

STUDIES IN ANCIENT EGYPT,
THE AEGEAN, AND THE SUDAN





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**Essays in honor of Dows Dunham
on the occasion of his 90th birthday,
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The Reserve Heads of The Old Kingdom

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It is a great pleasure to pay tribute in these pages to a scholar whose achievements over so many decades have spanned archaeology in both Egypt and the Sudan, and have covered virtually every period of time between the Predynastic and the early centuries of the Christian era. It is also a great personal pleasure for the writer, whose first guide and teacher in Egyptology Dows Dunham was, and to whom he will always owe more than can be expressed in words scholarly or otherwise. The contribution to this volume which follows was selected because it deals with a subject which was one of the topics of the first conversation the writer was privileged to have with Dows Dunham, in the old offices of the Egyptian Department of the Museum of Fine Arts, in June of 1953.¹

The so-called “reserve heads” of the Fourth Dynasty have long been rightly regarded as among the finest products of the sculptors’ workshops of the period, and specifically as remarkable examples of individualizing, if also idealizing, portraiture. Few pieces of Egyptian sculpture, even of the Fourth Dynasty itself, can be said to bring before our eyes the same startlingly vivid impressions of living persons. There is no doubt a strong idealizing tendency in the work, but apart from the conventional treatment of the eyes, it must be confessed that we could hardly deduce the fact from the heads themselves. They are intriguing also because of their oddity; as has been remarked over and over in the literature, simple bodiless portrait heads are not only almost unheard-of in Egyptian art, but they would also seem at first sight to contradict many of our cherished suppositions about the nature and function of Egyptian funerary sculpture. Equally puzzling are the strange mutilations to which many of the heads have been subjected; the ears of most have been damaged or removed, while several show in addition a roughly cut groove down the back of the head, beginning near the crown and ending only at the base of the neck. Their strangeness extends even to their location within the tomb, since they would seem to have been normally buried in the bottom of the shaft, at or near the entrance to the burial chamber, rather than within it or above ground in the chapel area. All in all, the heads are sufficiently bizarre that it is perhaps not surprising that Egyptological opinion has continued to accept the original excavators’ interpretation of the heads as ritual and religious in purpose. It is the intention of this brief article to attempt to demonstrate that another, more practical, explanation is to be preferred.

The ritualist explanations put forward by Junker, Reisner, and Borchardt, and repeated by more recent writers, range from the relatively simple notion that the reserve head served as a substitute (*Ersatzkopf*) for the vulnerable head of the mummy to more elaborate interpretations involving the assumed northward-facing position of the head and the direction of the circumpolar stars. None of these explanations, however, seem really to take into account either the strange mutilations already mentioned or the other striking peculiarities of the reserve heads as a group, and an archaeological explanation of a class of artifact must of course account for all features which distinguish that class from its nearest parallels: in this case, the heads of other statues of the same period.

The distinctive features of the class of reserve heads – apart from the primary fact that they are finished sculptures of the head alone – are the following, not all of which are characteristic of all or even most members of the class:

1. The mutilation of the ears. This is perhaps the commonest of all features, being met with in almost all examples to some degree or another. In one head, Cairo 37832, one of the two ears had been broken off but replaced, while the other was found beside the head; two other heads, the Dahshur example and Cairo 47838, seem never to have had ears. The woman’s head from G 4440 has the best-preserved ears of the series; it is perhaps worth pointing out here that the ears of her husband’s head are damaged and that he also has the cranial groove, while she

1. For bibliography, see A.L. Kelley, *Newsletter of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 5, no. 1 (1974), which embodies suggestions made in seminar by the present writer.

does not. There can be little doubt that this damage to the ears of the reserve heads was in some sense deliberate, in which case the replacement of the ear in Cairo 37832 requires an explanation. The head from G 4940 in Boston had two dowel holes for the attachment of ears which are now missing, but seem to have been made separately in any case and not carved in the block.

2. The cranial groove, as we may call it. This feature occurs frequently in a range of forms, being sometimes a fine shallow groove, and sometimes a rougher cutting exhibiting chipping of the limestone at the sides. It may start from forward of the centre of the cranium or near its centre, but always runs down to the very bottom of the back of the neck. The cutting is clearly deliberate and careful.

3. The cutting of the eyes. The treatment of the eyes in some of the reserve heads is distinguished from that in most contemporary statuary by a careful, emphatic cutting of the zone between the edge of the eyelids and the ball of the eye, particularly at the corners.

4. The cutting of the edge of the nostril. As William Stevenson Smith has pointed out, another peculiarity of the reserve heads is "the tendency to mark the outer curve of the nostril by a sharp incision or by an angular edge to the raised surface". This is especially noticeable, as he remarks, in the Nofer head.

5. The treatment of the philtrum. So far apparently unnoticed in the literature, this feature is common in the Cairo group of heads, but in the Boston group appears in only the male head from G 4440; it does not occur in the female companion piece. Like the cranial groove and the nose cutting, it is a distinctly unrealistic feature, and consists of the philtrum (the depression in the upper lip beneath the septum of the nose) being deeply cut out in such a way that it forms a shallow, straight-sided trough with square angles. Such a treatment of this facial feature is unknown in any Egyptian sculpture of any period.

6. The angle of gaze. As has been frequently pointed out, the reserve heads all have their line of gaze raised slightly from the horizontal, the entire head in fact being tilted backwards to a perceptible degree.

These then are the peculiar characteristics of the reserve heads which must be used to elucidate their nature. The hypothesis advanced here is that the reserve heads were in fact actually sculptor's prototypes, like the famous head of Nefretity and some of the other heads or masks found in the sculptor's studio at Amarna, and that from them artists would have copied the features of the deceased while making statues and portrait relief for funeral purposes. This hypothesis is advanced on the basis of what seems the only possible explanation of some of the peculiar features listed above: that moulds must have been taken from some at least of the heads. Thus certain subtly-cut features – the philtrum, the edge of the nostrils, and the eyes – were in some instances deliberately emphasized in a non-realistic manner so that they would appear more sharply in a rather unsatisfactory moulding medium, such as fine linen and size. The damage to the ears, and the feature called here the cranial groove, were the result, it is suggested, of the removal of such a mould. The hypothesis can perhaps best be explained by describing the process of moulding which it is proposed was used.

Of the mediums available to the ancient Egyptians of the Old Kingdom for the making of a mould, the two most likely are soft, plastic substances such as gypsum plaster or mud, or wet linen. That the first may have been used from time to time is suggested by the famous death mask from Saqqara, by the modelled plaster masks applied to mummies in the later Old Kingdom, and by the large quantity of plaster still adhering to the left cheek of the reserve head 21.239 from G 4940, now in Boston. This is usually explained as a correction layer added by a sculptor unsatisfied with the treatment of the left side of the face, but this is unlikely in view of the extreme thickness of the mass of gypsum; a very little plaster would have sufficed for the purpose of corrections, and the edges of the mass have a broken look in some places, as if there was at one time more of it extending over more of the face. It seems more probable that an unsuccessful attempt was made to take a direct plaster mould from the head, and that the remaining plaster is a section which

adhered too firmly to the stone to come off with the rest. The other likely medium, linen dipped in water with size (or possibly a very thin plaster), is certainly the best adapted to the purpose, particularly if it was desired to take a mould of the entire head. Very fine linen would presumably form the inside layer, the wet fabric being pressed firmly into the details of the stone, including those deliberately exaggerated for clearer reproduction. Strips or small sheets of linen would be added to cover the whole head right down the neck until the entire sculpture was encased in a wet shell. When the linen had dried the sculptor would remove it by cutting it from the top of the cranium down to the base of the neck, with an adze, knife or chisel, leaving in some cases the cranial groove so peculiar to this class of sculpture. The ears would of course often break off while the shell was being wrenched off the head; in some cases they may have been, as we have seen, made to come off more easily and were replaced on the original. Then the mould could be used for the production of further exemplars of the head in plaster or mud, either because others were needed at other work-sites (perhaps at the tomb site for workers on relief portraits, as well as in the sculptors' workshop) or because it was desired to produce models with different hair-styles for a variety of statues. When the reserve heads were no longer needed, the copies could have been easily broken up or dissolved, but the original limestone head seems to have been felt to be important enough, either because it was somehow felt to have absorbed too much of the owner's identity or because it was a royal gift, to be given decent burial in the bottom of the shaft or in the tomb chamber.

It is easy to see that such a custom may have given rise to the later habit of modelling the features of the deceased in plaster on the bandaged head of the mummy, but even then the modeller would have needed some sort of prototype to go on, either a portrait statue or such a reserve head as described, since after the crude mummification of the time the features of the corpse itself would have lost most of their individuality. Thus it can be suggested that the use of such sculptor's prototypes as the reserve heads was widespread in the Old Kingdom, and that the examples discovered are only those that were royal gifts in limestone, while more ordinary mortals would have had their portraits executed during life in mud (such as the head from G 4840), clay or plaster modelling.

It is the opinion of this writer that the famous bust of Ankh-haf is also one of the series of reserve heads. It shows some of the characteristics of the others, but differs from them in three main respects: it is an entire bust (of a rather portly individual) rather than a simple head; it has been painted; and it was found, not in the shaft, but installed on a mud-brick podium in a built chapel, in such a way that it is clear that it was doing duty as a cult statue. Despite these differences, its extreme degree of realism, its size, the missing ears (apparently made separately and attached with adhesive), the lack of any indication of hair, and a certain well-used look all suggest affinity to the reserve head category. Its employment as a cult object may well have been entirely secondary, and suggested by the fact that it was a full bust.