

EGYPTIAN ART
IN THE AGE OF
THE PYRAMIDS

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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THE PYRAMIDS

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CONTENTS

Lenders to the Exhibition	VIII
Directors' Foreword <i>Françoise Cachin, Philippe de Montebello, Lindsay Sharp</i>	X
Acknowledgments <i>Dorothea Arnold, Krzysztof Grzymski, Christiane Ziegler</i>	XI
Contributors to the Catalogue and Key to the Authors of the Entries	XIV
Maps	XVI
Notes to the Reader	XVIII
Chronology	
A Note on Egyptian Chronology <i>Élisabeth David</i>	XIX
Dynastic and Regnal Dates <i>James P. Allen</i>	XX
Introduction <i>Dorothea Arnold, Christiane Ziegler</i>	XXI

INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OLD KINGDOM <i>Jean Leclant</i>	3
THE STEP PYRAMID PRECINCT OF KING DJOSER <i>Jean-Philippe Lauer</i>	13
PYRAMIDS AND THEIR TEMPLES <i>Audran Labrousse</i>	21
THE TOMBS OF OFFICIALS: HOUSES OF ETERNITY <i>Peter Jánosi</i>	27
OLD KINGDOM STATUES IN THEIR ARCHITECTURAL SETTING <i>Dieter Arnold</i>	41
ROYAL STATUARY <i>Krzysztof Grzymski</i>	51

NONROYAL STATUARY <i>Christiane Ziegler</i>	57
RESERVE HEADS: AN ENIGMA OF OLD KINGDOM SCULPTURE <i>Catharine H. Roehrig</i>	73
ROYAL RELIEFS <i>Dorothea Arnold</i>	83
THE HUMAN IMAGE IN OLD KINGDOM NONROYAL RELIEFS <i>Nadine Cherpion</i>	103
FURNITURE OF THE OLD KINGDOM <i>Julie Anderson</i>	117
STONE VESSELS: LUXURY ITEMS WITH MANIFOLD IMPLICATIONS <i>Dorothea Arnold and Elena Pischikova</i>	121
EXCAVATING THE OLD KINGDOM: FROM KHAFRE'S VALLEY TEMPLE TO THE GOVERNOR'S CITY AT BALAT <i>Nicolas Grimal</i>	133
EXCAVATING THE OLD KINGDOM: THE GIZA NECROPOLIS AND OTHER MASTABA FIELDS <i>Peter Der Manuelian</i>	139
EXCAVATING THE OLD KINGDOM: THE EGYPTIAN ARCHAEOLOGISTS <i>Zahi Hawass</i>	155

CATALOGUE

THIRD DYNASTY	168
FOURTH DYNASTY	194
FIFTH DYNASTY	314
SIXTH DYNASTY	434
Glossary	494
Bibliography	495
Indexes	517
Photograph Credits	536



OLD KINGDOM STATUES IN THEIR ARCHITECTURAL SETTING

DIETER ARNOLD

Rarely conceived as an integral part of architecture, Old Kingdom statuary had a powerful but secluded existence. Statues were considered to be repositories for the living ka, the actual life force of gods, kings, and human beings. The ka of these entities could inhabit any number of statues at one time.¹ The statues were powerful and dangerous but also vulnerable and dependent on ritual treatment for survival. They needed, first of all, protection from climatic and human damage and were therefore sheltered, with the degree of seclusion and the kind of housing varying considerably. But statues—especially those representing the king—were also the recipients of complex rituals² and for that reason needed to be accessible to the officiating priests. The standard emplacement of such images was a wood or stone naos with wood doors. Early examples of images receiving a daily cult are known from the statue-cult temple of Snefru at Dahshur (fig. 48).³ This temple housed a row of six chapels built against its rear wall; each contained a statue of the ruler, expressing an aspect of Egyptian kingship. A more advanced version of such multiple statue-shrines appeared later in the pyramid temples of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, where five shrines were set up at the entrance to the rear part of the temple to accommodate royal cult figures (fig. 57). These statue shrines sat on a flat platform and had wood doors.

The Fourth Dynasty pyramid temple of King Khafre had a different arrangement of chapels. A row of five chapels, each of which measured 10.5 meters deep and 1.5 meters wide, was placed behind the temple court. The narrow elongated shape of the chapels suggests that they housed wood boats that carried royal images and were

similar to the divine ships in New Kingdom and Late Period temples.⁴

Some nonroyal statue-cult shrines in Old Kingdom tombs were apparently imitations of the royal prototypes. A statue-cult temple was added to the original structure of the mastaba of Ptah-shepses at Abusir (time of Niuserre) (fig. 16).⁵ It contained a row of three shrines raised on a platform. This private statue-cult temple clearly reflected the multiple-shrine disposition of a divine or royal temple.⁶

An example of a statue niche is found in the north wall of the pillared hall of Mereruka's mastaba at Saqqara (time of Teti) (fig. 17). Four steps lead to an altar behind which the statue niche opens 1.20 meters above-ground (fig. 18). The majestic lifesize statue of Mereruka steps forward from the niche, ready to reenter life.⁷

In addition to the cult images in chapels, Old Kingdom royal temples housed large numbers of freestanding statues and statue groups. The valley temple of Khafre contains a monumental pillared hall on a T-shaped ground plan.⁸ There twenty-three lifesize seated figures of the king were arranged along the interior walls in groups of three, seven, three, seven, and three (fig. 19). Many smaller figures of the king were placed among them. It is not known whether the valley temple was built to accommodate these statues or whether it was a multi-purpose structure, which housed the statues but also had other functions. The use of the valley temple as the royal embalming place has been disputed.⁹

The valley temple of Menkaure at Giza would also have contained a great number of statues, but it remained unfinished (figs. 85, 86). Some of the statues (cat. nos. 67, 68) were delivered and stored in the

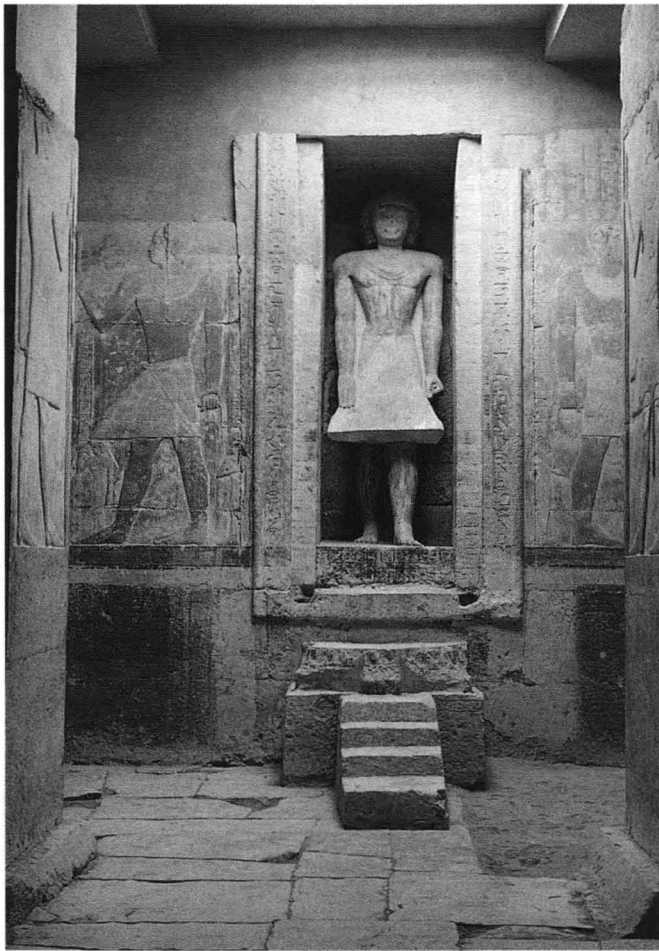


Fig. 18. Statue niche, mastaba of Mereruka, Saqqara

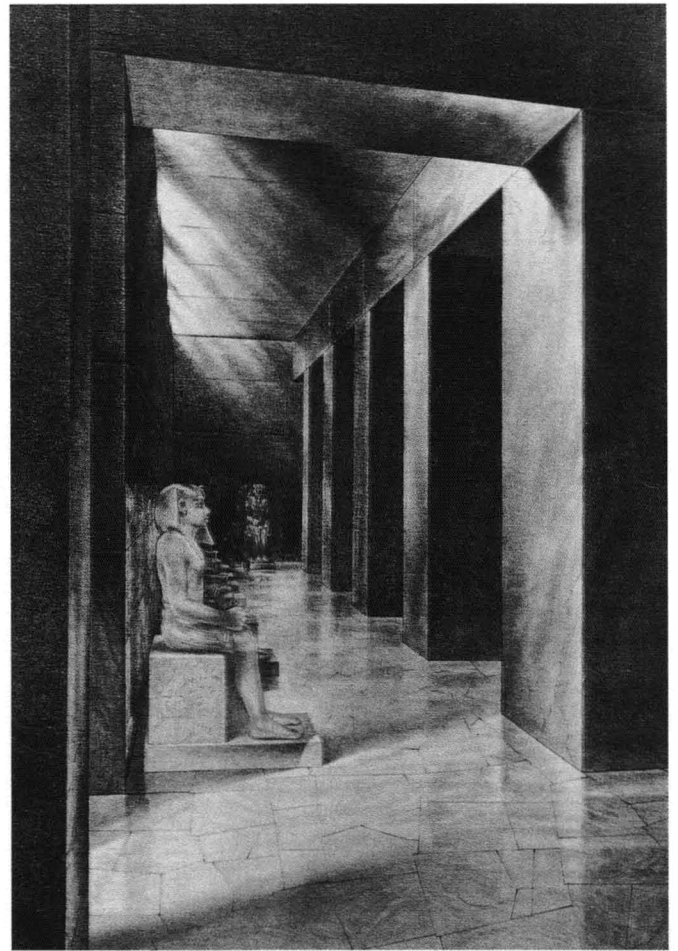


Fig. 19. Reconstruction of interior, valley temple of Khafre, Giza. From Hölscher 1912 (pl. 5)

unfinished building.¹⁰ These works included many types of royal statues, six or more being triads (cat. no. 68), which showed the king with the goddess Hathor and a representative deity of Upper Egyptian nomes.¹¹ Nothing is known about the intended emplacement of these statues.¹²

The statues of the king in the valley temple of Khafre might have been participants in specific royal rituals.¹³ The Menkaure triads appear to have evoked a primordial historic-religious situation. The figure of Hathor accompanying the king in these groups probably plays the part of the royal mother guaranteeing the rebirth of the king. The nome deities recall the Archaic Period idea of gatherings of all Egyptian divinities around the king as their foremost god and leader. In general, the royal-stature assemblies in the Old Kingdom temples seem to express a kind of petrified cultic action or play. Similar actors in ritual performances were later depicted in the kneeling statues of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri,¹⁴ the deity statues in the Kom el-Hetan temple of Amenhotep III,¹⁵

and the Ramesside action groups representing, among other activities, the purification of the king.¹⁶

The statues of kneeling foreign captives, which were probably placed in long lines along the causeway and entrance hall walls of Old Kingdom royal pyramid temples (cat nos. 173, 174), apparently were also action figures of a similar kind. Evoking the king's power, they appear to have undergone an enemy-destruction ritual.¹⁷

Further interesting examples of Old Kingdom royal statuary emplacements are provided by remains in the pyramid temple and the valley temple of Khafre, the nearby Harmakhis temple, and the Great Sphinx of Giza, towering over the Harmakhis temple. It has been suggested that groups of seated over-lifesize statues of King Khafre lined the courts of the king's pyramid temple and his Harmakhis temple at Giza (figs. 20, 21).¹⁸ These figures—twelve in the pyramid temple and ten in the Harmakhis temple—had their backs against the court walls. Entrances between the statues created the impression of pillared porticoes (fig. 20). The existence

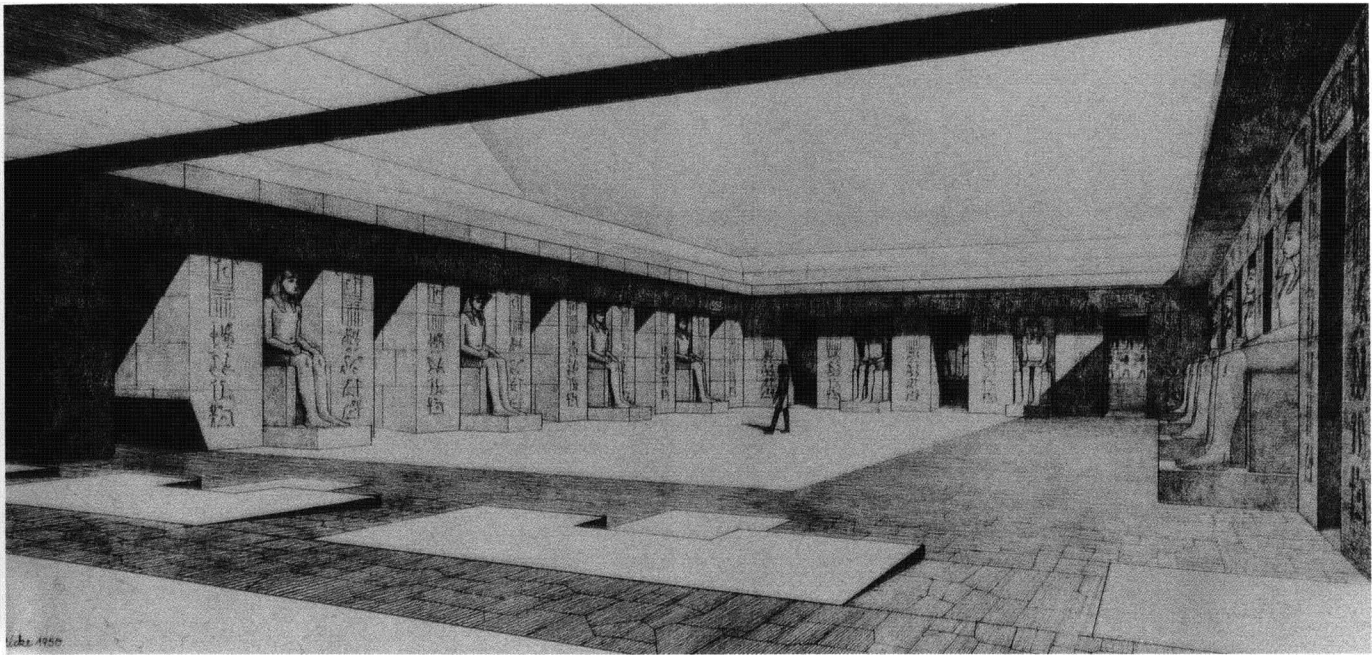


Fig. 20. Reconstruction of court, pyramid temple of Khafre, Giza. From Ricke 1950 (pl. 2)

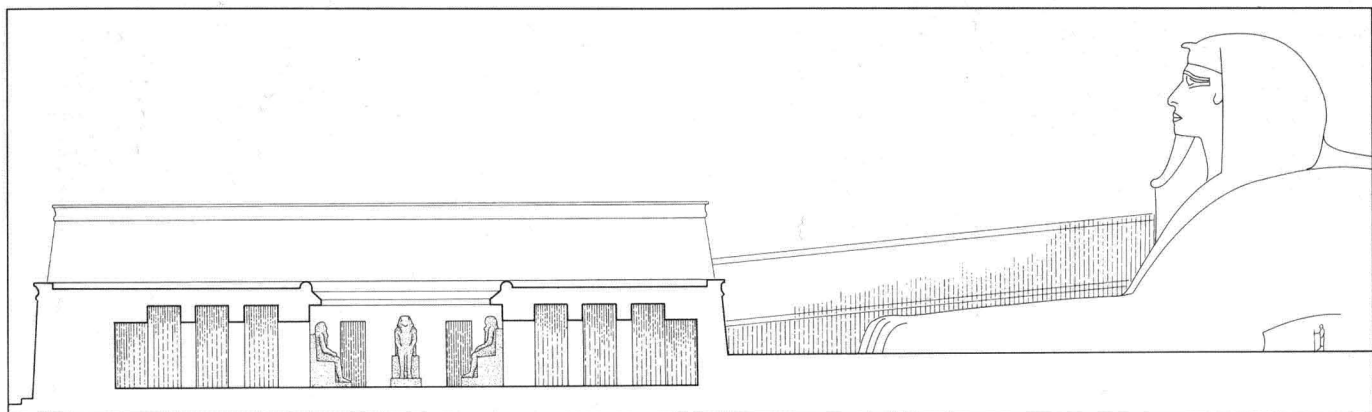


Fig. 21. Reconstruction of the Great Sphinx and temple of Harmakhis, with valley temple of Khafre in background, Giza. Drawing by Dieter Arnold after Ricke 1970, plan 4

of such statues has been deduced from the rectangular pits found in front of the wall pillars, for no fragments of them were found. In the pyramid temple court they would have been half-sheltered by recesses in the rear wall, while in the Harmakhis temple they would have been completely exposed. Although these statues may have received a special cult,¹⁹ they were mainly monuments of divine kingship. In contrast to all the other statuary considered here, such pillar statues would have formed an integral part of the temple architecture, their intense presence enhancing the centralized organization of the courts.

Like these royal statues in open courts, statues of sphinxes were also exposed to the sky. Of course, the Great Sphinx, which could be seen easily from a distance,

had nothing to fear from weather or people (fig. 21). Visibility of the upper part of this sphinx may have been essential for the priests who officiated in the small open court of the Harmakhis temple in front of it. The Great Sphinx and the Harmakhis temple were architecturally separate but seem to have formed a functional unit, emphasizing the solar aspects of the divine king.

Remains suggest that two pairs of sphinxes, each eight meters long, were positioned in front of Khafre's valley temple. Their threatening presence and visibility may have been intended to deter intruders. The sphinxes certainly fulfilled a symbolic purpose, but they may also have been meant as visual enhancements of the two gates in the temple's huge plain facade. Striding royal sphinxes were depicted in relief on the walls of the causeway of

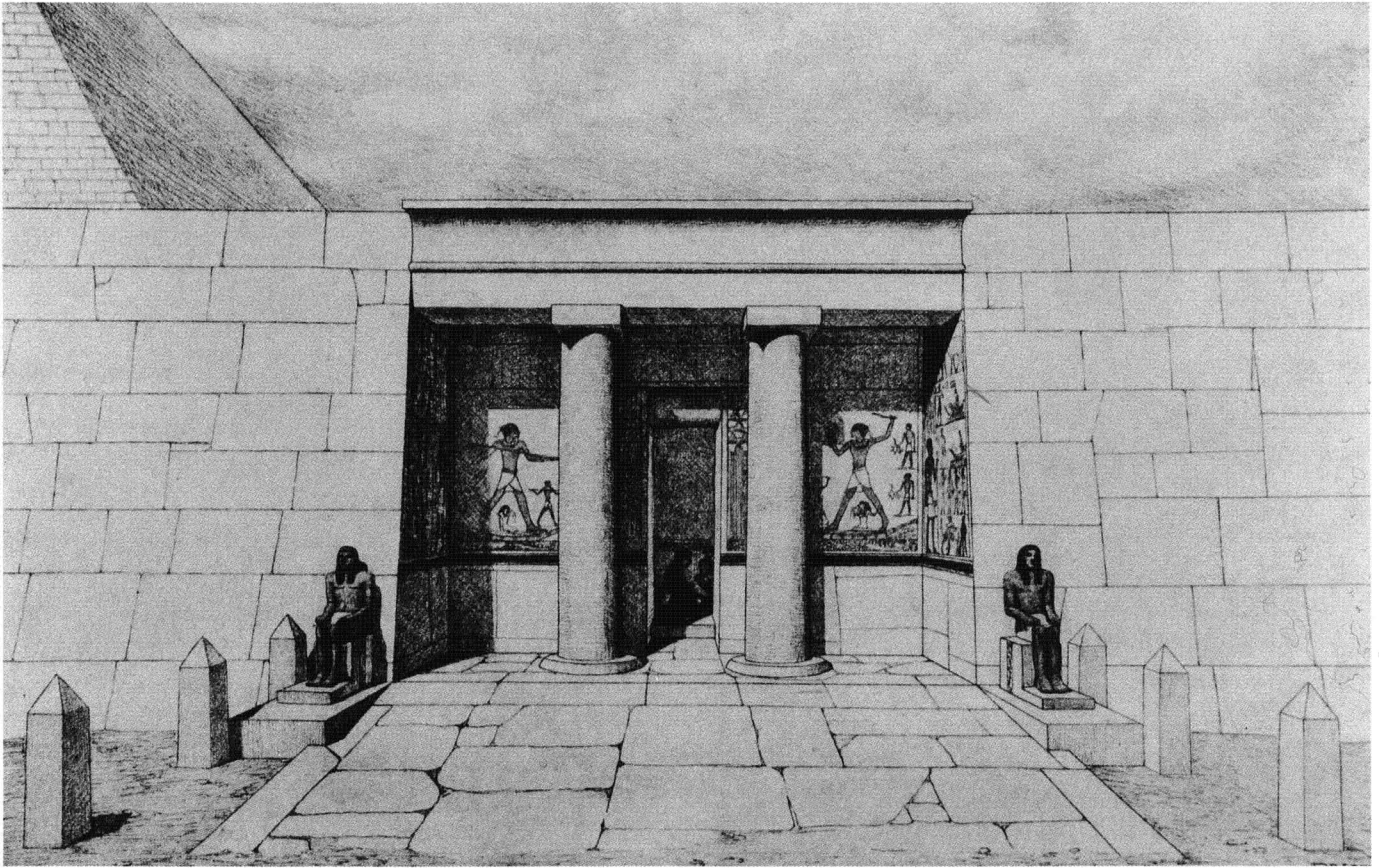


Fig. 22. Reconstruction of facade, mastaba of Seshem-nefer IV, Giza. From Junker 1953 (pl. 1)

King Sahure, suggesting an association between sculpture and relief.

In the New Kingdom, colossal statues of kings and queens were frequently erected in front of pylons. The closest Old Kingdom parallel is the arrangement of the four seated alabaster figures of Menkaure in pairs at both sides of the entrance from the court into the sanctuary of this king's valley temple.²⁰ The existence of other royal or divine prototypes for such emplacements is suggested by the two lifesize seated statues that flanked the sides of the entrance porch of the mastaba of Seshem-nefer IV at Giza (fig. 22).²¹ The association with a temple facade is underlined by the six small obelisks found in the area around the entrance to this tomb. These obelisks may have been aligned in two rows of three along the approach through the court of the tomb. In addition, the two famous statues of Ra-nefer from Saqqara²² appear to have stood opposite the entrance of a cult chamber.²³ Such remains clearly indicate that publicly accessible statues of kings and officials were not entirely unknown during the Old Kingdom.

Only rare examples of statues of private persons from Old Kingdom temples of deities are preserved.²⁴ The vast

majority of nonroyal statues were found in tombs. After death the ka of the individual was released to live in the tomb or to inhabit the tomb statue. The ka was summoned to receive the invigorating funerary repast either at the tomb's false door or in front of a statue.²⁵ Most often, the statue of the deceased was enclosed in an inaccessible room, the serdab (from an Arabic word meaning a closed, cellarlike hiding place).²⁶ Ideally the serdab's location would have been kept secret to ensure the statue's safety. In such a hidden place the statue could not enjoy actual contact with the priest and could not directly receive the kind of daily offerings that were presented to the statues of gods and kings. As a compromise, small window slots often connected the serdab with the cult chamber; if the serdab was situated behind the false door, a horizontal window slot beneath the door frequently allowed better contact. In the Third Dynasty, however, mastabas were still built without serdabs, and only during the reigns of the early Fourth Dynasty kings Snefru and Khufu were existing mastabas modified to include statue chambers. Prince Hemiunu's monumental mastaba at Giza (fig. 15a), for example, was originally built without a serdab, but two limestone chambers were

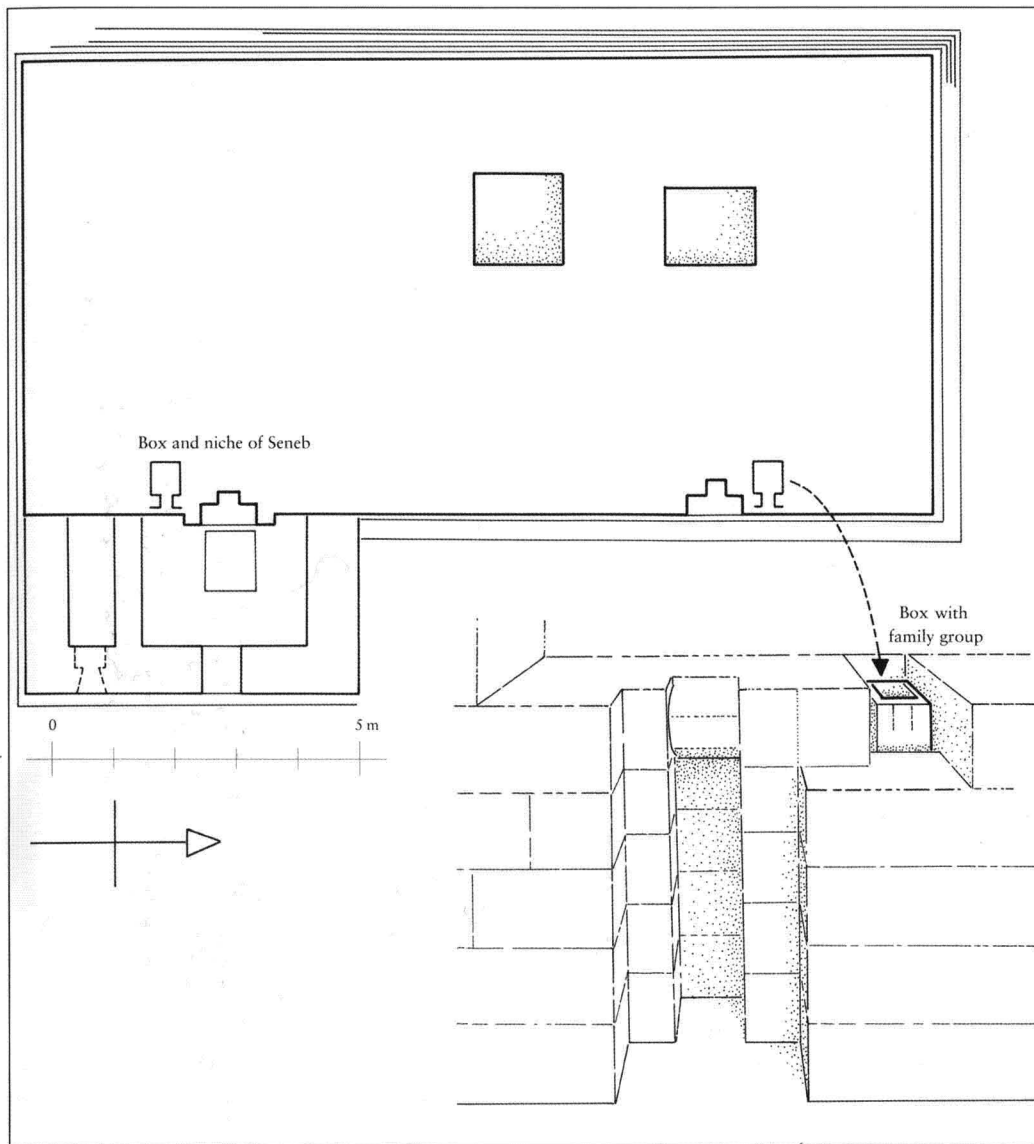


Fig. 23. Plan of mastaba of Seneb and view of northern false door of Senet-ites, with serdab niche, Giza. Drawing by Dieter Arnold after Junker 1941, fig. 2

later inserted into the front of the monument to accommodate his statues. The famous seated figure of Hemiunu (cat. no. 44) was found in the northern niche (fig. 15b); the southern niche was empty at the time of excavation.²⁷

The well-known seated limestone figures of Prince Rahotep and his wife, Nofret (fig. 31), of the early Fourth Dynasty were situated in a cult chamber in the mastaba core.²⁸ The emplacement of these statues must have occurred before the mastaba received a second brick facing, which disguised the chamber. One may assume, therefore, that during the Third Dynasty, before the addition of special statue chambers, statues were placed in the cult chamber. Even after the introduction of separate serdabs, in a few tombs statues were still positioned in cult chambers.²⁹

The most common situation, however, is represented by mastabas like that of the dwarf Seneb at Giza, which probably dates from the Fourth Dynasty (fig. 23).³⁰ Secluded cavities that housed small limestone chests were

located beside the two cult niches of the mastaba front. The southern chest contained a wood statuette of Seneb, the northern one the well-known family group of the dwarf and his wife, Senet-ites, and their children.³¹

During the later Fourth Dynasty and the Fifth Dynasty, growth of prosperity and concern that single statues might not survive led to an increase in the number of images produced, and thus a need for larger serdabs. Spacious serdabs in the interior of the mastaba were used to house lifesize statues such as that of Ti (fig. 38).³²

The Fifth Dynasty mastaba of Seshem-nefer II at Giza had special installations for the statue cult.³³ Here eight chambers, each holding three or more statues, were arranged behind the south, west, and north walls of a central corridor. The corridor's south wall displays three-dimensional representations of five false doors, with all the details of wood doors depicted in stone (fig. 24). The facade of the chambers on the opposite side replicated

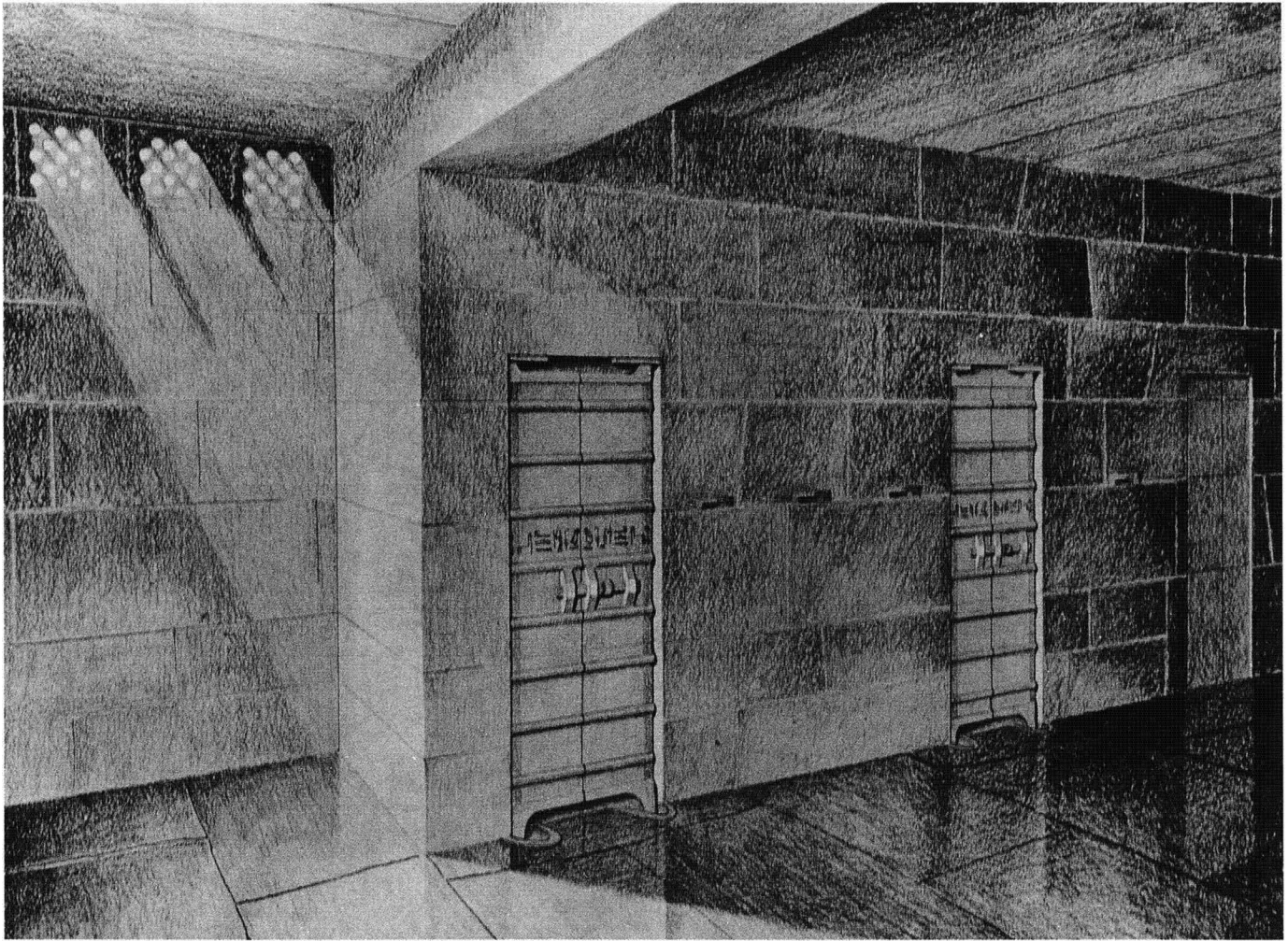


Fig. 24. Reconstruction of front of serdab, mastaba of Seshem-nefer II, Giza. From Junker 1938 (fig. 34)

the paneled facade of the royal palace, symbolically transforming the serdab into a small but magnificent statue temple.

Since it was difficult to integrate larger and more numerous statue chambers into the mastaba core, separate statue houses also began to be added to the exterior of the mastaba. The most striking example of this type of structure is associated with the mastaba of Ba-baef (or Khnum-baef, time of Shepseskaf).³⁴ Here two square statue houses of stone were erected in front of the mastaba (fig. 25). Each statue house had four parallel elongated statue chambers, communicating with a common transverse cult chamber through windows. Since the chambers had been robbed before they were excavated, the original number of statues is not known.

The insecure conditions at the end of the Old Kingdom probably encouraged tomb builders to reduce aboveground display of riches and to hide essential wall

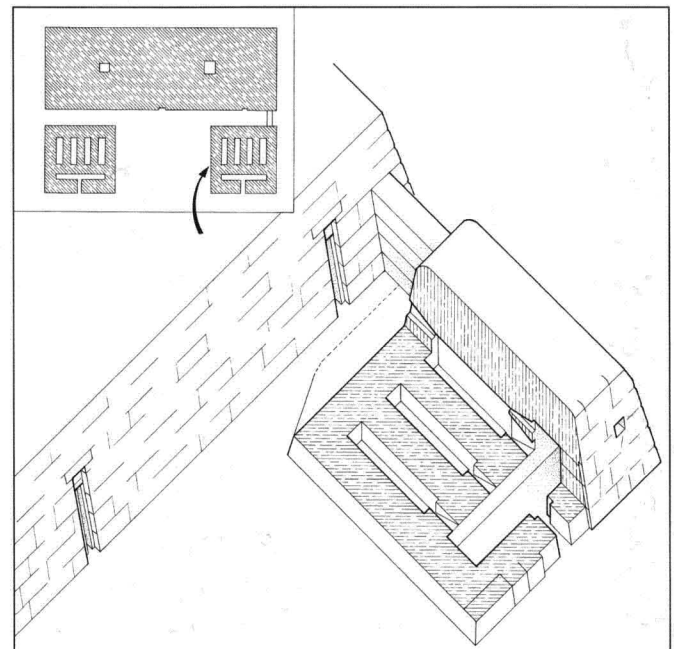


Fig. 25. Reconstruction of serdab in front of mastaba of Ba-baef, Giza. Drawing by Dieter Arnold from D. Arnold 1994 (p. 235)

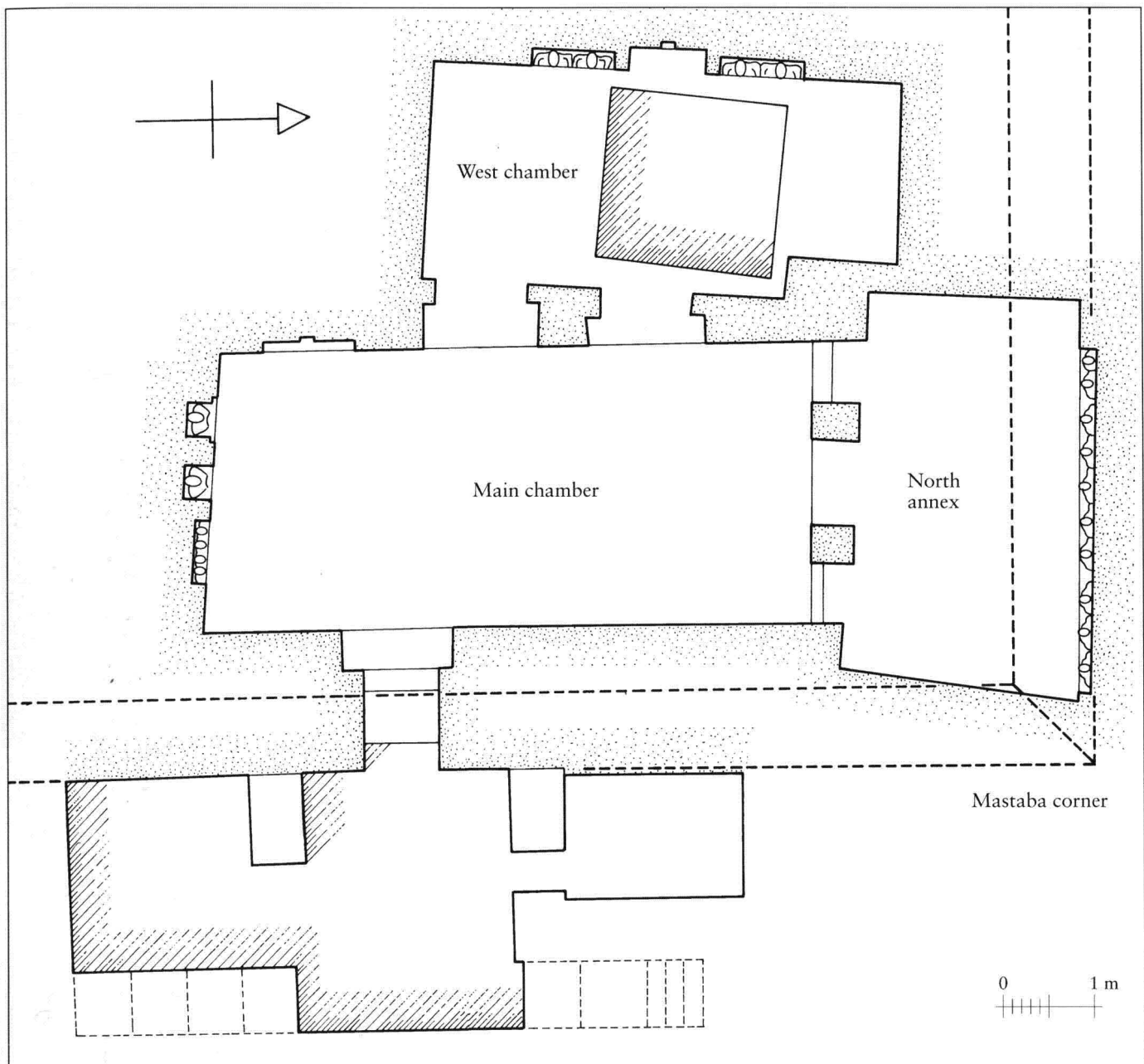


Fig. 26. Plan of underground cult chambers of Queen Mer-si-ankh III, Giza (structures within dotted lines are above ground). Drawing by Dieter Arnold after Dunham and Simpson 1974, plans B, C

decoration and statuary underground. There are indeed numerous examples of statue niches inside or at the bottom of the shaft. In some tombs, a statue was even placed in the burial chamber.³⁵ This practice has an interesting antecedent in the so-called reserve heads of the Fourth Dynasty (cat. nos. 46–49): none of these heads was discovered in situ, but the large number of them found in shafts or burial chambers makes an original underground location very probable (see “Reserve Heads” by Catharine H. Roehrig in this catalogue, pp. 74–75).³⁶

Thus nonroyal tomb statues of the Old Kingdom were usually, although not exclusively, hidden behind walls or

placed in the tomb shaft. In some cases images of the tomb owner appeared in the cult chamber or cult corridor, where they were accessible to family members and priests. Such statues in cult chambers were not completely free-standing: they protruded in three-quarter relief from the masonry of a wall or, more frequently, from the bedrock from which they were chiseled. Not hidden in a serdab, this eye-catching statuary was certainly part of the architectural design of the tomb, serving to intensify the magical life of the surrounding relief decoration.

The most extensive examples of this type of statue are found at Giza in the mastaba of the granddaughter

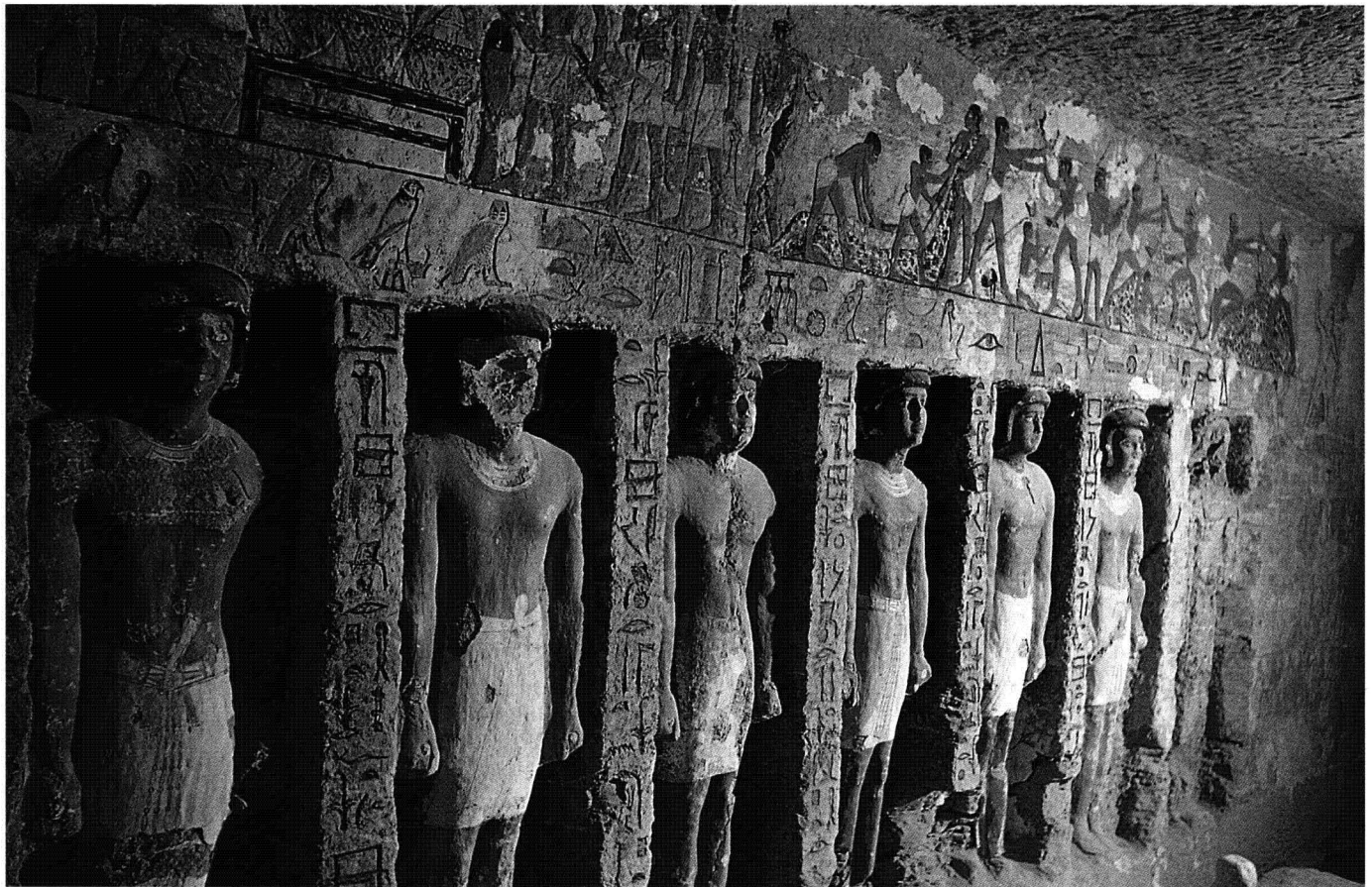


Fig. 27. Wall of funerary chapel, with engaged statues, tomb of Iru-ka-ptah, Saqqara

of King Khufu, Mer-si-ankh III (time of Shepseskaf) (fig. 26).³⁷ On the southern wall of the mastaba's main chamber two male scribes, each squatting in a flat niche, and four scribes in a group have been chiseled from the bedrock. To the north a portico opens into a smaller haremlike annex that houses a group of ten standing female figures. This gathering of female members of the royal household and their officials is a unique and as yet unexplained feature. The attached rock-cut west chamber displays, in two separate groups, two figures of Mer-si-ankh III and two of her mother, Hetep-heres II, standing at both sides of a central false door. Similar rows of standing figures of the tomb owner appear along the walls of the cult chambers of the Sixth Dynasty tombs of Idu (G 7102) at Giza and Iru-ka-ptah at Saqqara (fig. 27). A false door niche was cut in the center of the opposite west wall of Idu's offering chamber. In the bottom half of the false door his upper body appears; seeming to rise from the ground, he extends his arms and hands to receive the offering deposited on the altar slab in front of him.³⁸

Another impressive design is displayed in the small cult chamber of Khui-wer at Giza from the end of the

Fifth Dynasty.³⁹ A strongly articulated torus-and-cavetto frame in this chamber is derived from a chapel front. The standing figure of Khui-wer appears in three-quarter relief at both sides of the central false door. And in the tomb of Iteti the deceased appears in the false door slot of a tomb wall.⁴⁰

The emplacement of the Old Kingdom statues helps illuminate their meaning. Egyptian statues were never considered pure art, and during the Old Kingdom they were not displayed as monuments or memorials. Filled with magic life, they were participants in cultic performances, either as passive recipients of cultic ceremonies or as active sharers in cultic plays. In these capacities statues were simultaneously subordinate to the architectural framework needed for cultic performances and a main reason for the existence of the vast Old Kingdom temples and tombs, which were meant to house them.

1. Junker 1938, pp. 118–22.

2. Fairman 1954, pp. 165–203; Barta 1980, cols. 840–44.

3. That this building, which is located at the side of the causeway, was the actual valley temple is rather improbable.

4. See Landström 1970, pp. 116–21.
5. *Preliminary Report* 1976, pp. 64–68, fig. 28.
6. There are numerous examples in the pyramid temples of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties.
7. Duell 1938, vol. 2, pls. 123, 147–48.
8. Hölscher 1912, pp. 89–104; Krauspe 1997b, pp. 13–40, 118–21, 126–27.
9. Compare the old interpretation by Ricke (1950, pp. 86–102) with that of Stadelmann (1985b, cols. 189–93).
10. See Reisner 1931, pp. 108–29.
11. Upper Egypt had twenty-two nomes. Each nome would ideally have been represented by its main deity.
12. Seidel (1996, pp. 25–49) convincingly refutes the reconstruction by Wood (1974, pp. 82–93), which includes only eight triads in the front rooms of the temple.
13. Ricke (1950, pp. 96–99, 178–80) developed the fascinating theory that the two groups of three statues in the transverse section of the T-shaped arrangement took part in a ritualistic mummification, while those in the longitudinal hall played a rôle in the Opening of the Mouth ceremonies. Seidel's more recent interpretation (1996, p. 24)—that the pillared hall was dedicated to the deified king, guaranteeing him command over the two countries in the other world—remains rather ambiguous.
14. See Hayes 1959, pp. 89–101, fig. 53.
15. See Haeny 1981, pp. 56–61.
16. See the list in Altenmüller 1980b, cols. 575–77.
17. Lauer and Leclant 1970, pp. 55–62, figs. 1–6, pls. 8–10.
18. Hölscher 1912, pp. 27–28, fig. 16; Ricke 1950, p. 52, pl. 2; Ricke 1970, pp. 12, 25, plans 3, 4.
19. Schott (1970, p. 70) assumes that the solar cult in the Harmakhis temple required twelve statues representing the months of the year.
20. Reisner 1931, pp. 108–15, pls. 36–64.
21. Junker 1953, p. 110 (51a), pl. 1. There are similar remains at a mastaba east of this tomb in Reisner's cemetery 7000.
22. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (CG 18, 19); Saleh and Sourouzian 1987, nos. 45, 46.
23. Lange and Hirmer 1961, pls. 61–65; see also Mariette and Maspero 1889, p. 122.
24. The kneeling attitude of the figure of a priest or king of the Third Dynasty from Mitrahina (Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 1) may lead us to expect that this statue was dedicated to a temple (Saleh and Sourouzian 1987, no. 22).
25. From the beginning of the Fifth Dynasty forward, kings received a mortuary offering that required architectural installations similar to those of private tombs—for example, a false door.
26. Junker 1938, pp. 118–22.
27. Junker 1929, pp. 134–38, figs. 19, 20, pls. 16, 18.
28. It is impossible to reconstruct the exact position of the statues because the reports on the discovery by Mariette and Daninos in 1871 are superficial and no photographs were taken; see Daninos 1886, pp. 69–73.
29. Junker 1941, p. 146; Junker 1955, p. 54.
30. Junker 1941, pp. 3–124; Cherpion 1984.
31. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 51280). A chamber with a second serdab was later added to the front of the southern cult niche.
32. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 10065; Saleh and Sourouzian 1987, no. 49).
33. Junker 1938, pp. 189–91, figs. 33–35. Seshem-nefer III also added a huge serdab house to his mastaba; the new installation was accessible from the pillared antechamber of the main tomb; see *ibid.*, 1938, p. 194, fig. 36, p. 199.
34. G 5230; see Lepsius 1849–58, vol. 1, p. 24; Reisner 1942, pp. 248–50; and Junker 1944, pp. 151–55.
35. Firth and Gunn 1926, vol. 1, pp. 41–42, fig. 47; Junker 1941, p. 180; Junker 1944, pp. 85, 125, pl. 17a; Junker 1947, p. 140; and Junker 1950, p. 24.
36. Junker 1929, pp. 57, 60, pls. 9, 10; Junker 1955, p. 55. Junker reconstructed a small niche in the blocking of the crypt, which he believed held the reserve heads. This theory has been refuted. (See “Reserve Heads” by Catharine H. Roehrig in this catalogue, n. 21.)
37. Dunham and Simpson 1974, plan C, pls. 6, 8, 9, 11.
38. Simpson 1976, pls. 6b, 11a. The statue in the tomb of Qar (G 7101) at Giza is similar. See *ibid.*, pls. 21–23.
39. Lepsius 1849–58, vol. 1, pl. 44 (tomb LG 95).
40. Lange and Hirmer 1961, pl. 73.