



## 1.24 Two relief slabs of Nyankhnesut

Limestone.

Old Kingdom, early Dynasty 6, c. 2323–2291 BC.

Left panel: H. 64.5 cm, W. 23.5 cm, D. 5.5 cm.

Right panel: H. 61.5 cm, W. 29.5 cm, D. 5.0 cm.

Provenance: Saqqara.

The village of Saqqara has given its name to the central part of the necropolis of Memphis, the capital of Ancient Egypt for most of its 3000-year history. This huge city of the dead, the largest anywhere in the world, stretches from Abu Roash, just north of Giza, to Meidum, some 75 km further to the south. The part which we now call Saqqara is the area closest to the city of Memphis itself. Among the vast number of tombs from all major periods of Egyptian history that have been built there, hundreds of so-called mastaba tombs date to the Old Kingdom, particularly Dynasties 5 and 6, and many of these have been decorated with painted reliefs. The decipherment of the hieroglyphic script by Jean-François Champollion in 1822 gave rise to a sudden increase of scholarly and public interest in Egyptian antiquities, and museums in Europe began to acquire these in large numbers. Many monuments, particularly at Saqqara, were dismantled and the reliefs, statuary and other parts of the tombs were removed by local dealers and sent to Europe and later also to America, usually without any record being made of their provenance or position within the monument in question. This practice flourished particularly in the 1820s and 1830s, but continued to a lesser degree for nearly a century.

The tomb of Nyankhnesut, from which the present reliefs come, “holds the rather sad dispersion record among ancient Egyptian tombs”:<sup>1</sup> close to sixty pieces are scattered among museums and private collections all over the world. Many of these pieces, including the two relief slabs presented here, passed through the hands of the dealer Dr Jacob Hirsch. The tomb appears to have been discovered around 1917 and was said to be “already in ruins” at that time.<sup>2</sup> The exact location of the tomb within the necropolis remained unknown until January 2000, when it was rediscovered by the inspectors of the Saqqara office of the Supreme Council of Antiquities close to the north-west corner of the enclosure of Sekhemkhet.<sup>3</sup> It is a fairly large mastaba measuring some 20 m from the entrance to the rear wall of the innermost chamber; there are five rooms and a long corridor.<sup>4</sup>

The chambers within Old Kingdom mastabas are normally decorated in raised relief, and the pieces belonging to Nyankhnesut in various collections are no exception. Sunk (incised) relief is usually limited to the façade of the tomb and to door jambs, lintels, pillars, and the false-door stela which was the focal point of the offering chapel. The original location of the two relief slabs in the present collection cannot yet be established with certainty. As can be seen on some of the excavation photographs published so far,<sup>5</sup> the lower parts of the jambs of the false door stela, most of which is still *in situ* against the west wall of the innermost room (F), have been sawn out and at first sight this appears to be a likely provenance for the panels. The measurements of the jambs do not agree with those on the panels, however, and the inscriptions carved on the panels do not continue directly from those *in situ* on the false door. The spelling of the name of Nyankhnesut on the panels is also different to that used throughout the inscriptions on the false door. By contrast, this spelling and the layout of the signs, as well as the standing figure of Nyankhnesut underneath, are exactly similar to that on two square pillars in room D of the mastaba.<sup>6</sup> The latter appear to be complete, however, and we can therefore only assume that our panels come from a further, no longer extant square pillar elsewhere in the mastaba or in adjacent, as yet unexplored rooms nearby.<sup>7</sup>

The decoration of the two slabs is simple: each has a standing figure of the tomb owner facing inwards; above him are four hieroglyphs spelling his name, Nyankhnesut. Above the name on the left-hand panel the feet and tail of a bird-sign can be seen, possibly part of the writing of one of Nyankhnesut's many titles, “overseer of secrets”. As is so often the case with high officials of the Old Kingdom, many of the titles enumerated in the tomb link him with the court and with the king personally (“confidant of the king in his every place”); some of them may be honorific rather than real titles. On the other hand, Nyankhnesut bore several priestly titles, and this may have been his chief occupation in life. Thus he was “chief lector priest”, “*sem* priest”, “overseer of the secrets of heaven” and “greatest of seers in Heliopolis”, i.e. high priest of the sun god Re.

These priestly functions are reflected in the different costumes Nyankhnesut is seen wearing on each panel. On the left he wears the simple kilt with triangular apron knotted at the waist which was fashionable at the time. Wrapped around his left shoulder, chest and back is the distinctive sash of a cult priest, the end of which is tucked into the kilt. In his right hand Nyankhnesut holds a horizontal object, most likely the end of a





*sekhem*-sceptre, the front of which is not shown, however.<sup>8</sup> He is wearing a shoulder-length wig with carefully rendered locks covering his ears and sports a short square beard. A different priestly outfit is shown on the right-hand panel. Here Nyankhnesut is wearing a leopard-skin garment which covers most of his body down to the knees, but leaves his right shoulder uncovered. His hands hold one paw and the tail. The garment is fastened over his left shoulder with two cords joined in the middle and ending in a flat semicircular tab; this particular fastening device is often associated with the leopard-skin costume. On this panel Nyankhnesut is depicted beardless; his wig is of the same type as the one on the left-hand panel, but without detailed rendering of the locks. These, like all other details, would originally have been supplied in paint, virtually all traces of which have now disappeared.

The tomb of Nyankhnesut can be dated to the early years of Dynasty 6 (reign of Teti) on account of the names mentioned in the reliefs, the style of the carving, and the typology of the false-door stela.

*JvD*

<sup>1</sup> J. Málek, "The Provenance of Several Tomb-reliefs of the Old Kingdom", *SAK* 8 (1980), 201–206.

<sup>2</sup> L.M. Berman, *Catalogue of Egyptian Art. The Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland/New York 1999), 135. The Cleveland Museum of Art holds six reliefs from the tomb, the largest number in one collection (Berman pp. 136–141, Nos. 76–81).

<sup>3</sup> A. Leahy and I. Mathieson, "The Tomb of Nyankhnesut (Re) discovered", *JEA* 87 (2001), 33–42, Pls. IV–V; K. Mahmoud, "Preliminary Report on the Tomb of Ny-an-kh-nesut at Saqqara: 1st Season of Excavation", *GM* 186 (2002), 75–88.

<sup>4</sup> Leahy/Mathieson, 35, fig. 2; Mahmoud, 77 fig. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Leahy/Mathieson, Pl. IV: 1; Mahmoud, 88 Fig. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Leahy/Mathieson, 37, fig. 4, Pl. IV: 2; Mahmoud, 83.

<sup>7</sup> In neither of the preliminary reports are the exterior walls of the mastaba described, nor do they figure on the published plan. It is unclear whether the suite of rooms which appears on the plan is all there is or whether some of the remains of further Old Kingdom structures to the south of Nyankhnesut mentioned by Mahmoud (p.87) might in fact be part of his tomb complex.

<sup>8</sup> Following Egyptian artistic conventions of this period, the sceptre is often shown as passing behind the body of the standing person. The front part of the sceptre is normally shown as if protruding from the triangular apron of the figure.