Stone Pillaging for the New Kingdom Tombs at South Saqqara

To Professor Lacey: recalling with appreciation the wonderful support you gave to a small group of Egyptologists, eager to progress.

Introduction

South of the Pyramid Complex of King Unas at Saqqara, beyond the rock-cut tombs that border his Causeway, there is an expanse of desert flecked with thousands of ancient pottery sherds and fragments of mud brick (fig. 1, left). Originally, this was the site of an Old Kingdom cemetery, but once the funerary services to the tombs had ceased to function the monuments were gradually claimed by the desert and doubtless pillaged from time to time by workers searching for stone. By the Eighteenth Dynasty the terrain south of the Causeway must have presented an ideal spot for the creation of a new necropolis for officials from the city of Memphis, situated in the fertile valley below. Future excavations might reveal the approximate boundaries of this cemetery, though the limits of the Old Kingdom burials may never be known, due to the demolition of the ancient tomb superstructures.

In 1843 the desert south of the Causeway was examined by Carl Richard Lepsius, whose surveyor made a careful plan of the New Kingdom cemetery and marked in the monuments visible at that time. More than a century later, his plan provided a starting-point for a scientific examination of the necropolis by a British:Dutch team, in the area west of the Apa Jeremias monastery and approximately in line with the south-east corner of Zoser’s Enclosure Wall. This Expedition, from the Egypt Exploration Society (London) and the National Museum of Antiquities (Leiden), arrived at Saqqara in the
Figure 1: The necropolis of Saqqara (adapted from Lauer, *Saqqara*, frontispiece).
winter of 1975 to commence work at the necropolis. Initially, its aim was limited: to re-discover, excavate and record the tomb of Maya, which was marked on Lepsius’ plan and had remained exposed and vulnerable for many years before being hidden by wind-blown sand.

The Tomb of Horemheb

It is a tribute to the accuracy of Lepsius’ surveyor, and of his modern-day counterpart, that the EES: Leiden Expedition missed pin-pointing the tomb of Maya by a mere few metres. This fortuitous accident led instead to the discovery of the long-lost tomb of Maya’s illustrious contemporary, Horemheb, who was the Commander-in-Chief of Tutankhamun during the construction of his Memphite tomb but in due course became the last Pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The uncovering of Horemheb’s tomb initiated 18 years of painstaking excavation and recording of tombs in the necropolis, which reached a climax for the Expedition in 1986 with the discovery of the elusive tomb of Maya, Treasurer of Tutankhamun.

The relevance of the Old Kingdom burials in the area became evident during the first season of excavation (1975) when Old Kingdom relief blocks and fragments were uncovered in the debris of Horemheb’s tomb, particularly in the superstructure. These pieces had been used by the ancient architects as building material, probably to save the labour, time and expense of extracting good quality limestone blocks from the quarries on the east bank of the Nile, then transporting them up to the desert plateau and westwards to the site of the tomb’s construction. No doubt some of the reliefs came from mastabas dismantled on the site to make way for the tomb of

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1 I am grateful to the Committee of the Egypt Exploration Society, to Professor Geoffrey Martin (Field Director), and to Professor Hans Schneider (National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden) for permitting me to use material from the New Kingdom excavations at South Saqqara, and to reproduce drawings from Horemheb Vol.I. All of the Old Kingdom blocks are to be published by the EES as an Excavation Memoir, under the joint authorship of Geoffrey T. Martin (epigraphy) and Y.M. Harpur (commentary).
Horemheb, while others were taken from richly decorated monuments in the Old Kingdom cemeteries further north at Saqqara (fig. 1, right). In any event, it is certain that at least two Old Kingdom mastabas had existed, partly intact or already demolished, on the site of Horemheb's tomb, because the New Kingdom architects made use of earlier tombshafts when constructing a subterranean burial complex for Horemheb. Shafts i and iv of the substructure of Horemheb's tomb were elaborated from two Old Kingdom tombshafts (figs. 2-3). In fact, the inscribed sarcophagus of Khuywer, an Old Kingdom official, was left undisturbed in its burial chamber as the builders continued their ambitious plans for the development of the substructure, especially Shaft iv.

By the final year of the Horemheb tomb excavation the Expedition had amassed some 47 Old Kingdom relief blocks and fragments—then the largest collection of re-used decorated blocks ever to be found in a private tomb in Egypt. Details in the style and content of

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2 The types of scenes are quite varied: carpenters, metal workers, painters, singers and dancers, musicians, bearers carrying haunches, elaborate food
these reliefs reveal that most were from Memphite monuments dating from the mid-Fifth to the later Sixth Dynasty, that is, between the reigns of Neuserre and the later years of Pepy II. Many of the blocks were removed from private tombs, and two bear the hieroglyphs of ‘Chief Justice and Vizier’, indicating that the tombs of the mightiest officials of that era were just as vulnerable to pillaging as the rest. It is evident, too, that royal monuments were not protected from the enthusiasm of Horemheb’s stone collectors. Numerous undecorated blocks were taken from the Zoser Funerary Complex, including stones from the recessed walls of the Enclosure and pieces from the Entrance Colonnade, easily identified by their distinctive shape (fig. 1, centre). Royal relief blocks were also pillaged, probably quite openly. At least three reliefs in the Horemheb Old Kingdom collections bear such a striking resemblance to the desert-hunt scenes

offerings, bearers with birds, boating in a marsh, fording, herdsmen bringing cattle, wooden boat building, rendering accounts, a bed preparation scene, a pavilion scene, fragments of desert-hunt landscapes, parts of major figures, and sections of inscriptions and titles.
on the south wall of the Unas Causeway, just north of the solar boat-pit of the King, that there can be little doubt as to their identity. All were found during the clearance of the superstructure in 1975. They had been broken unevenly, either by smashing a large block, already removed, or by hacking pieces from a large, decorated wall that could not be demolished stone by stone.

Four slabs of limestone found re-used in the lower chamber of Shaft i of Horemheb’s tomb add an extra dimension to this history of ancient pillaging. These stones were used as roofing slabs over the sarcophagus of the Old Kingdom official already mentioned, the Judge Khuywer, whose burial chamber was not used for New Kingdom interments (fig. 2). The roofing slabs, three of them decorated, were plundered by Old Kingdom builders, either openly or furtively, from a royal monument. Each of the three slabs bears monumental-sized hieroglyphs in raised relief, and two join to form a narrow strip showing part of the conventional scene of a king wearing his double crown and smiting cringing enemies (fig. 4). Regrettably, the name of the king is not included on these blocks, but they probably come from one of the three mortuary temples in the vicinity, that of Unas, Userkaf or Teti (fig. 1).

The Tomb of Tia and Tia

The second major project of the EES:Leiden Expedition was to uncover and record the tomb of Tia and Tia, the similarly named brother-in-law and sister of Ramesses II. This tomb, discovered as early as 1975 during the excavation of the Outer Courtyard of the tomb of Horemheb, yielded scarcely any Old Kingdom reliefs—not

Figure 4: Roofing Slabs in the burial chamber of the Old Kingdom official, Khuywer.
necessarily because such material was not used for the tomb construction but because the superstructure of the Tias’ tomb was thoroughly stripped from antiquity onwards, probably mainly by workers searching for building blocks or stone to convert to lime. Faint traces of an Old Kingdom bird procession scene are visible on one stray block but if similar blocks were used they have simply disappeared, or remain firmly embedded and totally unrecognisable in the remaining architecture of the tomb. Curiously, an association with the Old Kingdom is apparent on the south wall of the Apis Chapel of Tia and Tia, where the couple are depicted in a shrine on a papyriform craft which is towed by a larger vessel under sail. Below this ‘Journey to Abydos’ scene is a representation of the Nile, shown as a series of wide, vertical zigzags carved on a background of blue. The fish, birds, lotus foliage and crocodile depicted in the ‘waterband’ are so reminiscent of those included in Old Kingdom marsh scenes at Saqqara that their presence raises an interesting possibility: this

Figure 6: Re-used Old Kingdom block from the tomb of Maya. Parts of a scene of fish gutting and fowling.

Figure 7: Re-used Old Kingdom block from the tomb of Maya. Parts of two seine-netting scenes.

Figure 8: Re-used Old Kingdom block from the tomb of Maya. Bearers carrying live ducks.

Figure 9: Re-used Old Kingdom block from the tomb of Maya. Netting and angling, with a pelican swimming nearby.
Nineteenth Dynasty artist might well have admired the marsh scenes in such ancient mastabas as those of Kagemni and Mereruka, and used ideas from these reliefs with the approval of Tia and Tia. Iniuiia’s painted chapel, excavated in the 1993 season by the Expedition, has provided another example of fish and lotuses in water, but in this case the ‘waterband’ appears to be used as a border pattern and its contents lack the Old Kingdom similarities evident in the Tias’ scene.

The Tomb of Maya

The discovery of Maya’s tomb substructure via the tomb-shaft of Ramose, Deputy of the Army, ushered in another important phase in the study of re-used blocks in the New Kingdom necropolis (fig. 5). When the superstructure of the tomb was cleared in the 1987 and 1988 seasons it became apparent that Maya, like Horemheb, had not been averse to sanctioning (or turning a blind eye to) the pillaging of stone from the tombs of his Old Kingdom predecessors; indeed he might have used this material more extensively than his colleague and superior, Horemheb. Not only were relief blocks used as building material for walls, blocking and filling, but the best were re-cut and re-used for Maya’s relief decoration in the superstructure and substructure of his tomb. Huge limestone blocks, typical of high-quality Old Kingdom architecture, were sliced widthways to produce three or four slabs, each about 12 cm thick. As a result, the Old Kingdom relief-registers were cut into long, fairly even strips, bearing, for example, (1) the inscription and heads of figures; (2) the bodies of figures; (3) legs and/or feet; and, finally, (4) objects and other features near the baseline, such as boats and water (figs. 6-9). Maya’s own decoration was carved on the new, broad surfaces after each had been dressed and prepared for that purpose. Once the blocks were set in place, in preparation for carving, the Old Kingdom relief strips were no longer visible, having been jammed against the sides of surrounding blocks and covered with a filling of plaster to disguise the joins.

Many of Maya’s re-used reliefs feature activities in the marsh, and several others include bowing officials—figures never depicted in private tombs of the Old Kingdom. The cartouche of Unas is preserved a number of times on both types of scenes.
Occasionally the masons appear to have been a little careless in their handling of these slabs. On the staircase leading down to Room H in the substructure the stone forming the vertical side of the lowest step bears a finely carved Old Kingdom relief of part of a male figure and text. Perhaps a workman forgot to reverse this block in order to hide the sculpture, or he might have covered it with an over-thin coating of plaster that dribbled to the floor. Another relief, this time an inscription fragment, is visible on the outer (right) jamb as Room H is entered. Lumps of plaster above and below the carving indicate that it had received a rough coating that subsequently fell away. More intriguing is a paving-stone in Maya’s Outer Courtyard, which was laid with its carved side upwards. Numerous bare and sandalled feet must have trodden over the representation of four bowing officials, obviously plundered from the Unas Causeway nearby (fig. 10). The unusual position of this last block suggests that in matters of economy and labour a practical approach outweighed sentiment or religious considerations, as far as the tombs of predecessors were concerned. However, it is unlikely that Horemheb and Maya were the first to use material from the Unas Causeway; pieces were probably being removed much earlier, even from the reign of Teti, in Dynasty VI.
Near the close of the winter season in 1989 the paving-stones in the Outer Courtyard of Maya’s tomb were carefully raised, to check if their bases or sides bore earlier reliefs. This resulted in the discovery of 12 more ‘slices’ which were marked on a plan of the pavement then photographed and copied epigraphically before being re-laid. Most prominent in this group was a long, narrow slab in the approach path to the Inner Courtyard, immediately east of the jambs of that courtyard’s entrance. On one of the sides of this paving-stone was a representation of gymnasts next to a group of boys playing the so-called ‘prisoner’ game within a pretend boundary, of rope (fig. 11). In terms of style, size and quality this piece could well be from the Unas Causeway, in which case it would be the earliest-known representation of these activities and perhaps the inspiration for the closely similar scene in the uppermost register on the east wall of the chapel of Ptahhotp II, a Vizier of Unas (fig. 12). Other examples of the ‘prisoner’ game, two with the rope boundary, are represented in Sixth Dynasty tombs at Giza and Saqqara, whereas the gymnasts are very rare.
Of all the Old Kingdom blocks discovered in the tomb of Maya the largest was used in a manner which, as far as I am aware, is unique. This block became the dyad, or pair-statue, of Maya and his wife, Meryt, which was positioned against the south wall of the Inner Courtyard facing the space between the first and second columns on that side. The entire dyad had been hewn from a massive Old Kingdom block, originally decorated with a large-scale relief of food offerings on its broad side, that is, the underside of the New Kingdom statue-plinth (fig. 13). A relief block of such dimensions is unlikely to have been transported from afar, and could only have come from the wall of an impressively large structure, conceivably the Mortuary Temple of King Unas.

Work in Maya's tomb was completed by the EES: Leiden Expedition in the season of 1992. By that time the quantity of re-used blocks and fragments from the tomb amounted to 73, greatly exceeding Horemheb's total and transferring to Maya the dubious honour of being the most prolific private re-user of relief blocks in ancient Egypt. The accuracy of this, however, is essentially a matter of conjecture, for without dismantling the tombs, block by block, we cannot be sure what reliefs lie hidden in the walls, or on the sides of sculptured relief slabs still plastered in position, Nor do we know the quantity of re-used
blocks that were stripped from the New Kingdom tombs for further re-use, or the extent to which plunderers destroyed such blocks for lime, or smuggled them away to sell to dealers in the past two centuries. It is nevertheless likely that the re-use of relief blocks from Old Kingdom monuments was far more extensive than the surviving evidence could lead us to believe. Indeed, it has now been discovered that the New Kingdom builders were even cannibalizing New Kingdom relief blocks from the same cemetery once the funerary cults of the earlier tombs of that period had petered out.

The Tomb of Iniuia

Winter 1993 saw the EES: Leiden Expedition at work on the south side of the tomb of Horemheb where a number of smaller tombs had been located in earlier seasons. First to be uncovered was the late Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Iniuia, Overseer of the Cattle of Amun and High Steward at Memphis. Yet more Old Kingdom relief fragments were found in the debris of the superstructure, having been used as building material or thrown there by robbers plundering Horemheb’s tomb close by. Although relatively small and uneven, with battered edges, the pieces found in 1993 were very like the ‘slices’ discovered in the tomb of Maya. There is no direct evidence that they come from a royal context but clearly they were taken from a monument decorated with reliefs of high quality.4

The Tomb of Pay

Only days after commencing the 1994 season of excavation in the New Kingdom cemetery the Expedition uncovered the tomb of Pay, south of the Outer Courtyard of the tomb of Horemheb and east of Iniuia’s chapel. Work on this monument has proceeded during the

4 They include a beautifully sculptured head of a woman wearing a striated wig, part of a papyrus skiff of a spear fisherman or fowler (major figure), three female dancers with closely cropped hair, and the remains of a scene of food offerings and stoppered jars.
writing of this contribution, and up until February 1994 no further Old Kingdom blocks have been found. There remains, however, one course to investigate, perhaps towards the end of the season. Many of Pay's paving-stones have long, straight edges like those in the Outer Courtyard of the tomb of Maya, which proved to be 'slices' of re-used, decorated, Old Kingdom blocks. Once the sand between these paving-stones is loosened and removed temporarily, it might be possible to feel the surfaces of the vertical sides of the slabs, and to establish whether or not they bear reliefs. Inevitably, the results of this Braille-like search must be left for mention in a future publication.

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Suggested reading (selected)


