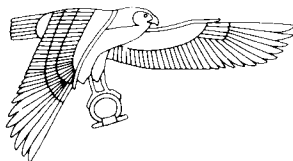


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# THE WEARING OF SANDALS IN OLD KINGDOM TOMB DECORATION

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The Egyptian practice of decorating tombs with scenes illustrating almost every human activity affords the modern scholar with unparalleled insights into a time long past. Much of what we know about the life and customs of this ancient society has been gleaned from close examination of the details rendered in these scenes.

The aim of the following discussion is to examine one of these details - the wearing of sandals in Old Kingdom tomb decoration. In any given tomb the owner is depicted repeatedly, dressed for eternity in a range of clothing suitable for a man of his social standing and dominating every scene in which he appears. Usually he is found barefoot (as indeed is everyone else in the scenes) but on occasion he can be found wearing sandals.

The earliest pictorial evidence for the wearing of sandals dates from the early dynastic period of Egyptian history. On the obverse of a slate votive palette belonging to King Narmer, a diminutive figure of the king's sandal-bearer stands at attention while his lord deals with a kneeling enemy captive. This official makes a similar appearance on the reverse of this palette (Fig. 1). In each instance Narmer is barefoot, but his attendant is in readiness with his sandals should the king require them.

Narmer's sandal-bearer has a counterpart in the Sixth Dynasty official, Weni who was pleased to record events which occurred: 'When I was chamberlain of the palace and sandal-bearer ...'.<sup>1</sup> As the office of sandal-bearer required Weni to walk directly behind the king, he served as a kind of bodyguard whose responsibilities included guarding, escorting and attending the king. In a number of tombs, attendants can be seen walking along behind the tomb owner carrying a pair of sandals, providing a service for their masters reminiscent of that performed by Weni and by Narmer's steward (Fig. 2). Many of these sandal-bearers appear in tombs which contain no surviving examples of the tomb owner actually wearing sandals, and are helpful at least, in providing proof that the use of footwear was more widespread than the archaeological evidence would first suggest.

Modern scholarship has voiced various opinions as to the wearing or non-wearing of sandals with the generally held conclusion that 'most people in Ancient Egypt went barefoot for most of the time'.<sup>2</sup> Much has been inferred about the manners and customs relating to the practice of wearing sandals based on their occurrence in tomb decoration, leading to the conclusion that 'custom forbade that they should be worn in the presence of a socially superior person as a sign of respect'.<sup>3</sup> Another myth perpetrated by modern

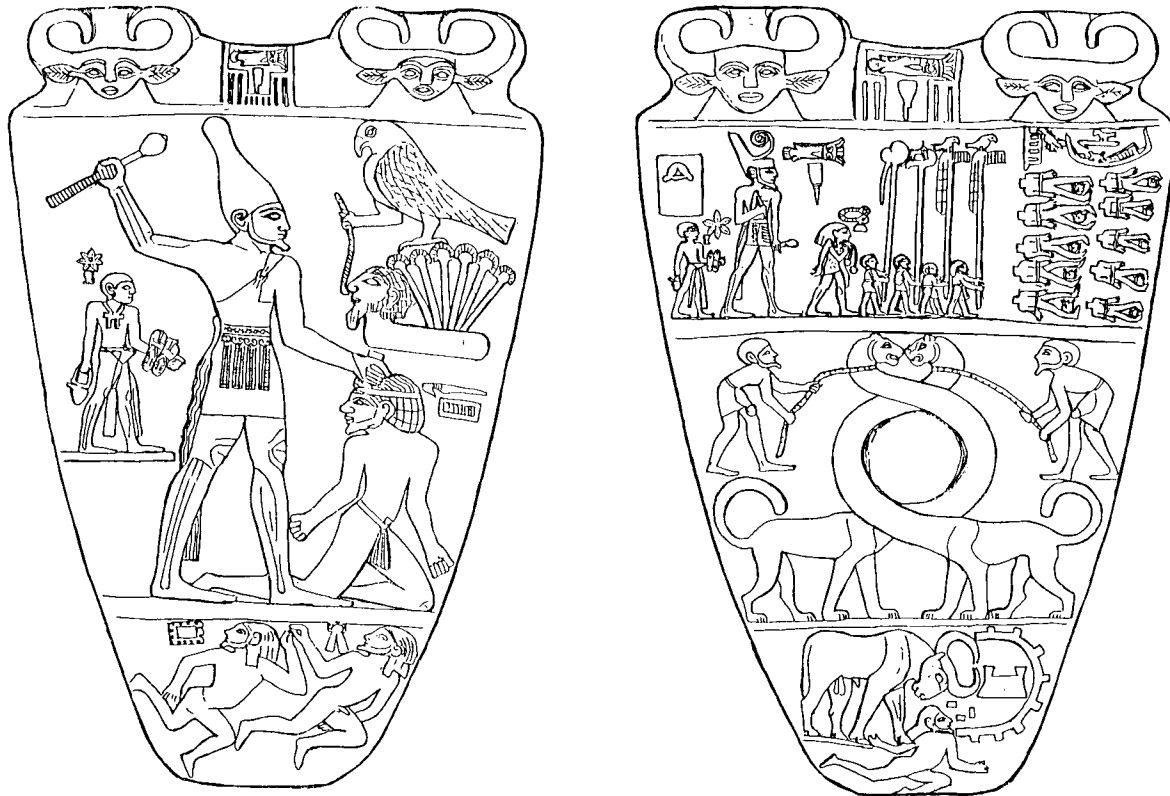


Figure 1. The Narmer Palette

sources is that women of the Old Kingdom never wore sandals.<sup>4</sup> A close examination of who is wearing sandals in Old Kingdom tomb decoration reveals that most of these observations do not have any basis in the archaeological record, and that the material relating to this subject can be categorised under three broad headings:

1. Minor figures wearing sandals (people other than the tomb owner and his family).
2. Women wearing sandals.
3. Major figures (tomb owner) wearing sandals.

### Minor figures wearing sandals

Very few examples of minor figures wearing sandals have survived in Old Kingdom tomb decoration. That they exist at all indicates that the possession of sandals was not the exclusive prerogative of the upper classes. That they are worn in the presence of the tomb owner should signify that good manners did not oblige the wearer to remove them in the presence of a superior.

In three Fifth Dynasty tombs, sandals appear on the feet of a select group of men who participate in the work on the tomb owner's estate. These men are the drovers who escort the donkeys to and from the field with their burden of

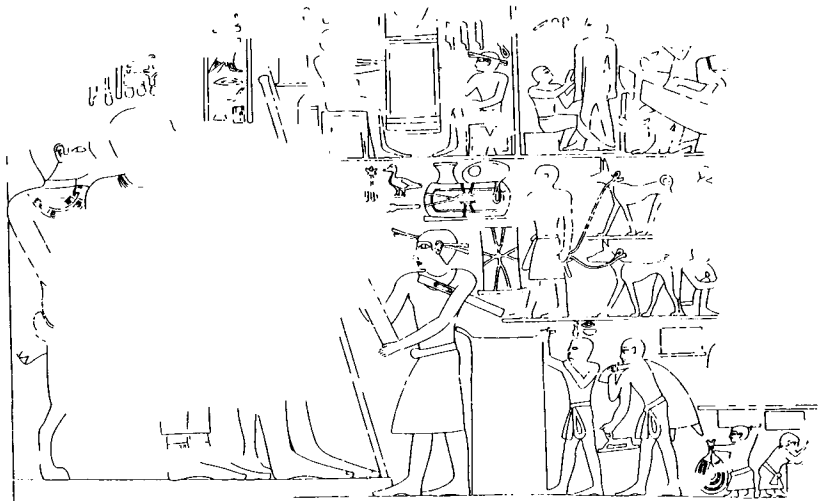


Figure 2. A sandal-bearer in the tomb of Inti at Deshasha

harvested grain.<sup>5</sup> This activity is an integral part of the agricultural cycle, the various phases of which are a common theme in tomb decoration, and present the sequence of activities necessary in the production of grain. Frequently incorporated into this sequence are registers which show the harvested grain being tied into sacks, which are then secured onto the backs of donkeys. The drovers, with batons in their hands, drive the donkeys with their sacks of grain to the threshing floor and back to the fields once the load has been discharged, ready to begin the process once again. A large number of field-hands are depicted in pursuit of these various tasks and all conduct their business barefoot, with the exception of the three tombs already cited, where only the donkey drovers wear sandals. In the tomb of Neferiretenef the sandal-wearing donkey drovers perform their escort duty in the barefoot presence of the tomb owner (Fig. 3).

A further example of donkey drovers wearing sandals occurs in another Fifth Dynasty tomb, although in a different context. In the double tomb of Nianchchnum and Chnumhotep at Saqqara, the tomb owners are carried along in sedan-chairs strapped to the backs of a pair of donkeys.<sup>6</sup> Both sets of donkeys are preceded and followed by attendants wearing sandals. In each instance the tomb owner is barefoot, but each is followed by a servant carrying a pair should the need arise. It would seem that sandals were adopted when the walking or running of distances was required. Ancient literary sources indicate that sandals were an essential component of a traveller's baggage. Weni performed his duties with such rectitude that 'no-one seized a loaf or sandals from a traveller'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, a spell from the Coffin Texts, a body of literature which had its antecedents in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts, conveys a like impression: 'Take your staff, your loincloth, your sandals and your arrows for the road'.<sup>8</sup>

Consistent with the idea that sandals were worn commonly, in fact if not in representation, in situations involving travel over distances is a scene in the tomb of Ankhmahor, an official of the early Sixth Dynasty.<sup>9</sup> In this scene a series of registers parade numerous offering bearers carrying the conventional range of fare. From the disposition of their feet, it is clear that these figures are proceeding at a walking pace. Coming along behind these bearers, in postures suggestive of a running pace, are three men wearing sandals, whom Badawy describes as 'swift messengers'.<sup>10</sup> That they are in a hurry is clarified by the inscription above the first of the three, entreating all to 'make way for me!'. Similar messengers appear in other tombs, but nowhere else do they wear sandals.

The examples cited above all belong to a category of workmen who, because the nature of their activities required constant walking or running, sought the comfort and protection of sandals in certain instances. There remain three other extant examples of individuals other than the tomb owner wearing sandals. In the Fifth Dynasty tomb of Nefer and Kahay, a 'prominent man' wearing sandals observes the progress of various activities taking place in the shipyard.<sup>11</sup> Clad in a wrap-skirt and leaning on a staff, this individual has the

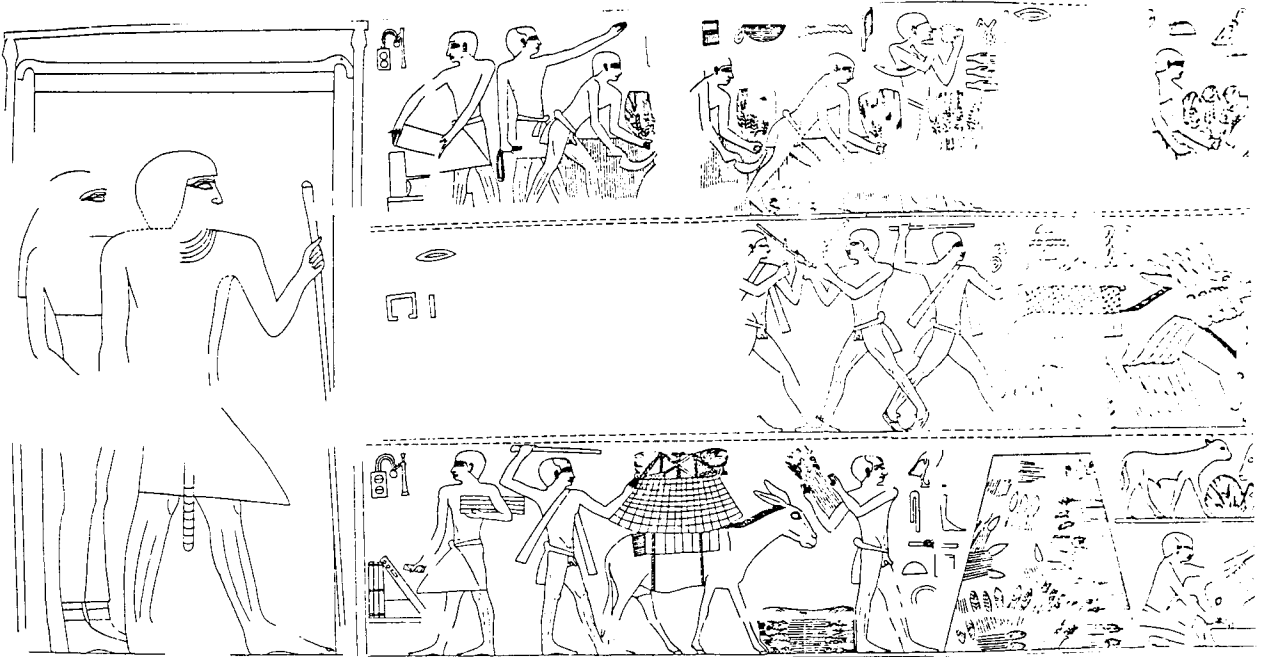


Figure 3. Donkey drovers in the tomb of Nefertitenef



added comfort of a servant holding a sun-shade over his head. His manner of dress, his bearing and accessories are all suggestive of poses adopted by tomb owners elsewhere, and one is tempted to identify him with one of the occupants of the tomb, perhaps the second born son of Kahay, Senetef, who possesses amongst his credentials the titles 'overseer of six men of the boat' and 'scribe of the king's house' which are indicative of an administrative position in expeditions. This identification with Senetef would help overcome the problem of the highly unusual depiction of an overseer wearing sandals in someone else's tomb.



Figure 4. The steward Itjai in the tomb of Pepy-ankh at Meir

Unusual though this may be, there is the suggestion of a similar occurrence in the late Fifth Dynasty tomb of Ptah-hetep and Akhet-hetep at Saqqara.<sup>12</sup> In a very fragmentary scene, the lower portion of a figure can be seen leaning on a staff in typical overseer fashion, supervising activities relating to animal husbandry. He appears to be wearing sandals. The identity of this individual is not so easily associated with a member of the deceased's family and both examples may, in fact, illustrate a reality infrequently demonstrated in tomb decoration - that overseers often wore sandals in the supervision of activities on the estate.

The only remaining extant example of a minor figure wearing sandals occurs at Meir in the tomb of Pepi-ankh (A2), an official who served during the latter half of Dynasty 6.<sup>13</sup> Unlike our other examples of minor figures wearing sandals this individual is named. He is: 'the scribe of the royal records, superintendent of land scribes beloved of his master, who does what he praises every day, the steward who is in his master's confidence, Itjai'.<sup>14</sup> In this scene Pepi-ankh, who is also wearing sandals, is offered boxes containing cloth and other cult accessories. Itjai, who leads the parade of bearers marching toward the tomb owner, is proffering a box containing three lengths of cloth (Fig. 4). His titles reveal him to be a man of some importance and his stature in this scene is superior even to the figure of the tomb owner's eldest son, who stands as a barefoot, diminutive figure behind his father. To be placed in such prominence in a scene, with his name and titles recorded, and with the care given to the rendering of the details of his appearance, this steward must have enjoyed high favour and distinction in the service of his master.

### Women wearing sandals

As already noted, a number of modern sources state that women in the Old Kingdom did not seem to wear sandals. It is easy to see how statements of this nature could be made. Women feature regularly in tomb decoration, as owners of tombs, as members of the deceased's family and as servitors amidst the host of people performing service for the tomb owner, and in all but four instances they are barefoot.<sup>15</sup> Particularly distinctive is the representation of Khenti-kaues as she stands, resplendent in her footwear, behind her barefooted husband (Fig. 5). Doubtless other examples of women similarly shod were incorporated into tomb decoration, but these are no longer extant and any conclusions we might draw must derive from the material we have at hand and in every instance this material dates to Dynasty 5. Women in Dynasty 6 enjoyed prominence in their husband's tomb decoration, and some are far more elaborately dressed than their Dynasty 5 counterparts, but these women are depicted, without exception, barefoot.

The decision to portray these four women wearing sandals remains a mystery as there is nothing about them, apart from the distinction of footwear, that sets them apart from their sisters. Each bears the title

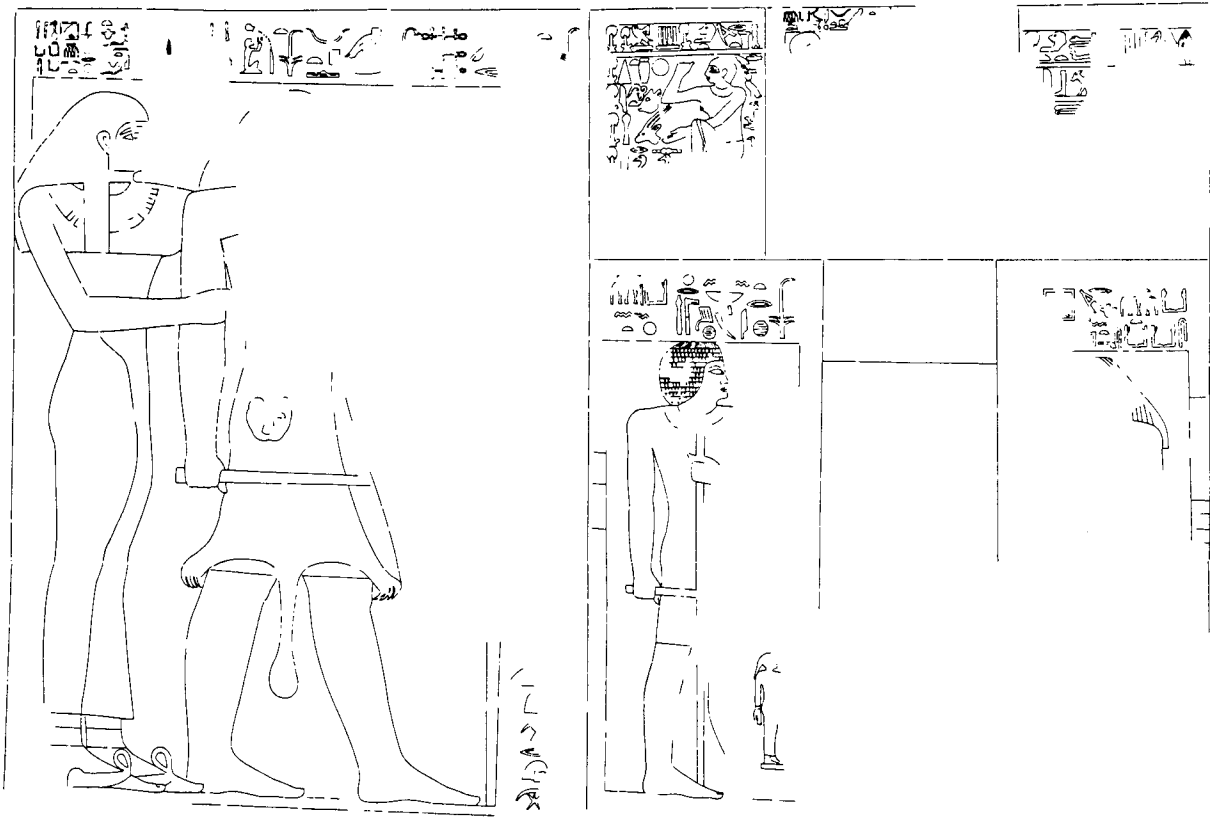


Figure 5. Khenti-kaues with her husband Kai-khent at El-Hammamiya

'acquaintance of the king', but this appellation is one commonly held by women of the ruling classes in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. Meret-Min's additional title of 'royal ornament' is similarly held by women of the same period, but she is the only holder of the title wearing sandals. The other three women bear another common title, that of 'priestess of Hathor'. Again, as this title is held by so many women who do not appear in sandals, it can hardly hold the key to the problem. If social standing provided the answer, we should expect to find such notable women as Meresankh III, Hetepheres II and Idut to be depicted wearing them in their tomb decoration, but this is not the case.<sup>16</sup>

In three of our examples, the women are standing behind their husbands in association with a false door. Meret-Min and Inti are directly above a small false door, Kai-Khent and Khenti-Kaues are facing one and Nefer and his wife Meret-ites are to be found in a panel between two false doors. In each instance the wife is wearing the long figure-hugging dress typical of the period, the only embellishment displayed is the elaborate banded pattern on the shoulder straps of Meret-ites' dress. However the internal details of a woman's dress clearly have no bearing on the wearer's decision to wear sandals. The husband of each of these women is clothed in the regalia of the Sem priest. Once again we reach an impasse, for counterparts to this arrangement of husband and wife in association with a false door abound in tomb decoration, and in all other instances the wife is barefoot. The other woman wearing sandals, Hetepheres, is found on the right hand thickness of the tomb entrance as if stepping out of the tomb chapel in the company of her husband.

Another Fifth Dynasty tomb provides further information relevant to the problem. On the left and right outer jambs of his false door, Chnumhotep stands with his wife Khentyt-ka.<sup>17</sup> On the left jamb, the diminutive figures of a male and female attendant are standing behind them, in superimposed registers. Each carries a sack and a pair of sandals. The remains of a similar composition can be found on the right jamb. It is likely that the male servant attends his master, the female her mistress. Khentyt-ka might not be wearing sandals, but like her husband she had them at her disposal should the need for them arise (Fig. 6).

The only visual testimony to women wearing sandals occurs in Dynasty 5. That they are not depicted wearing them in the following dynasty should not lead us to the conclusion that they did not wear them at all. Ancient Egyptians are notorious for their adherence to old ideas and customs, and if women wore sandals in Dynasty 5, even if only rarely, one can be sure they continued to do so in other periods.

### Major figures wearing sandals

The majority of individuals wearing sandals in Old Kingdom tomb decoration are the tomb owners themselves, those who had sufficient means and social standing to build and decorate a tomb. Although they are more usually portrayed barefoot, most tombs show the owner, at least once, in sandals. In tombs where this does not occur the decoration is usually very fragmentary and one does gain the impression that the officials of this period liked to be presented for eternity in every item of attire they had at their disposal - the full range of their wardrobe, in fact.



Figure 6. The sandal-bearers of Chnumhotep and his wife, Khentyt-ka

In all instances where the major figure is wearing sandals, the individual is depicted in a standing position, and all but one is holding a staff or leaning against one.<sup>18</sup> An analysis of the types of sandals worn by major figures demonstrates that from late Dynasty 5 all sandals have an additional strap around the heel, those prior to this period lack this refinement. This stylistic trend applies only to the tomb owner, and the sandal with the ankle strap was the style adopted by all minor figures even in times when their lords favoured the slip-on variety.

To discount the possibility that the wearing of sandals served as an indicator of rank and/or privilege, it is necessary to compare the titles held by these individuals with those of their bare-footed brothers, an exercise which proves only that there is no one title or group of titles that exemplifies the sandal-wearer. What it does expose is that the most common title held by an official up to the end of Dynasty 5, regardless of what is on his feet, is that of 'acquaintance of the king', while a similar state of affairs exists for the title 'sole companion' from the beginning of Dynasty 6. In either case, these titles are not held by every official who happens to be wearing sandals, and therefore cannot be regarded as the definitive attribute for this custom. Nor is sandal-wearing a distinction enjoyed by one particular class of officials, as there are representatives from the Higher, Middle and Lower orders who make an appearance wearing them.<sup>19</sup> As donkey drovers and messengers also wear sandals and it is unlikely that they could lay any great claim to social distinction, the titles an individual carried in life do not appear to hold the key to whether or not he is represented in his tomb decoration wearing sandals.

The context in which sandals occur is more successful in determining why they were worn. The majority of individuals wearing sandals do so when surveying a wide range of activities taking place outdoors, including the various phases of agriculture, hunting and animal husbandry (Fig. 7). If not actually worn in this environment, an attendant often carried them just in case they were required. However sandals do not appear exclusively in scenes depicting outdoor life, and are found in most circumstances, save those in which the tomb owner is seated or when he is standing on a papyrus raft. They are worn in almost every context possible, even on architectural devices such as pillars, entrances and false doors, being incorporated into any scene in which the tomb owner makes an appearance. If we perceive sandal-wearing as a practice adopted principally in an outdoor context, their appearance on entrances and false doors may be reflective of the deceased's ability to leave the tomb and travel at will in the abode of the living. This is given some support by the discovery in some burials of staffs and sandals placed on top of the coffin.

An appearance in sandals does not imply a rigid adherence to any particular detail of personal appearance. For the example of a tomb owner wearing sandals in combination with a wide range of dress, hair and accessory styles, it is possible to find others similarly attired lacking only the detail of footwear. They are worn when the tomb owner stands in a formal attitude

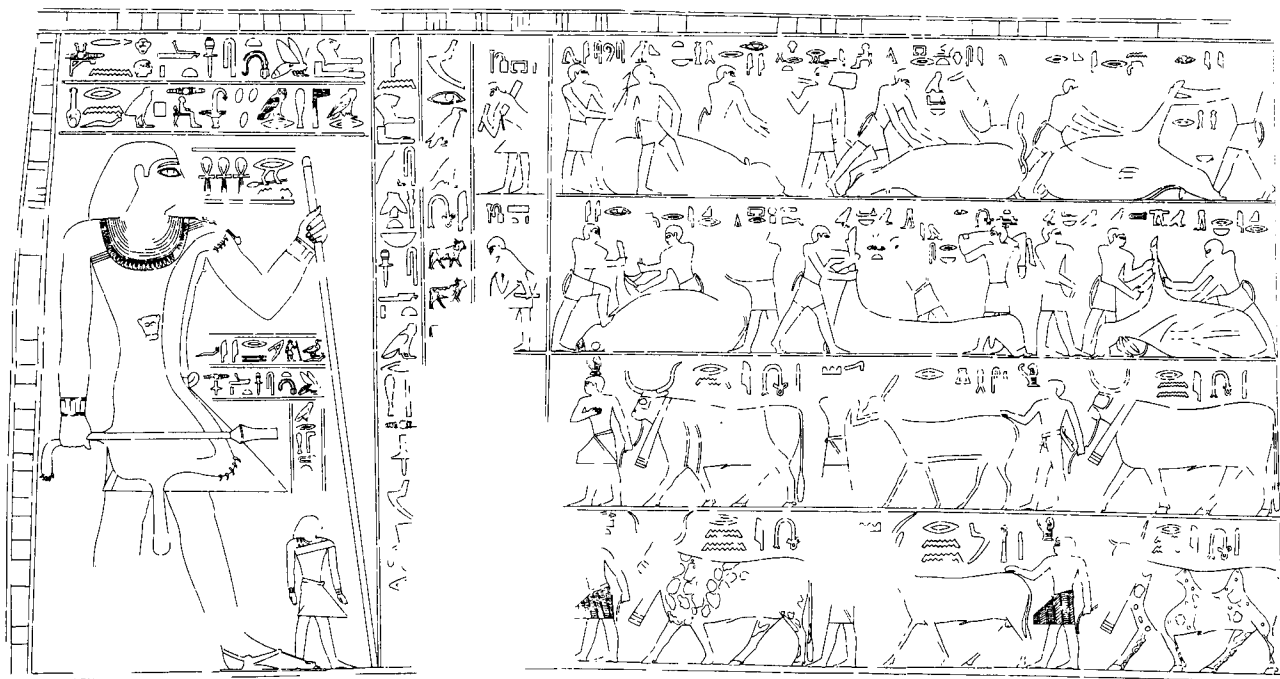


Figure 7. Kheni viewing the cattle of his estate

holding his staff and sceptre, but they are equally popular when he adopts a more casual pose, leaning on his staff. The one qualifying agent we can assert with some security is that in the decision to depict the tomb owner wearing sandals, this individual must be in a standing position.

## Conclusion

From the evidence at hand, the conclusion that we must draw from the incidence of sandal-wearing in the Old Kingdom is that it did not imply some particular distinction enjoyed by the wearer and could in fact be worn by all who so desired, regardless of their sex or social standing. Nor did the utilisation of this accessory demand the observation of strict social conventions which might require the wearer to remove them in the presence of superiors. The decision to wear sandals appears to be simply a matter of personal choice, and some individuals clearly favoured them more than others.<sup>20</sup> A tomb owner generally ensured that he appeared at least once in his tomb decoration wearing sandals, and the context in which this occurred was usually in what was clearly an activity taking place out of doors.

## Illustrations

- Fig. 1. From W. A. Fairservis Jr., "A Revised View of the Narmer Palette" in *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 28 (1991), figs. 1, 2.
- Fig. 2. N. Kanawati and A. McFarlane, *Deshasha: The Tombs of Inti, Shedu and Others* (Sydney, 1993), pl. 28.
- Fig. 3. B. van de Walle, *La chapelle funéraire de Neferirtenef* (Brussels, 1978), pl. 12.
- Fig. 4. A. M. Blackman, *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. V (London, 1953), pl. 26.
- Fig. 5. A. El-Khouli and N. Kanawati, *The Old Kingdom Tombs of El-Hammamiya* (Sydney, 1990), pl. 62.
- Fig. 6. H. Petrie and M. Murray, *Seven Memphite Tomb Chapels* (London, 1952), pl. 15.
- Fig. 7. N. Kanawati, *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish: The Cemetery of Akhmim*, vol. II (Sydney, 1981), fig. 26.

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- <sup>1</sup> M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, vol. I, The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 21.
- <sup>2</sup> B. Watterson, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Bath, 1991), p. 102.
- <sup>3</sup> A. Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1971), p. 227.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226; Watterson, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 102.
- <sup>5</sup> B. van de Walle, *La chapelle funéraire de Neferirtenef* (Brussels, 1978), pl. 12; N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of Sheikh Saïd* (London, 1901), pl. 16; A. Varille, *La Tombe de Ni-ankh-Pepi à Zaouyet El-Mayefîn* (Cairo, 1938), fig. 9.
- <sup>6</sup> A. Moussa and H. Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep* (Mainz/Rhein, 1977), pls. 42, 43.
- <sup>7</sup> Lichtheim, *Literature I*, p. 20.
- <sup>8</sup> R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, vol. I (Chicago, 1954), Spell No. 23.



- <sup>9</sup> A. M. Badawy, *The Tomb of Nyhetep-Ptah at Giza and the Tomb of Ankhmaḥor at Saqqara* (California, 1978), fig. 34.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Moussa and Altenmüller, *The Tomb of Nefer and Kahay* (Mainz/Rhein, 1971), pl. 18.
- <sup>12</sup> Davies, *The Mastaba of Ptahhetep and Akhetetep at Saqqarah*, vol. I (London, 1901), pl. 21.
- <sup>13</sup> A. M. Blackman, *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. V (London, 1953), pl. 26.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- <sup>15</sup> The four examples are: Hetepheres in S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza*, vol. VII (Cairo, 1953), fig. 18; Khenti-kaues in A. El-Khouli and N. Kanawati, *The Old Kingdom Tombs of El-Hammamiya* (Sydney, 1990), pl. 62; Meret-ites in Moussa and Altenmüller, *Nefer and Kahay*, pl. 32; Meret-Min in N. Kanawati and A. McFarlane, *Deshasha: The Tombs of Inti, Shedu and Others* (Sydney, 1993), pl. 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Meresankh III and Hetepheres in D. Dunham and W. K. Simpson, *The Mastaba of Queen Mersyankh III* (Boston, 1974); Idut in R. Macramallah, *Le mastaba d'Idout* (Cairo, 1953).
- <sup>17</sup> H. F. Petrie and M. A. Murray, *Seven Memphite Tomb Chapels* (London, 1952), pl. 15.
- <sup>18</sup> The one exception is Seseshem-Nefer, see S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza*, vol. VI, 1934-1935 (Cairo, 1950), fig. 217.
- <sup>19</sup> N. Kanawati, *The Egyptian Administration in the Old Kingdom: Evidence on its Economic Decline* (Warminster, 1977), Higher Officials - p. 15, Middle Officials - p. 23, Lower Officials - pp. 27-28.
- <sup>20</sup> e.g. Shepsi-pu-Min/Kheni at El-Hawawish makes an appearance wearing sandals on six separate occasions in his tomb decoration: N. Kanawati, *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish*, vol. II (Sydney, 1981), figs. 14b, 15, 20, 21, 23, 26.