

REVUE
D'ÉGYPTOLOGIE

PUBLIÉE PAR

LA SOCIÉTÉ FRANÇAISE D'ÉGYPTOLOGIE

AVEC LE CONCOURS DU CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA RECHERCHE SCIENTIFIQUE

TOME 38

PARIS

ÉDITIONS PEETERS

1987

THE COLOSSAL STATUE OF MYCERINUS RECONSIDERED

[PLANCHES 3-4]

BY

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One of the most impressive examples of royal sculpture to have survived from the Old Kingdom is the colossal “alabaster” (calcite) statue of Mycerinus now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston¹ (pl. 3-4). Reassembled from fragments² found in the ruins of the king’s pyramid temple at Giza in 1907³, the statue depicts the king seated on a block throne, wearing the *nms*-headcloth with uraeus and dressed in the *šndyt*-kilt, his left hand laid flat against the left knee and his right hand clutching the familiar “napkin”⁴.

In common with the entire series of Mycerinus figures⁵, the king is shown with a broad upper torso. This Reisner took as perhaps indicating that “Mycerinus ... [was] actually distinguished by unusually heavy shoulders”⁶; others have seen this sort of exaggeration as a mere artistic convention, an attempt to emphasize the power of the figure⁷ or “to give a correct impression when the statue is seen from below”⁸. Whatever the true explanation may be, with the Mycerinus colossus the effect is heightened by a head which, even allowing for the imbalance caused by the exaggerated shoulders, is incongruously small⁹.

The strange proportions of the Boston statue have attracted a good deal of comment over the years. Most recently, Arielle Kozloff, in a paper presented at the Third International Congress of Egyptology, has put forward the view that “the colossal portrait

For comments, suggestions and other assistance, thanks are due to Cyril Aldred, Christine Barratt, E.J. Brovarski, R.A. Caminos, W.V. Davies, J.R. Harris, T.G.H. James, F.R. Jay, M. Lehner, A.J. Spencer and R. Stadelmann. Responsibility for the opinions offered, however, lies solely with the writers.

¹ MFA 09.204. Cf. PM III (2nd ed.)/i, 32f.

² The missing portions of the feet, lower legs and the base were restored in plaster in 1935, along with much of the lower torso, arms and the right shoulder; cf. Dunham, *BMFA* 33, 21f. Additional fragments of the statue not incorporated in the 1935 restoration are in storage in the Museum of Fine Arts.

³ Reisner, *Mycerinus. The Temples of the Third Pyramid at Giza*, p. 108 (A) (1).

⁴ For which cf. Fischer, *Ancient Egypt in the Metropolitan Museum Journal 1968-1976*, 143f.

⁵ Reisner, *Mycerinus*, p. 119; cf. pl. 38f.

⁶ Reisner, *o.c.*, p. 119; he notes that the well-known statue of Rahotpe from Maidum displays similar proportions. Cf. Harris, *Egyptian Art*, p. 35, nos 3, 6 & 7.

⁷ Cf., commenting generally, Fazzini, *Images for Eternity*, p. 19.

⁸ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Illustrated Handbook* (Boston, 1976), 152.

⁹ Cf. Dunham, *BMFA* 41, 72. It might perhaps here be stressed that there can be no doubt as to the correctness of the restoration and the association of the head and torso. Not only is there a join between the head and the surviving shoulder (cf. pl. 4, a), but these elements were actually found together. Cf. Reisner, *Mycerinus*, p. 22, 108 (A) (1) (a)-(b); Vandier, *Manuel III*, p. 25, n. 3.

of Mycerinus was originally the portrait of an earlier king. Mycerinus had the head re-cut to create his own portrait ... [and] this necessarily resulted in making it disproportionately small for the body"¹⁰. The recutting of facial features in the context of statue usurpation, although not unknown in Egyptian art¹¹, is nevertheless a relatively rare phenomenon, and two features¹² would militate against appropriation as an adequate explanation for the Boston statue's curious appearance. First, it seems most improbable that a reworking of the face would have resulted in such a drastic imbalance of the head as a whole¹³. Secondly, the comparatively steep slope of the seat of the block throne—discernible even in its broken state (pl. 3, right)—is a distinctive feature of the large Mycerinus sculptures¹⁴, and would seem definitely to associate the figure with the rest of the series. In short, neither in conception nor in its final form would the Boston colossus appear to pre-date the reign of Mycerinus.

If usurpation by Mycerinus is unlikely, it must be considered equally improbable that the piece was subjected to any later alteration. Quite apart from the fact that it is not at all easy to see when, in what circumstances and by whom such alterations might have been carried out, the features of the Boston statue conform in every respect to other contemporary portraits of Mycerinus, and there can be no doubt that the head is a product of that king's reign¹⁵.

Since the attribution of the Boston colossus to Mycerinus seems certain, we are left with but three possible explanations: (I) that the improbable size of the head was intentional, a

¹⁰ Kozloff, in *Third International Congress of Egyptology*, 5-11 September 1982, *Programme* (Toronto, 1982), p. 32.

¹¹ Cf., for example, Cairo CG 430 and 432 (Borchardt, *Statuen und Statuetten*, II, pl. 70f.; Evers, *Staat aus dem Stein*, I, pl. 65f.; Aldred, *Middle Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt*, pl. 41, 43 and 46f.), Berlin 7264 (Evers, *o.c.*, I, pl. 64), Berlin 1121 (Fechheimer, *Die Plastik der Ägypter*, pl. 52; cf. Schäfer, *Principles of Egyptian Art*, p. 18, n. 27), Philadelphia E635 (Miller, *JEA* 25, 1f., esp. 4), and perhaps Louvre A40 (Ed. "Tel", *Le Musée du Louvre*, pl. 52f.). Each of these figures, the three former originally contemporaneous representations of Sesostri II, the fourth a statue of Ammenemes III usurped by Merenptah, the latter figure at one time attributed to the Middle Kingdom but now correctly identified as a representation of Amenophis III, were reworked more or less extensively in the Nineteenth Dynasty. Note, in particular, with regard to CG 430, 432 and Berlin 7264, the reduction in the size of the ears and the subtle remodelling of the facial features; the uraei on the Cairo sculptures were recarved to conform with New Kingdom fashion, whilst the pectoral ornaments on all three sculptures presumably replace the distinctive royal pendant of the Middle Kingdom. Although restorations of damaged sculptures from earlier epochs are frequently met with in the later period (cf., for example, British Museum EA 58892: Vandier, *Manuel*, III, *Album*, pl. 71, 6), the motive for these particular alterations was evidently usurpatory (though what has been done to the neck on CG 430 and 432 could be the result of removing a damaged beard).

¹² Quite apart from the fact that the usurpation of royal statues seems to be unattested before the New Kingdom.

¹³ Note that, although the recarving of the facial features and ears on CG 430 and 432 in particular (n. 11 above) has thrown the head slightly out of the proportion to the rest of the body, the relationship between the head-dress and torso remains substantially unchanged.

¹⁴ Cf., in particular, Reisner, *Mycerinus*, pl. 40, c-d; 47, b; 48, d. The smaller, unfinished Mycerinus sculptures from the valley temple (n. 19 below) do not display this feature, and return to the throne type with a flat or less pronounced slope seen, for example, in the Chephren sculptures (cf. Vandier, *o.c.*, pl. 2f.).

¹⁵ Cf. Vandier, *Manuel*, III, p. 25; Dunham, *BMFA* 41, 72. The identification as Mycerinus is implicitly accepted by Godron, in *Fs. Struve (Drevnii mir. Sbornik statei.)*, p. 71f. = *BIFAO* 62, 59f.

device—albeit unparalleled elsewhere in Egyptian art—to produce a more impressive figure¹⁶; (II) that figure was the work of a maladroit sculptor—which, as Vandier notes, is difficult to believe¹⁷; or (III) that the artist's efforts were constrained by other, more practical considerations.

Given the inherent improbability of (I) and (II), option (III) perhaps warrants closer examination. One suggestion tentatively put to the writers is that an alteration in the size of the head may have been necessitated by a flaw in the stone¹⁸. Although this explanation may well contain a germ of truth, it cannot be considered wholly satisfactory. As is shown by the unfinished statuettes of Mycerinus from his valley temple¹⁹ (pl. 4, b), the rough proportions of the sculptures were blocked out in the initial cutting; major flaws would surely have appeared at this stage, in which case the design could and most probably would²⁰ have been adapted to avoid unduly altering the proportions of the finished piece²¹.

An explanation which perhaps fits the facts more closely is that the curious proportions of the Boston statue were the result not of accident but of a deliberate alteration in the iconographic composition of the piece²²—though an alteration which might well have been prompted by difficulties in realizing in a rather brittle medium and on such a large scale the proposed iconographic features of the piece. It is the conviction of the present writers that, as initially blocked out, the colossus was intended to be represented wearing not the *nms* but a narrow, upright crown—probably the *ḥḏt* (white crown). If this is so, the amount of stone allowed for the carving of the head will have been relatively narrow, determined, in fact, by the swelling of this projected crown; and indeed a reconstruction of the figure with a white-crowned head the width of the existing *nms* will restore the proportions of the statue to normality²³ (fig. 1). At a relatively early stage in the

¹⁶ Cf. Dunham, *BMFA* 41, 72.

¹⁷ Vandier, *Manuel*, III, p. 25.

¹⁸ By Mark Lehner (personal communication).

¹⁹ Reisner, *Mycerinus*, p. 112f., pl. 62f.

²⁰ Examples of sculptural proportions being constrained by the size of the available stone are not, of course, unknown: cf. Maspero, in *Le Musée Égyptien*, II, p. 37f., pl. 13, b (JE 35126).

²¹ Note also that an unintentional break resulting from a flaw in the rock could have been remedied by pegging, cementing or otherwise re-attaching or replacing the displaced portion. Instances of such restorations are fairly common, and several might be cited: cf. in general Fischer, in *Ancient Egypt in the MMJ*, 120 and n. 40.

²² Cf., perhaps, Berlin 21838 (conveniently, Aldred, *Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, p. 81, 105, n. 19).

²³ As seems frequently to be case with seated representations of the Old Kingdom and earlier (cf. Cairo JE 32161 [Aldred, *Old Kingdom Art in Egypt*, pl. 5]; Ashmolean 1896-1908 E.517 [*ibidem*, pl. 4]; Brooklyn 39.120 [Vandier, *Manuel*, III, *Album*, pl. 8, 1]; exceptions include Cairo CG 40 [Vandier, *o.c.*, pl. 6, 3]), the figure's restored white crown has been furnished with no form of dorsal support. In standing representations of the king wearing the white crown, a dorsal support of some kind seems to have been obligatory; cf., for example, the Mycerinus sculptures from the valley temple (Reisner, *Mycerinus*, pl. 38f.; Vandier, *o.c.*, pl. 4f., Wood, *JEA* 60, 82f., pl. 23f.); Cairo JdE 39103 (Vandier, *o.c.*, pl. 7, 5). Cf. Romano, in *Neferut net Kemit: Egyptian Art from the Brooklyn Museum*, cat. no. 9 (Brooklyn 46.167).

blocking out of this figure, the decision must have been made (for whatever reason) to alter the composition to depict the king wearing the low, broad *nms*. The maximum width of the headcloth will therefore have had to be accommodated in a space originally intended for the head alone. The sculptor appears, naturally enough, to have encountered some difficulty in carrying out this commission, with the result that the proper canonical relationship between head and body was irretrievably lost.

The scant archeological record perhaps furnishes some support for this hypothesis, as we may briefly consider. Both at the so-called “valley temple” of Snofru at Dahshur²⁴ and at the pyramid temples of Cheops²⁵ and Chephren²⁶ at Giza, there seems to have existed a multiplicity of representations of the king, each temple having been designed with an open court fronting a series of statue emplacements²⁷. In the Snofru complex, at least, these statue emplacements appear to have represented the monarch wearing the *hdt*²⁸. With the pyramid temple of Mycerinus the plan changes, and one specific niche is featured²⁹. There can surely be little doubt that this niche was intended for the Boston colossus, evidently the main cult statue within the pyramid temple³⁰. All the indications are that the headgear of this statue was altered from a narrow, upright crown to the *nms*-headcloth, and it is clear from the head of the colossal statue of Userkaf now in Cairo³¹ that the tradition of a single cult figure with *nms* was continued into the Fifth Dynasty. It may well be, therefore, that a development is to be discerned from a plurality of cult figures within the pyramid temple, each figure adorned with the *hdt*, to a single cult image wearing the *nms*³². If this is the case, the Mycerinus colossus evidently marks the point of iconographic transition — although it is admitted that the exact motivation for this change must, for the moment, elude us.

²⁴ Cf. Fakhry, *The Monuments of Sneferu at Dahshur*, I, p. 106f.; II, *passim*. The unusual plan of the structure in which the Snofru sculptures (n. 28 below) were set up, and the existence of a second, as yet unexcavated precinct close to the cultivation (cf. de Morgan, *Carte de la nécropole memphite*, pl. I), tend to cast doubt upon the excavator’s interpretation of its role as being that of a valley temple; cf. further Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* (2nd edn. revised by Simpson), p. 72f. Its closer affinity to the pyramid temples at Giza suggests, in fact, that it functioned in a similar way.

²⁵ Cf. Lauer, *ASAE* 46, 245f., fig. 17, pl. 68.

²⁶ Hoelscher, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Chephren*, pl. 3.

²⁷ The relevant portion of the Cheops pyramid temple is now largely destroyed, but its design seems to indicate that it too contained a number of statue niches (Mark Lehner, personal communication). For a consideration of the possible reconstruction of the rear portion of this temple, cf. Lauer, *ASAE* 49, 116f.

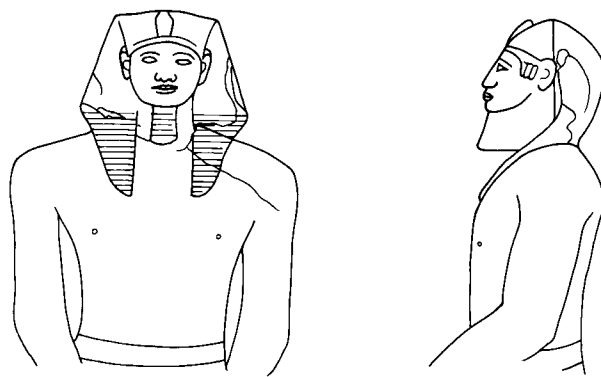
²⁸ Cf. Fakhry, *Monuments of Sneferu*, II/ii, p. 3f., pl. 33, 36f.

²⁹ Reisner, *Mycerinus*, plan I (8).

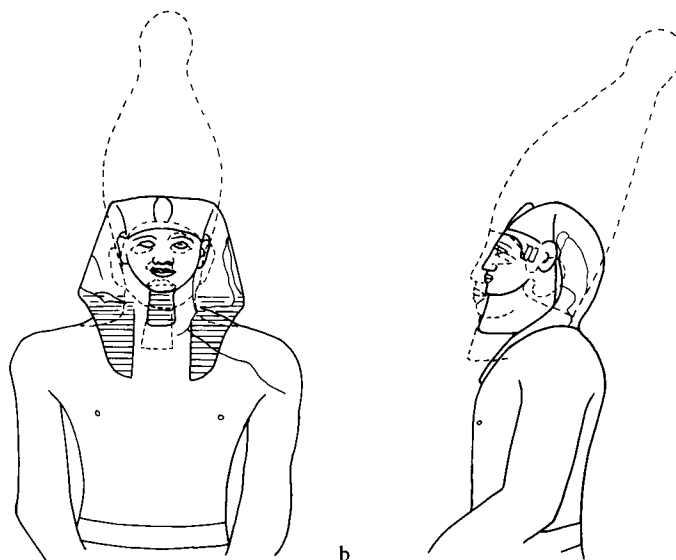
³⁰ Cf. Seidel-Wildung, in Vandersleyen, *Das alte Ägypten*, p. 224.

³¹ JE 52501: Vandier, *o.c.*, pl. 7, 6.

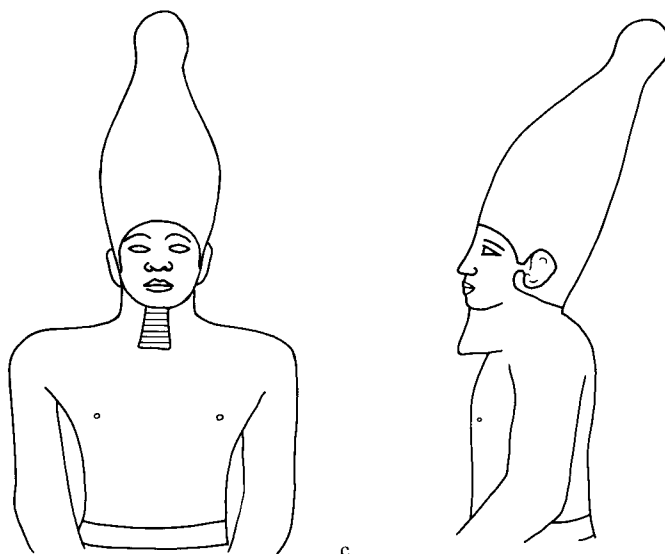
³² With sculpture from the valley temples, the *nms* is attested rather earlier, by the reign of Chephren at least (Vandier, *o.c.*, pl. 2f.). The statue of Zoser from the Step Pyramid complex, wearing what some might construe as a “proto-*nms*” (cf. Lauer, *La pyramide à degrés*, II, pl. 24), is probably not immediately relevant to the present discussion; its discovery within a serdab, albeit attached to the temple on the north face of the pyramid, suggests that its role was more akin to the “ka” statues of the Old Kingdom funerary complex than to the later pyramid temple cult figures.



a



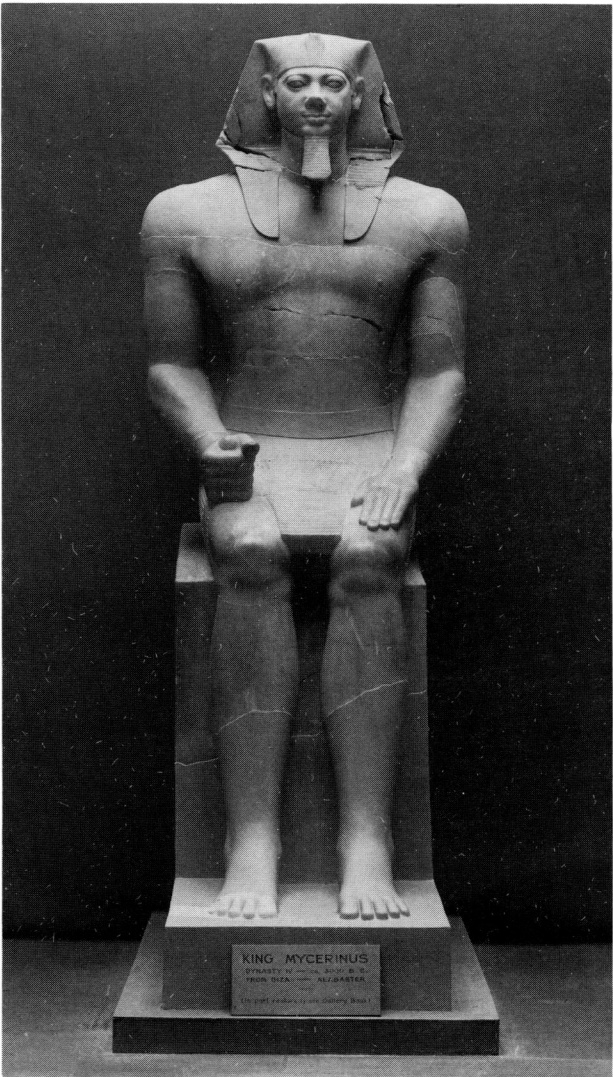
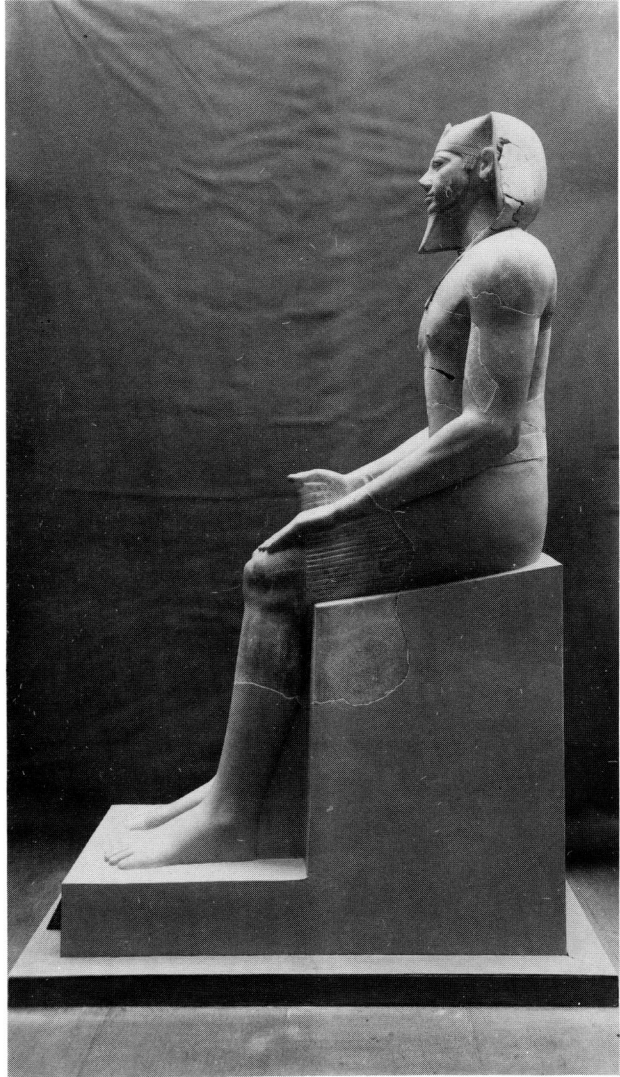
b



c

Figure 1:

- a) MFA 09.204, as is;
 b) the same, with white-crowned head of correct proportions superimposed;
 c) the same, as originally conceived.



Statue MFA 09.204, as restored (courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



a) MFA 09.204, head fragments and shoulder before restoration
(courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



b) Left to right: MFA 11.731, 11.730, 11.729, 11.733, 11.732
(courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)