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1. Fragmentary slate triad of Mycerinus: the goddess Hathor on Mycerinus' right, personification of a nome on his left, ca. 2599-2571 B.C., from Giza. *Harvard-Boston Expedition.* 11.3147

A Fragmentary Triad of King Mycerinus



IT HAS LONG been a commonplace to speak of the Old Kingdom as the period of the first flowering of the brilliant civilization of ancient Egypt. More specifically we consider the Fourth Dynasty as the time when the forms of Egyptian sculpture were rationalized, to establish a framework adhered to but sometimes reinterpreted during the succeeding twenty centuries. But as with all commonplaces, the expert and the public tend sometimes to neglect the well-known for the sake of less frequently cultivated fields which appear thereby to be more rewarding. For this reason it is always a source of considerable pleasure to have the mind and eye taken back to the familiar from a fresh point of view. This rare occurrence is what prompts the present note in connection with the fragmentary slate triad of Mycerinus (Figs. 1-3).¹ The triad was brought to Boston not long after its discovery in 1908 by the American Egyptologist and late Curator of Egyptian Art in the Museum of Fine Arts, Dr. George Andrew Reisner. For many years it was considered too fragmentary for exhibition with the other masterpieces of the Fourth Dynasty and was placed in the Old Kingdom Study Room. Not long ago it was decided that the rarity of the piece as well as its neglected beauty justified its reinstallation in the First Egyptian Sculpture Gallery with other great treasures gleaned from Dr. Reisner's excavations at Giza. More recently it was possible to have new photographs made and the handsome results of Mr. Edward J. Moore's skill speak for themselves (Figs. 1-3).

The triad is one of several found by Reisner in the Valley Temple of Mycerinus' pyramid, third and smallest of the three pyramids at Giza. Four complete examples were discovered, including the Boston slate triad (Fig. 4).² The triads show Mycerinus either sitting or standing with the goddess Hathor and a male or female personification of one of the nomes of Upper and Lower Egypt. Theoretically there might have been as many as forty-two of these sculptures, one for each nome. In the fragmentary piece here illustrated the king stands in the center, Hathor on his right and a male nome-figure on his left. The right hand of the nome can be seen on Mycerinus's right shoulder (Fig. 2), indicating that the former embraces the king. The significance of these statues may lie in Hathor's association with the nome-figures as a fertility goddess, to ensure the provision from the nomes of rich food offerings for the king in after-life.

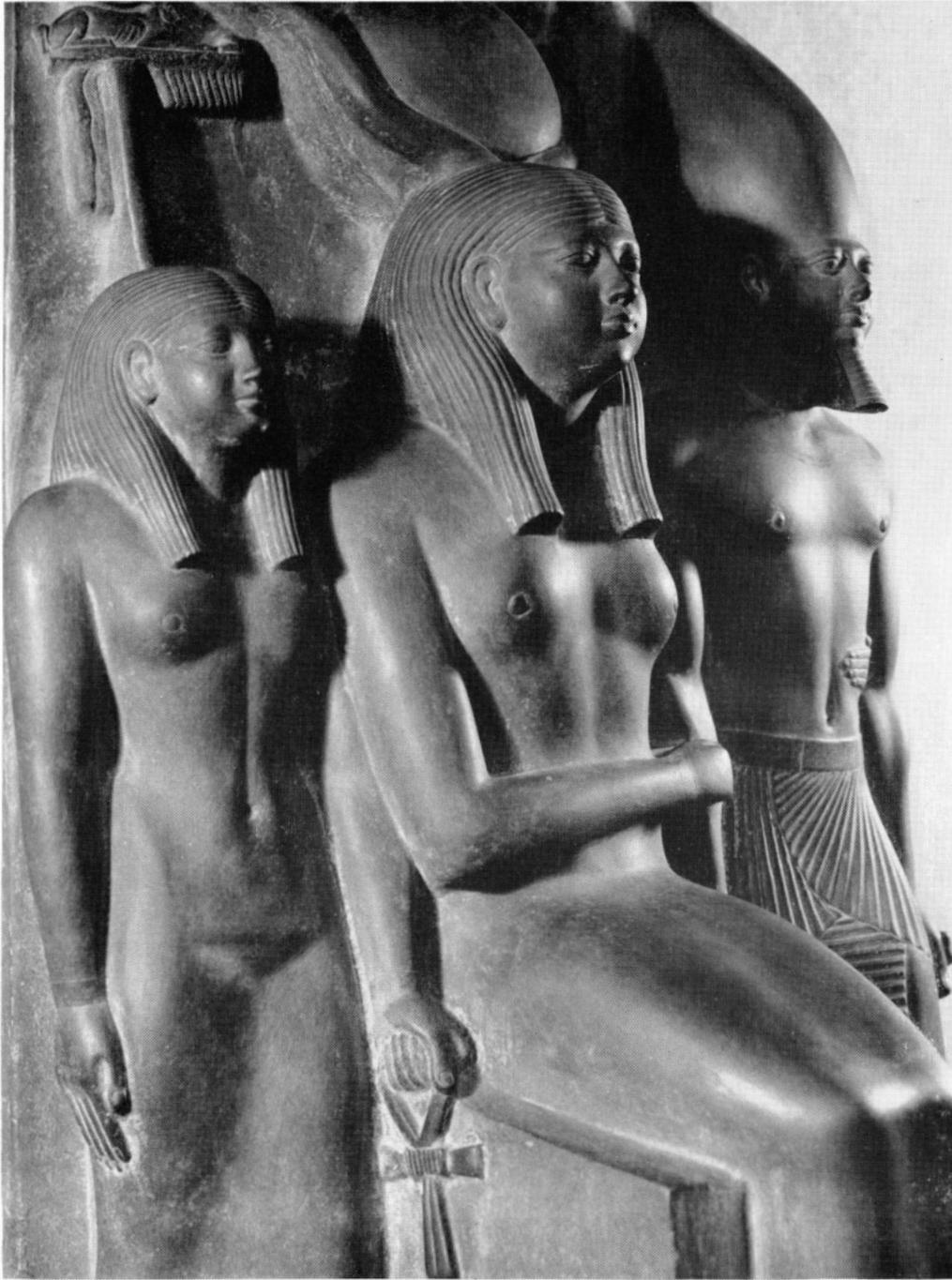
If, as seems likely, Reisner and W. Stevenson Smith are correct in their reconstruction of the scanty and tantalizing evidence,³ Mycerinus came to the throne of Egypt after a period of family strife and dynastic unrest whose causes may well be found in the tremendous output demanded by the construction of the two great pyramids. In any case Mycerinus, the successor of Cheops and Chephren, was



2. Three-quarter view of slate triad.
Opposite page: 3. Detail of figure of Hathor.



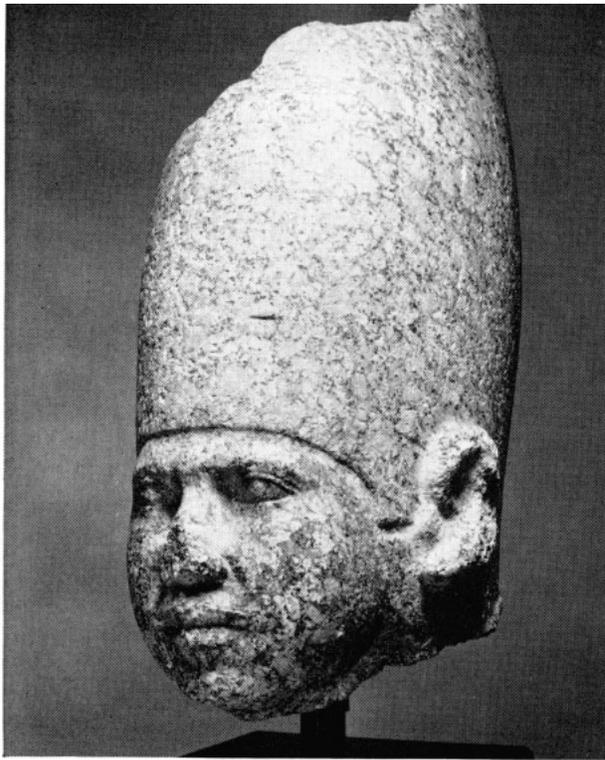
4. Slate triad of Mycerinus; Hathor seated, personification of the Hare Nome on her right, Mycerinus on left. From Giza. *Harvard-Boston Expedition.* 09.200



evidently unable to command resources of manpower or supplies equal to those of his predecessors. In later times the legend grew up that Cheops and Chephren were wicked and cruel monarchs who neglected the gods of Egypt, whereas Mycerinus was highly respected for having restored the dignities and piety due the sacred temples and their establishments. Little enough has survived of these pious works and it is rather from his own funerary monuments that come many of the masterpieces, including several representations of himself, which have made possible a more complete assessment of Old Kingdom sculpture.

Only fragments of sculptures of Sneferu, the first king of the Fourth Dynasty, have survived at his valley temple at Dahshur,⁴ and so there is no well-preserved royal portrait in the round of the early Fourth Dynasty, unless it be the extraordinary red granite head in Brooklyn (Fig. 5)⁵ which has been dated to the late Third or early Fourth Dynasty. The Brooklyn granite head which is rather over life-size and made more impressive still by the high and massive white crown of Upper Egypt, can be rewardingly compared with the very much smaller Cairo ivory statuette of Cheops,⁶ Sneferu's successor and builder of the Great Pyramid. In both sculptures is to be found a massiveness and heaviness reminiscent of the great statue of Djoser in Cairo⁷ (Third Dynasty, ca. 2750 B.C.), but unlike that work the two later sculptures, and particularly the granite head carved though it may be in very hard stone, show an advanced sense of plastic forms. Especially significant in this connection are the heavy brows of the Brooklyn head which so effectively protrude over the eyes. We shall follow as we can the development of this feeling for muscular form which reaches its most profound expression during the reign of Mycerinus. Despite the rarity of definitely dated royal statuary of the first reign of Dynasty IV we possess from that earliest period one of the most famous works of Old Kingdom art, the statues of Rahotep and his wife Nofret in Cairo.⁸ These statues are justly famed for their monumental character so marvelously heightened by the brilliant colors which cover every part of the figures. Yet, skilfully as the body of Nofret is shown beneath her tightly-fitted garment, we find a certain simplicity of forms in which, as has been noted, the minor planes are given no detailed attention. They are, in fact, subordinated to the effect of entire masses. We do not look here for a symphony of harmoniously related planes which distinguish the fragmentary triad, but rather for the pleasing relationships of massed forms. We detect, nevertheless, some uncertainty in the position of the right arm of Rahotep, a problem which was to be resolved later in the Dynasty.

In the sculptures of the reign of Cheops we see the continued development of this search for the simplified ideal of the human form which finds its apogee in the limestone reserve heads from Giza. In those sculptures are to be found elements of individual portraiture scarcely equalled at any other time in Egyptian art, but they are given their individuality by details of physiognomy such as profile, cheek bones and nose type, while retaining a framework of complete simplicity of form (Fig. 6). Alongside these portraits is the large seated statue in Hildesheim⁹ of the Vizier Hemiunu (possibly the administrator for the construction of the Great Pyramid), in which full attention is paid the details of physiognomy and the literal appearance of the subject. Much more detail is represented in this work: the plumpness of the



5. Red granite head of an unknown king: late Third or early Fourth Dynasty, perhaps ca. 2680 B.C. *The Brooklyn Museum.*

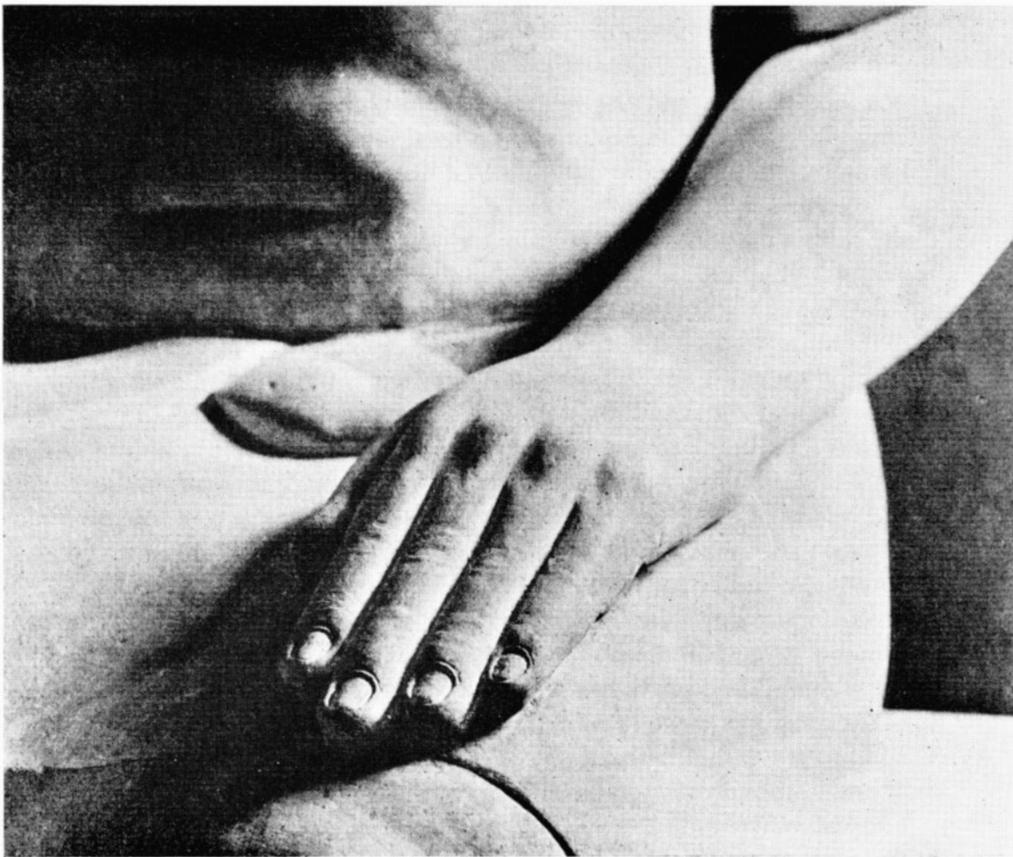
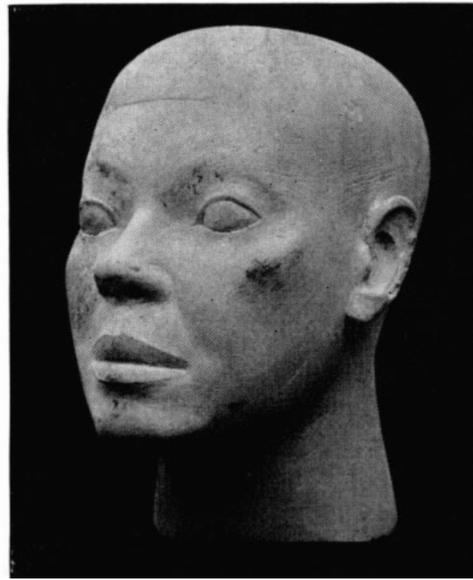
torso whose folds of flesh are truthfully shown, the musculature of the neck, the lifelike quality of the fingers (Fig. 7). Still, we are in that school of sculptors which was aiming for a whole in which such details as these were either incidental or were broadly rendered with great simplicity. The sculptor has now successfully dealt with the position of the right arm which had caused some awkwardness in the poses of Rhotep and the ivory statuette of Cheops.

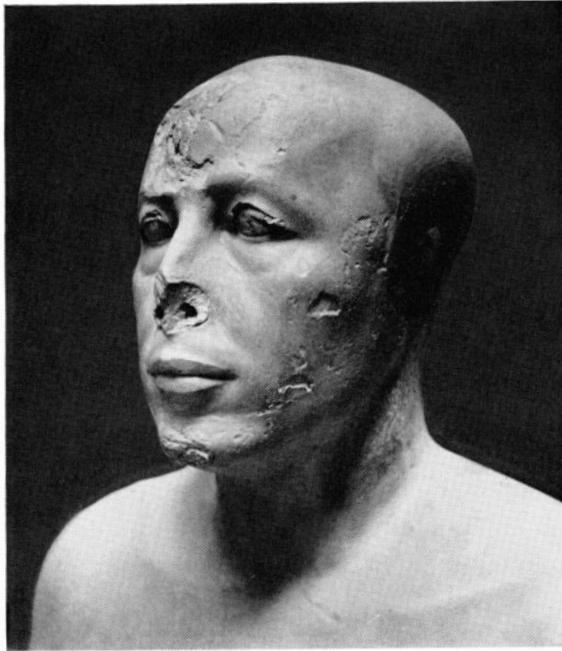
At the death of Cheops his son Radedef succeeded to the throne. Two heads¹⁰ from this king's funerary monument at Abu Roash, one in Paris and the other in Cairo, follow generally the traditions of that school which produced the reserve heads. But perhaps in the modeling of the brows, the mouth and the cheeks there is a suggestion of a second school of sculpture which seems to have come into its own during the next reign, and which possibly finds its origins in the master of the Brooklyn granite head.

During the reign of Chephren the two schools of sculptors posited by Reisner, and of which we have seen tentative steps in the preceding reigns, become distinct from one another. The first, called by Reisner the school of "Sculptor A," was trained in the shop or shops which produced the reserve heads. To "Sculptor A" or his colleagues are attributed the Great Sphinx at Giza (whose face is a portrait of Chephren), the diorite statue of Chephren in Cairo (Borchardt No. 14), the slate pair of Mycerinus and his queen, Khamerernebty II, in Boston, and the slate triads of Mycerinus in Cairo. In all these works the sculptor or sculptors arrived at a fully developed ideal of sculpture in which unnecessary details and minor surface modeling were severely limited as being irrelevant to the desired whole. Of this school the masterpiece is undoubtedly the great diorite Chephren in Cairo.¹¹ The works thought by Reisner to belong to the school of "Sculptor B" include among others the ala-

6. Limestone reserve head from Giza,
ca. 2656-2633 B.C. H. .300 m.
Harvard-Boston Expedition. 14.719

7. Detail of statue of the Vizier Hemiunu
from Giza, ca. 2656-2633 B.C.
Hildesheim, Pelizaeus Museum.





8. Detail of painted limestone bust of Ankh-haf from Giza., ca. 2625-2600 B.C. *Harvard-Boston Expedition.* 27.442

baster statue of Chephren from Memphis (Cairo, Borchardt No. 41), the diorite face of Chephren in Leipzig, the great alabaster seated Mycerinus in Boston, the Boston Mycerinus triad (Fig. 4), and the Boston head of the supposed youthful Shepseskaf, successor to Mycerinus. To these can certainly be added the painted limestone bust of Chephren's Vizier Ankh-haf in Boston,¹² which is not only an early example of the second school but in many respects surpasses all others, earlier and later, in the perfection of modeled surfaces (Fig. 8). It may well be that the slate pair of Mycerinus should also be put into the second group, but it was the leaner facial type of Mycerinus which induced Reisner to include it with the first school.

There are hints of the predecessors of the second school in the Brooklyn and Radedef heads, but there is no complete set of antecedents by which to follow the steps taken by the school to achieve the brilliant result of the Ankh-haf bust. This portrait must be the decisive point at which the shops fall into two distinct groups, and with the Ankh-haf bust the second school attains complete mastery of technique and control of a new concept which is to flourish during the reign of Mycerinus. In these masterpieces we see a school of artists working within the established and now highly respected framework which the royal workshops had spent some generations of experiment and experience in achieving. However, the new school, or rather the successors to whatever studios produced the Brooklyn head and the Louvre and Cairo Radedef heads, gave way to a greater freedom in their treatment of the outlines set down so perfectly by the master of the first school. This freedom is in contrast to the severe but noble simplicity of "Sculptor A" and his colleagues. The new sculptures reveal a remarkable sense of plasticity, subtly modeled musculature and bony structures which might mean only the expression of considerable skill in stone-carving but are actually brought together coherently to amplify, so to

speak, the stricter early models. There is in the new freedom no lessening of dignity and nobility; majesty continues to receive its full due.

The fragmentary triad contains these characteristics of the second school. The anonymous sculptor who created this work reveals an almost unrestrained feeling for plastic form, and has thereby imbued his figures with an astonishing sense of movement. Particularly in the three-quarter view of Fig. 2 the eye is carried across the piece in a series of vertically undulating planes whose movement is not broken but only heightened by short horizontals. These horizontal planes in one sense control the verticals but in another, by calling attention to them, strengthen them. And how wonderfully effective is the fan-like pattern of the king's kilt which appears to unite the opposing planes by taking part in both. In addition, the sharply shadowed ridges of the kilt provide an important decorative accent to the otherwise polished surfaces of the figures.

We need not call attention here to further details such as the modeling of the hips of Hathor or the fully naturalistic rendering of the muscles and joints at the elbows of the goddess and the king. These and others are evident in the illustrations. One may view with sad resignation the present fragmentary state of the triad, but all will agree that this sculpture is one of the great masterpieces of ancient art.

EDWARD L. B. TERRACE

NOTE

The theory of two schools of sculpture during the reigns of Chephren and Mycerinus was first proposed by G. A. Reisner in *Mycerinus: The Temples of the Third Pyramid at Giza*, Cambridge, Mass., 1931, Chapter VII (*The Statuary*), followed and amplified by W. Stevenson Smith in *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, 2nd edition, Oxford, 1949, pp. 33ff.; *Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, Harmondsworth and Baltimore, 1958, Chapter 5 (*Dynasty IV*); *Ancient Egypt as represented in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, 4th edition, Boston, 1960, pp. 33ff. These volumes should be consulted for more detailed material on the sculpture of the Old Kingdom in Egypt. For another interpretation of Old Kingdom sculpture see Cyril Aldred, *Old Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt*, London, 1949.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Acc. no. 11.3147. Slate, h. .800 m. Harvard-Boston Expedition. *Mycerinus*, p. 110, Statue 13, pl. 46f.
2. Acc. no. 09.200. Slate, h. .835 m. Harvard-Boston Expedition. *Mycerinus*, p. 109, Statue 9, pls. 38-40; *Ancient Egypt*, fig. 23.
3. Reisner and Smith, *A History of the Giza Necropolis II*, p. 8; *Mycerinus*, Chapter XI (*The Family of Mycerinus*).
4. Ahmed Fakhry, "The Excavation of Snefru's Monuments at Dahshur, Second Preliminary Report," *Annales du Service*, vol. 52, 1952 pp. 588-589 and pls. 18 and 19.
5. John D. Cooney, "A Colossal Head of the Early Old Kingdom," *The Brooklyn Museum Bulletin*. Spring 1948, pp. 1ff.
6. *Old Kingdom Sculpture and Painting*, pl. 5b
7. *Ibid.*, pl. 2c
8. *Ibid.*, pl. 6c
9. *Ibid.*, pl. 6d
10. *Ibid.*, pl. 11
11. *Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, pl. 40.
12. Acc. no. 27.442. Limestone with painted layer of plaster, h. .506 m. Harvard-Boston Expedition. *Old Kingdom Sculpture and Painting*, pls. 14 and 15a.