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COVER: Slab-stela of Prince Wepemnofret (detail). Color plate courtesy Department of Egyptian Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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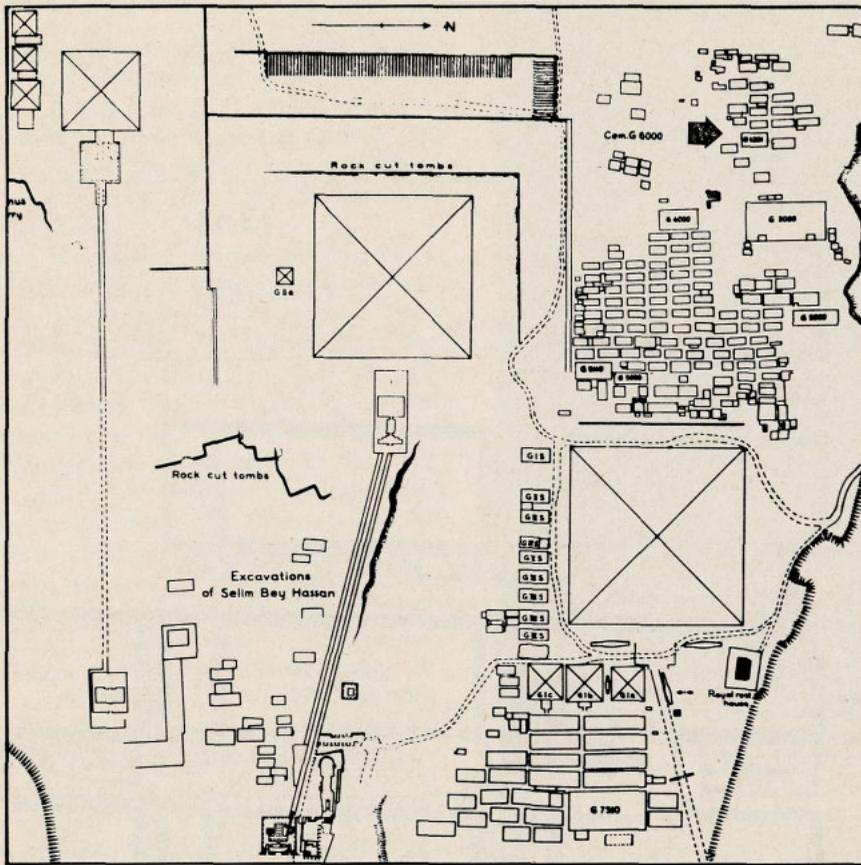
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# THE STELA OF PRINCE WPEMNOFRET

By William Stevenson Smith



1. Slab-stela of Prince Wepemnofret. Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, California. Height 17½ inches.

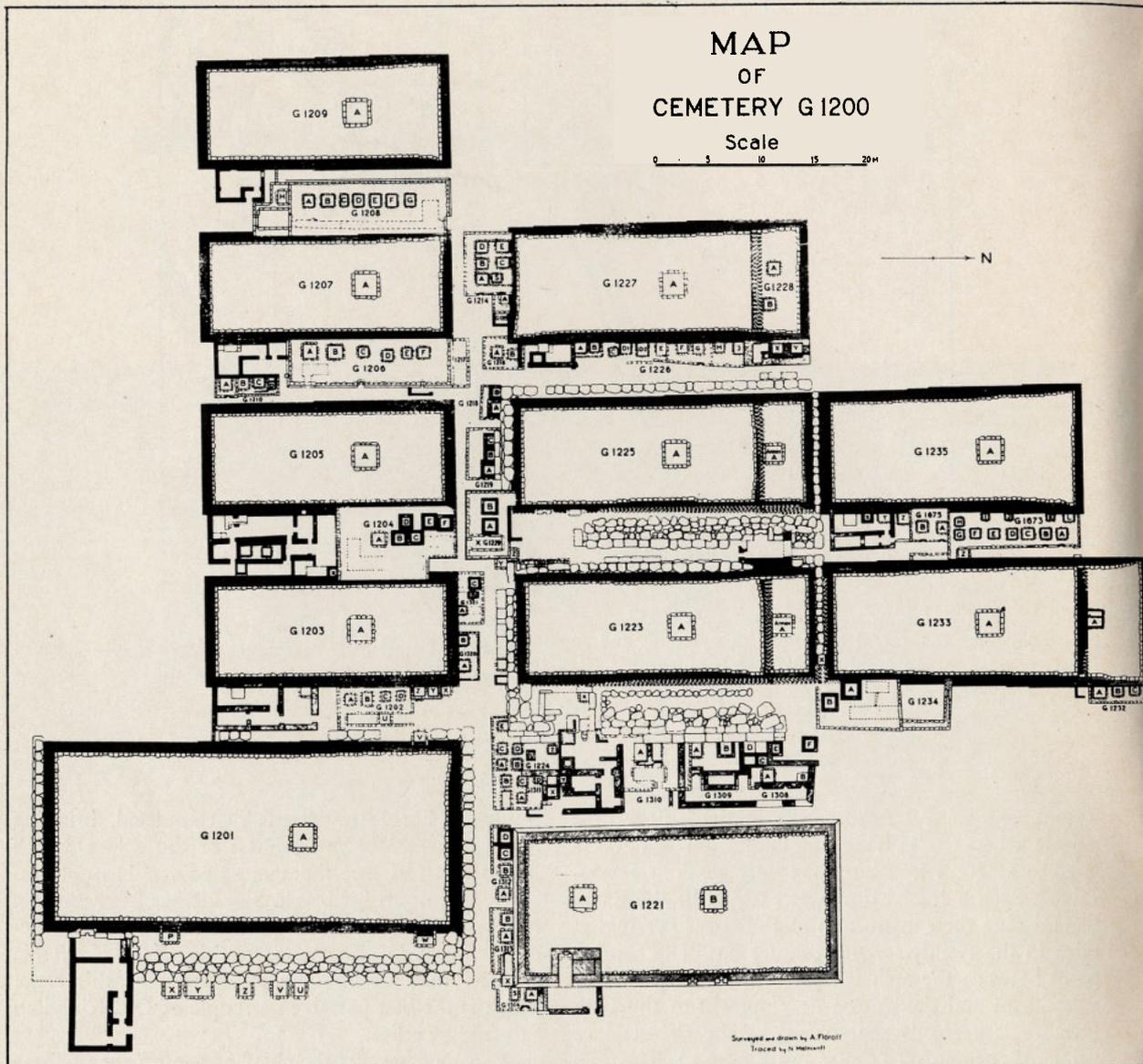


2. General map of Giza pyramids and surrounding cemeteries. The Great Pyramid is at the right. Wepemnofret's tomb is designated by an arrow.

THERE ARE CERTAIN MOMENTS in the history of a people when the striving for expression achieves a balance of form in which opposing tensions are resolved. Such a crucial time was reached by the Egyptians during the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza in the twenty-seventh century B.C. The turning point between the archaic style of a fertile period of experiment and the mature development of the IVth Dynasty is perfectly represented by the slab-stela of Prince Wepemnofret (Cover and Figure 1). The stela was discovered in 1905 by the Hearst Expedition of the University of California, directed by George A. Reisner. It is one of the chief treasures of the Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology at Berkeley. Since humidity was endangering the surface, the stone was brought to Boston in 1961 to be treated by William J. Young, Head of the Research Laboratory of the Museum of Fine Arts. The delicate work of con-

solidation has been successfully completed, bringing out the extraordinary freshness of the colors, which makes one feel that the ancient painter has only recently laid down his brush. Since it has been possible to study the details of the workmanship under especially favorable circumstances, this seems a suitable occasion to underline the importance of this stela, which is the best preserved example of Old Kingdom painted low relief.

Wepemnofret was the chief person of one of three branches of the older generation of the royal family. His was the largest tomb (G 1201) in the westernmost of the three early cemeteries which were laid out on a regular plan when Cheops began to build his pyramid (Figures 2, 3). Wepemnofret was a less important man than the king's cousin Hemiunu, who served Cheops as Vizier and Overseer of All the King's Works and who was the most prominent of



3. Plan of Cemetery G 1200 at Giza. Wepemnofret's tomb is G 1201.

## Wepemnofret continued

the people buried in Cemetery 4000. A very imposing tomb was constructed for this vizier, who undoubtedly played an important part in the building of the Great Pyramid. We do not know the name of the chief person for whom the third cemetery (2100) was commenced at a point nearer the Pyramid and north of Cemetery 4000.

The able men who served Cheops planned on a scale never before attempted. The final shape and dimensions of the Great Pyramid were probably those intended from the first, but vast alterations in the interior were undertaken during the course of construction. The corbeled gallery ascending to the sarcophagus chamber is one of the extraordinary achievements of Egyptian architecture. As the work progressed a fourth cemetery was built in front of the king's funerary temple for three of the queens of Cheops and their children. The innovations introduced into these eastern tombs were then imitated rather late in the reign of Cheops by the owners of some of the earlier buildings west of the pyramid, among them Wepemnofret. The remodeling of his tomb, like that of the others in the Western Cemetery, was never completed. However, the remarkable preservation of the Wepemnofret stela is due to the care with which it was sealed up when a new stone chapel was commenced in front of the original tomb superstructure, in which it had been placed (Figures 4, 5).

The early superstructures of the tombs in this cemetery were built with a sloping retaining wall of stepped courses of rather small stone blocks, the interior being filled with rubble. This was an innovation at Giza, replacing the old use of brickwork, as in the mastabas (rectangular tombs with sloping sides and flat top) of Dynasty III and the reign of Sneferu. It should be remembered, though, that in front of Sneferu's northern pyramid at Dahshur there is a regularly laid out cemetery of stone mastabas. (These still remain unexcavated and little is known about the details of their construction.) An even earlier example of the use of stone for the superstructure of a private tomb has been found across the river in the Early Dynastic cemetery at Helwan; therefore the idea of employing stone instead of unbaked mud bricks was not entirely new in the reign of Cheops. The use of the stepped courses of small blocks was soon given up, and retaining walls of heavy masonry were employed in all but the earliest mastabas in Cemetery 4000. All these retaining walls were originally designed to support exterior chapels built of mud brick; they show an expert use of brick vaulting which is often overlooked in considering the architecture of



4. Chapel of Wepemnofret; the stela is behind one of the large stone slabs in the background.



5. Stone slab, part of later chapel, moved away so as to show the Wepemnofret slab-stela in place behind it.



6. Brick chapel of Kanofer (G 1203) situated in the street behind Wepemnofret's tomb. Remains of two barrel vaults are visible.

7. (Below) Chapel G 1207, showing stela in place.

8. (Right) Scenes from daily life on east wall of tomb of Queen Meresankh III at Giza. IVth Dynasty.



## Wepemnofret continued

the Old Kingdom. Figure 6 illustrates how the rooms are roofed with barrel vaults. The manner in which the slab-stela was set in the stepped face of the mastaba and revealed in a niche of the brickwork in the back wall of the offering room is best seen in a chapel farther west in this same row of tombs (Figure 7). The niche was probably closed at the top by a round arch (such as Hermann Junker suggested should be restored in one of the chapels found in his excavations in Cemetery 4000).

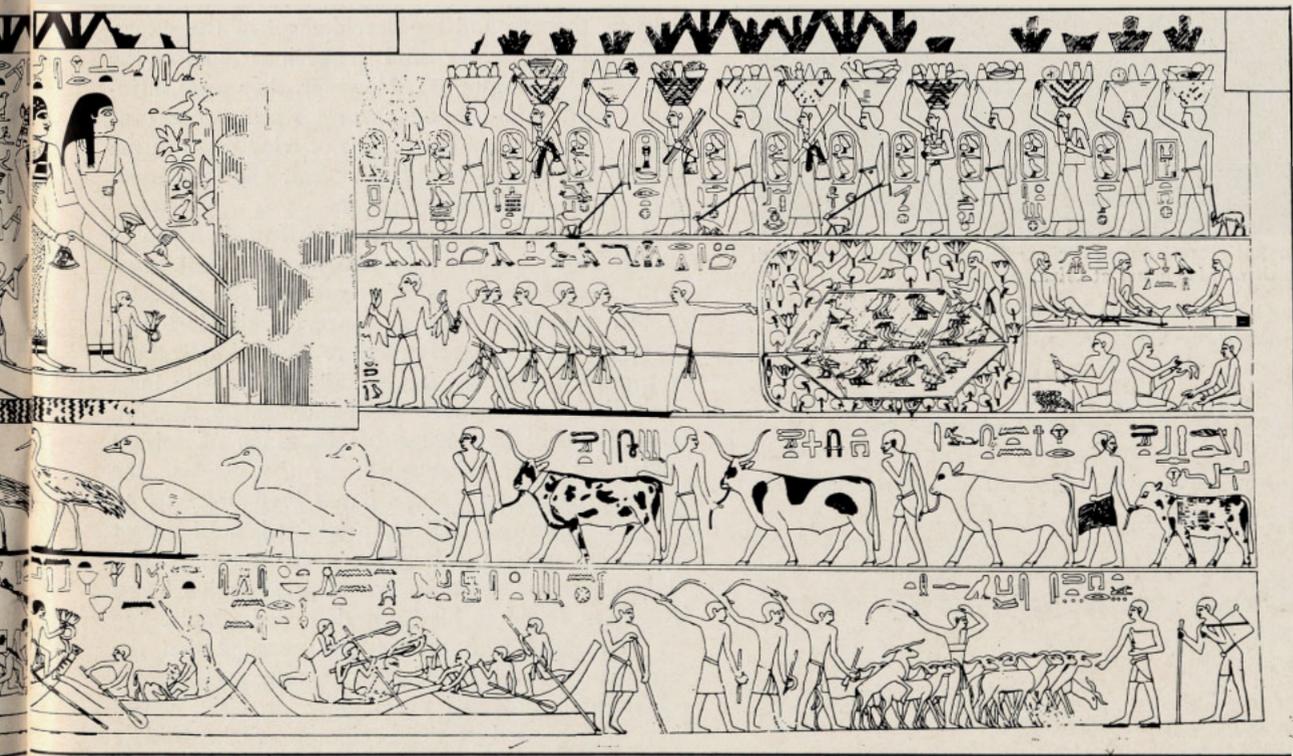
The austere simplicity of the design of these tombs, with their drastically curtailed decoration, is contemporaneous with the early years of the construction of the Great Pyramid. At about the middle of the reign of Cheops, when the size of the temple east of the pyramid had been determined, large twin mastabas, intended for a prince and his wife, were laid out in the Eastern Cemetery, each pair of cores being constructed with a facing of large blocks of stone. It was then decided to join the two separate structures with a filling of local stone and to face the double tomb with a sloping casing of fine white



limestone like that of the pyramid. Here was introduced for the first time the interior L-shaped offering room which was to be characteristic of the Giza cemetery. It was not long before several of the most important people began to remodel their tombs in the Western Cemetery to introduce the latest architectural ideas. The mud-brick chapel of Prince Wepemnofret was destroyed during the construction of a heavy stone masonry addition to his mastaba intended to contain an interior chapel. The workmen first carefully covered the painted stela with a slab of stone which was plastered around the edges (Figure 5). Against this they built the fine limestone back wall of the chapel, but at this stage either the owner died or else there were not sufficient funds available, and the other walls of the new chapel were completed in brick (Figure 4). There was no attempt to encase the mastaba in white limestone, although this had been commenced in the neighboring tomb of the Princess Nefert-yabet (G 1225) where a similarly protected slab-stela (now in the Louvre) survived with its coloring nearly intact.

ALTOGETHER SOME TWENTY-FOUR inscribed slabs

such as these have been recovered. Eleven were virtually complete. They were evidently donated by the king as a special sign of ownership, but were primarily intended to indicate the place at which food offerings were to be made to the dead. Such a custom is a curious reversion to that employed in the corridor chapels of the brick mastabas of Dynasty II at Saqqara, where a primitive version of such a stone tablet was placed in the principal offering niche. Early in Dynasty IV the stone-lined cruciform chapels in the brick tombs of the reign of Sneferu already had a niche in the form of a false-door. The tablet over it portrayed, as did the slab-stela, the owner seated at a table laden with bread, together with a list of food offerings and household equipment as well as his titles and name. On each of the rather restricted wall spaces of the cruciform chapels was a large figure of the owner and a few small figures of men performing his funerary services or personifying the landed properties which were part of his tomb endowment for the supply of foodstuffs. More rarely there was inserted an abbreviated representation of certain typical activities involved in preparing the necessities for the afterworld named in the offering lists. Such are the





9. Relief portraying Prince Khufu-khaf on the north wall of his chapel at Giza.

### **Wepemnofret** continued

men shown building a boat and the agricultural scenes in the chapel of Rahotep at Medum, or the desert animals, suggesting a hunt, in Methen's tomb at Saqqara. Rare glimpses into more personal activities, such as the children of Prince Nefermaat shown playing with animals, were probably considered as affecting the owner's general well-being.

It is still not clear why a system of representation which had attained considerable development at Medum and Saqqara was briefly abandoned in the early years of the reign of Cheops. It is barely possible that paintings could have been executed on the walls of a brick chapel such as that of Wepemnofret, but the fact remains that no trace of them has survived. It would appear that all decoration had been reduced to a small rectangular stone with the single figure of the owner seated at his funerary meal, in other words, the slab-stela. The L-shaped offering room of the great tombs in the Eastern Cemetery, like the cruciform interior chapel which preceded it, presented restricted wall spaces. It is really only in the big rooms of the rock-cut tombs at Giza, the first of which was excavated for Queen Meresankh III at the end of the dynasty, that we find the development of the system of representing scenes from life such as those of the Vth Dynasty (Figure 8). However, they were introduced earlier into stone chapels which were constructed in the street outside the offering room in the Eastern Cemetery. These had at least one long room with a sizable area for decoration.

It is in the work of the second half of the reign of Cheops that we can finally recognize the established IVth Dynasty style of relief decoration. The character of this style is not easy to convey in simple terms. Only the interior chapel of Prince Khufu-khaf's tomb is preserved virtually intact (Figure 9). We must study the other examples from fragmentary remains, without a full knowledge of the range of subject matter originally represented. In the case of the funerary temple of Cheops it has been necessary to struggle against a belief, maintained until recent years, that such early buildings were not decorated. Only a few pieces obviously associated with Cheops have been found in his badly destroyed temple. We are thus faced with the peculiar paradox that the largest surviving body of IVth Dynasty royal temple reliefs was discovered miles away, at Lisht, where they were re-used at the beginning of the Middle

Kingdom in the construction of the pyramid of the first King of Dynasty XII, Amenemhat I (Figure 10). There is good reason to believe that a large part of the decorated walls of the Cheops temple were pulled down and carried off to Lisht. (The Lisht reliefs are at present in process of publication; their contents, although known to a few specialists, are not yet generally available.)

PERHAPS WE CAN REACH some understanding of the stylistic development by examining the stela of Wepemnofret and comparing it with the work immediately preceding and following it. First, however, we should consider briefly another matter which tends to trouble the modern mind. The religious beliefs reflected in the architecture at Giza and in its decoration seem to us to present conflicting elements. The unprecedented height of the Great Pyramid is thought to express the soaring concept of an ascent to the celestial realms. The people recognized in their king, the living Horus, the Great God who would rule after death as one of the indestructible stars that remained always on view in the night sky. On the other hand, the structure's huge stone mass embodies the more prosaic idea of preserving the earthly body in order that the spirit might return to it at will. A more permanent substitute for the body was provided in the form of a statue and, against the chance of man's neglect in furnishing food and drink in royal temple and private chapel, pictures of these necessities were carved on the walls. Basically, it was sufficient to list such things in the inscriptions as long as the name and titles of the owner were carefully recorded, as well as those of his family and retainers who were to share in his benefits. Such inscriptions and offering lists occupy the greater part of the space on Wepemnofret's slab-stela. The individual hieroglyphs are drawn so beautifully that we are conscious primarily of their pictorial quality.

We are first impressed by the fresh, clear tones of the color and the sure, delicate lines. We then begin to realize that in addition to the fine rendering of details such as the feathering of the owl's wing there is also an attempt at impressionism, as in the use of brush strokes to suggest texture on the frog hieroglyph, and the use of a wash deepening from pale yellow to orange on the body of the quail chick (*Cover*). A peculiar purplish brown is employed for the half-loaves of bread on the table and for the sign for a whole loaf beneath it. A lingering archaic feature is

the absence of blue pigment; this is generally replaced by gray or black in most IVth Dynasty work, although we now know that blue was occasionally used as early as Dynasty I. Green is applied sparingly along with the red and yellow.

The color scheme is, then, rather sober, with especially delicate brushwork in the areas of gray paint on birds and fish. An impression of slightly stiff precision is accentuated by the gray dividing lines which separate the inscription and the lists of linen and other offerings. This strongly rectilinear scheme is continued by the seated figure with its broad shoulders and simple treatment of body and limbs (Figures 1, 11). The very low table contributes to this effect. All the details are executed in relief so low that it is largely obscured by the paint. Nevertheless the whole retains something of the proportions and broadly conceived outlines which were characteristic of the preceding reign of Sneferu, when they were carried out in bold, flat carving which stood out from the background to a much greater extent.

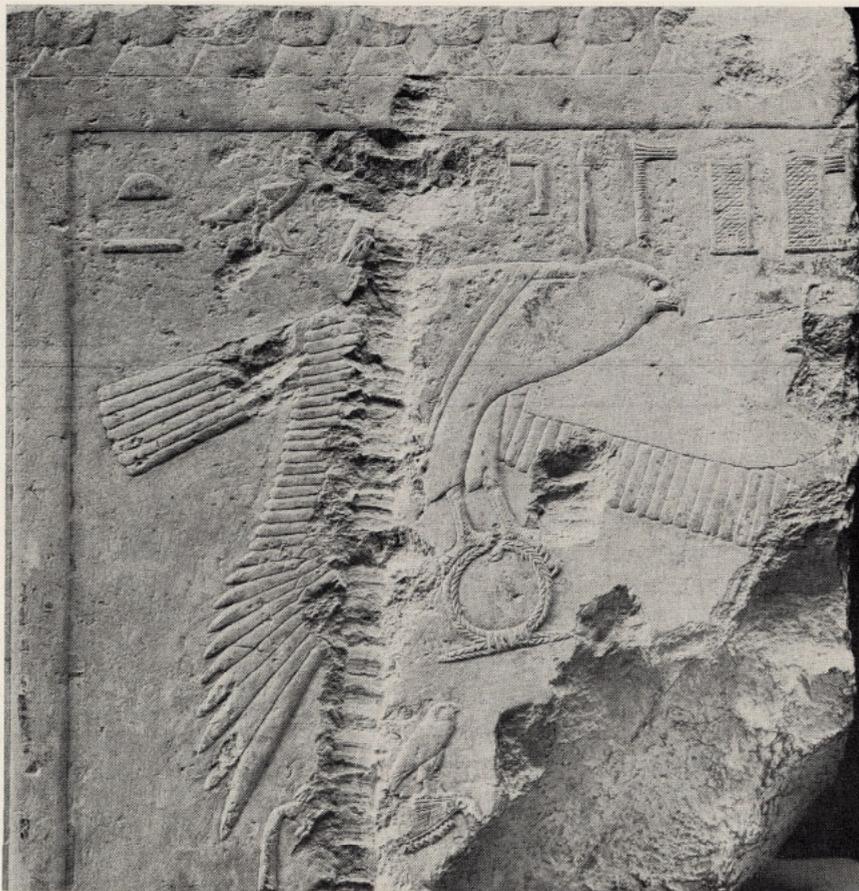
In the second half of the reign of Cheops, shortly after the slab-stelae were made, the sculptor finally achieved a satisfactory adjustment between the modeling and the outlines of his figures as well as between the raised surface and the background. This is apparent whether the carving is in very low relief, as on the walls of the Cheops Temple (Figure 10) and in a few chapels of the princely tombs (Figures 12, 13), or employs the higher projection favored by the master craftsman who designed the wall decorations of Khufu-khaf (Figure 9). The slightly altered proportions of the figures, the drawing of their outlines and the subtle surface modeling are the same in these two methods of carving. In fact, one gains an almost identical impression from the low relief inscriptions on a Cheops block from Lisht (Figure 10) and that carved above Khufu-khaf (Figure 14), whose chapel provides the best example of the use of higher relief. The higher projection of the surface can better be seen when the figure of the prince (Figure 9) is compared with the very low carving of the heads of the Princess Merytyetes (Figure 12) and Prince Hemiunu (Figure 13). However, in both cases we find that the mature IVth Dynasty style has achieved a classic balance, whether it employs one or the other of these technical means. The same maturity is to be sensed in the sculpture in the round.

The characteristic of archaic work in sculptured relief is certainly the uneasy tension between broadly

## Wepemnofret continued

conceived forms and minute surface detail. In sculpture in the round this is more apparent in the fragmentary statues of Zoser than it is in the more complete seated figure of this IIIrd Dynasty king, where the enveloping cloak and the heavy wig, in spite of its meticulously carved strands of hair, produce an impression of monumentality. The sculptors who worked for the court in Dynasty III favored more attenuated forms than are evident in Zoser's carved panels in the Step Pyramid complex. The elongated limbs of the spare human figures are echoed in the long slender hieroglyphs. There is also an experimental interest in musculature and the bony structure of the body, with emphasis upon ankles, cheek bones and collar bones. (Likewise to be noted is a certain discrepancy in qual-

ity between private and royal workmanship.) Gradually these features gave way to the massive style of the reign of Sneferu, with its boldly projecting forms, rather flat as to surface but with heavily rounded edges. This change can be paralleled in the statues. The legacy of the two strains of high and low relief was inherited at Giza in Dynasty IV. We have seen that the two schools of sculpture in the round predicated by Reisner, with their contrast between simple and detailed modeling, are probably related to this. Certain it is that the slab-stela of Prince Wepemnofret represents the turning point which led to the solution aimed at by the sculptor of both statues and reliefs. He eliminated the conflicting elements characteristic of an experimental period, along with all unnecessary detail, in the balanced presentation of the essential elements of his subject (Figure 9).



10. Detail of relief found at Lisht, taken from the temple of Cheops at Giza, and reused in the pyramid of Amenemhat I. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



11. Detail of Wepemnofret stela as it appeared in 1905.



12. Relief of Princess Merytyetes III. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



13. Portrait of Prince Hemiunu, cousin of Cheops. He was the son of Prince Nefermaat and probably the grandson of Huni, the last king of Dynasty III. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



14. Inscription above the head of Khufu-khaf on the relief shown in Figure 9.

### **Wepemnofret** continued

Like Prince Hemiunu, Wepemnofret held a number of rare titles which had been employed in Dynasty III. Some of these are difficult to interpret. All that we know about Wepemnofret is contained in these titles, which appear only in the inscription which begins in the two columns on the right of the stela and continues in the band across the upper part of the stone. It has been assumed that the first title means Overseer of Royal Scribes, but in IIIrd and IVth Dynasty contexts we do not find it except when associated with the second title which consists of an axe above a lioness. The axe ordinarily has the meaning "carpenter" and is used in the title Royal Architect, appearing also in connection with sculptors and makers of stone vessels. The Vizier Hemiunu bears the same pair of titles as does Wepemnofret. Hemiunu was Overseer of All the King's Works, the control of the great construction projects being one of the important functions of the Old Kingdom vizier. As in the case of the false-door of a man named Mery (Smith, *American Journal of Archaeology* 46 [1942] 510), the order of the signs suggests that we might

interpret the titles as Royal Architect and Scribe (or Building Supervisor, Royal Scribe), Craftsman of Mehit (the lioness goddess of the Thinite Nome). A similar form of the lioness appears on Early Dynastic seal designs, where she is obviously connected with the Upper Egyptian Sanctuary.

Wolfgang Helck, in his study of Old Kingdom titles (*Ägyptologische Forschungen* 18 [1954] 76, 92, 104), and Hermann Junker in his fascinating demonstration of the important position which the Egyptian artist occupied in Old Kingdom society (*Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Sitzungsberichte* 231/1 [1955] 18-20) both agree that the axe stands for a word like "overseer" when combined with Royal Scribe. This would certainly seem to be the case in inscriptions of the later Old Kingdom, but appears less likely for the time that we are considering. Both scholars have noted that in another connection the axe must mean something like "Master Builder." Lacau, in discussing the craftsmen's titles on stone bowls from the Step Pyramid at Saqqara (P. Lacau et J.-Ph. Lauer, *La Pyramide à Degrès IV* [1961] 65ff.), takes it for granted that in Dynasty II the axe is to be read separately as "car-

penther" when followed by the title of sculptor or maker of stone vessels. Junker has gone far in clarifying the relationship between the administrative duties of royal officials and certain professional skills which today we would consider separate functions. He has shown the inadequacy of the widely accepted belief that the Egyptian artist was an anonymous craftsman of little standing. In the IVth Dynasty, statues of the King's son show him in the attitude of writing. The training of the scribal schools in the court library could also have served for the man who made architectural plans. Accustomed to fashioning such detailed hieroglyphs as those on the Wepemnofret stela, an educated man would be in close rapport with the draftsman and painter.

Wepemnofret held only two other secular titles in addition to several priesthoods, including those of Seshat, the goddess concerned with the royal records, the Northern Horus, Anubis, the frog-goddess Heket and the desert god, Ha. He was a member of the southern council (Great One of the Upper Egyptian Ten) and Director of the Fleet, or Leader of Transport. This last title associates him with the men who led expeditions to seek out raw materials beyond the borders of the Nile Valley and who were closely concerned with the great construction works undertaken by Old Kingdom monarchs.

A badly worn short inscription in cursive hieroglyphics or hieratic has been noticed for the first time on the upper edge of Wepemnofret's slab-stela. It is difficult to decipher. One would like to find here the name of one of the gangs of men who had the task of delivering the stela and placing it in the face of the mastaba. However, it is more probable, as Klaus Baer points out to me, that the peculiarly arranged signs form the name of the prince. We know of a number of these ink inscriptions on the fine white limestone casing blocks. They usually give the date when the stone was quarried and more rarely the name of the person who owned the tomb to which it was to be delivered.

IT IS VERY PROBABLE that Prince Wepemnofret, whether we call him architect, supervisor of buildings or royal scribe, was closely concerned with the vast building project being carried out at Giza, for he was one of the three men who built the first tombs in the cemeteries west of the pyramid. There is no doubt that Hemiunu played a leading part in carrying out the plans of Cheops. Cemetery 4000, which was constructed east of his very large tomb, was the most extensive of the early cemeteries and occupied the best of the sites. Princess Merytyetes II and the Princes Iwnw and Sneru-seneb, who were buried here, must

have been important people related to Hemiunu. The third cemetery, to the north, produced a remarkable limestone portrait head of the Treasurer Nofer (G 2110), who probably served in Chephren's government, and a broken slab-stela of Prince Seshat-sek-hentiu (G 2130). However, the mastaba which began this group of tombs (G 2100) also contained an emplacement for a slab-stela which was not recovered. We do not know the name of this prince but he was evidently married to the Princess Sedit who appears in the chapel of their son Merib (an addition to the southern end of the superstructure of G 2100). Merib, whose official duties must have been undertaken at the end of Dynasty IV or early in Dynasty V, was a Chancellor of the God in connection with four royal ships; therefore he was in control of the king's expeditions for raw materials. He had other titles connected with transport and was Overseer of All the King's Works. It is very likely that Merib succeeded to offices held by his father, just as Hemiunu followed in the duties of Prince Nefermaat of Medum. We might then think of Merib's father, Wepemnofret and Hemiunu as being able to construct tombs for themselves and their close associates both because they were related to Cheops and because they occupied positions of favor as a result of their practical connection with the construction of his pyramid.

The training of the huge body of men who labored at Giza for Cheops and his successors, Chephren and Mycerinus, constituted a great school of the arts and crafts which established the tradition of fine workmanship that was maintained throughout the rest of the Old Kingdom. Closely connected with the administration of this construction work was the control of the transport of building materials, the desert expeditions which undertook exploration for stone and metals, and the state-sponsored sea trade which brought back timber from the Syrian mountains and other foreign products. If our interpretation of Wepemnofret's career is correct it enables us to see him more clearly as one of the many able men of the king's family whose resourcefulness and skill made possible the remarkable achievement of Cheops at Giza.

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WILLIAM STEVENSON SMITH is Curator of the Department of Egyptian Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and Lecturer in the Fine Arts at Harvard University. He is President of the American Research Center in Egypt. Dr. Smith worked with George A. Reisner in the Museum's excavations at the Giza pyramids and has been engaged in the publication of the results of this long-maintained expedition. He is the author of *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* and other books and articles on Egyptian art and archaeology.