

# BULLETIN

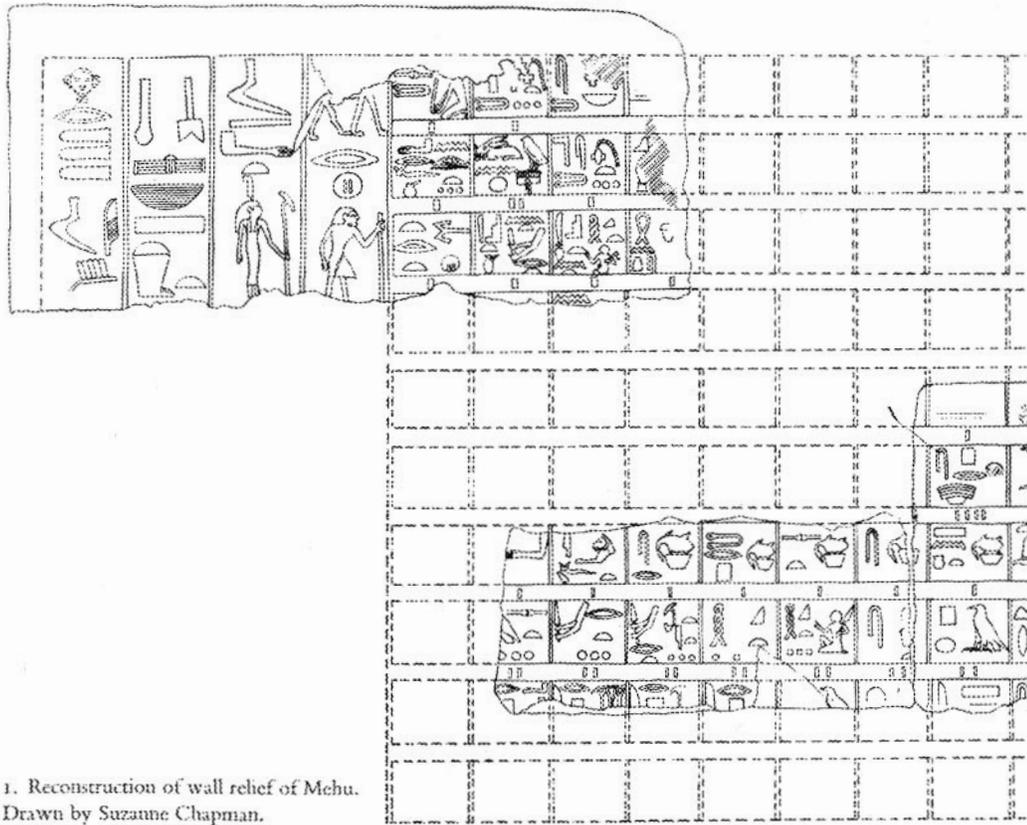
VOLUME LVI

NUMBER 304

SUMMER, 1958

*Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*

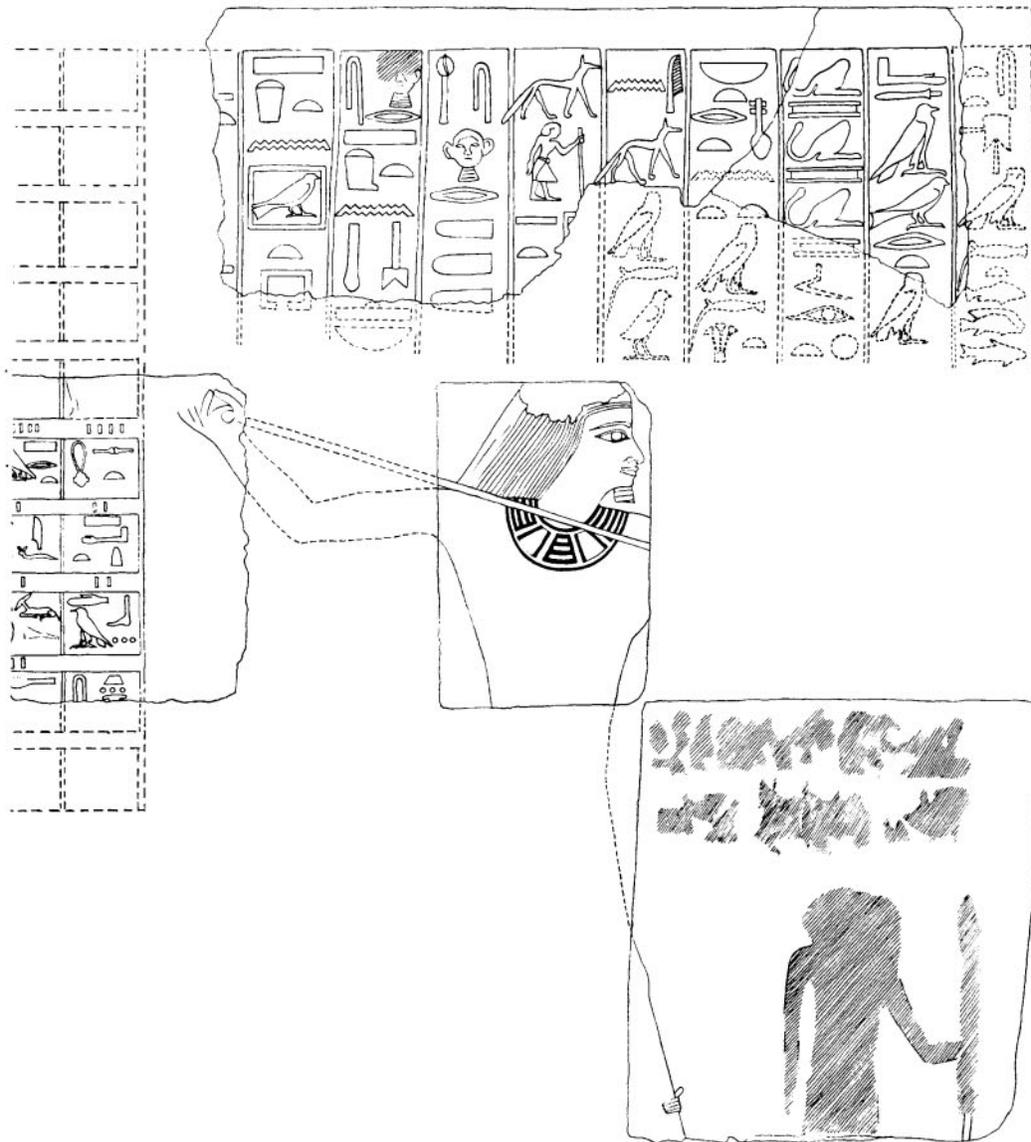




1. Reconstruction of wall relief of Mehu.  
Drawn by Suzanne Chapman.

## The Judge Goes Fishing

**T**HE ancient Egyptian took such a keen pleasure in fishing and hunting birds in the papyrus swamps that he wished to enjoy such activities in the After-world. He hoped to bring this about by means of pictures on the walls of his tomb chapel. Prayers and descriptive inscriptions lent the magical potency which was believed to be inherent in the written word. In fact, there was an intimate relation between the hieroglyphs which formed the syllables and letters of the words and the larger pictures which portrayed the action in a wall scene. Most of what was represented in the chapel of an Egyptian tomb was concerned with the provision of material needs, that is, the agricultural processes by which food was supplied and stored away, or its preparation for the table. However, the portrayal of the life of the marshlands or the hunting expeditions in the desert involved an element of sport,



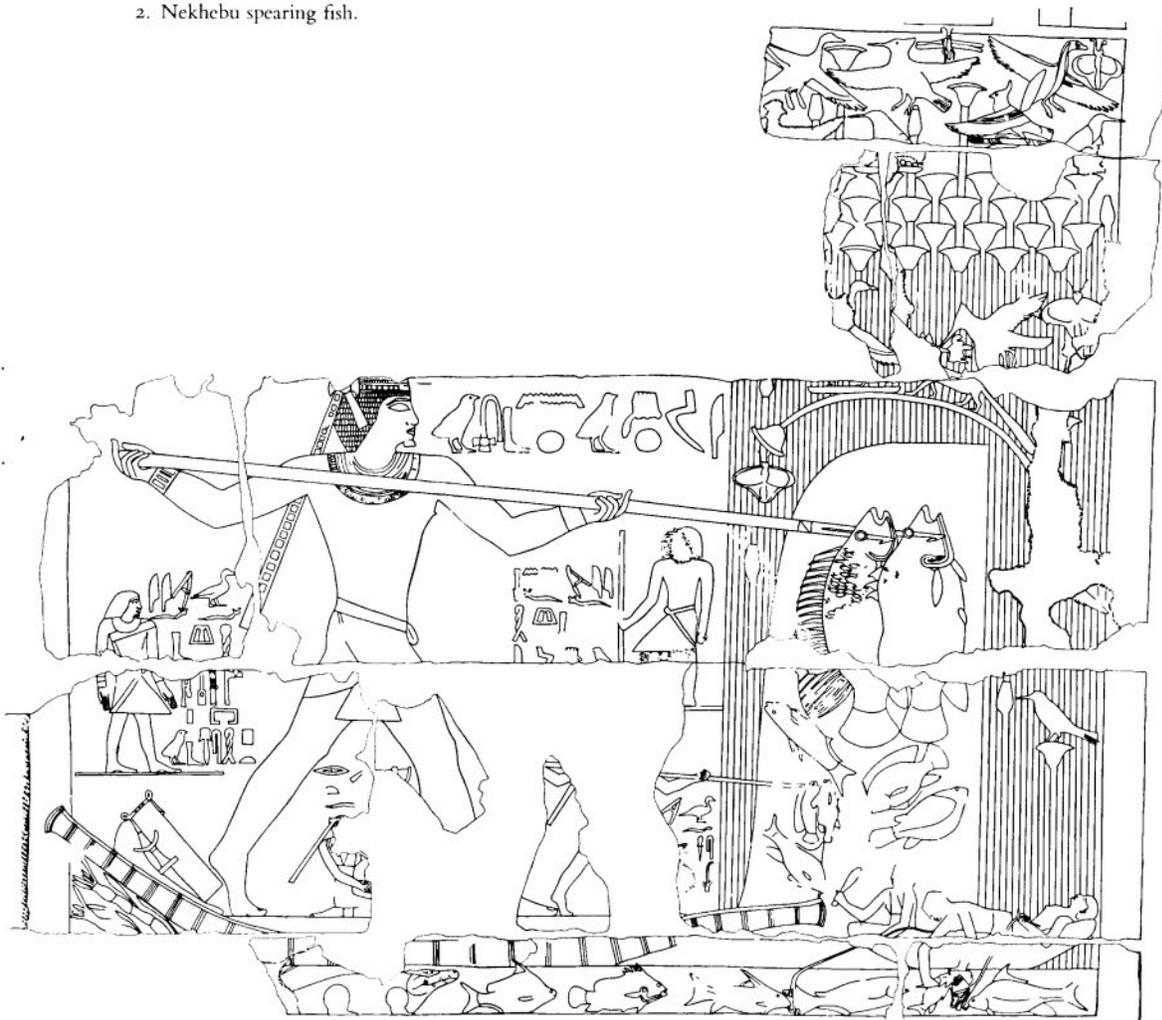
expressing delight in energetic action which arouses our special interest. The emphasis is upon the prowess of the chief figure and his competitive skill in activities which are characteristic of a country so peculiarly constituted geographically. The long narrow valley, hemmed in by desert on each side, owed its rich soil to the accumulated silt of the regular annual inundation. There was always the contrast between the rocky desert borderland, which could support game, and the watery expanses of reeds and papyrus filled with fish and birds along the edge of the cultivated fields. For a part of the year after the inundation these fields were themselves covered by the flood waters.

In the Old Kingdom, by the end of the Fifth Dynasty (about 2400 B.C.), the craftsman had developed a typical method for portraying the hunter shooting arrows from his bow or lassoing game, using a throwing stick for bringing down birds, harpooning a hippopotamus or spearing fish. It is the last named action which appears in the painted limestone relief from the small tomb of a man named Mehu at Giza (Cover)<sup>1</sup> which has recently been installed in our first Old Kingdom Gallery. Since the block only shows the yellow line of the fish-spear across the broad bead collar on the man's chest, a reconstructed drawing has been made including the adjoining stones from the same wall (Fig. 1). Fortunately, a large part of the inscription over Mehu's head was recovered. The missing part can be plausibly restored, although the statement is made in an unusual manner which cannot be exactly paralleled elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> It says that Mehu was "spearing fish in great quantities in the backwaters and seeing all good things in the northland." There then follow his titles which are amplified in four other lines of inscription to the left of the offering list, each square of which provided an item of food and drink for his use in the other world. This probably surmounted a table at which he was seated for his meal, attended by funerary priests, on the destroyed lower portion of the wall. Another list of Mehu's titles appeared carved in sunk relief on a long stone which probably served as the architrave of the entrance of the chapel.

These titles establish that our fisherman was a judge. The simple statement of his office (the standing jackal: *sab*) is augmented by others such as "Priest of Maat, the Goddess of Truth," "Eldest One of the Hall" and "Secretary of the Secret Decisions of the Great Judgement Court." Such solemn epithets contrast amusingly with the references to his sport in the marshes and the spirited action of the figure below. Adjoining blocks from the wall show the raised hand holding the fish-spear, the figure of his son standing in the boat in front of him, as well as the hand of his wife grasping his leg. She must have been seated at his feet in the light papyrus skiff. The son's name has been carefully erased in the space over his head but the name of Mehu's wife was found above one of the pairs of standing figures of the owner and his wife which once formed the sides of the entrance doorway. She is called "his beloved wife, the King's Descendant, Khenty."

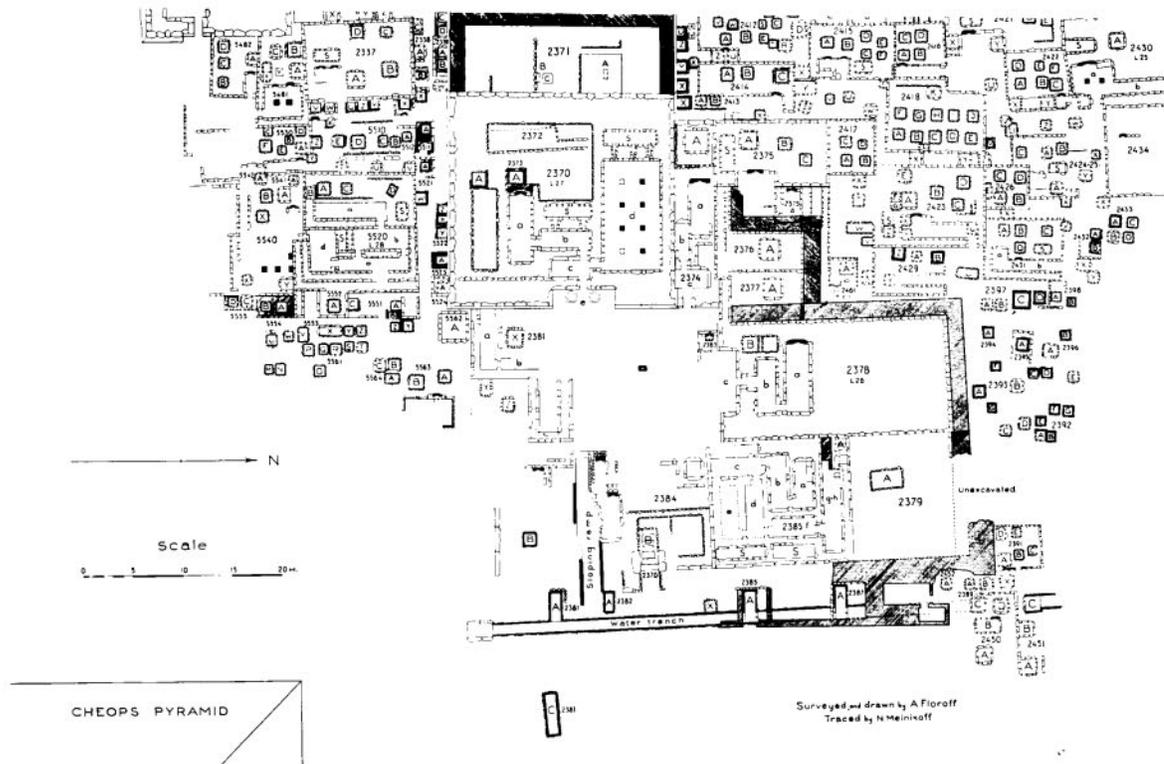
The scene in Fig. 1 can be better understood by comparison with the representation of the fishing party of a more distinguished family. This came from one of the later chapels of the large neighboring tomb complex which was begun by King Isesy's Vizier, Senezem-ib Yenty, toward the end of Dynasty V. This relief with its adjoining biographical inscription<sup>3</sup> has long been installed in Gallery E 12.<sup>4</sup> It formed part of the embrasure of the entrance to the chapel of Nekhebu who flourished in the reign of Pepy I as one of a family of master builders who throughout four generations carried out a series of royal construction projects into the last years of the Old Kingdom. Nekhebu was probably the son of the Vizier Mehy who served Unas, the last king of Dynasty V. This would make him the nephew of Khnumenty, who apparently succeeded his brother Mehy as Vizier and built his chapel (G 2374) between the latter's large tomb (G 2378) and that of their father (G 2370). This was the Overseer of all the King's Works and Vizier, Senezem-ib Yenty, who through the favor of King Isesy in the next to the last reign of Dynasty V founded the family

2. Nekhebu spearing fish.



fortune, as he tells us in his biographical inscription. After the time of Khnumenty the viziership passed to other men, two of whom are mentioned in the reliefs of the causeway corridor of the pyramid of King Unas at Saqqara. The title of Overseer of all the King's Works was retained, however, by the descendants of Senezem-ib, although there were evidently other contemporaries of theirs who also held this title in connection with building projects in other parts of the country. Nekhebu in his own biography tells how he progressed step by step in the profession of royal architect, being at first apprenticed to an older brother.

Nekhebu was in turn succeeded by his son Impy. Father and son appear together in a rock carving which records an expedition to the stone quarries of the Wady Hammamat in the Eastern Desert in the reign of Pepy I, while Impy is shown among the courtiers on the walls of the pyramid temple of Pepy II. He is probably the youth with the harpoon whose name is broken away in his father's fishing scene (Fig. 2).



3. Plan of corner of Giza Cemetery with tombs of Senezem-ib family: Yenty (G 2370), Khnumenty (G 2374), Mehy (G 2378) and Nekhebu (G 2381), and neighboring tombs of Mehu (G 2423) and Akhet-mehu (G 2375).

Impy was buried in a wooden coffin that had originally been prepared for his brother Ptah-sabu who stands behind their father in the same scene. The burial chamber of Impy was found with its equipment intact. His wooden coffin, pottery and many copper models of implements and vessels, as well as a broad collar of gold-covered faience beads, have long been exhibited in our collection.<sup>5</sup> An imported pottery jar that contained cedar oil from Syria was stamped with a cylinder seal of Pepy II.<sup>6</sup>

In his fishing scene, which is better preserved than that of Mehu, Nekhebu is shown in the same attitude spearing two large fish. According to a usual convention the mass of water has been raised as a background for the fish against the stems of the papyrus. Birds and a grasshopper fly up from the marsh, while a genet-cat has seized a young bird from a nest and is attacked by a kingfisher. Three men are catching fish by hook and line from a little boat at the foot of the papyrus thicket. Nekhebu is accompanied in a larger skiff by his wife, who sits at his feet, and a son, probably Impy, who also wields a fish-spear. Before Nekhebu stands the brother to whom he was apprenticed as a youth in the building trade, as he tells us in his biographical inscription. We know from another relief in this chapel that his name was Mer-ptah-ankh-Pepy. A second son, Ptah-sabu, stands behind his father.

The Judge Mehu's small stone mastaba (G 2423) was constructed to the west of the group of tombs built around the courtyard of the important Senezem-ib family

in a part of the Giza Cemetery which lay near the north-west corner of the Great Pyramid (Fig. 3). Like the owner of the nearby tomb (G 2375) who had a similar name, Akhet-mehu, and judicial titles, Mehu is not mentioned as a relative or an adherent of the more powerful family. However, the position of their tombs makes some sort of relationship very likely. While Mehu obviously had nothing to do with construction work, his judicial titles might connect him with the office of the vizier who held the title of judge as one of his important functions in controlling the various administrative branches of the government. It was probably in their judicial capacity that Mehu and Akhet-mehu were associated with the first and second generations of the Senezem-ib family which held the vizierate. A block of painted relief from Mehu's burial pit bore titles similar to those in his chapel and mentioned the pyramid of Isesy. Even if this evidence is of a somewhat doubtful nature, it is fairly evident that Mehu's long corridor chapel should be dated to a time at the turn of Dynasty V to Dynasty VI. The walls had been dismantled, probably at the end of the Old Kingdom, and some of the blocks with reliefs were used to roof over intrusive burial pits in the floor of the chapel.

Only a small portion of the chapel decorations was recovered. The carving varies considerably in quality, the finest workmanship being undoubtedly that applied to the block with the head of Mehu illustrated here (Cover). This is a remarkably attractive example of the new type of bolder relief carving that was beginning to appear toward the end of Dynasty V. It presents some stylistic peculiarities of its own which invite comparison with the new method of approach to the modelling of the face of our unusual naked wooden statue (Fig. 4) from the tomb of the Vizier

4. The Vizier Mehu.



Mehy<sup>7</sup> in whose entourage we should like to place the Judge Mehu. Both relief and statue show a similar sharpness in the joining of the planes of the face, long, peculiarly shaped eyes, a deep crease beside the nostril and a crisp cutting of the lips, with well defined medial lines on the upper lip. In addition the relief presents an unusual waving outline of the long hair framing the face. Unusual also is the red line marking the outer corner of the white of the eye. The well preserved coloring allows the drawing of the eye to make its full effect against the red of the face. The blue and green elements of the broad collar, the yellow shaft of the fish-spear, the partly preserved black of the hair and the traces of the gray background all add an especial vividness to the relief. This is particularly welcome since Old Kingdom carvings have so frequently lost the color that was a necessary adjunct to the completed work.

The small statuettes of Nekhebu,<sup>8</sup> whose fishing scene we have just been examining, show a distinctive emphasis upon the simplified planes in the carving. This has a linear, angular quality which was accentuated in the meagre modelling of poorly executed pieces when craftsmanship declined under the adverse economic conditions that accompanied the political collapse of the Old Kingdom. The earlier hints of this development which appear in such important works as the wooden statue of the Vizier Mehy or in the limestone triad of figures of a man named Pen-meru<sup>9</sup> are useful indications of a change in style in the later Old Kingdom. In the main it is almost impossible to distinguish the ordinary examples of sculpture in the round of Dynasty VI from those of Dynasty V. This is because a traditional style established in royal work of Dynasty IV was so successfully handed down by the large body of craftsmen trained in the Giza workshops connected with the pyramids of Cheops, Chephren and Mycerinus. We have a typical example of such pleasingly executed conservative work in our small wooden statue of Methethy.<sup>10</sup> It came from the Saqqara Cemetery and was made at about the same time as that of the Vizier Mehy, at the turn of Dynasty V to Dynasty VI. However, the heads of two other wooden figures of this man<sup>11</sup> have the long narrow inlaid eyes and the sharply joined facial planes of the Mehy statue. One small royal statuette of the Sixth Dynasty also represents this style in its peculiar facial structure. This is the slate kneeling figure of Pepy I in the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>12</sup>

More examples of the new style will undoubtedly be recognized as time goes on and more familiarity is gained with the fascinating changes that were continually taking place within the broad outlines of a traditional Egyptian style. It was already clear that a broader treatment of relief was established in Dynasty VI, bold in contrast to the delicate low modelling of the work of Dynasty V. The Mehu relief provides a new piece of evidence for a more subtle change that has affinities with the new treatment that was being applied to sculpture in the round. Perhaps our main interest in this attractively preserved example of early painted relief should lie however in its depiction of the Judge's very human relaxation from his labors at court in a family fishing party.

WILLIAM STEVENSON SMITH

NOTES:

1. M.F.A. Acc. No. 39.833; height 40 cms.; width 26.7 cms.; excavated by the Museum's Expedition in tomb G 2423 in the Western Cemetery at Giza in 1937.
2. See, however, H. Junker, *Giza IV*, p. 28, Fig. 8; A.M. Blackman, *The Rock Tombs of Meir, V*, Pl. XXIV; and P. Montet, *Les scènes de la vie privée dans les tombeaux égyptiens de l'ancien empire*, pp. 4, 21.
3. Dows Dunham, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 24 (1938), pp. 1ff.
4. M.F.A. Acc. No. 13.4332 from Giza chapel 2381. The drawing of this face of the wall by Mrs. Stephen Minot Weld (Elizabeth Eaton) is published here for the first time.
5. G. A. Reisner, *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, XI, (1913) pp. 53ff.; W. S. Smith, *Ancient Egypt*, pp. 61-63, Figs. 38, 39.
6. Smith in G. A. Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis, II*, p. 76.
7. M.F.A. Acc. No. 13.3466; W. S. Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, Pl. 23.
8. Particularly M.F.A. Acc. Nos. 13.3156, 13.3149; Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 85, Pl. 26a-c.
9. M.F.A. Acc. No. 12.1504 from the small Giza tomb G 2197; Smith, *op. cit.*, Pl. 21c.
10. M.F.A. Acc. No. 47.1455; B. V. Bothmer, *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, XLVI (1948), pp. 30ff.
11. One in the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City, W. S. Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, Pl. 54; and the other in the Brooklyn Museum, J. D. Cooney, *Five Years of Collecting Egyptian Art*, Pls. 4, 5.
12. Cyril Aldred, *Old Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt*, Pls. 60, 61.

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RECENTLY PUBLISHED (BY THE SAME AUTHOR)

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