THE TREASURES OF THE PYRAMIDS
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The Tombs of the High Officials at Giza

by Peter Der Manuelian

Perhaps the greatness of an achievement may be defined by the degree of difficulty we have in imagining the world without it. Can we conceive of ancient Egypt without the Pyramids of Giza? Over four millennia have passed since anyone gazed upon the now famous plateau and saw only bedrock and sand, devoid of towering mortuary edifices and surrounding cemeteries. So imposing is the image of the Great Pyramid and Sphinx on the collective memory of humanity that to consider its absence, its pre-existence, strikes us as a highly unnatural and arduous task.

The pyramids themselves are the subject of other chapters in this volume. This chapter emphasizes that the three pyramids that catch the eye and dominate the horizon west of modern Cairo are merely the tip of a vast funerary 'iceberg.' The Giza plateau consists of hundreds of tombs of the governing classes carefully placed around three royal pyramid complexes. They were conceived as an integral part of the Great Pyramid and Sphinx on the collective memory of humanity that to consider its absence, its pre-existence, strikes us as a highly unnatural and arduous task.

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The Pyramids of Giza were reserved for royalty; non-royal tombs and cenotaphs housing exclusively the burials of women. Tombs, low rectangular superstructures with sloping sides. While Egyptians, as well as certain royal family members, sought out a new portion of the desert's edge for his own sepulcher. Just beyond the arable floodplain west of the Nile, a few kilometers west of what is now modern Cairo, Khufu located a natural plateau This was doubtless a consideration in Khufu’s selection of the site, for the transport of limestone blocks could be greatly enhanced by means of barges across the flooded riverbanks.

The area was probably not completely virgin territory upon Khufu’s accession, for some evidence of cemeteries prior to the Fourth Dynasty exists, but nothing would be allowed to stand in the king’s way. His necropolis architects’ vision far exceeded anything the country, indeed the entire ancient world, had ever experienced before, for he set in motion the most ambitious construction project ever undertaken. He prepared the largest, most accurately conceived pyramid complex to date, including a porticoed mortuary temple abutting the pyramid’s east face, a long causeway stretching eastwards off the plateau to a valley temple below, and four subsidiary or satellite pyramids on the eastern side. In addition, he engaged in ‘urban planning’ for the dead on an unprecedented scale.

The pyramids were reserved for royalty; non-royal Egyptians, as well as certain royal family members, were to be buried in traditional mastaba tombs, low rectangular superstructures with sloping sides. While the majority of the Giza tomb owners were male, there is clear evidence of a number of major mastaba tombs housing exclusively the burials of women. Taken as a unit, the site came to encompass almost the entire corps of the elite members of Egyptian society in the Fourth Dynasty. Fully developed Old Kingdom provincial cemeteries were still a dynasty or two away.

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This scene of boating (above) and statue manufacture (below) comes from the rock-cut mastaba chapel of Queen Mersamah III, G 7300A, main room, east wall, upper registers, and dates from the Fourth Dynasty.

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This polychrome relief shows the deceased, seated, facing a table of offering loaves. From the rock-cut mastaba chapel of lassum, G 2196, west wall, southern section. Sixth Dynasty.
This aerial photograph shows the Giza plateau, looking west, with the pyramids (from right to left) of Khufu, Khafr, and Menkaure. The Eastern Cemetery is in the foreground, while the Western Cemetery lies behind the Great Pyramid. The Central Field and Sphinx are visible toward the lower left.

In this view of the Great Pyramid, looking southeast, Khufu's queens' pyramids (top) and the Solar Boat Museum are visible, and southern mastaba field is to the right.
Attempts at organized necropolis development had been undertaken previously, but Khutu expanded the pattern to include vast arrays of mastabas, all laid out methodically in 'streets' and 'avenues,' and aligned to the axis of the king's pyramid complex. It is staggering to consider the sheer metric tonnage of limestone that required preparation, transport (from either local quarries or from Tura, on the east bank, across the river), dressing, and placement during the several decades of the king's reign. Thousands of laborers must have covered the site, working on both the royal and private construction projects, probably simultaneously. The scaffolding, dust, and cacophony must, at times, have been disorienting at best, and downright dangerous at worst. How these workers were managed, where they lived and how they were compensated is only just coming to light, thanks to recent excavations to the south of the plateau. Far from brutally enforced slave labor, the image made famous by the Hollywood film industry, the Giza constructions are now seen rather as massive public works projects, religiously motivated, and tarried through to completion by and for the benefit of the entire nation. To the average Egyptian, the pyramid was most likely much more than pharaoh's 'mansion of eternity.'

Excavations from the first half of the twentieth century unearthed the vast cemeteries surrounding the Pyramids. In 1902, the Egyptian antiquities authorities, decrying the unscientific treasure hunters at Giza, invited several archaeological missions to excavate the site responsibly. Among the candidates were three foreign missions: an American team headed by George A. Reisner (1867-1942), a German expedition by Georg Steindorff (1861-1951), and an Italian team led by Ernesto Schiaparelli (1856-1928). The necropolis was divided into equal portions and the colleagues drew lots to determine their shares. This historic division was later revised as the Italian mission abandoned Giza for other sites, and Steindorff traded his concession to Hermann Junker (1877-1962) of the University of Vienna, in order to excavate in the Sudan. The only excavator to work almost continuously at Giza was Reisner. From his early years under the sponsorship of Phoebe Apperson Hearst (1842-1919) and the University of California (1902-1905), through the transfer of his expedition to Harvard University and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1905-1947), Reisner settled into his beloved 'Harvard Camp' west of the pyramid of Khafre and based all his archaeological activity from this landmark location. Physically exhausted and nearly blind after forty-three years of excavations in Egypt and the Sudan, with a short interlude in Palestine, he died at Giza in June 1942. His concession came to include two-thirds of the vast cemetery west of the Great Pyramid, the entire cemetery east of it, and the pyramid and valley temples of Menkaure, builder of the third and smallest pyramid. The Steindorff/Junker expeditions excavated the central third of the Western Cemetery and the row of mastabas just south of the Great Pyramid. Important later excavations by Selim Hassan (1886-1961), on behalf of Cairo University, revealed the so-called Central Field, west of the Sphinx and south of the causeway to Khafre's pyramid. Abdel-Moneim Abu Bakr (1907-1976) worked in the far Western Cemetery in the 1940s and 1950s, also for Cairo University. All these scholars, and several others in recent years, have produced a total of about thirty monographs on their work at Giza, and these remain fundamental secondary sources for the study of Old Kingdom mortuary tradition and indeed most aspects of ancient Egyptian civilization.
What were the basic funerary needs of the average high official of the Old Kingdom? Most tombs of this era consisted of two discrete elements, the first of which was a substructure that could house and protect the deceased’s mummy, which had to survive intact in the next world as a point of reification for the various aspects of the persona. While the art of mumification was still in its early stages in the Fourth Dynasty, high-ranking individuals were interred in stone sarcophagi or wooden coffins deep within a burial chamber sunk into the bedrock off of a vertical shaft. The second element was a superstructure that could house the cult focus, the offering place where the living provided food offerings and recited invocation spells on behalf of the tomb owner. The various forms of equipment needed for the cult focus developed and changed at Giza, sometimes with surprising results.

It seems clear that Khufu laid out the orderly cemeteries to the east and west of his pyramid in what may be the world’s first example of ‘prefabricated’ construction, with the assignation of specific tombs to specific individuals following later. The construction process consisted of laying exterior courses of limestone blocks around the perimeter of the mastaba ‘core,’ which was then filled with rubble or debris. (Only a few mastabas contained a core of solid limestone blocks.) Additional courses were added, with the blocks set back from the preceding course, to form a battered or stepped exterior. The burial shaft (or shafts) was sunk through the core of the mastaba’s superstructure deep down into the bedrock below. A short corridor connected the shaft to the actual burial chamber, housing the sarcophagus and canopic equipment. Some mastaba superstructures later received an additional exterior casing consisting of blocks of smooth white limestone, quarried, for those whose resources allowed, from across the river at Tura. Disentangling the architectural history of the Giza mastabas, distinguishing the originally intended structures from the various subsequent additions and alterations, and the degree of completion attained, is one of the more interesting challenges for scholars of Egyptian architecture.

Another challenge is unraveling the events of Khufu’s early reign that led to the form and content of the Giza mastabas. It is perhaps a modern prejudice to expect a linear development of cultural expression: ever-higher pyramids, larger temples, and an expanded repertoire of decoration over time. One might look at tomb development prior to the Fourth Dynasty as indeed following such a course. But at Giza, and to a lesser extent at Dahshur under Khufu’s father, Snufere, such linear development is suddenly replaced with a simplicity and austerity whose explanation remains the subject of scholarly debate. In place of elaborate tombs with multiple chambers in the superstructure and so-called ‘false doors’ serving as the focal point for offerings and contact between the realms of living and of the dead, the earliest Giza mastabas under Khufu are solid buildings. Gone are the interior chambers, and the decorated wall surfaces known from earlier tombs at other sites. With very few exceptions, the early Fourth Dynasty Giza tombs show only a simple niche at the south end of the east wall where an inscribed rectangular slab stela, a sort of ancient tombstone, was installed. Carved on the stela was just about everything needed for a successful afterlife: a scene of the deceased seated at a table of offerings, his/her name and administrative titles, various offerings both spelled out in hieroglyphs and represented ideographically, and a list of different types of linen needed for the burial. In some cases a mud-brick exterior chapel was added around the stela, in others, the stela was later walled up and the area refined with a stone exterior and a list of different types of linen needed for the burial. In some cases a mud-brick exterior chapel was added around the stela, in others, the stela was later walled up and the area refitted with a stone exterior chapel and a monolithic false door. Clearly, changes crept into the design process, and the pace accelerated towards the end of the reign of Khufu and beyond.
George Reisner 1902-05 (Hearst)
George Reisner 1905-42 (HU-BMFA)
Georg Steindorff 1903-07
Hermann Junker 1912-14, 1925-29
Abdel-Moneim Abu Bakr 1949-53
Ernesto Schiaparelli 1902-05
Clarence Fisher 1915

L = Lepsius tomb number
What accounts for this royal reductionist policy? Did Khufu perceive a threat from the administrative classes and attempt to refocus attention solely on the monarchy? Were the state’s resources simply stretched too thin with the construction all over the site, resulting in a dearth of craftsmen to decorate tomb walls as in earlier times? Or were the slab stelae merely ‘placeholders,’ a temporary solution prior to the intended expansion and completion of the tomb and its decoration? Did the tomb owner’s premature death play a role in the use of a slab stela over more traditional forms of decoration, as has recently been suggested? We may never know the answer, but systematic research into these questions is only now receiving detailed scrutiny as the archaeological finds from the 1900s arc processed with the fresh eyes of a new archaeological generation. But one fact is clear: the dearth of private tomb decoration under Khufu was certainly not caused by a lack of talent. The famous slab stela of Wepemnefret, with its masterful polychromy and exquisite low-relief carving attests to a sophistication and stylistic refinement that can only be the product of the finest royal workshops. The stela was the only decorated element from its mastaba, no. G 1201, located in the cemetery far to the west of the Great Pyramid, and it survived in such pristine condition because the ancient craftsmen lovingly covered it over as they reworked the tomb’s offering chapel in limestone and mud brick, shifting the cult focus from the slab stela to a monolithic false door. Some of the archaic elements on the stela, such as the raised ground line for the table of offering loaves, the stool carved in imitation of bull’s legs and the small linen list, indicate that Wepemnefret may have been one of the first occupants of Khufu’s new Western Cemetery.

This painted limestone ‘slab stela’ from the mastaba of Wepemnefret (G 1201), dates to the Fourth Dynasty reign of Khufu, and is 45.7 cm high, 66 cm wide, and 7.6 cm thick, it is conserved in the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. At bottom is a detail of three Horus falcons from the stela’s list of linen intended for Wepemnefret’s burial.
Along with the slab stelae, many of the early Fourth Dynasty Giza tombs contained another unique item: the so-called 'reserve heads.' Most unusual in Egyptian art, which prefers complete statuary, these limestone heads were never part of composite or complete sculptures. They were found, not in the mastaba superstructure in a serdab (statue chamber), but in disturbed contexts at the bottom of the burial shafts. No two heads are alike, and their highly individual features also set them apart from the rest of Egyptian sculpture. The last word remains to be written about the reserve heads, they are commonly taken as stand-ins should a substitute home for the deceased's spirit be needed in the event of damage to the mummy, but alternative theories abound (sculptor's models? templates for funerary masks? ritually mutilated effigies?).

The absence of accompanying inscriptions, the curious incisions running down the center of the skull on some heads, the apparently removed or mutilated ears, and the range in quality, from crude visages to polished and finished masterpieces, have only fueled speculation as to the original function of these mysterious heads. They clearly belong, like the owners of the slab stelae and reserve heads, is justly famous today as the architect who probably oversaw the Great Pyramid's construction. As vizier (second in command to pharaoh), royal seal bearer, and overseer of all royal construction projects, Hemiuu was the eldest son of the vizier Nefermaat, who in turn was Snefru's eldest son, and whose beautifully painted tomb is located at Meidum. Under Khufu's reign, Hemiuu obtained one of the three largest mastabas at Giza. The owner of the largest tomb, mastaba G 2000, remains unidentified but must have been a favored prince, the tomb is so monumental that one might even construe some of the surrounding mastaba fields as oriented to it rather than to the Great Pyramid. To the south of mastaba G 2000, Hemiuu extended the simple mastaba layout described above to include two chapels in his tomb, connected by a long corridor added to the east face of the superstructure. The cut of these limestone blocks is so precise that the corners retain their joins and sharpness even today, some 4,600 years after their construction. In the northern chapel, an over-sized seated statue of the corpulent (to the ancient Egyptians corpulence was equated with the prosperity and success) Hemiuu gazed eastwards towards the pyramid of his sovereign. We can only guess at the logistical challenges Hemiuu faced as the pyramid slowly rose to dominate the surrounding landscape, raising the national psyche with it in an unprecedented public works project to secure the immortality of pharaoh and thereby the cosmic order and prosperity of the country.

By the end of Khufu's reign, the original layout of the great mastaba fields had undergone significant changes. Simple core mastabas with nothing but a slab stela as the cult focus were expanded with exterior chapels, sometimes in limestone, sometimes in mud brick. Additional burial shafts were sometimes added, probably for additional family members. In the Eastern Cemetery, reserved primarily for the royal family, what began as four rows of twelve mastabas was completely remodeled. Some of these tombs were joined together while others received extensions, the result was four rows of eight great double-mastabas. Most of these were badly plundered before the arrival of the twentieth-century archaeologists, but they once contained the burials of the ruling elite of the land, and perhaps some of Khufu's successors on the throne. His own mother, the wife of Sneferu, Queen Hetepheres, may also have been buried in the Eastern Cemetery, either in one of the three queens' pyramids, or in the hundred-foot deep burial chamber just further to the north, which was accidentally discovered in 1925. Some of the oldest examples of furniture from the ancient world were found here, along with a mysteriously empty sarcophagus and the queen's viscera in canopic jars, containing a solution still in liquid form after more than four millennia. This royal mystery—a burial without a body—continues to contradict what we think we know about Egyptian burial traditions.
Tomb decoration began to expand again later in Khufu’s reign, into the succeeding reigns of the Fourth Dynasty and beyond. Chapels bearing carved and painted scenes and inscriptions on interior walls of limestone were now added inside the core of the mastaba superstructure. One such tomb in the Eastern Cemetery, belonging to a priest of Khufu named Khufukhaf I, shows remarkably well-crafted, large-scale figures of the deceased and his wife Nefret-kau in a variety of poses and costumes, as well as countless offerings, magically available for all eternity by virtue of being carved in stone. Size did not matter in terms of providing equipment for the afterlife: a model beer vessel, just a few centimeters in height, bore the same ritual potency as a carved or painted two-dimensional representation, or indeed an actual beer vessel interred in the tomb itself. Mortuary ceramics abound in the Giza mastabas, and form a corpus that still awaits detailed study, not to mention comparison with ceramics from secular (that is, non-mortuary) contexts of the Old Kingdom. On the back of one of Khufukhaf’s casing stones displaced from the east face of the mastaba, quarry marks seem to contain a date indicating Khufu’s twenty-third regnal year.

The largest tomb in the Eastern Cemetery belonged to Ankhhaf, possibly a vizier under Khafre if not under Khufu himself. While fragments from Ankhhaf’s destroyed chapel remain to be published, the tomb owner is justly famous for a striking bust found on a plinth in one of the exterior mud-brick chapel rooms east of the mastaba. That the bust lay on top of a heap of shattered ceramics indicates that it was the ‘recipient’ of offerings from the living. Carved in limestone with modeling added in plaster, the bust portrays the careworn expression of a burdened official, and departs radically from the more idealized sculpture that was the norm during the Old Kingdom.
Engaged statues of Meresankh III and her family on the north wall of the main room of the rock-cut mastaba of Queen Meresankh III, looking northeast.

The north and east walls, looking northeast, in the rock-cut mastaba chapel of Queen Meresankh III: the reliefs depict the daughter of Kawab and Hetepheres II and royal wife of Khafre, G 75300a, main room. Fourth Dynasty.
Along with increasingly elaborate chapels in the mastaba superstructures, a new type of burial place developed at Giza, most likely late in Khafre's reign: the rock-cut tomb. Carved out of the bedrock and lacking a superstructure, these tombs foreshadowed the type of burial place that was later to dominate Egyptian cemeteries through the Middle and New Kingdoms at sites such as Beni Hasan, Aswan, and Thebes. An unusual early example of a rock-cut tomb belongs to Queen Meresankh III, daughter of crown prince Kawab, the eldest son of Khufu, and wife of Khafre. Located in the Eastern Cemetery, Meresankh's decorated chapel rooms were actually hewn beneath a mastaba superstructure in a most unusual combination of the two tomb forms. Her decorated chambers contain some of the most vibrant wall paintings ever found at Giza, and expand the scene repertoire to include boating scenes, offering bearers, scribes, craftsmen and agricultural production. The tomb even boasts a number of engaged statues of Meresankh and other family members and officials, set into niches in the chapel walls. The production of statues of the deceased, his or her family, and even servant figures, immortalized for all time in the act of producing the staples of daily existence, began to turn up in serdabs, or statue chambers, in the mastaba superstructures. Hundreds, if not a few thousand statues and statuettes from Giza, now in collections the world over, would form a veritable 'who's who' of the necropolis if they could be united, for the inscriptions carved on their bases and back pillars tell us their names and administrative titles. While it is probably impractical to bring them all together physically, the potential exists today for a virtual gathering via digital images, databases and the Internet.
The Fifth Dynasty at Giza saw the beginnings of the eventual breakdown of Khufu's ordered system of mastaba streets and avenues. Intrusive burials, additional shafts and new areas all added to the complexity of this urban city of the dead. Officials under Khafre had begun to exploit the quarry area west of the Sphinx, now available for both mastabas and rock-cut tombs after the removal of all that stone to build the first two Giza pyramids. With additional chambers came an increased repertoire of wall scenes, and longer hieroglyphic texts. During the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, we can read for the first time extensive narratives containing records of the exploits of the tomb owners, their biographies, interactions with the pharaoh, and even legal decrees concerning the means of providing for their mortuary cults.

In the Central Field, between the Sphinx and the second pyramid of Khafre, is a labyrinthine mastaba belonging to the vizier Rawer. Dating to the second half of the Fifth Dynasty, the tomb contained, in addition to columned porticoes borrowed stylistically perhaps from royal mortuary architecture, a unique account of an accident that took place in the reign of Neferirkare. The hieroglyphic inscription tells us that Rawer bumped up against the king's staff during a particular ceremony, and feared not just corporal, but divine punishment for disturbing the proceedings. The king, however, sided with Rawer, forgiving his indiscretion and avoiding an unpleasant 'incident.' Rawer was so proud of this event that he had the account carved in a raised relief inscription in his tomb.

Other tombs in the Western Cemetery testify to the elegance of polychromy that originally adorned the increasingly elaborate chapel areas. Processions of offering bearers, scenes of daily life, boating scenes, a wide variety of produce from the tomb-owner's estate, all appear over and over, but each time with subtle personal touches and unique features. The all-important 'false doors' set into the chapel's west wall (the west being traditionally the land of the setting sun, and hence of death and resurrection) now graced the elite burials at Giza, and reveal their own line of development. Some of the decorated chapels are still preserved at Giza, while others are housed in several Egyptian collections in European museums (Kaninisut in Vienna, Seshem-nefer III in Tübingen, Wehemka in Hildesheim).

This limestone raised-relief inscription from the tomb of Rawer, Central Field, details the 'accident' with the king and a staff during an important ceremony. Height 37 cm, with 1.23 m, thickness 25 cm. First half of the Fifth Dynasty. Now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.
General view looking north, showing the chapel of Nisut-nefer, mastaba G 4970. Early Fifth Dynasty.

The ka-priest and scribe Tjenti presents accounts to the tomb owner on the west wall of the chapel of Nisut-nefer.

On the east wall of the mastaba of Nisut-nefer, offering-bearers personify the estates that provide produce for the mortuary cult of the tomb owner.

A scene of sheering a young oryx before the tomb owner from the west wall of the chapel of Nisut-nefer.
The tomb owner seated at a table of offering loaves, on the northern entrance to the chapel of Seshat-hetep, mastaba G 5150, looking north. End of the Fourth Dynasty–early Fifth Dynasty.

The entrance to the chapel of Seshat-hetep, looking southwest.

Detail of the 'palace façade' decoration on the exterior of the mastaba of Seshat-hetep, looking west.

General view inside the chapel of Seshat-hetep, looking north.
Detail of relief with livestock from the north wall, bottom register of the rock-cut chapel of Iasen, mastaba G 2196. Sixth Dynasty.

The tomb owner and his wife and son at right, overseeing processions of livestock and accounts on the east wall of the rock-cut chapel of Iasen. The vertical text reads: "Viewing the document of the gifts brought from an invocation offering (consisting of) bread, beer, and cakes every day."

Relief detail from the rock-cut chapel of Iasen showing a donkey driver. From the north wall, middle register.

This relief from the south wall of the rock-cut chapel of Iasen shows the tomb owner seated on a high-backed chair within a booth.

An engaged niche statue stands in the west wall of the chapel (right) of Iasen's mastaba.
A banquet scene from chamber 2, south wall, middle section of the chapel of Iymery. G 6020. Fifth Dynasty, reign of Niuserre.

A scene depicting jousting in the papyrus marshes from the north wall of chamber 2, eastern section of the chapel of Iymery.

This calving scene is conserved in chamber 2, south wall, eastern section of the chapel of Iymery.

General view of the vaulted chamber 2 of the chapel of Iymery.
Detail of two processions of men towing the funerary boat containing Qar’s sarcophagus toward his tomb, in court C, north wall, lower half of the subterranean chapel of Qar, G 7001. Sixth Dynasty, reign of Pepy I or later.

Sunk relief depicting the seated figure of Qar. From his subterranean chapel, room D, west wall, with entrance to room E, looking southwest.
Raised-relief seated figure of Qar before a table of offerings, from his subterranean chapel, court C, west wall. Reading the hieroglyphs, in the upper register before him, the 'true scribe of the god's document, Idu' extends his fingers in a gesture of anointing. In the lower register, the 'overseer of ka-priests, Nakhiti' is shown pouring a libation.

Sunk-relief inscriptions and engaged statues characterize the subterranean chapel of Qar, looking south from court C into chamber D.