
UCLA ENCYCLOPEDIA *of* EGYPTOLOGY

RESERVE HEAD

الرؤوس البديلة

Barbara Mendoza

EDITORS

WILLEKE WENDRICH

Editor-in-Chief

Area Editor Material Culture, Art and Architecture
University of California, Los Angeles

JACCO DIELEMAN

Editor

University of California, Los Angeles

ELIZABETH FROOD

Editor

University of Oxford

JOHN BAINES

Senior Editorial Consultant

University of Oxford

Short Citation:

Mendoza, 2017, Reserve Head. *UEE*.

Full Citation:

Mendoza, Barbara, 2017, Reserve Head. In Willeke Wendrich (ed.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles. <http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002kbwtk>

8389 Version 1, February 2017

<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002kbwtk>

الرؤوس البديلة

Barbara Mendoza

Ersatzkopf
Têtes de remplacement

The enigmatic reserve heads of the Old Kingdom (2670-2168 BCE) in Egypt have been the topic of much discussion and debate since their discovery, primarily on the Giza Plateau, at the turn of the twentieth century. Their purpose and meaning to the ancient Egyptians confounded the first excavators who discovered them (de Morgan, Borchardt, Reisner, and Junker), and have puzzled the later Egyptian art historians, archaeologists, and Egyptologists who have studied them over the past century. This is mainly because the Egyptians did not leave a record for their use or function and because the heads were discovered in secondary context. All of the tombs in which they were found were either plundered or disturbed by flood, leaving them to much speculation. Their original discoverers and subsequent scholars have advanced numerous theories, which may or may not have a basis in the archaeological record. Included here is a closer examination of the form, typology, and archaeological context of the reserve heads, as well as an overview of the theories of their function and meaning, in short, an anatomy of an enigma.

ظلت الرؤوس البديلة الغامضة والمؤرخة بعصر الدولة القديمة (2168-2670 ق.م) الفرعونية موضع الكثير من النقاش والجدل ، وذلك منذ بداية الكشف عنها في منطقة هضبة الجيزة خلال مطلع القرن العشرين. كان الغرض من هذه الرؤوس ومعناها لدى قدماء المصريين سبب ارتباك المكتشفين الأوائل لها (دي مورغان، بوركهارت، ريزنر، ويونكر) ، وسبب حيرة اللاحقين لهم من مؤرخي الفن المصري وعلماء الآثار وعلماء المصريات ، الذين درسوا تلك الرؤوس على مدار القرن الماضي. وهذا في الأساس لأن المصريين لم يتركوا سجلا لاستخدام تلك الرؤوس أو وظيفتها ، ولأنه لم يتم الكشف عنها في أماكنها الأصلية ، وهذا بسبب أن كل المقابر التي وجدت فيها إما أنها نهبت أو بعثرت في غير أماكنها بسبب الفيضان ، حيث تركت للكثير من التكهنات. إن المكتشفين الأصليين لتلك الرؤوس والعلماء اللاحقين لهم قدموا عدد من النظريات ، التي قد لا تكون لها أساس في الواقع الأثري. شملت هذه الدراسة إلقاء نظرة فاحصة على شكل وتصنيف والسياق الأثري للرؤوس البديلة.



The reserve head of the 4th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom is an unusual artifact from ancient Egypt in which the artist sculpted a partial statue. Approximately life-size, reserve heads were

made as self-contained heads, cut off at the neck; they are somewhat portrait-like, and most of them appear with close-cropped hair (fig. 1). Both sexes are represented among the 33 extant examples; and although—in keeping

with the art of this period—their faces appear idealized, some of them possess individualized features. Most were made of limestone, and a few had traces of paint and/or plaster. Some heads show evidence of intentional damage. When stood on end, the heads appear to gaze upward—although it is not known whether they were meant to stand on end. Most of these figures were manufactured during the 4th Dynasty and were found primarily in a burial or funerary context.

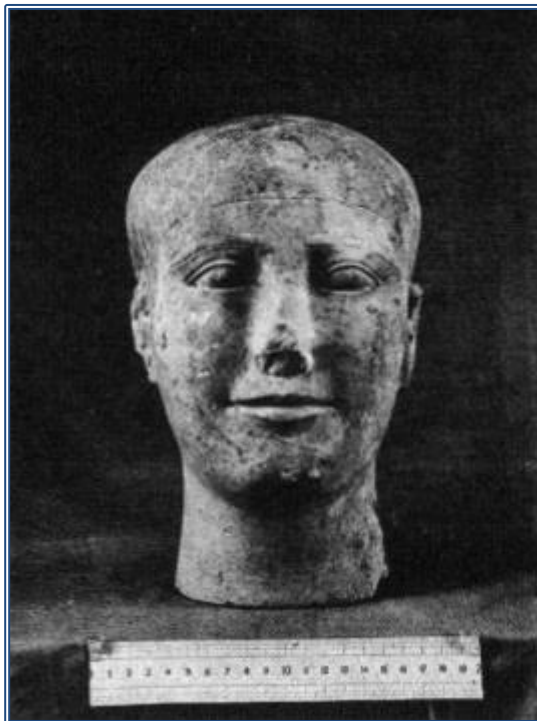


Figure 1. Wife of Kanofer. Limestone with traces of yellow paint, 24.5 cm.

Background, Location, Provenance

The term “reserve head,” first advanced by Borchardt (1907: 133) and later subscribed to by Junker and Reisner (D’Auria et al. 1988: 82), derived from his theory that these sculpted, portrait-like heads were placed in the burial shaft or chamber as a “substitute for the head of the deceased,” that is, held in reserve should the head of the deceased be destroyed (Simpson 1949: 288; Smith 1949: 25; Dunham 1958: 44; Russmann 1989: 20). Thus, the heads were defined by their supposed function.

Another term used for them was “portrait head” (Simpson: 1949), since the sculptor attempted to capture some individualization, especially in the rendering of the nose, musculature, and physiognomy; the rendering of the eyes and hair, however, was somewhat idealized. If, indeed, the heads were attempts at portraiture for its own sake, they would appear to be unprecedented in the history of Egyptian sculpture.

When the reserve heads were originally discussed at length by Smith (1949: 25-27) the total corpus of heads, both whole and fragmented, was 31. Tefnin (1991) later extended this corpus to 33 extant reserve heads, both published and unpublished. Of the 33 heads, photographs for only 29 heads were available in Tefnin’s catalog. He included one located in a private collection in Belgium (Tefnin 1991: pl. XXIIc), the Saqqara head excavated by Fakhry (1959-1961: 30), and a head mentioned by Porter and Moss (Cairo JE 89611; PM III: 305). The discrepancy in the count is due to the inclusion by Smith (1949: 26, no. 19) of a fragment of an ear, which he counted as a head.

Reserve heads date primarily to Dynasty 4 of the Old Kingdom in Egypt (2600-2480 BCE) and were mainly sculpted in white limestone; two were crafted in clay. The majority of them were found at Giza in the mastaba tombs of officials in the Western Cemetery (Smith 1949: 23) and of the royal family in the Eastern Cemetery (Fig. 2). The original use of these cemeteries dates to the reigns of Khufu and Khafra. Although a few have been dated to Dynasty 5 and 6 (Abusir head, Belgium head, London head), the majority of tombs with reserve heads belong to the group of mastabas from Cemetery G4000. More specifically, 23 were located in the Western Cemetery (Tefnin 1991: 42) dating to the reign of Khufu (Smith 1949: 23, 25), one each was located in Cemeteries G1200 and G2000 dating to the reigns of Khufu and Khafra, respectively; and three were located in the Eastern Cemetery at Giza from mastabas of varying dates. G7650 dates to the reign of Khafra (Tefnin 1991: 106), G7560 to the end of Dynasty 4 (Tefnin 1991: 127), G7560B to

the beginning of Dynasty 5 (Tefnin 1991: 107). Three heads are dated to Dynasty 5 or 6: the Abusir head (Berlin 16455), the Belgium head (Tefnin 1991: pl. XXII c), and the London

head (Tefnin 1991: pl. XXVI b), according to Tefnin (1991: 99, 122, 126). The latter two heads are of unknown provenance.

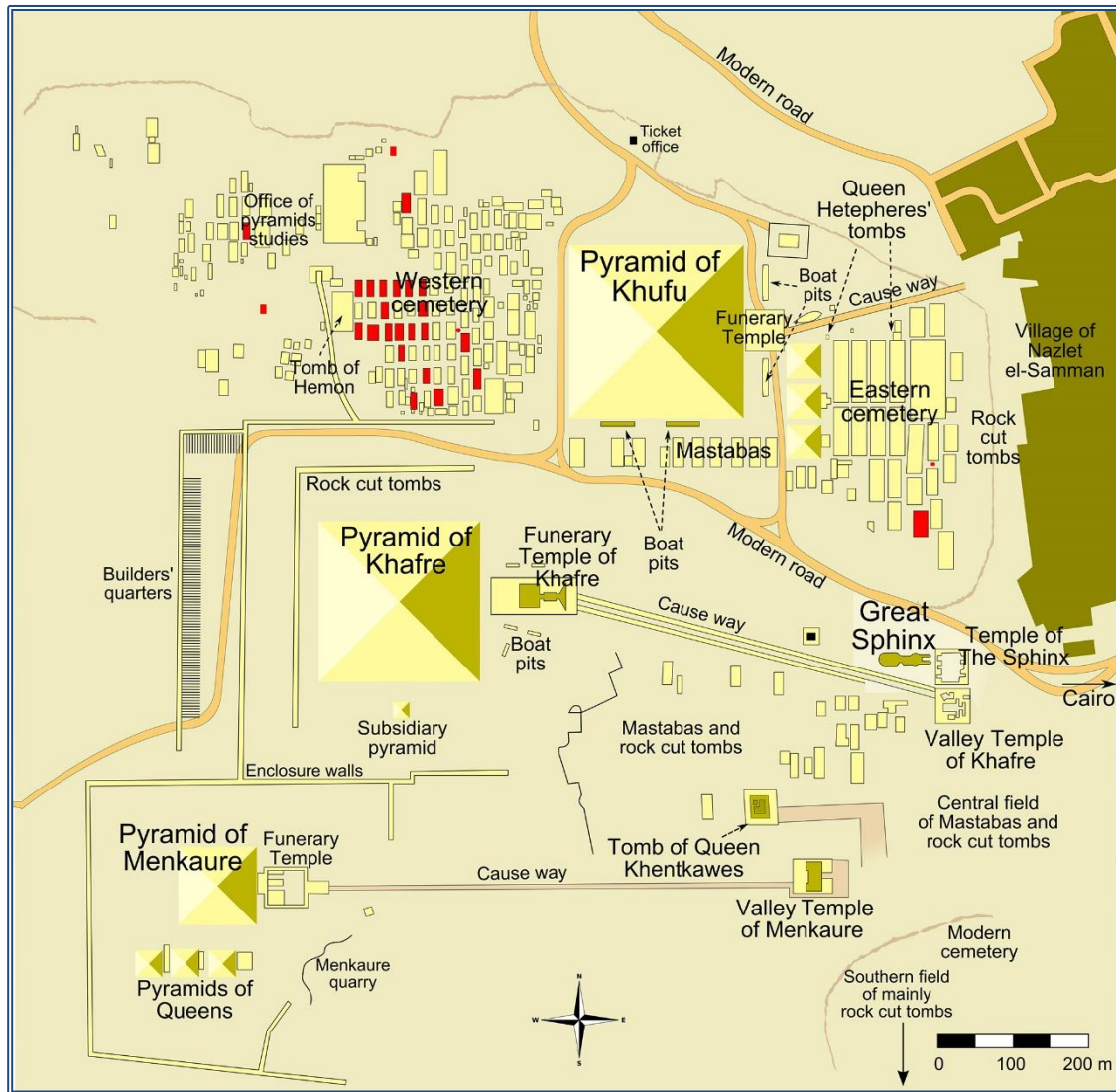


Figure 2. The Giza cemetery. Find locations of reserve heads are indicated in red.

There are three reserve heads of known provenance from a location other than Giza: the Dahshur head (Cairo G519), the Abusir head (Berlin 16455), and the Saqqara head (Cairo unnumbered). The head found by de Morgan at Dahshur in Mastaba 5 was the first published (de Morgan 1895) and could “possibly (be) the earliest of all the heads, if (the) mastaba is to be dated to the reign of

Sneferuw” (Smith 1949: 27), the first ruler of Dynasty 4. The head excavated by Borchardt at Abusir was located in the fourth chamber of the lector priest Kahotep, dating to the reign of Neusera (Dynasty 5; Borchardt 1907: 133; PM III,2: 343). At Saqqara, Ahmed Fakhry excavated near the temple of the pyramid of Djedkara Isesi and uncovered a reserve head from pit number 5 (Fakhry 1959-1961: 30),

dating to the middle of Dynasty 5 (Tefnin 1991: 120).

Form

The form of the reserve heads is unprecedented in ancient Egyptian art history. While examples of complete human statues existed in the early periods, separate heads had not been a part of the sculptural repertoire thus far—nor afterwards. In a Spanish expedition to the Sudan, Almagro et al. (1965: 87) found a sandstone reserve head at Argin dating to the second to third century CE (Wenig 1978: cat. # 160). As a rare example of Meroitic Lower Nubian funerary sculpture, it probably represented “the deceased in the tomb chapel as a substitute for the more customary *ba* statue” (Wenig 1978: 232-233) of the Meroitic culture. Furthermore, Simpson (1949: 291) noted another African parallel tradition from southern Nigeria. Though the origins of this modern tradition from Ile-Ife are obscure, he observed bronze and terracotta versions of the heads (Simpson 1949: 291-292).

Old Kingdom reserve heads generally range from 20 to 30 centimeters in height (Kelley 1974: 6-7) and are sometimes referred to as life-sized (Borchardt 1907: 133; Reisner 1915: 30). They are fashioned to the base of the neck, with a flat, smooth pedestal surface. As mentioned above, when stood on end, they generally tilt their heads slightly back and have a somewhat upward glance. The majority appear to be unpainted, although two have been noted with traces of paint: G1203 and G4560. Traces of yellow, black, and red paint have been found on the head preserved at the University of California, Berkeley (G1203), and were analyzed (Knudsen 1987, 1988). The head was determined to be female, as indicative of the yellow paint on the skin, in accordance with ancient Egyptian canons for painting men and women: red-brown for men, yellow for women. In addition, Junker (1929: 210-211, Taf. XIVa = G4560) found traces of black paint on one head. The treatment of the hair for the majority of the heads is simple and somewhat cap-like, with the characteristic incised line in low relief, encircling the ears, forehead, and back of the head. This can also

be observed in Old Kingdom relief paintings (for example, Smith 1981: figs. 105, 106, 129, 130, 131).

Though these objects are similar enough to be considered a corpus or type, the attempts at individualization on these heads may qualify some of them as portrait-like. There is a certain degree of variation in “the method of facial treatment” (Kelley 1974: 7), which can be seen in G4440₁ and G4440₂ (figs. 3-4). The musculature is varied, and even the race can be distinguished (G4440₂). Furthermore, Reisner observed what he determined to be a family resemblance in G4240 and G4440₁ (Reisner 1915: 32) and contended that the Western Cemetery at Giza was the location for the burials of the royal family.

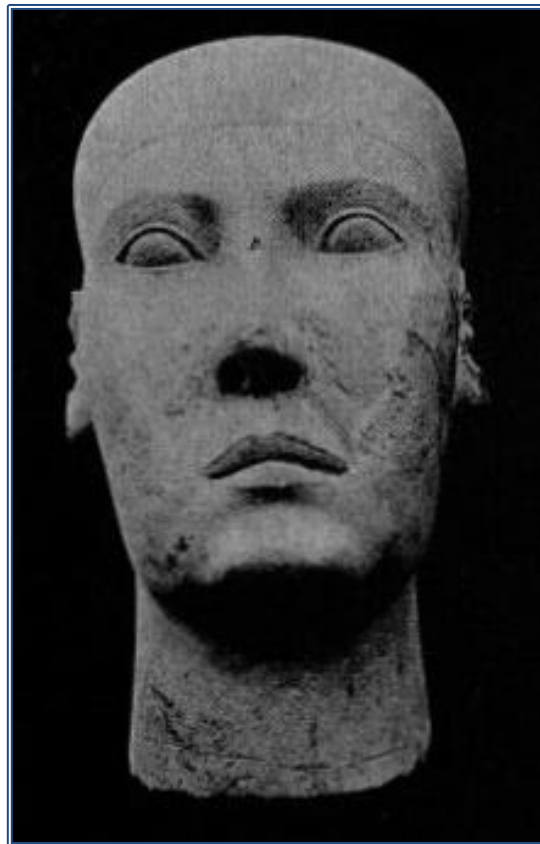


Figure 3. Reserve head. Limestone, 27 cm.
Boston MFA 14.718 (G4440₁).

The distinguishing features of the reserve heads must be considered when attempting to determine their purpose. Their most obvious distinction is that they are finished works that

were never attached to a body or altar (Dunham 1958: 44). The next most common feature is the mutilation of the ears. All of the ears were either damaged or never existed. Those heads with ears originally sculpted on them had varying degrees of breakage. In one instance, Cairo JE 47838 (Tefnin 1991: pl. Xxa), the ears were replaced (Millet 1981: 129, misidentified as Cairo JE 37832), while similarly, on another head (G4940), two dowel holes were indicative of the separate attachment of ears that are now missing (Tefnin 1991: pl. X). Eight heads appear to have been sculpted without ears: Dahshur head, G4640A, G4160, Hassan head, Cairo JE 37832, Abusir head, London head, and Belgium head.

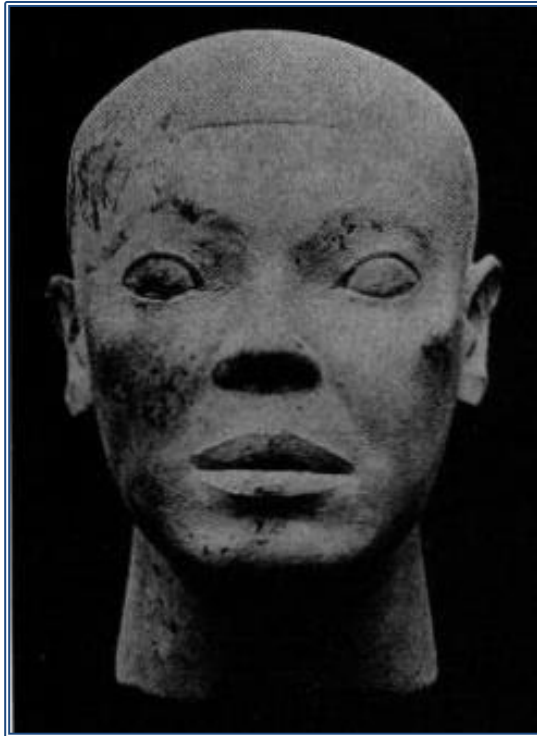


Figure 4. Reserve head. Limestone, 30 cm. Boston MFA 14.719 (G4440₂).

Another feature is what Millet (1981: 130) referred to as the “cranial groove.” Not every head has this groove, its appearance, however, is puzzling. A groove, either fine or roughly cut, descends from a position approximately at the center of the cranium down to the back of the neck. “The cutting is clearly deliberate and careful” (Millet 1981: 130). Of the heads photographed in Tefnin’s catalog, 11 display

this groove (Abusir head, G2110, G4140A, G4160, G4340, G4350, G4440₁, G4640A, G4650, G4940, G7650). Related to this deliberate marking are curious incised lines appearing at the neck (G1203, G4240, G4440₁, G4560, Hassan head) and on the forehead (G1203, G4650, Abusir head, Hassan head), which admittedly occur on only a few heads.

Three more distinctive features of the heads concern the manner in which they were sculpted, especially in the rendering of the eyes, nostrils, and philtrum. The eyes exhibit an emphatic incision in the area between the edge of the eyelid and the eyeball, especially at the corners (Millet 1981: 130; GG4340). The nose is sometimes rendered with a flat bridge (G2110, G4940), which gives it a sort of unfinished appearance, and there are sharp incisions at the curve of the nostrils on many of the heads (G2110, G4140, G4340, G4440₁, G4640A, G4650, G4840). As can be seen with this incision, the Egyptian sculptor made stylistic generalizations, which also included the area of the philtrum. It is deeply sculpted and appears as a straight-sided, angular trough, which “is (otherwise) unknown in any Egyptian sculpture of any period” (Millet 1981: 130).

The last distinctive feature of many of the heads is the angle of their gaze. While the head was cut level at the neck, it has a slight tilt when placed on end. The chin, then, is at an angle and the eyes gaze upward (Simpson 1949: 289). This feature is noticeable on the head from Ile-Ife (Simpson 1949: 291-292), which displays this “characteristic tilt of the reserve heads” (Simpson 1949: 291). Simpson thought that the gaze might be a modification of the principle behind the reserve heads.

Typology

The earliest heads were naturalistically fashioned and were “characterized by deliberate gradations in the plane surfaces” (Simpson 1949: 289). The eyebrows were often sculpted in raised low relief, such as those on the head from Dahshur (Cairo CG 519), or they were indicated by a change in surface gradation, such as G4240. Outstanding examples are characterized by a smooth

treatment of the surface plane (G4440₂). A preference for the impressionistic treatment of the eyebrows, rather than the raised modeled ones, was apparent on the more carefully crafted heads produced during the reign of King Khafra.

In the latter half of Dynasty 4, ancient Egyptian sculptors continued to work in the naturalistic tradition, although they lacked the precision and skill of earlier sculptors. The heads from this period exhibit a decline in artistic merit, for example, G7560, G7560B, Belgium head, Hassan head, and London head. Also, a major change in the later period heads is the use of plaster to either finish or alter the work. The thickness ranges from a lumpy surface (fig. 5, G4940 = Tefnin 1991: pl. IXc-d; Hassan head) to thin coatings (G4350, G2110) that make it impossible to determine whether the plaster was applied for subtle nuance or to repair a work that was either over- or poorly cut. Kelley (1974: 7) asserted that they used plaster “to mask defects in the cutting of the stone,” which is also a common practice in tomb painting.

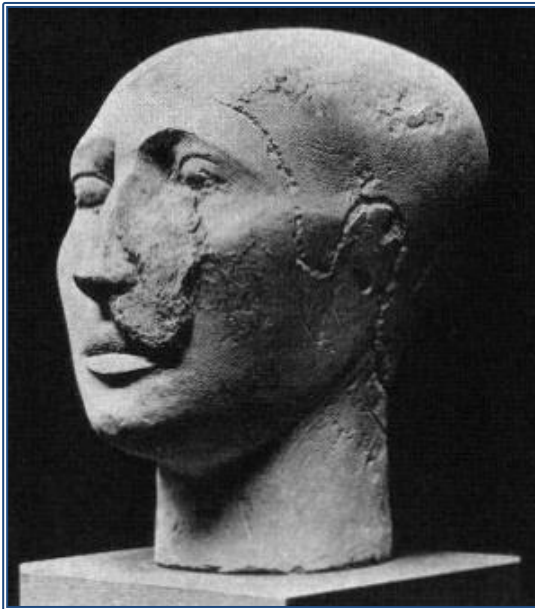


Figure 5. Reserve head. Limestone, with plaster. Boston MFA 21.329 (G4940).

Archaeological Context

While form and typology are important in discussing the uniqueness of the heads and could bear some light later on in the discussion of “meaning,” the most important archaeological evidence to consider when attempting to determine function and meaning is context. Can anything be discerned by looking at how and where they were found? Unfortunately, for the most part, information on the excavation of the heads was inadequately recorded.

Each of the heads was found in secondary context. The majority of them were discovered in plundered tombs, and one find, touted as “unplundered,” was still not discovered in primary context as the tomb had been flooded in antiquity (Hassan 1936: 639). It is generally assumed that the heads were left in the tombs because the ancient tomb robbers were “not interested in works of art, but only in things of value such as gold, jewelry and the like” (Dunham 1958: 44).

It is unfortunate that none of the reserve heads were found in their original placement, or that we must assume that they were not found as originally placed because there are signs of looting in each of the tombs. There is no way of telling whether a reserve head, found buried in a tomb shaft or chamber, was placed there during the original burial or accidentally buried by ancient or modern tomb robbers; therefore, there is no way to be certain of their use. The lack of primary context, however, did not stop the original excavators or subsequent scholars from speculating and hypothesizing about them. They considered the facts as they had appeared up to that point.

Most of the heads were discovered in the burial chamber or shaft, which led scholars to conclude that they had a religious or funerary function. Six heads were discovered in the burial chamber: Abusir head, G1203, G4140A, G7560B, Cairo CG519, Hassan head. Fifteen heads from Giza were discovered in tomb shafts, usually in thieves’ debris at the bottom (fig. 6): G2110, G4140, G4160A, G4240, G4260, G4340, G4430, G4440₁, G4440₂, G4460, G4540, G4640A, G4840, G5020

annex, G7560, plus the Saqqara head. Three were found at the “entrance to the burial chamber,” with the excavator tending to believe that they were originally placed in the shaft: G4350, G4560, G4650. This would bring the total to 19 heads found in the context of the burial shaft, or 66%. All totaled, the percentage of heads found in the funerary substructure (e.g., chamber or shaft) is 86%. For the remaining 14%, two were found to be intrusive (G4840 and G 940); two were found in the street between mastabas (G7650 and G4660?); two were known to be excavated but no report or record was made (Cairo JE 37832 [Steindorff] and Cairo JE 47838 [Boulas]); and two have absolutely no record (Cairo JE 89611 and Belgium, Private Collection).



Figure 6. Reserve heads found in situ. Boston MFA 14.718 and 14.719 (G4440₁ & 2).

Since most of the heads were found in a funerary context, Smith asserted that they were always found with a burial (Smith 1949: 23). Aldred and others agreed that the heads were related to burial practice (Scharff 1940: 46; Reisner 1942: 65; Aldred 1949: 30; Dunham 1958: 44). Reisner believed that they were originally placed in the burial chamber, “in spite of the fact that no evidence existed of their original position” (D’Auria 1988: 82). Regardless of this lack of primary context, the likelihood that 86% of the heads would be randomly found in a funerary context is low;

therefore, since the majority of the heads were found related to a burial, they must have had some sort of funerary function, and unlike the *ka* statues, were not found primarily in the tomb chapel.

Function and Meaning

Several theories have developed about the function and meaning of the reserve heads. Reisner, considering the physical properties of the heads, hypothesized that since they were cut off at the neck, they could be stood upright—given the flat, smooth surface of the base. He thought that they may have stood on a sarcophagus or “on the floor of the chamber” (Reisner (n.d.): 239) because they were originally placed in the burial chamber. Furthermore, he believed that the heads were substitutions for the vulnerable heads of the deceased, as did Junker (though he considered a different use) and Borchardt, and he first advanced the theory that the ancient Egyptian concept of “substitution” extended to the function of the “reserve” heads, hence their name.

The concept of substitution is simple. By Dynasty 3, the ancient Egyptians believed that the king had a *ka* or “double,” which was created when he was born, stayed with him throughout life, and “lived in the tomb” upon death (Spencer 1982: 58). Provisions were made for the *ka* in the burial process; that is, a funerary temple or serdab (statue chamber) was built inside the tomb for the *ka* and a statue was created for it to live in. The statues were representations of either tomb owners alone or the tomb owner with the royal family and served “as substitute bodies for the dead” (Dunham 1958: 45). With the statue as home for the *ka*, it could come and go at will and partake in food offerings, which were offered periodically by mortuary priests. Mortuary priests maintained the provisions of the deceased. The funerary temple was often situated over a passage that led down to the burial chamber (Smith 1981: 59). The function of *ka* statues is clear as they were placed frontally behind an altar in the chapel to receive the offerings (Bolshakov 1994: 15) or in association with a false door, through which

the *ka* could move. Statues of this sort usually have the name of the deceased inscribed on the base, to identify the correct deceased person with the ka. The statue and name produces his double, “thereby completely describing and fixing forever the person’s individuality” (Bolshakov 1990: 130).

Often cited as a possible parallel to the reserve head is the bust of Ankhaf (fig. 7), an Egyptian royal prince of Dynasty 4 and a son of Sneferu by a minor queen (Dunham 1958: 41). It is a limestone and plaster bust that had been realistically sculpted and painted and was found lying on the floor of one of the innermost rooms of the southern part of the funerary chapel of his mastaba (Bolshakov 1991: 7), the largest one in the Eastern Cemetery (G7510; Smith 1981: 115). The bust was probably “the object of a special cult” (Bolshakov 1991: 14) as it was not found in association with a false door or serdab.



Figure 7. Bust of Ankhaf.

The bust itself is remarkable. The rendering of the bony structure under the skin of the skull is exquisite, and the treatment of the upper eyelids, the pouches under the eyes, and the modeling of the eyebrows are extremely realistic, due in part to the naturalistic color of the skin the artist used. Bolshakov (1991)

believed that the bust was probably part of a *ka* statue that received offerings even though Ankhaf’s name was not inscribed on the bust (Bolshakov 1990: 105). He contended that it was possible to express the concept of receiving offerings “without the lower part of the figure, which was implied, but not represented” (Bolshakov 1994: 17). He referred to this artistic mechanism as the “Egyptian ‘art of hinting’ where the imaginary part is supposed to be as real as the represented one” (Bolshakov 1994: 17). Thus, by extending this concept to the reserve heads, they very well could be “substitutes” for the deceased, in spite of the general consensus that they contradict our assumptions “about the nature and function of Egyptian funerary sculpture” (Millet 1981: 129), that the body should be complete, and that the name should be inscribed to identify the deceased.

Junker agreed with Borchardt and Reisner that the heads were substitutes, but he disagreed with Reisner as to their location in relationship to the burial. Junker felt that they must have been placed on “a niche in the masonry blocking between the chamber entrance and the portcullis stone, gazing out into the shaft through a peephole in the portcullis” (Junker 1929: 50-51; Kelley 1974: 7) since the majority that he had excavated were discovered at the entrance to the chamber. Kelley had two problems with Junker’s interpretation. First, he stated that there was little evidence for a *ka* statue to be concealed in a burial chamber during Dynasty 4. The general practice at Giza was to expose the statues in the chapel and not conceal them in serdabs, as was the case with the chapel of Kawab (Kelley 1974: 7). His second point was that there was no evidence of a niche in the masonry. The general practice for the tombs with published information (G1203, G2110, G4140, G4340, G4430, G4440, G4540, and G4650) indicated that the passage was solidly packed with rubble.

The concept of substitution was the prevailing theory until more recently. Smith referred to burial practices of the earlier dynasties and the idea of preserving the body of the deceased as well as the concept of

substitution. He not only hypothesized about the relationship of the reserve heads with contemporary burial practices but suggested they were a prototype for the cartonnage mask (Smith 1949: 25). Early attempts at mummification and preservation of the body were evidently not felt to be successful; therefore, the practice of coating the head and body of the deceased with plaster was utilized to provide a more permanent form than the uncoated wrappings could provide. The mummy wrappings were regarded as “substitutes for the outward form of the body” (Smith 1949: 25). He assumed that the reserve heads could have been an expensive substitute for the perishable linen-wrapped body, which tended to occur in the lesser burials at Giza. “The reserve heads...did not supplant the modeling of the face in linen but accompanied the elaborately wrapped body” (Smith 1949: 25).

The plaster masks of Dynasty 5-6 (G2092A, G2415T, G6014A, G7491B), which “are not ordinary death masks” (Smith 1949: 27), are usually cited as a parallel to the reserve heads of Dynasty 4-6. They were not casts made from the face of the deceased at the time of death; instead there was “a rounding out of the shrunken features of the dead man to simulate his appearance in life” (Smith 1949: 27). They are usually rough and retain a general aspect of the deceased, rather than exhibiting details. In contrast, the death mask found in a northwest corner temple at the pyramid complex of Tety exhibits life-like detailing (Quibell 1909: Pl. LV). Furthermore, a recently found plaster mask illustrates the difference (Hawass 1992: 331).

Kelley advanced a hypothesis that was elaborated on by Millet. They contend that the heads may have been sculptor’s models or prototypes (Kelley 1974: 9; Millet 1981: 130), which could be possible, since even Quibell in 1909 suggested that the death mask “after serving its purpose as a model to the sculptors, was buried in the sand...” (Quibell 1909: 113). According to Kelley, this would not necessarily exclude the ritual placement of the reserve heads in the burial (Kelley 1974: 9), but that they had a practical function as well. Millet

cited the New Kingdom bust of Nefertiti as an analogy because it was found in a sculptor’s studio, with the idea that the sculptors would copy “the features of the deceased while making statues and portrait relief for funeral purposes” (Millet 1981: 130).

The major difference between the bust of Nefertiti and the reserve heads would be the use of the heads as molds for plaster masks, whereas the bust was elaborately painted and was not touched when copied. Kelley assumed that the heads may have been a short-lived artistic mechanism used by the royal sculptors when designing tomb reliefs and statues (Kelley 1974: 9); both Kelley and Millet discussed their use as being a base for a plaster mold. Considering the physical features of the heads, they contended that the eyes, edge of nostrils, and philtrum were rendered unrealistically and deliberately emphasized to appear sharp on an unsatisfactory molding medium. They suggested damages, such as those to the ears and the “cranial groove,” were incurred while removing the mold. Millet believed that the large lump of plaster still adhering to the left side of G4940 was indicative of an unsuccessful attempt at removing a mold from the head (Millet 1974: 131). Further, the two clay heads (G4430 and G4840) were made of inferior material and likely to have belonged to non-royal personages (Millet 1974: 131).

According to two scholars, the more expensive portrait heads, when thought to be no longer needed, were buried in the tomb of the deceased, possibly as royal gifts or as expressions of a special favor by the king (Smith 1949: 25; Millet 1974: 131). One factor, not adequately discussed by the major proponents of these theories, is the occurrence of more than one head in a single tomb or the head of a male or female in a tomb belonging to one known to be of the opposite gender. In other words, it is generally assumed that the heads were representations of the deceased person buried in the chamber, but Reisner, nor anyone else since then, did not attempt to explain why the head of a man was found in the shaft of a princess, while *her* head was found in the chamber (Reisner 1915: 30).

Mutilation or Not?

Damages made to the ears, nose, and cranium are often noticed when examining the heads. Kelley and Millet, as noted above, felt that they had a practical explanation for the breakage, for example, the use of the heads as the base for molds. However, we have yet to find a mold that was created by using a reserve head. This lack of physical evidence proves to be difficult; however, lack of preservation may be the reason why such molds no longer exist, even though a few plaster masks have survived from Dynasty 5 and 6 (Smith 1949: 27-28).

When comparing the damage to the reserve heads and the bust of Ankhhaf several similarities can be noted, even in the medium itself. Both are “portraits” or “portrait-like” heads fashioned out of limestone; the bust, however, is realistically painted (cf. G1203 and G4560) and has a plaster coating (cf. G2110, G4350, G4940, Hassan head). The nose of Ankhhaf is broken off and the ears are missing, but were apparently attached with adhesive (Millet 1974: 131). The noses of the extant heads including G1203, G4140A, G4160A, G4350, G5020 annex, G7560, Abusir head, Dahshur head, and Cairo JE 89611 are broken in varying degrees. All of the ears on the heads are either missing or somewhat broken. The best-preserved ears are on G4440₂.

It is possible that the heads suffered the same fate as the bust of Ankhhaf. Smith stated that the bust was originally a free-standing sculpture (contra Bolshakov), which “was found overturned in front of a low brick bench” (Smith 1960: 42) of the exterior brick chapel. He believed that it was found where it originally fell and was not dragged from an interior chapel (Smith 1960: 42). The bust of Ankhhaf possibly incurred its damages when it fell from its low bench, since limestone differs in hardness (Lucas and Harris 1962: 52) and can easily break. It is impossible to say whether someone deliberately damaged it (Bolshakov 1991: 5) or an earthquake toppled it. If the heads were originally placed on end, as Reisner suggested, the damages could have occurred when dropped or when they fell. The nose and the ears, being weaker appendages on the head, were likely to break off.

It seems more likely that tomb robbers damaged some of the heads, though it is impossible to tell if they were thrown or, like the statue of Djoser whose eyes had been gouged, were deliberately mutilated. The ancient Egyptians had a deep concern for preventing the head of the deceased from being destroyed, as is often cited with Spell 43 of the *Book of the Dead*, entitled “A Spell for not Letting N’s Head [Be] Cut off from Him in the God’s Domain” (Borchardt 1907: 133; Naville 1909: 9). Although the text appears much later in date than the reserve heads, it identifies a concern that must have existed early in ancient Egyptian beliefs, especially since “ritual mutilation” of the body may have occurred in Egypt before recorded history (Naville 1909: 7-9). While the spell is often cited as evidence for the concern about the preservation of the deceased's head, and as an explanation for the inclusion of reserve heads in burials, it may also explain the damages, if made deliberately, upon the heads.

On a different note, if the ancient tomb robbers regarded the heads as *ka* statues, they may have deliberately tried to destroy or mutilate the heads so that the *ka* could no longer live to find them. The nostrils, although only damaged on nine of the heads as well as the bust of Ankhhaf, were considered “to be the seat of life” by the ancient Egyptians (Simpson 1949: 288); it seems that once significantly damaged, the *ka* could no longer live to punish the robbers.

Though, admittedly, much is speculation, there are apparently two kinds of damage on the reserve heads: “haphazard” and “deliberate and precise.” The “haphazard” damage could have occurred by chance, i.e., to the ears and nose. The “deliberate and precise” damage is puzzling: the cranial groove and the grooves on the neck and forehead. Tefnin (1991: 81) believed that the groove on the neck may have been a second attempt at ritual mutilation and had magical significance. In addition, the groove on the forehead of the Meroitic head was explained as a representation of a diadem (Amalgro 1965: 87; Wenig 1978: 233). This could also be the case on the Egyptian heads

since the ones with these marks were of royal women.

Conclusion

The curious burial practice of including reserve heads in the tombs of royal personages of the Old Kingdom has baffled archaeologists and scholars for almost a century. Their appearance in ancient Egypt is unprecedented and nothing like them has appeared since. Although parallels can be cited, such as ancient Egyptian *ka* statues, funerary busts, or plaster burial masks, there really is no other form that is like the reserve head in the ancient Egyptian sculptor's repertoire. While the heads were made of similar material to some of the *ka* statues, they lacked the inscribed name that would give them life. Although the better quality heads were crafted in the technique of the 4th Dynasty sculptural tradition of the Old Kingdom, specific details were found only on the heads: for example, the sharp incisions on the eyes and nostrils, the rendering of the

philtrum, the cranial groove, and even certain "ritualistic" markings. Thus, the heads are "likenesses" with a certain amount of individualization mixed with idealization. We know that the Egyptian craftsman was capable of realistic portraiture, as the bust of Ankhhaf has illustrated; therefore, they are not portraits in the modern sense. The fact that each of the heads was found in secondary context poses a problem for the interpretation of function and meaning. Because the majority of the heads were discovered in a burial context, it is logical to conclude that they had some sort of funerary meaning, but we do not know if they were placed or buried in the tomb before it was initially sealed. There is not sufficient physical evidence on the heads, such as remains of plaster, to support interpretations as sculptor or mask models and their deposition as debris from a sculptor's workshop. Their position in the shafts leaves open the possibility that they had a function during the funerary rites at the time of the burial.

Bibliographic Notes

For a comprehensive study of the reserve heads, complete with identifying data, see Tefnin (1991). The seminal works for the excavation and meaning of the reserve heads continue to be Reisner (1915), Naville (1909), Simpson (1949), Kelley (1974), and Millet (1981). More recent investigations include Roehrig (1999), Nuzzolo (2011), and Lacovara (2012); recent theories of decapitation and cult practice include Picardo (2007) and Elshamy (2015).

References

- Aldred, Cyril
1949 *Old Kingdom art in ancient Egypt*. London: A. Tiranti.
- Almagro, Martín, R. Blanco, M. A. García Guinea, F. Presedo, M. Pellicer, and P. Teixidor
1965 Excavations by the Spanish Archaeological Mission in the Sudan, 1962-63 and 1963-64. *Kush* 13, pp. 78-95.
- Bolshakov, Andrey
1990 The ideology of the Old Kingdom portrait. *Göttinger Miszellen* 117-118, pp. 89-142.
1991 What did the bust of Ankh-haf originally look like? *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 3, pp. 4-14.
1994 Hinting as a method of Old Kingdom tomb decoration. *Göttinger Miszellen* 139, pp. 9-33.
- Borchardt, Ludwig
1907 *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Ne-User-Re*. Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 7. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs.
- D'Auria, Sue, Peter Lacovara, and Catharine Roehrig
1988 *Mummies & magic: The funerary arts of ancient Egypt*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts.

- De Morgan, Jacques
1895 *Fouilles a Dabcbour, Mars-Juin 1894*. Vienna: A. Holzhausen.
- Dunham, Dows
1958 *The Egyptian Department and its excavations*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts.
- Elshamy, Mostafa
2015 "Reserve heads" of Old Kingdom Egypt: *A transitory cult of heterodoxy*. Rediscovering the Egyptian Legacy (REL) Issue 2. Cairo, Egypt.
- Fakhry, Ahmed
1959- *The monuments of Sneferu at Dabshur*, Vol. I: *The Bent Pyramid* (1959-1961). Cairo: General Organization for G.P.O.
- Hassan, Selim
1936 An Egyptian princess's tomb of the 4th Dynasty (about 3600 B.C.) found intact among the pyramids: A daughter of Khephren? *The Illustrated London News* 187, p. 639.
- Hawass, Zahi
1992 A burial with an unusual plaster mask in the Western Cemetery of Khufu's pyramid. In *The followers of Horus: Studies dedicated to Michael Allen Hoffman, 1944-1990*, Egyptian Studies Association Publication 2, ed. Renée Friedman and Barbara Adams, pp. 327-336. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Junker, Hermann
1929- *Giza: Bericht über die von der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien auf gemeinsame Kosten mit Dr. Wilhelm Pelizaeus unternommenen Grabungen auf dem Friedhof des Alten Reiches bei den Pyramiden von Giza* (1929-1955). Denkschriften-Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, 71 Bd., etc. Vienna and Leipzig: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky A.G.
- Kelley, Allyn
1974 Reserve heads: A review of the evidence for their placement and function in Old Kingdom tombs. *Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities Newsletter* 5(1), pp. 6-12.
- Knudsen, Joan
1987 *A question of paint: An investigation into traces of paint on the reserve head from the tomb of Ka-nofer*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the ARCE (Memphis1987).
1988 *Further investigation into the paint on the reserve head from the tomb of Ka-nofer*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the ARCE (Chicago 1988).
- Lacovara, Peter
2012 Reserve heads. In *The encyclopedia of ancient history*. Wiley Online Library.
- Lucas, Alfred, and J. R. Harris
1962 *Ancient Egyptian materials and industries*. 4th edition, revised and enlarged by John Raymond Harris. London: Edward Arnold.
- Millet, Nicholas
1981 The reserve heads of the Old Kingdom. *Studies in ancient Egypt, the Aegean, and the Sudan*, pp. 129-131. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts.
- Naville, Edouard
1909 *Les tetes de pierre deposees dans les tombeaux egyptiens*. Geneva: Georg & Cie.
- Nuzzolo, Massimiliano
2011 The 'reserve heads': Some remarks on their function and meaning. In *Old Kingdom, new perspectives: Egyptian art and archaeology 2750-2150 BC*, ed. Nigel Strudwick and Helen Strudwick, pp. 200-216. Oxford: Oxbow Books
- Picardo, Nicholas
2007 "Semantic homicide" and the so-called reserve heads: The theme of decapitation in Egyptian funerary religion and some implications for the Old Kingdom. *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 43, pp. 221-252.

- Porter, Bertha, and Rosalind Moss
1974 *Topographical bibliography of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic texts, reliefs and paintings (PM), Vol. III: Memphis I and Memphis II*. 2nd edition, revised and augmented by Jaromír Málek. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Quibell, James
1909 *Excavation at Saqqara (1907-1908)*. Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut francais d'archeologie orientale.
- Reisner, George
1915 Accessions to the Egyptian Department during 1914. *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* XIII, pp. 29-36.
1942 *A history of the Giza necropolis*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
n.d. *A history of the Giza necropolis I.2*. Department of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (unpublished).
- Rochrig, Catherine
1999 Reserve heads: An enigma of Old Kingdom sculpture. In *Egyptian art in the age of the pyramids*, ed. Dorothea Arnold and Christiane Ziegler, pp. 72-81. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. N. Abrams.
- Russmann, Edna
1989 *Egyptian sculpture: Cairo and Luxor*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Scharff, Alexander
1940 On the statuary of the Old Kingdom. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 26, pp. 41-50.
- Simpson, William K.
1949 A IV Dynasty portrait head. *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* NS 7(10), pp. 286-292.
- Smith, William Stevenson
1949 *The history of sculpture and painting in the Old Kingdom*. 2nd edition. London: Oxford University Press.
1960 *Ancient Egypt: As represented in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts.
1981 *The art and architecture of ancient Egypt*. Revised edition. London: Penguin Books.
- Spencer, A. Jeffrey
1982 *Death in ancient Egypt*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tefnin, Roland
1991 *Art et magie au temps des pyramides: L'enigme des têtes dites "de remplacement."* Monumenta Aegyptiaca 5. Bruxelles: Fondation égyptologique reine Elisabeth.
- Wenig, Steffen (ed.)
1978 *Africa in antiquity: The arts of ancient Nubia and the Sudan*. Vol. 2: *The catalogue*. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum.

Image Credits

Figure 1. Wife of Kanofer. Limestone with traces of yellow paint, 24.5 cm. Berkeley, PAHMA 6-19757 (G1203). (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Reserve_head_Berkeley_6-19767#/media/File:Reserve_head_Berkeley_6-19767_1.png)

Figure 2. The Giza cemetery. Find locations of reserve heads are indicated in red. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giza_Reserve_heads.svg)

Figure 3. Reserve head. Limestone, 27 cm. Boston MFA 14.718 (G4440₁). (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Reserve_head_Boston_MFA_14.718_1.png)

- Figure 4. Reserve head. Limestone, 30 cm. Boston MFA 14.719 (G4440₂).
(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Reserve_head_Boston_MFA_14.719#/media/File:Reserve_head_Boston_MFA_14.719_1.png)
- Figure 5. Reserve head. Limestone, with plaster. Boston MFA 21.329 (G4940).
(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8d/Reserve_head_Boston_MFA_21.329_4.png)
- Figure 6. Reserve heads found in situ. Boston MFA 14.718 and 14.719 (G4440₁ & ₂).
(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/08/The_portrait_heads_of_a_Prince_and_his_wife%2C_as_found_in_the_shaft_of_Mastaba_No._4440.gif)
- Figure 7. Bust of Ankhhaf. Painted limestone, 50.48 cm. Boston MFA 27.442 (G7510). Photograph courtesy of Harvard University—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition.
(<http://educators.mfa.org/ancient/bust-prince-ankhaf-27523>)