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The Meaning of Menial Labor: “Servant Statues” in Old Kingdom Serdabs

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Serdabs, the inaccessible chambers adjoining elite tomb chapels of the Old Kingdom period, were built to hold statues of the tomb owner, members of his family, and other dependents.¹ In the late Fourth Dynasty, and more commonly after the middle of the Fifth Dynasty, serdabs also began to include small statues depicting people performing everyday tasks, most often some aspect of food preparation, such as grinding grain and straining beer. James H. Breasted, Jr., in the title of his *Egyptian Servant Statues*,² gave the conventional designation for these statues, which assumes both their identity and their function. They are generally thought to have represented anonymous servants and to have insured that the dead person in whose tomb they were found would have servants in the afterlife to prepare food and do other work for him. Because of the humble tasks they are shown performing, these statues have often been compared with the sacrificed workers found around royal and elite tombs of the First Dynasty, with the wooden figures of workers depicted in early Middle Kingdom models of estate workshops, and with the *shabtis* that develop in the later Middle Kingdom.

The nature and purpose of these Old Kingdom statues, however, have never been questioned or fully investigated. A careful assessment of the tasks depicted, the archaeological context in which the statues appear, and the texts that are inscribed on a few examples suggests that these statues had a more complex purpose than merely to supply labor. For this reason, these statues will here be referred to as “serving statues,” which is a more neutral term than “servant statues” in that it does not presuppose the identity of the people depicted or the purpose of their representation.³

The Appearance of Serving Statues

Serving statues could represent both men and women. When the paint is preserved, the skin color is usually yellow or gold on the statues depicting women and dark red on those depicting men. Although women who performed outdoor work are sometimes depicted with darker skin in Old Kingdom wall reliefs, there is no evidence of this practice among these statues. Men are most often shown

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¹ The word *serdab* is derived from the Arabic word, *sirdâb*, “cellar,” itself borrowed in turn from the Persian phrase *sârd-ob*, “cold water,” an original meaning quite far from its Egyptological application.

² J. H. Breasted, Jr., *Egyptian Servant Statues*, Bollingen Series 13 (Washington, 1948), is the principal general study on these statues. It is essentially a catalogue of examples, including statues of workers from all periods of Egyptian history.

³ Marsha Hill, on the basis of an earlier version of this article, has already adopted this more neutral terminology in her discussions of these statues in the catalogue for the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids* (New York, 1999), 386–89. Her entries also cite several of the conclusions argued here about the identity of the serving statues.



Fig. 1. Serving statue from Giza mastaba 2088, showing a woman grinding grain, wearing a necklace. (Drawing by the author.)

with close-cropped hair (probably their own rather than a wig), wearing a wrapped white kilt. The hair of the women could also be close-cropped or shoulder length or longer, but in at least one case, a woman's natural hair is visible beneath a wig.⁴ Women usually wear a white dress of mid-calf length, often with shoulder straps covering one or both of the breasts. In statues depicting women grinding grain, the hair is often partially or entirely covered by a cloth. With surprising frequency, women are shown wearing necklaces or even elaborately beaded collars (fig. 1).⁵ The dress and coiffures of the serving statues thus do not differ significantly from the depictions of elite family members that are often found in more formal poses in the same serdab. The size of the serving statues varies considerably, even within a single serdab, usually ranging from 10 to 30 cm in height. The meaning of this variation is unclear.

The most obvious characteristic of serving statues is that they show people performing various types of work. This distinguishes them from other statues in the serdab, which, with the exception of depictions of the tomb owner as a scribe, are static formal portraits of seated or standing figures. The activities represented in these statues are clearly important to understanding both the purpose of the statues and the identity of the workers. The workers depicted in serving statues are sometimes said to be the three-dimensional equivalents of the workers depicted in the two-dimensional scenes of production shown in contemporary Old Kingdom tomb chapels. But although the most typical

activities of the serving statues (straining beer, grinding grain, baking bread, and so forth) are sometimes represented on chapel walls, many other important activities shown in chapel decoration are not usually represented in Old Kingdom serving statues (the cultivation of grain, the care of livestock, boat building, and fishing, for example). The more limited range of possible activities shown suggests that the purpose of these serving statues differs from that of the representations of workers on tomb chapel walls.

Old Kingdom serving statues most often depict a limited subset of food preparation activities in their final, domestic, stages, principally the cooking and serving of food.⁶ The most common work is the preparation of the bread and beer that were the staples of the ordinary Egyptian's diet: grain is ground and sifted, beer is strained. The stages of agricultural production that would have taken place in the fields and away from the house are not shown. (Two men shown wielding hoes⁷ may represent small-scale cultivation, such as a kitchen garden, since no other aspects of large-scale agricultural pro-

⁴ M. Saleh and H. Sourouzian, *The Egyptian Museum, Cairo: Official Catalogue* (Mainz, 1987), no. 52.

⁵ There are numerous occurrences of such depictions of jewelry. See, for example, S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza I* (Oxford, 1932), pl. 71; A. M. Roth, *A Cemetery of Palace Attendants Giza Mastabas 6* (Boston, 1995), 81–82, figs. 31a, 32a, and 40; Saleh and Sourouzian, *The Egyptian Museum*, no. 52. Ann Foster pointed out to me the significance of the women's jewelry for my argument.

⁶ In Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, I counted 115 Old Kingdom serving statues who were depicted producing, transporting, or otherwise preparing food; 79 of these involve the production of bread and beer. Only 12 statues were not involved in food production.

⁷ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, 6.

duction are attested.) The domestic work represented normally would have been done by those living within the tomb owner's household; farm workers probably lived in their own houses.

Specialized craft activity is rarely shown among serving statues, in contrast to the abundance of metalworkers, leatherworkers, carpenters, and so forth that populate the walls of Old Kingdom chapels. The activities depicted in these statues for the most part required no specialized professional training. Breasted cites two statues as depicting craft activities.⁸ One of these is a potter; however, when potters are shown in relief scenes, they are normally adjacent to the scenes that depict their pots being filled with beer or bread.⁹ It is likely that the making of containers was viewed as a domestic activity, closely related to the preparation of the food that filled them. While some ceramics in the Old Kingdom were clearly made professionally, the ubiquitous beer jars are simple coiled forms that might have been formed by ordinary members of the household and then fired in a communal kiln. Breasted also identifies as a crafts specialist a second statue, which he calls a metalworker, but his interpretation is far from certain: the man is simply holding a tube to his mouth. More likely, this tube is in fact a type of flute. (The cylinder in front of him may be a drum.)

Musicians¹⁰ are the most common type of serving statues that are not concerned with food preparation.¹¹ This kind of work was clearly not viewed as menial, since the wife and daughters of a tomb owner could be depicted playing musical instruments in chapel relief decoration. Like most other serving statues, musicians are domestic workers rather than an outdoor servant. The same would be true of the single examples of a hairdresser and of dancing girls.¹² Two examples of men carrying jars¹³ could also represent the performance of household tasks. In a few instances the activities depicted are difficult to interpret. There are two examples of a kind of service that Breasted describes as "men kissing dogs."¹⁴ He suggested that these statues may represent a man who has chewed the food intended for a sick animal and is letting the animal feed from his mouth.¹⁵ Such a service could be rendered both indoors (for a pet) and outdoors (for a farm animal), but again would have required no special skills. An equally unusual statue that Breasted identifies as "children playing leapfrog"¹⁶ seems far more likely (given similar scenes depicted in chapel decoration) to represent a scene of punishment or spanking.¹⁷ In tomb chapel reliefs, this scene is invariably depicted in connection with representations of activities taking place in the marshes (and cattle herding in particular). However, punishment must have taken place in other venues as well; like the other tasks being performed by serving statues, its administration does not require specialized training.

Rather than depicting a cross section of the work done on a nobleman's estate, the majority of serving statues show unspecialized domestic tasks, most commonly food preparation. In wealthy households, these tasks would have been performed by servants who would probably have lived with the family. The tasks depicted, almost without exception, are those that in poorer families would probably have been performed by the wife and children of the head of the household.

⁸ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, pl. 45.

⁹ For the tomb of Ti, see L. Épron and F. Dumas, *Le tombeau de Ti*, I, MIFAO 65 (Cairo, 1939), pls. 66–69; for the tomb of Rashepses (LS 16), see P. Montet, *Scènes de la vie privée* (London, 1925), 237 [2], 248 [2].

¹⁰ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, pls. 80–81.

¹¹ Musicians account for four of the 12 statues in Breasted's survey that are not involved with food production. This does not include the "metalworker" discussed above.

¹² Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, pl. 49a (hairdresser) and p. 89 (dancing girls, in wood and plaster only).

¹³ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, pl. 50; Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, pl. 32d.

¹⁴ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, pls. 94d and 94e.

¹⁵ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, 101.

¹⁶ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, pl. 86.

¹⁷ Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, 45.

The Archaeological Context of Serdab Statues

Because serving statues are usually not inscribed, their context is essential to understanding their nature and function. Serving statues have been found only in serdab chambers and, in the late Old Kingdom, in burial chambers, but never in tomb chapels; they thus would not have been visible to visitors to the tomb. In order to understand serving statues, it is necessary to understand how serdabs functioned.

Serdab chambers were built into the superstructure of the tomb; accessible only through small holes that opened onto the tomb chapel or onto public spaces along the approach to it. The holes are round in the earliest examples, but by the Fifth Dynasty they had become narrow horizontal or vertical slots (sometimes almost invisible from the chapel) that widened toward the serdab chamber. The number of slots varies; two are common in Old Kingdom serdabs, perhaps because they were thought to be extensions of the eyes of the statue within. Serdabs often contained several statues of the tomb owner and his family, either of wood or of limestone. (The stone statues have survived in greater numbers, but it seems likely that wooden statues were actually more common, particularly in the later part of the Old Kingdom.) After the Fourth Dynasty, serdabs increasingly included serving statues of both men and women. These statues were generally of limestone, but wooden statues of workers also survive, sometimes equipped with little model tools made of limestone.

There is very little textual information about the serdab. Hermann Junker suggested that the serdab was called the *ḥwt k3*, or “Haus des Ka,” since the cornice over the slots of the serdab in the tomb chapel of Rawer bears the inscription “*ḥwt k3* of Rawer.”¹⁸ Alexandre Moret read this text as *jrtj nt ḥwt k3* of Rawer, “les deux yeux du *ḥwt k3* de *R'-wr*,” and argued that the term for “serdab” was actually *jrtj*, “the two eyes” of the deceased.¹⁹ His reading of the text, however, was based on a preliminary report and the examination of a damaged fragment. When the fragments were joined, the area in which Moret saw two eye signs falls in the middle of a string of recognizable titles, as Junker pointed out in his final report. Aylmer Blackman, whose work also predated the final report, followed Moret’s misinterpretation, but equated the chimerical *jrtj* to the slots of the serdab.²⁰ He took the term *ḥwt k3* as a reference to the tomb chapel as a whole, an interpretation based on his belief that the serdab itself was called the *pr-twt*, “the house of the statue,” as indicated by a text from the tomb of Pepi-ankh the Younger at Meir. Regardless of whether “house of the ka” or “statue house” was actually used to describe the serdab, neither term reveals much about its purpose or meaning; that must be deduced from the architecture of the serdabs themselves and the artifacts that have been found in them.

The architecture of a serdab resembles that of burial chambers in several respects: a small area, usually rectangular, and similar in proportions to a sarcophagus. It was sealed at the death of the tomb owner or possibly before, and thus, like the burial chamber, it was inaccessible to a visitor to the tomb chapel. Also like the burial chamber, the serdab was located in relationship to the principal false door when this was possible; both were often placed behind it (although the main burial chamber was usually subterranean and far below the serdab and the false door itself). Old Kingdom mummification techniques, in which the appearance of the deceased was modeled over the actual body in

¹⁸ H. H. Junker, *Giza III* (Vienna, 1938), 119–22.

¹⁹ A. Moret, “Serdab et maison du Ka,” *ZÄS* 52 (1914), 88–92.

²⁰ A. M. Blackman, “The Ka-House and the Serdab,” *JEA* 3 (1916), 250–54. Despite the fact that no eyes are in fact mentioned in this text, his conclusion that the duality of the serdab slots relate to the eyes of the deceased is probably valid. He points out that serdab slots, like the eyes frequently depicted on false doors or coffins, served as an interface between the worlds of the living and the dead.

plaster or in resin-soaked cloth, produced mummies that resembled statues; thus, like the serdab, the burial chamber often contained a sculptural representation of the tomb owner.²¹ Like the burial chamber, the serdab sometimes also contained real or model food offerings. Some sort of functional exchange between the burial chamber and the serdab is also suggested by the fact that in at least one group of Giza tombs the size of the serdab increases during the later Fifth Dynasty, while the size and depth of the burial chamber declines.²² The serdab may therefore have been seen as an auxiliary burial chamber.

Like the architecture of serdabs and burial chambers, changes in the placement of sculpture within the serdab and the burial chamber during the latter part of the Old Kingdom also suggest a functional connection between the two. Towards the end of the Old Kingdom, when serdabs began to disappear as an element of tomb architecture, the sculpture that in earlier periods had been placed in the serdab was often placed in a niche in the wall of the burial shaft. Statues are often found in the burial chambers of late Old Kingdom tombs, but such placements have been found occasionally in early Old Kingdom contexts as well, an indication, perhaps that the two spaces were functionally equivalent from the beginning. The increasingly frequent placement of the statues in a completely inaccessible part of the tomb probably reflects the disappearance of a function of these statues that had previously distinguished them from the actual body: their role in mortuary cult rituals performed after the funeral.

The statues of the tomb owner in the serdab were substitutes for the body that rested in the burial chamber, rendered more accessible (although not entirely so) by being placed at the same level as the chapel. There is little question that these statues were cult statues. The most frequently attested pose for the wooden statues of the tomb owner, standing with the left foot forward, a staff in the left hand and a scepter in the right, is identical to that of the statues depicted in tomb reliefs as the object of censuring. Heinrich Schäfer suggested that the funeral rites of the Old Kingdom included a ritual on the roof of the tomb, after which the statues were lowered into the serdab and it was roofed and sealed.²³ Evidence for such rituals is attested in the tomb of Metjen, one of the earliest private tombs with a serdab. There, statues that were probably the serdab statues are depicted on the chapel walls as the objects of an opening of the mouth ritual.²⁴ This ritual, which was also performed on the body of the tomb owner, enabled the statue to benefit from censuring and other rituals.

The decoration of the tomb chapel of Ti at Saqqara²⁵ and that of Senedjemib-Inty at Giza²⁶ depicts cult functionaries holding incense burners to the slots of a serdab. Incense (*sntr*: literally, "that which makes divine") was burned to transform the dead into divinities. The incense burned in front of the serdab slots presumably was believed to benefit the people whose statues were inside the serdab. Blackman argued that the purpose of the wider opening at the serdab end of the serdab slots was to allow the incense to enter the serdab chamber and circulate around the statue, rather than to allow a viewer in the tomb to see more of the statues.²⁷ In fact, the statues were clearly intended to exist

²¹ The sculptured plaster-coating, which was often placed over a linen-wrapped body, essentially transformed the body into a plaster statue; a similar effect was achieved by the alternate technique of modeling the body in resin-soaked linen. S. D'Auria, P. Lacovara, and C. Roehrig, eds., *Mummies and Magic: The Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt* (Boston, 1988), 14–19.

²² Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, 56–57.

²³ H. Schäfer, "Darstellung einer Beisetzung im Alten Reich," ZÄS 41 (1904), 65–67. L. Klebs, *Die Reliefs des Alten Reiches* (Heidelberg, 1915), followed Schäfer's interpretation, but maintained that the ritual was performed for statues that were placed in the serdab, rather than only for those that were lowered into the burial chamber.

²⁴ PM III² /2, 493–94 (LS 6). R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Ägypten und Äthiopien* (Berlin, 1849), II, pls. 4–5.

²⁵ H. Wild, *Le tombeau de Ti*, III (Cairo, 1966), pls. 169 and 172.

²⁶ Edward Brovarski, *The Senedjemib Complex, Part I, Giza Mastabas 7* (Boston, 2001), fig. 53.

²⁷ A. M. Blackman, "The Significance of Incense and Libations in Funerary and Temple Rituals," ZÄS 50 (1912), 69–75.

unseen and in darkness throughout eternity, another parallel with the mummy.²⁸ However, unlike the mummy, the serdab statues allowed their owner to be regularly refreshed with incense.

Additional evidence for the use of the serdab in rituals after the funeral is the fact that it was often located directly behind the false door, with its slots cut into the door itself, so that the *htp-di-nswt* offering ritual would have routinely been directed at it. This would allow the serdab statues to receive the benefit of the ritual through the slot, just as the false door would magically conduct the same benefits to the actual dead body in the burial chamber.

It is perhaps significant that the indications of ritual activity around the serdab slot tend to appear in Fifth Dynasty contexts. The advent of the east-west chapel in private tombs at the end of the Fifth Dynasty seems to have resulted in a relocation of the serdab from behind the false door to an adjacent area, and often an adjacent room, with slots more frequently opening onto an antechamber or even a portico. While this may simply reflect an architectural adjustment to the new east-west orientation of the chapel, it probably also indicates a scaling back of cult activities focused on the serdab slot during the Sixth Dynasty, foreshadowing the transfer of the serdab's contents to the burial chamber in tombs after the Old Kingdom. When the need for physical access to the statues, provided by the serdab slot, became so unimportant that the statues could be transferred to the more inaccessible burial chamber, the serdab disappeared as an element of tomb architecture. Statues placed in the burial chamber were clearly *not* cult statues, or at least they could no longer be the objects of an active cult once the chamber had been sealed. While there was access to the serdab through its slot, there was no comparable physical access to the burial chamber, although the false door provided magical access. It is perhaps also significant that burial shafts tend to become shallower during this period,²⁹ so that the offering places were physically closer to the actual body than they would have been in burial chambers of earlier tombs.

The serdab statues that represented the tomb owner, and presumably those that depicted his family as well, clearly served as a focus of mortuary cult rituals. The serving statues that accompanied these cult statues, however, have not been thought of as cult statues themselves on the grounds that they do not represent individuals but rather the simple fact of service. Nevertheless, the incense and offerings made at the serdab slot would have benefited the serving statues as well as to the statues of the tomb owner and his family. Is there, then, a difference of identity between the two types of statues?

The fact that the serving statues are inscribed less often than the other statues points to one distinction between the two, but this difference is only one of degree: serdab statues of the tomb owner and his family were often left uninscribed as well; presumably the rituals that accompanied their deposition were sufficient to imbue them with identities.³⁰ Inscriptions would not have been visible in the darkness of the serdab, so the serdab statues did not have the function of publicly memorializing the tomb owner that the statues in chapels did. It was this memorial function that made the inscription of a name on the chapel statue essential.

A more obvious distinction between the serving statues and the other statues is the fact that that the serving statues are depicted in arrested movement, whereas the tomb owner and his family are normally depicted in static poses. The exception to these formally posed statues is the depiction of

²⁸ Although the architecture of serdabs tends not to be very well recorded archaeologically, I know of no evidence in any Old Kingdom serdab for clerestory windows or skylights intended to illuminate the contents of the serdab. The statues could be dimly illuminated by a lamp held to the slot, but a light so close at hand would probably blind a viewer to the serdab's contents. Furthermore, many serdab slots are placed well above eye-level.

²⁹ Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, pp. 56–57.

³⁰ This scarcity of inscription on serdab statues has not been much discussed, but it is obviously important to understanding the function of such inscriptions elsewhere. Rock-cut statues are also less often inscribed, which suggests an affinity with serdab statues.

the tomb owner as a seated scribe. Breasted³¹ argued that statues of scribes are not “servant statues,” because their labor is not menial, because they are usually larger than servant figures, and because they are sometimes inscribed with the name of the tomb owner. He concluded that “although a number of scribal statues have come down from the Old Kingdom, not one of these may be identified as a servant figure.”

Nonetheless, these scribe statues share several characteristics with the serving statues. Like many serving statues, seated scribes are often shown with a slightly raised gaze. They are also often carved with a very small base or no base at all, and inserted into a larger base. This may have been connected with the ritual placement of these statues in the serdab. Like the serving statues, scribe statues are never depicted in two-dimensional representations of statue-making, as Marianne Eaton-Krauss has noted.³² And like both serving statues and the so-called pseudo-groups, another type of serdab statue, they are not paralleled by statues in the more public parts of the tomb.³³ The scribe statues found in serdabs are assumed to be cult statues, since they represent the tomb owner; and it seems likely that the serving statues with which they shared so many characteristics were also the recipients of cult.

Another important point to consider in examining the context in which Old Kingdom serving statues appear is that in at least one case (the tomb of Nikauhathor, discussed below), the serving statues were put in a serdab with no statue of the tomb owner. Assuming that this serdab had a slot before which incense and offerings were presented,³⁴ the conclusion is inescapable that these serving statues were also cult statues. As cult statues, it seems likely that, inscribed or uninscribed, they represented individuals rather than generic servants.

Inscribed Serving Statues

The identity of serving statues is rarely made explicit by inscriptions, but even the formal serdab statues that presumably represented the tomb owner are often uninscribed. Nonetheless, the few serving statues that do bear inscriptions are illuminating. Four main groups of these inscribed statues dating to the Old Kingdom have survived, as well as a small number of Middle Kingdom inscribed serving statues. These five groups will be considered below.

The Serving Statues of Nikau-Anpu

The largest surviving group of Old Kingdom inscribed serving statues, and the one that gives the clearest clue to their function, is in the Museum of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.³⁵ The serving statues were acquired as part of a group of twenty-five statues early in the twentieth century from Nicholas Tanos, a dealer who maintained that they all came from the same tomb at

³¹ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, 1.

³² M. Eaton-Krauss, *The Representations of Statuary in Private Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 39 (Wiesbaden, 1984), 20.

³³ Scribe statues and “pseudo-groups” are sometimes found in niches cut into the chapel walls of rock-cut tombs. Such statues were carved from the surrounding bedrock and thus attached to the walls of the chapel. But it is not clear whether these rock-cut statues were exposed to public view. The recessed niches in which they sit may have been fitted with doors or even walled up or sealed with plaster, so that they formed a different type of serdab. No serving statues have been found among such rock-cut statues, however.

³⁴ No serdab slot is recorded in the publication (perhaps because of insufficient preservation of the wall, but since there are no known examples of a fully preserved serdab that did not have a slot, it is reasonable to assume that one existed originally).

³⁵ These statues are published in Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*. I am grateful to Karen Wilson, director of the Oriental Institute Museum, for granting me access to these statues and the records concerning them. Museum staff members Emily Teeter and Ray Tindel were both helpful during my examination of the statues, and the former also very kindly re-checked the originals for me (twice!) when questions arose later.

Table 1: Inscribed Statues from the Serdab of Nikau-Anpu and Hemet-Re

OI # Description	Inscription
10618 Couple standing	<i>shd w3bt hrty-ntr Nj-k3w-Jnpw hmt.f dt jrj-ht-nswt Hmt-R^c</i>
10621 Nikau-Anpu sitting	<i>shd hrty-ntr Nj-k3w-Jnpw</i>
10622 Woman grinding grain	<i>z3.f Nbt-m-pt</i>
10623 Man with round sieve	<i>dt Smrt</i>
10624 Man making loaves	<i>z3.f Mnw-h^c.f</i>
10629 Man stirring cauldron	<i>z3.f Hnw</i>
10634 Man poking furnace	<i>z3.f Hw[fw]-jm3</i>
10635 Woman ladling liquid	<i>z3t Mr(t)</i>

Giza. The style of the carving and the similarity of the inscriptions tend to support his claim. The necropolis inspector Nikau-Anpu, apparently the tomb owner, is twice represented standing with his wife Hemet-Re and once more seated by himself. Apart from these three statues and a model granary, all the statues are serving statues. The group includes five named sons and daughters, explicitly called *z3.f*, “his son,” and *z3t.f*, “his daughter” (table 1). The possessive “his” on these labels clearly connects both the individuals depicted and the work in which they are engaged directly to the tomb owner. Another man in the group is identified as the *dt* Semeret; the word *dt* normally refers to the body or estate of the tomb owner, and this man was presumably attached to him as a dependent. Like the titles “son” and “daughter,” *dt* seems to refer to a relationship, although possibly a socially constructed one rather than a biological one.³⁶ The same title is also given to Nikau-Anpu’s wife, so it clearly did not always designate a person who did menial work. The most plausible translation seems to be “dependent.” One wonders whether it might refer to dependents buried in the secondary shafts of the tomb owner’s mastaba.

The five children of Nikau-Anpu are depicted doing all sorts of menial work: grinding and sieving grain, ladling liquid, making loaves, poking a furnace, and stirring a cooking pot. Given that people identified as the children of tomb owners are never depicted doing such work on chapel walls, it might be argued that Nikau-Anpu simply added these names to the serving statues, despite their inappropriate form, in order to include his children in his mortuary cult. But the size and quality of this collection opposes such an explanation: This is not a single child, born after more formal statues had been finished, who had to be included in an unorthodox way, but five children. Moreover, since these inscribed statues form part of an unusually large collection of serving statues, it can hardly be argued that Nikau-Anpu lacked the resources to have statues made of his children in more formal poses. Since there are no other statues of his children in the collection, a more likely interpretation is that the children of the deceased chose to be represented engaging in exaggeratedly humble activities in order to demonstrate their humility and dependence on their father and to emphasize their usefulness to him in the afterlife.

The remaining serving statues in this collection are not inscribed. They include the peculiar “spanking” scene mentioned above, several statues of musicians, a potter, a dwarf with a sack, and several others. The uninscribed statues are also differentiated from the inscribed statues by the fact that they are not, with a few exceptions, involved in food preparation. They may have represented another category of dependent, perhaps more distant relations, or employees, shown doing less es-

³⁶ The title has been much discussed; see references in D. Jones, *An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom* (Oxford, 2000), 1011–12.

sential labor. The preparation of food for the tomb owner is done by the children of the tomb owner, and was perhaps seen as the giving of *kꜣw*, “sustenance,” to the one who had given *kꜣ*, “life force,” to them. On the other hand, these other serving statues may represent the children a second time: there are, after all, two statues of Nikau-Anpu and his wife in the collection, one inscribed and the other uninscribed.

If the children of Nikau-Anpu were represented working to demonstrate their importance to his comfort in the afterlife, and hence their right to an afterlife as well, one might ask how his wife Hemet-Re justified her claim to an afterlife. She is shown embracing her husband, in a gesture that to a modern viewer seems a touching display of marital affection and support. However, this gesture may have had the added function of demonstrating her usefulness to the tomb owner and justifying her presence in the afterlife in the same way as the more tangible labor of her children does. It has been noted that it is far rarer for a husband to embrace his wife in such statue groups.³⁷

Another way in which a wife can be shown supporting her husband is suggested by the two statues in the tomb of the *jrj-ht nswt jmj-r pr shꜣ hmw-kꜣ* Ankh-tef.³⁸ The serdab was found intact, directly behind the smaller northern false door. It contained two statues, both apparently facing south, toward the main false door and away from the serdab slot. Closest to the slot was a seated statue of the tomb owner, in what Edna Russmann has called the “second style” of the Old Kingdom.³⁹ It is well carved but oddly proportioned, the body being unusually thick from back to front. Behind it was a beautifully carved statue of a woman grinding grain, uninscribed, almost two-thirds the height of the male statue, despite the fact that she is kneeling while he is seated on a chair. Although she is not identified, the circumstances suggest that this statue represents the tomb owner’s wife, here shown serving him, just as her children might have done.

The Serving Statues of Ka-khent

The tomb of the inspector of palace attendants Ka-khent (G 2088)⁴⁰ yielded a number of fragmentary serving statues, several of which were inscribed. Among the inscribed examples was a rare double statue that names each of the women depicted (fig. 2), although no titles are given to specify their



Fig. 2. Double serving statue showing two women from Giza mastaba 2088. Two women are identified, Ankhi-emaes on the right and Nefer-inet on the left. (Drawing by the author.)

³⁷ Nadine Cherpion, “Sentiment Conjugal et Figuration à l’Ancien Empire,” *Kunst des Alten Reiches*, SDAIK 28 (Mainz, 1995), 33–47 and Taf. 2–8, has noted a decline in the frequency of such affectionate gestures in two-dimensional representations in the middle of the Fifth Dynasty. Since this is exactly the period when serving statues first appear, the three-dimensional depictions in the serdab (which almost invariably show affection) may have taken over a function previously fulfilled by the two-dimensional representations in the tomb chapel decoration.

³⁸ S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza 5* (Cairo, 1944), 232–33, and pls. 24 and 25. This example was kindly pointed out to me by Slawomir Rzepka.

³⁹ E. Russmann, “Le ‘deuxième style’ de la statuaire de l’Ancien Empire,” *MDAIK* 51 (1995) 269–77.

⁴⁰ See Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, p. 81 (fig. 32) and pl. 32c. This statue clearly was originally from a serdab in G 2088 because the pestle of the woman pounding grain was found there; the remaining pieces were found widely dispersed around the cemetery.

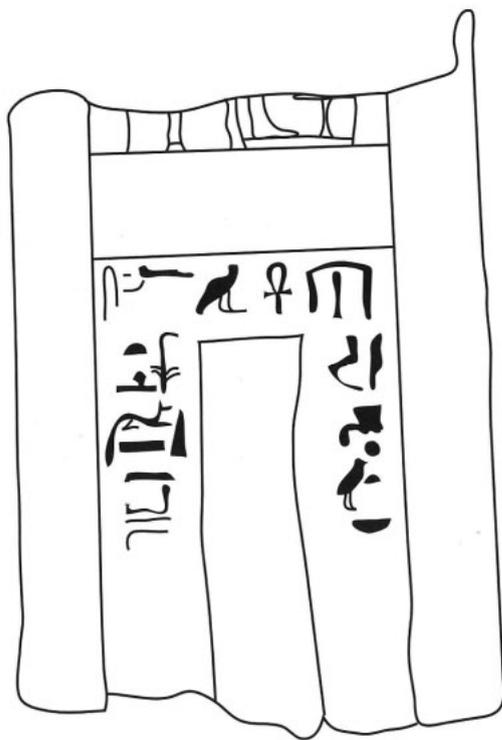


Fig. 3. A small false door in Giza mastaba 2088, giving the name of Ankhimaes. (Drawing by the author.)

relationship to the tomb owner. This double statue is important because it demonstrates that the names on these serving statues refer to the figures depicted, and not simply to donors of the statues. The placement of the names makes it clear that each name refers to one of the individuals.⁴¹

Ankhimaes and Nefer-inet are referred to in the decoration of Ka-khent's tomb chapel. Ankhimaes is named as the owner of a tiny, crudely made secondary false door set into the door recess of the chapel (fig. 3)⁴² that would seem to indicate that one of the secondary burials in the tomb belonged to her. On neither the false door nor the serving statue is her relationship to the tomb owner made explicit, but she must have been a close relation or dependent to justify her burial in the tomb. The woman with whom she is working, Nefer-inet, was identified as a daughter of the tomb owner in the chapel decoration (fig. 4).⁴³

Both the women represented in the model, Nefert-inet and Ankhimaes, were probably daughters of the tomb owner. It is perhaps significant that the raised relief scene in the chapel depicts Nefer-inet playing the harp for her father. Music-making is the one type of scene in which children (and, oc-

asionally, wives) are shown in action in tomb chapel decoration. The fact that they are shown in three dimensions doing more energetic types of labor in the serdab may simply be a difference in decorum between the chapel's publicly visible two-dimensional representations and the serdab's hidden three-dimensional representations. It seems likely that these more humble activities, if shown publicly, would detract from the high regard and respect that the more public representations of the tomb owner and his family were intended to inspire.

Several other serving statues from G 2088 bear inscriptions. One of these is identified as the karpriest Nen-ankh, who is shown cutting up a duck.⁴⁴ He is not depicted in the decoration of 2088, but a scene in the neighboring tomb 2086, identifies Nen-ankh as the eldest son of the tomb owner.⁴⁵

⁴¹ John Ray, citing the frequency in later periods of gifts of tomb equipment provided by tomb owners' children, suggested to me that the names on the serving statues might represent the names of the donor, rather than the person depicted in the statue. This statue, in particular, makes such an explanation unlikely.

⁴² Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, pls. 31c and 152b.

⁴³ Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, pls. 28 and 147, in the lowest register, the second figure from the left. The drawing in figure 4 differs from the published drawing, which was my own. The name is written horizontally below the title, "his eldest daughter, Nefert-inet." The published drawing omits the *jn* and *t* signs, and instead shows an additional *s* and *r* below the group *Nfirt*; however, the relief (now lost) is carved in plaster that is very worn and damaged. Upon re-examining the excavation photographs, I found the two signs shown below the group *Nfirt* in the drawing of the name are very questionable; instead, parts of the signs *jn* and *t* can be seen to the left of the group. These signs are, I think, visible in the published photograph, but they are somewhat more convincing in the original sepia print.

⁴⁴ Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, 81 (fig. 33).

⁴⁵ Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, pls. 18b and 143.

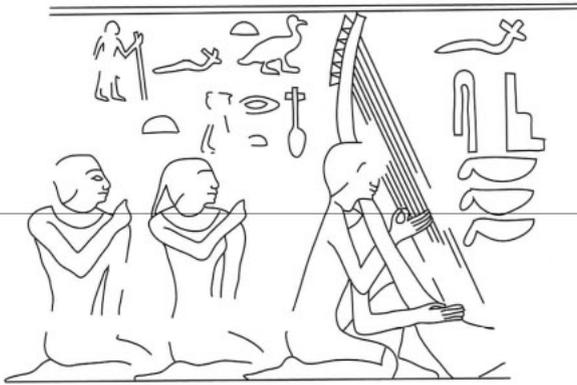


Fig. 4. Detail of a scene from the east wall of the chapel of Giza mastaba 2088, showing Nefer-inet. (Drawing by the author.)

Nen-ankh's father held a title subordinate to Ka-khent's,⁴⁶ and it is not unlikely that Ka-khent would honor his service by appointing his son as a ka-priest. Nen-ankh probably succeeded to his father's position as inspector of palace attendants, and assuming that it represents the same man, this serving statue may again show a dependent performing labor that was beneath his dignity.

Other inscribed serving statues from Ka-khent's tomb depict a man setting down an offering table, named Ka-tjesu; a man straining beer mash, called Hetepes; and a woman probably engaged in the same task, called Seti-mu.⁴⁷ None of these names appear in the chapel decoration, but their absence may be an accident of survival. Since the two female figures labeled solely with personal

names in this tomb are likely to have represented the tomb owner's daughters, while the statue of a subordinate official's son is given a title that indicates a different relationship to the tomb's occupant, it would be reasonable to assume that the three untitled people named on the serving statues were Ka-Khent's sons and daughter.⁴⁸

The Serving Statues of Werireni

A third group of inscribed statues comes from Mariette's mastaba D 20 at Saqqara.⁴⁹ Among the serving statues found in the serdab, four were inscribed with personal names. The two women, Wehem-nefret and Ishat, are shown grinding grain and are given the title "*dt* of Werireni"; a third statue shows Iti-wer, who holds the same title, straining beer. This title, like the filiation "his son" or "his daughter," stresses the connection with the tomb owner, Werireni—and the name Werireni is placed in honorific transposition in these texts, as if he were a king or a god. The title *dt* again presumably indicates some attachment to the funerary estate of the tomb owner, and possibly to his family as well.

The same title appears on the fourth labeled statue from this serdab—that of Kaemqed, who is called both a *dt* and a ka-priest of Werireni, and is shown kneeling, presumably in performance of the funerary ritual. There seems to be a great variability in representational decorum among Old Kingdom statues: a ka-priest can be depicted performing a ritual (as here) or cutting up a duck (as in G 2088); children can be shown accompanying their parents in independent formal statues or in serving statues; a wife can be shown separately, or embracing her husband, or grinding grain; and the tomb owner himself can be represented in formal statues, or as a scribe, doing humble work for the state.

⁴⁶ Ka-khent was an *jmj-r st hntjw-š pr-š*, ("assistant overseer of palace attendants"), while Nen-ankh's father was a *šd hntjw-š pr-š* ("inspector of palace attendants"), a rank below that of Ka-khent in the hierarchy.

⁴⁷ Roth, *Cemetery of Palace Attendants*, 82–83 (figs. 38, 44, and 43). Another inscribed fragment from a model, perhaps depicting beer-making, was found on the surface of G 2230 nearby (p. 157 and fig. 85 [find no. 39-3-9]), and may have come from the same serdab since other fragments of the statues seem to be widely scattered. Only the end of the name, [. . .]-*wsrj*, is preserved, so it is not clear whether this serving statue was accorded a title.

⁴⁸ A similar pattern may hold for the serving statues of Nikauhathor, discussed below.

⁴⁹ A. Mariette, *Mastabas de l'Ancien Empire* (Paris, 1889), 232–35.

Table 2: The Serving Statues of Nikauhathor and her Husband

Name	Activity	Journal d'entrée
Male Serving Statues		
Niankh-Izezi	cleaning goose	JE 72232
Werdi(?) [<i>Wrt-dj</i>]	brewing	JE 72231
<i>hm-k3</i> Remensekhemka	cooking	JE 72230
<i>hm-k3</i> Hererem(?) [<i>Hmrr</i>]	cleaning jars	JE 72229
<i>hm-k3</i> Inpu-shesi	dyeing?	JE 72233
Female Serving Statues		
<i>hm(t)-k3</i> Henut-sen	grinding wheat	JE 72234
<i>hm(t)-k3</i> ..peheret	sifting flour	JE 87820
<i>hm(t)-k3</i> Nimaathathor	kneading dough	JE 72228
unnamed woman	heating pots for bread	JE 72227

The Serving Statues of Nikauhathor and her Husband

Another group of inscribed Old Kingdom serving statues was found in the Fifth Dynasty tomb of the royal acquaintance Nikauhathor and her husband in the Central Field at Giza.⁵⁰ One of the tomb's serdabs contained nine serving statues: five male and four female (table 2 and fig. 5). All of the men and three of the women are labeled with names; and three men and all three named women are given the title *hm-k3*. The unlabeled statue of a woman was probably originally inscribed as well; the front of its base, where the names on the other statues occur, is missing. It is tempting to assume that, as with the statues from G 2088, the two men not given titles are the tomb owner's sons and the others are unrelated, or more distantly related, dependents, attached to the tomb owner by the service they perform for him. What is particularly interesting about this tomb is that the serdab was found essentially intact, although the statues had been somewhat disturbed and broken, and it is possible to reconstruct their position to some extent from the published photographs. Several apparently gender-based distinctions are evident in the original emplacement of the statues. While the male figures are arranged in two rows facing the serdab slot, the statues of the women seem to have been placed at angles. The women are engaged exclusively in tasks associated with the manufacture of bread; the work that the men perform, while similarly related to the preparation of food (with one uncertain exception) encompasses a broader variety of tasks. The significance of the orientation of the figures within the serdab is not entirely clear, although principal statues normally face the serdab slot directly; the restriction of women to bread-making may, however, represent a distinction in the social roles allotted to men and women.

Two other aspects of this tomb cast light on the roles of these serving statues. First, the damaged relief decoration in the chapel shows a procession of four or more men and four women. Some of the names of the women survive (*Nj-k3* . . . *nb/Hwt-Hr*, . . . *r* . . . , *Jtj*, and *Ffj*⁵¹); none can be equated with any of the names inscribed on the serving statues, but several, by virtue of their form, are probably

⁵⁰ Selim Hassan, *Excavations at Giza 5*, pl. 10; *Excavations at Giza 6/3* (1934–35) (Cairo, 1950), 173–85, pls. 73–80; PM III/1 247. This has generally been assumed to be a woman's tomb, since the name (preserved only on the lower lintel of the only false door) is apparently feminine. However, all the remaining decoration in the chapel shows either a man alone, or a man and woman with the man in the principal position. The tomb probably belonged to a couple (there are two principal shafts behind the false door); if so, it is simply chance that the only part of the false door that was preserved sufficiently to be read bore the name of the wife.

⁵¹ Selim Hassan, *Excavations at Giza 6/3*, 174, gives the first of these names as *Nj-k3w-Hwt-Hr*, but in figure 171 on p. 177, the sign above the *n* and the single *k3* sign appears to be a *nb* or perhaps a *k*.

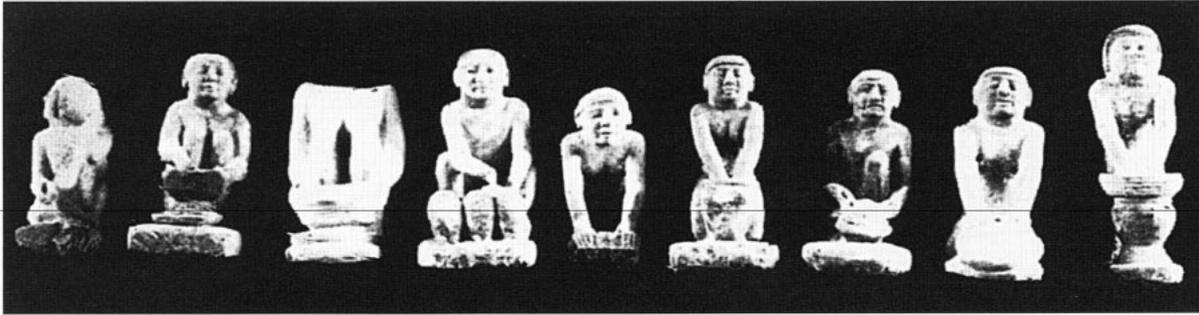


Fig. 5. The inscribed serving statues from the tomb of Nikauhathor and her husband at Giza. (From S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza 5*, pl. x B.)

nicknames. These names might also be later additions to the scene: they are described as “incised” in the excavation report. In any case, the numbers of men and women are suggestive: If the top line of the drawing accurately represents the length of the wall, there would be sufficient space for a fifth man to the right of the first surviving one, and a larger-scale representation of Nikauhathor and her husband facing the procession. If this was the case, the men and women represented on the chapel’s wall (five and four, respectively) would correspond to the gender distribution of the serving statues in the serdab.

Similarly suggestive is the number of shafts found in the tomb (fig. 6). There are two principal, subterranean shafts west of the chapel, presumably belonging to the principal tomb owners and both containing burials. To the north, in a stone-cased mud-brick addition to the mastaba, which contained the serdab, are ten shallower secondary shafts, and in a similar extension to the east are two more. Nine of these contained skeletons. The remaining shafts did not have burial chambers. It seems likely that the individuals represented by the serving statues in the serdab were also represented in the chapel decoration and that all were buried in secondary shafts in the same mastaba. If so, here again the serving statues in the serdab would represent cult statues of the dependents of the deceased.

The serdab contained no statues of the tomb owners. Any rituals performed before the serdab slot (which is not described in the excavation report) would have been done for the benefit of the people depicted in the statues. They were clearly not menial servants, but probably the family and close dependents of the tomb owners, who were buried in the same tomb.

Middle Kingdom Inscribed Serving Statues

Although only a very small sample of inscribed serving statues from the Old Kingdom has survived, *none* contain titles like *b3k* (“servant”) or the more specific titles *ndty* (“miller”) or *fty*, (“brewer”) which *do* occur on serving statues from the Middle Kingdom, among the very few inscribed examples of that period.⁵² The other examples are two offering bearers from Rifeh, two boats from the tomb of Mentuhotep in the Assasif, and two mourners on a funerary boat from Meir, all of which give the names and professional titles of the person depicted.⁵³ This clearly indicates that the primary importance of serving statues in the Middle Kingdom lay in the services being performed. All the inscribed Old Kingdom statues, by contrast, indicate a family relationship or service in the mortuary cult, which are

⁵² L. Borchardt, “Dienerstatuen aus den Gräbern des alten Reiches,” *ZÄS* (1897), 33, lists two Middle Kingdom brewers who are identified by both their occupation and their names.

⁵³ Angela Tooley, *Egyptian Models and Scenes* (Princes Risbourough, 1995), 21–22.

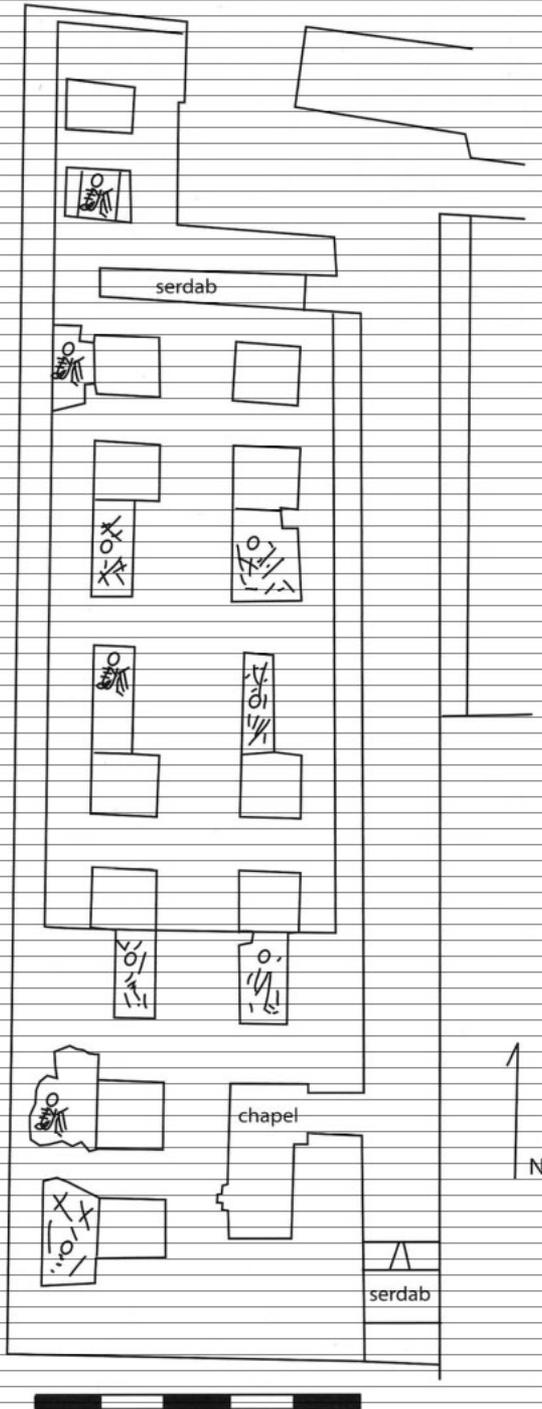


Fig. 6. A plan of the tomb of Nikauhathor and her husband, showing the two serdabs, of which the northern held the inscribed serving statues, as well as the burials excavated in the tomb. Two further shafts, one containing a body, lay to the east. (Drawing by the author.)

never specified in the Middle Kingdom examples. This distinction points to a change in the function of serving statues between the Old and Middle Kingdoms.

Patterns in Inscribed Old Kingdom Serving Statues

The pattern of inscription supports the hypothesis that the people represented by Old Kingdom serving statues represent individuals, in most cases family members or dependents of the tomb owner, rather than anonymous workers, and that their purpose is thus not, or not only, to serve the dead tomb owner, but to increase these individuals' chances of survival after death by depicting them performing useful service for someone who presumably will have influence in the other world.

A slightly different explanation for this pattern of inscription has been proposed by Angela Tooley.⁵⁴ She interprets the service depicted as taking place within the cult of the tomb owner. Noting that most family members were also cult functionaries (and vice versa), she suggests that the people depicted in these statues were in fact servants, but that the names of cult functionaries were added to some statues because although they did not actually do the work, they were responsible for having it done. While this view is not entirely impossible to reconcile with my interpretation, it is unnecessarily complicated and takes no account of the fact that it is the people represented in the statues who would have received the benefits of the incense, offerings, and cult activities presented through the serdab slot. It is true that once the names of the sons and daughters were added to anonymous serving statues, they would also probably be thought to benefit from the statue cult. But the difference between this procedure and actually representing the children as individuals who are performing a service is hard to distinguish in the Egyptian context.

⁵⁴ Tooley, *Egyptian Models*, 20.

Another explanation for the pattern of inscriptions has been suggested by Hans Schneider in his study of shabtis.⁵⁵ He argues that the Old Kingdom serving statues were simultaneously representations of servants and representations of the family member or even the tomb owner. The servants were substitutes for their masters and performed work for which their masters were responsible. There is, however, no example of a serving statue that bears the name of the tomb owner himself (excluding the scribe statues). Nor does there seem to have been any attempt to make the serving statues resemble the tomb owner; most often, they are quite individual and distinct from one another. Although the dual identity that Schneider suggests seems extremely apposite for the shabtis that may have derived from the serving statues, it does not seem to fit the serving statues themselves.

The daughters of a wealthy tomb owner would rarely if ever have had occasion to grind grain. Nonetheless, they may have done so on occasion, to prepare a special meals that honored their father at a holiday or anniversary, or to show respect for particularly honored guests.⁵⁶ Moreover, the preparation of food for the head of the household would have been the stereotypical duty of sons and daughters, deriving from the necessity of their doing so in households without servants, although children of the elite may not have performed it often. To be depicted in that way would have served to mark their relationship to their father and to show symbolically their contribution to the family economy. Their service probably happened about as often as a high official sat cross-legged on the floor to take dictation, as elite tomb owners are shown doing in scribe statues. The children's grinding of grain represents their support for their father, just as the scribe statue represents symbolically the support of the official for his king and the state.

The Evolution of Serving Statues

The serving statues of the Old Kingdom are not an isolated phenomenon but rather an early stage in the continuum of development of three-dimensional representations of work. It is important to demonstrate how the revised view of the Old Kingdom workers offered here fits in with the other stages of evolution. Moreover, one of the later phases of this development offers some confirmation of the new explanation proposed.

Old Kingdom serving statues are the earliest known examples of model workers buried with the dead. It has been suggested that these statues developed as more humane substitutes for the human sacrifices found around royal and elite tombs dating to the First Dynasty.⁵⁷ The prevalence of women and dwarfs among these burials might suggest a similar domestic function, but the other burials belong to household pets and specialized craftspeople, neither of which are major components of the corpus of serving statues. In addition, the hiatus between the cessation of these sacrifices at the end of the First Dynasty and the appearance of the serving statues in the middle of the Old Kingdom makes a direct development unlikely.

After the popularity of the limestone serving statues in the second half of the Fifth Dynasty, the Sixth Dynasty seems to mark a gradual decrease in limestone serving statues, although wooden statues seem to replace them in part. (It may be that the wooden statues are more visible archaeologically, since they are now often given limestone tools.) There is also a shift in the placement of the

⁵⁵ H. Schneider, *An Introduction to the History of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Statuettes* (Leiden, 1977), 22–24.

⁵⁶ I am grateful to McGuire Gibson for pointing out to me that the serving of food prepared by the hands of the women of an elite family is a way to honor important visitors to the household in the Middle East even today.

⁵⁷ For example, Selim Hassan, in *Excavations at Giza 6/3*, 177, describes the custom as “very likely a humane and civilized development of the primitive usage of slaughtering the slaves and attendants of the Kings and nobles and burying them in or near their master’s tomb that they might continue to minister to his needs in the Hereafter.”

statues, from the serdab to the burial chamber. These changes in the medium and the placement of the serving statues may signal more simplified understanding of their function. During the Old Kingdom they served two purposes: they magically helped provide the tomb owner with the food he needed in the afterlife, but they were also cult statues that represented individual dependents, who justified their existence in the afterlife by the service they were shown giving, and who partook of the incense and offerings given to the tomb owner. The underground portion of the tomb became increasingly important, probably fueled by the growth of the Osiris cult and the concomitant increasing importance of the chthonic symbolism of burial. Initially, the burial of serving statues may have been moved to the underground part of the tomb as a more effective means of getting the people represented into the afterlife. With the absence of cultic benefits from activities in front of the serdab, serving statues became less individual, and their first, more servile, function came to predominate.

In the transition to the Middle Kingdom, the second purpose seems to have disappeared almost entirely. The serving statues of the early Twelfth Dynasty represent a much wider range of activities and seem to function solely for the benefit of the tomb owner. Even superb models like the procession from Bersha are not labeled with names or titles; the few models that are given names and titles are given professional designations like “miller” or “brewer,” rather than a title relating them to the tomb owner. It is perhaps significant, however, that those few statues that are inscribed include depictions of people engaged in the same activities—the preparation of food—commonly found in the Old Kingdom serving statues. There may be some significance as well in the fact that those models depicting processions of offering bearers (which represent the activity of a ka-priest, a relationship specified in some Old Kingdom serving statues), though uninscribed, are often of noticeably better quality than the other models. This type of statue may represent a partial continuation of the mortuary beliefs associated with Old Kingdom serving statues, or it may simply be a memory of the high-quality prototypes for serving statues depicting cult functionaries.

Nonetheless, there is clearly a change in function between the Old and Middle Kingdom serving statues. It may be that the actual work of cult functionaries in elite tombs during this period had become professionalized, and that family members no longer took such an important part in the cult's support. During the Old Kingdom, such cults seem to have been staffed by family members and the children of friends at the same social level, and the tomb owners therefore arranged for their cult officials to benefit from their cult rituals. During the Middle Kingdom, the cult was maintained by paid professionals (probably) of a lower class, who were compensated in other ways and were not included in the benefits of the cult.

Workers still were needed to accompany the tomb owner to the afterlife, as is shown by the rudimentary mummification of the serving statues by wrapping them with linen,⁵⁸ but they no longer represented living, known individuals. The serving statues of the Middle Kingdom can thus appropriately be called servant statues—they are anonymous workers of a lower class than the serving statues of the Old Kingdom, who were members of the household of an elite tomb owner.

The decline in the status of serving statues made it possible for the tomb owner to make use of them as substitutes, in case he should be drafted for corvée labor in the afterlife. The obligation of elite tomb owners to perform this type of public service, which seems not to have been a concern in the Old Kingdom, may have arisen out of the more efficient (and hence more demanding) state

⁵⁸ These wrappings were often removed by excavators and museum staffs to reveal more of the figures; they can be seen in excavation photographs and in the exhibits in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. See, for example, H. Winlock, *Models of Daily Life in Ancient Egypt from the Tomb of Meket-Re' at Thebes* (Cambridge, 1955), pls. 13, 16, 20–21, 25–29, 32–47, and 51; Tooley, *Egyptian Models*, fig. 13 on p. 23; and Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, pls. 51, 52 b, and 71 b.

bureaucracy of the Middle Kingdom. The need to find substitutes for such duties was apparently more pressing than the desire for the personal services performed by serving statues.⁵⁹ Some shabtis are made to resemble the dead tomb owner himself (presumably the better to substitute for him in the *corvée*), while others represent an anonymous worker who has taken on this duty, perhaps mirroring a kind of substitution that took place on earth. One could not imagine assigning such service to the sons, daughters, and cult functionaries found in the Old Kingdom serdabs, but the anonymous laboring groups of the Middle Kingdom would have been ideally suited for fulfilling these obligations. Shabtis developed only when the Old Kingdom mechanism of depicting manual labor as a justification for an association with a person or being of higher status had fallen out of use.

This view of menial service seems to have been revived again for a brief period in the New Kingdom, around the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty. Eight statues from this period depict high-ranking individuals grinding grain.⁶⁰ The subjects of these statues include a king's son, a royal wife, and a high priest of Ptah, and their craftsmanship is of a commensurately high quality. Even more clearly than in the case of the Old Kingdom serving statues, these officials are depicted performing a task that is menial in comparison to their normal occupations.

In one case, the accompanying inscription identifies the man grinding grain as "the servant of the god, his miller." It is clear from this description that the official is connecting himself with the divinity by doing this menial service for him, just as the Old Kingdom scribe statues stressed service to the king and serving statues stressed service to the tomb owner.

Paradoxically, three of these statues are also inscribed with all or part of chapter 6 of the Book of the Dead, that is, the shabti spell. The person depicted is given the title *shd*, which so far as I know is attested only from that chapter, and the word *shabti* is used explicitly. While such contradictions often are explained by suggesting that the Egyptians had forgotten what their own mortuary spells meant, it seems churlish to attribute confusion to the Egyptians when it is modern Egyptologists who are unable to make sense of their monuments. One possible explanation for the use of the shabti spell is that the historical evolution of shabtis from such statues was still known, and the term shabti was applied to these new serving statues by historical analogy. A more intriguing possibility is that the Old Kingdom serving statues were themselves called shabtis; certainly no other name is attested for them. The term shabti and the title *shd* may have been transferred from the Old Kingdom serving statues to the early Middle Kingdom servant models, and thence to the models of substitutes for *corvée* labor.

Although these statues come from Thebes as well as the Memphite area, it is perhaps significant that they begin to appear at a time when many high officials are again beginning to build tombs in the Memphite necropolis. Construction activities at Saqqara may have brought to light Old Kingdom tombs that had long been buried and forgotten, and as a result there may have been renewed interest in the conceptions of the afterlife alluded to in their equipment and texts. Such encounters with Old Kingdom texts or even ruined serdabs containing serving statues might have inspired a revival of the older idea of labor justifying one's claim to an afterlife.⁶¹ It is at precisely this period that high officials such as Horemheb and Amenhotep son of Hapu were depicted as humble seated scribes, a

⁵⁹ Schneider, *Funerary Statuettes*, 67–68.

⁶⁰ Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, 23.

⁶¹ Recent excavations south of the Unis pyramid at Saqqara by British, Dutch, and Egyptian expeditions have demonstrated that extensive cemeteries were built there at exactly this period. Many New Kingdom tombs are built above earlier mastabas, and their builders may have run across serdabs containing serving statues in the course of their construction and been inspired by the archaeological remains of the older tradition.

statue type that had been developing continuously since the Old Kingdom, but which became particularly popular in the reign of Amenhotep III, and continued to be so through the reign of Rameses II, roughly the time period spanned by the New Kingdom cemeteries at Saqqara.⁶² The serving statues showing high officials grinding grain date to the same period.

The Meaning of Menial Labor

The people represented in Old Kingdom serving statues, where they are identified, were dependents of the tomb owner, often members of his immediate family. They were depicted doing labor that would be considered menial for people of their class because their service to the tomb owner was thought to ensure their access to the afterlife. It can only be supposed that the anonymous serving statues had a similar identities and a similar purpose, though some of the people represented may have been less closely connected with the tomb owner.

In their performance of menial tasks, the serving statues resembled the statues of the tomb owner as a seated scribe that are also found in many serdabs. Here the tomb owner himself is depicted at work, in his bureaucratic job for the state, or, more accurately, in a lower-level job that emphasized his subservience. (It is unlikely that the high administrative officials who were wealthy enough to commission such statues spent much of their time taking dictation; one of the earliest examples was a king's eldest son.) The pose of a seated scribe encapsulated the archetypal mode of bureaucratic service. By means of this statue, the tomb owner's service to the king is invoked to justify and ensure his right to a life in the hereafter, in the same way that his service to the king might be stressed in a tomb autobiography inscribed on the walls of his chapel.

This belief that one can ingratiate oneself with the powers of the other world by taking on more humble tasks than one would ordinarily perform is also implied by two spells in the Pyramid Texts, the earliest mortuary texts, which appear shortly after the period when serving statues were most common. In Spell 309 (Pyr. 490–91), for example, the dead king describes himself as the secretary to the sun god:

Unas is the gods' *dh3j*⁶³ circulating around the mansion of Re
 Born of Nehet-netjeru, she who is at the front of Re's boat
 Unas sits in his presence
 Unas opens his boxes; Unas breaks open his commands
 Unas seals his letters
 Unas sends his messengers who do not tire
 Unas does what he tells Unas to do.

To be sure, doing clerical tasks for the creator of the universe as he sails around in the sun barque is hardly a lowly position; but the type of work being done is humble, and the passage clearly emphasizes Unas's subservient attitude.

Spell 260 (Pyr. 316–23) also speaks of the king's service, this time in company with the gods, fetching and carrying water for the annual flood. Again, the context of the task, as well as the divine nature of his co-workers, marks the king's status, while the actual nature of the work is humble. In this

⁶² Gerry Scott, *The History and Development of the Ancient Egyptian Scribe Statue*. (Ph.D., diss. Yale University, 1989), 272 and 376.

⁶³ The meaning of the word *dh3j* is not clear, but the context here seems to indicate a clerical position. The word might be related to the name of the god Thoth.

case, however, the work is explicitly said to be done so that he might be justified, (literally: “be found true of voice”) and so admitted to the other world:

O Geb, the bull of Nut! Unas is Horus, the heir of his father
 Unas is one who comes and goes, the fourth of these four gods,
 who bring water and start the inundation
 who rejoice over the forelegs of their fathers
 He desires that his voice be found true through what he has done.

In both cases, the “work” performed is divine and cosmic in scope and hardly humble by our definition: the king is doing clerical tasks for the sun god as he sails across the sky, and he is working with other gods to set in motion the annual flood.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, his attitude in Spell 309 is subservient; and in 260 he is clearly working at a task in the hope of justification. If the spells were illustrated with three dimensional representations of the king, the first would resemble a seated scribe statue and the second would appear to be a serving statue. The cosmic context of the tasks is given in the texts, but cannot be seen in the representations; and this is equally true of servant statues.

Although the king is serving in these spells, he is not a servant, any more than high officials depicted in the scribe statues are simple scribes. The mode of depiction is less a question of identity than of willingness to be useful. The dead person is depicted doing more menial labor than he would normally be engaged in, in mortuary literature and probably also in sculpture, so “that his voice be found true through what he has done.” The sculptural or magical statements create the fact of the labor, even if it has not actually been done. The people depicted in the serving statues are demonstrating their service to the tomb owner, just as the tomb owner demonstrates his service to the king and as the king demonstrates his service to the gods.

The patterns in the evidence seem to suggest that the idea of labor as a means of association with a higher-status person, king, or god may have been more prevalent than has hitherto been noticed. The depiction of a high-status person doing work that is probably below his real status can be clearly shown for Old and New Kingdom scribe statues, for the New Kingdom statues of millers, and in the Pyramid Texts. At the very least, the parallels should be sufficient to stop our calling serving statues servant statues, and to consider the possibility that they, too, represented distinct individuals who benefited from ritual activities performed before serdab slots. The serdab statues of the tomb owner certainly were cult statues, and there is good reason to believe that the serving statues that accompanied them served the same function for his family members and dependents.

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⁶⁴ I am very grateful to James Allen for discussing these passages with me and for cautioning me about over-interpreting them.