museums in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, which means that the necropolis was used all over the history of ancient Egypt.

Relief content and style

At first glance, the subject and many of the details appear to have been lifted directly from the Old Kingdom, for they are seen as early as Dynasty 5 in almost identical form in reliefs from the tomb. To judge from the style of the relief, this relief was found in the great desert cemetery of Saqqara. Too little is known of the monuments of Saqqara to permit a precise dating for the relief, however. That it is work can be determined from its resemblances to other works of that era.

One of the most important elements in this fragment is the Lotus flowers that were included among tomb offerings from the Old Kingdom on³. They were represented in the hands of offering bearers⁴, on the head of the tomb workers⁵, and among the offerings for the deceased⁶. Beginning in the Middle Kingdom, the lotus was used as a decorative element⁷ that was placed on top of the gifts piled on offering tables represented on both tomb walls and stelae⁸. In the New Kingdom, lotus flowers or bunches became an integral part of

1 Martin, G., *The Hidden Tombs of Memphis*, (London, 1991)

2 Zivie, A., *New Kingdom tombs at Saqqara, Discovery; unearthing the new treasures of archaeology*; (London, 2007), 58 - 61

3 Brooklyn Museum: *Five years collecting Egyptian Art 1951-1956 Catalogue of an Exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum*, (Brooklyn, NY. 1956), See the Lotus Frieze No. 41

4 Junker, H., *Giza VII* (1944) 12, Fig. 3, pl. 4d; PM III, 1, 2(1974) 143; Martin, K., *Pelizaemus-Museum Hildesheim/3 : Reliefs des Alten Reiches/1, Corpus antiquitatum Aegyptiacarum; Lose-Blatt-Katalog ägyptischer Altertümer*; CAA, (Mainz, 1978), 125

5 Martin, K., op. cit. 41

6 Klebs, L., *Reliefs des alten Reiches : (2980 - 2475 v. Chr.) ; Material zur ägyptischen Kulturgeschichte Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse*; 3, (Heidelberg 1915), Fig. 8; Junker, H., *Giza VIII* (1947) 84, Fig. 37 links, pl. 15c links; PM 111.1, 2(1974) 179; Martin, K., op.cit. 116

7 De Morgan, J., *Fouilles A Dahchour en 1894-1895*, (Vienne, 1903), pls. 15, 16, 20 No. 24

8 Klebs, L., *Die Reliefs und Malereien des Mittleren Reiches (VII.-XVII. Dynastie ca. 2475-1380 v. Chr.)*

Material zur ägyptischen Kulturgeschichte, Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 6, Fig. 123; De Morgan, j., op.cit. Fig. 44, 80

the offering table and of offerings carried in the funerary procession¹. The open blue lotus flower and closed bud is well known in this form from the 18th Dynasty² until the late period.

The hairstyle and dress of the woman depicted on this relief fragment are also of interest. In ancient Egypt, hairstyles changed through time, varying lengths and styles during the same time period reflecting changes in fashion, as well as differences in sex, age, and social status. The tripartite wig worn by women in the Old Kingdom continued in use during the New Kingdom and later, although by that time it was an archaic coiffure worn chiefly by queens and goddesses. Ordinary upper-class women wore massive wigs of human hair, elaborately braided, curled, and frizzed. These wigs, which generally cover the wearer as far as her shoulder blades, have been called 'enveloping wigs', because they are shown without divisions and with the ears covered. This style distinguishes the coiffure from the Hathoric and tripartite wigs that are pushed behind the ears to leave the ear obvious as a sign of godlessness.

The only part of the woman's dress which are visible, are the shoulder straps of a shift dress³, another archaic style worn by goddesses from the New Kingdom onwards⁴. The broad-collar necklaces of the type shown in the relief, were made of plain tubular beads, and were already known by the early Old Kingdom⁵. Such traditional collars consist of two or more (here four) rows of tubular beads woven together vertically, with an outer row of drop beads. The terminals are simple semi-circular plaques. There can be no doubt that such broad collars had an amuletic function, for they are depicted beside other types of amuletic jewelry on Middle Kingdom coffins⁶. The style of broad collar worn by the woman in the fragment is well known in Egypt from the Old Kingdom, during the 18th Dynasty, and later.

The sistrum and *menat* necklace which the woman is holding, are indications of her status, and both were associated with the goddess

1 Leprohon, J. R., *Stelae II The New Kingdom to the Coptic Period, Corpus Antiquitatum Aegyptiacarum Museum of Fine Arts, Boston department of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Art*, Toronto 1986, (Mainz am Rhein, 1991), pls. 17, 159, 173, 189

2 Boston Museum of Fine Arts: *Egypt's Golden Age: the Art of Living in the New Kingdom, 1558-1085 B.C.* A Catalogue of Exhibition held 3/2-2/5/82 Boston, 1982, Piece No.72, 84, 109; Fazzini, Richard A., *Ancient Egyptian Art in the Brooklyn Museum*, (New York, 1989), Fig. 33

3 This style is well known from the Old Kingdom onward see: Teeter, E., op.cit. Fig. 6

4 Martin, G., *Corpus of Reliefs of the New Kingdom from the Memphite Necropolis and Lower Egypt*, vol. 1, 1987, pl. 80; Fazzini, Richard A., op.cit., Fig. 29

5 Firth, C.; Gunn, B. *Excavation at Saqqara: Teti Pyramid Cemeteries*, (Cairo, 1926), pls. 34, 35

6 Jequier. G. M., *Les. Frieses des Sarcophages du Moyen Empire*, (Cairo, 1921), 62 ff.

Hathor. The Egyptians used two types of sistrum; the hooped-shaped, called *sekhem*, and the naos-shaped called *sesheshet*. The name of the first derived from *sekhem*, meaning ‘mighty, powerful’¹, alludes to the instrument’s ritual power; that of the second (derived from *seshesh*, meaning ‘to rustle’², may refer onomatopoeically to the sound made by the sistrum’s precursor, bundles of papyrus plants shaken during rituals. In our relief, the upper part of the naos-sistrum takes the form of a temple gate with a Uraeus snake shines at its gate³, which links between the Uraeus that represented in the goddess NHmt-awAjj, and the naos-sistrum⁴. The use of the sistrum was to rustle it in front of the the goddesses to ask them for protection.

Both kinds of sistrum were associated with the goddess Hathor, and an image of the goddess’s head often links the handle to the frame. The sistrum was used in rituals to call on deities, particularly Hathor and associated goddesses⁵, to beseech them for protection and divine blessing, and to soothe their potentially violent and dangerous tempers. It symbolized joy and fertility, and was often represented in miniature as an amulet⁶. Such sistrams were typically donated to the temple by the king or other high officials. Actual sistrams were used mainly by priestesses⁷, by the queen⁸ and occasionally by the king⁹.

Conclusion:

This relief fragment is probably from a scene in a tomb chapel at Saqqara. The fragment was originally attributed to the 19th Dynasty. The simply modeled face, the softness of the features, and the strange shape of the nose indicate that the head was made during another Period. A closer look to the relief fragment however reveals that the wig is not arranged in horizontal rows, as in the Old Kingdom examples, but instead are echeloned, much as they appear in a the

1 Wb IV 251(18-20)

2 Wb III 487 (6-8)

3 Sachs, C., *Die Musikinstrumente des alten Ägyptens* (Berlin, 1921), Fig. 26, p. 30;
Winlock, H., *Bas Reliefs from the Temple of Tamses I. at Abydos, Metropolitan Mus. Papers I* (New York, 1921) pl. 6. ; LD III, 72, 147

4 Sethe, K., *Urgeschichte und älteste Religion der Ägypter*, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 18/4 (Leipzig, 1930), 8, 15

5 LD III 147, 189, 286

6 Andrews, C., *Amulets of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1994), 81

7 Winlock, H., op.cit. pl. 8

8 LD III, 72, 189, 256; Naville, E., *The festival-hall of Osorkon II. in the great temple of Bubastis (1887 - 1889)* (London, 1892) pl. 4 - 12

9 Breasted, J. H., *Ancient Records of Egypt. Historical Documents. From the Earliest times to the Persian Conquest, III* (New York, 1906), 414; LD III 198 the goddess Hathor is wearing a wig on her head

reliefs of the New Kingdom¹. But by far the most convincing evidence of a Late Period date.

The relief exhibits the characteristic artistic style of the Late Period. Among the most obvious features are the eye is almond-shaped and convex, with an incised lid line and a modeled eyebrow. The nose is long and unusually low, and has a flared nostril. The mouth shape is sensuous. She is shown wearing a wig with a glimpse that falls upon her brow and in front and back of her right shoulder.

The subject matter, overall carving style, and preserved elements together with the appearance of the woman, her clothing, and the sistrum accouterments, these features imply a 26th Dynasty date. Individual details are related to analogous scenes in other contemporaneous tombs and placed in the context of the late period.

Although the relief, due mainly to several stylistic affinities such as material, technique (such as changing between low raised and sunk relief²), and mouth shape, the artistic style of the woman's hand grasping on the sistrum handle, suggesting a Late Period date of 26th Dynasty³, it is difficult to assign it to a particular ruler.

It is well known that the naos-sistrum was never held by private, it was restricted only to the royal house⁴. Princesses, priestesses and royal wives were often represented shaking the instrument while participating in rituals or ceremonial activities, in our fragment the lady is holding the sistrum to her chest as an insignia that may indicate that the woman was the goddess herself and not a priestess or princesses.

The style of the hair pushed behind the ears, which distinguishes the goddesses' hairstyle from others, suggests that the profile was of the goddess Hathor.

The measurement of the fragment is the same like that of the late period fragments distributed among the different museums of the world⁵. The tendency to archaize during the late 25th and the 26th Dynasty, make it possible to say that this fragment can be dated to this period.

1 Roehrig, C.; Lacovara, P.; Auria, Sue D', *Mummies and Magic, the Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt. Exhibition Catalogue Boston*, Sept. 14 - Dec. 11, 1988. Boston, 1988, Fig. 80; Fazzini, R. A., *Ancient Egyptian Art in the Brooklyn Museum* (New York, 1989), Fig. 33

2 This style is well known in the Late period see: *Cleveland Museum of Art: Catalogue of Egyptian Art*, (New York, 1999), Fig. 310, 311

3 *Ibid*

4 Klebs, L., Die verschiedenen Formen des Sistrums, *ZÄS* 67 (1931), 63

5 *Cleveland Museum of Art: Catalogue of Egyptian Art* (New York, 1999), Fig. 310, 311

It seems to me possible that the fragment can be dated later than 19th Dynasty and probably reveals indications of 26th Dynasty. For that reason, a suggestion to the Late Period has been considered.



(Fig. 1) Relief fragment from Saqqara, Al-Arish Museum No. 879