

11

SOME REMARKS ON THE SHEIKH EL-BELED

BY
JEAN CAPART

Reprinted from

THE JOURNAL OF EGYPTIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Volume VI, Part IV, 1920.

Bibliothèque Maison de l'Orient



134455

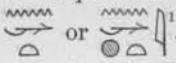


THE WIFE OF THE SHEIKH EL-BELED

SOME REMARKS ON THE SHEIKH EL-BELED

By JEAN CAPART

It would be unjust to condemn the old archaeologists for not having conducted their excavations with the same exactness and method that we have the right to expect from our modern explorers. We must take into account the circumstances under which they had to work, and try to extract from their publications as much useful information as possible without wasting time in lamenting the lack of precision there displayed. From this point of view, it seems to me that the comparison of certain documents discovered by various excavators during the last few years helps to throw light on some of the more celebrated Egyptian monuments. The aim of this article will be to furnish some examples of that method of research.

During their excavations in the necropolis of Assiût, in 1893, MM. Chassinat and Palanque had the good fortune to open the intact tomb of a personage named Nakht . In the upper chapel two almost life-sized wooden statues of the defunct were found. The first (Pl. XXIV, top, left) represents him upright, "in a walking attitude, supporting himself on a long stick. His right arm is outstretched and holds the sceptre.... A white loin-cloth held closely round the loins by a narrow belt covers the upper part of the thighs and stops just above the knees. The head is protected by a round wig of small curls, concealing the ears.... Evidently it is here the question not so much of a portrait, but rather...of one of those commonplace images manufactured according to fixed types, which were made to supply the immediate needs of the undertakers charged with the furnishing of the tombs¹." The other statue (Pl. XXIV, top, right) "shows the defunct in an upright, walking attitude, the left arm swinging and the fist closed. The right hand is gathering up and holding to the thigh the edge of a flowing skirt that covers the lower part of the body from the waist to just above the ankles, and forms in front a sort of stiff straight apron. The head of this personage is completely shaved."

A fleeting glance at these two statues will show how completely different they are in appearance, and nobody could possibly dream of maintaining that both should be considered faithful likenesses of the person whom they claim to represent and whose name is carved on the base of each. The remark made by the authors of the discovery with regard to the first statue without doubt furnishes us with the explanation of the differences shown by the two pieces: they are really "commonplace images manufactured according to fixed types." It is interesting to insist upon this point and to show that the two types afforded by the large statues of Nakht were precisely those fixed by a tradition which certainly prevailed at Assiût. And indeed, besides the two statues from the chapel, there were found, in the funeral chamber, at the bottom of the shaft, lying beside the coffin and still in

¹ CHASSINAT-PALANQUE, *Fouilles dans la Nécropole d'Assiout*, pp. 29 foll., with Pls. III to XXVIII.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 31 foll.



WOODEN STATUES OF NAKHT, FOUND IN HIS TOMB AT ASSIÛT

The plan, or more accurately the sketch, made by Mariette (Plate XXV, at top), indicates to us the place occupied by the two statues of Raḥnūfer and by that of an unknown lady named Ḥekenu , presumably his wife¹. The statues of the great priest were placed beside each other, their backs to the wall that faces the door; and in the angle of the wall out of which the door opens, on the right, was the statue of the woman. The inscriptions engraved upon the base of the two statues of the man show plainly that there can be no doubt about the identity of the person represented in either case, and it is a strange error that has led one writer at least to separate the two statues and attribute them to two different people bearing the same name². If we examine the two statues of Raḥnūfer (Pl. XXVI) we note that they give us once again the two fundamental variants that have been seen in the statues of Assiūt. The one depicts the person without a wig dressed in a long garment, of which the edge is turned back at the side, since the artist has despaired of expressing in stone the gesture of the hand holding the edge of the garment. The other statue represents Raḥnūfer, his face framed in a very wide wig, and dressed in the short loin-cloth to which the name of gala-dress has been given³.

But the same long garment has been known for many years in one of the most famous works of antique art; it is the dress worn by the Sheikh el-Beled. This man exhibits a wigless head and wears the long garment that hides the knees and ends in a large fold on the right side. But if so, does it not seem likely that one should regard the statue of the Sheikh as one of a pair of effigies? This is the point that we will now proceed to investigate.

Everybody knows that the Sheikh was discovered in the course of Mariette's excavations. Less is known, unfortunately, of the circumstances of the find. In Mariette's posthumous work, which has just been quoted, one comes across certain summary indications on the subject, accompanied by a sketch of the plan⁴. It will be noted at a single glance how great a similarity there is between the tomb of Raḥnūfer and that of the Sheikh. Both are gigantic maṣṭabas without an interior chamber, of which the chapel is constituted by a small structure attached to the maṣṭaba at the southern extremity of the east face. In the case of the Sheikh, a granite stela has been let into the face of the maṣṭaba. The wall facing the entrance door of the chapel reveals a little niche, marked B (see Plate XXV, middle). Mariette writes thus: "The importance of these explanations will be understood when it is realized that it is at the back of this niche B, belonging to the little chamber, that the precious wooden statue was found.... The head, the arms, the trunk, even the stick was intact; but the legs and the base had rotted irremediably, and the statue was only held upright by the pressure of the sand on all sides. At door C of the small chamber, in the sand and overturned at the place where it evidently had been thrown, was the other wooden statue....(the female statue)."

As it will be seen, the analogy between the two cases is very great. The two Raḥnūfers were upright, facing the door; the Sheikh likewise. The woman with Raḥnūfer was in the angle near the door; the wife of the Sheikh (Plate XXVII, left; the head is reproduced in the photogravure, Plate XXIII) was beside the door, in the sand and overturned.

¹ BORCHARDT, *op. cit.*, nos. 18, 19 (Raḥnūfer); no. 53 (Ḥekenu).

² L. CURTIUS, *Die antike Kunst*, Berlin 1914, pp. 80-1 and Figs. 74-6.

³ SPIEGELBERG, *Zu dem Galaschurz des alten Reiches*, in *Rec. de Trav.*, Vol. XXI, pp. 54-5.

⁴ A. MARIETTE, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-9.

The stone statues do not seem to have moved since ancient times; the wooden statues, having less resistance, present themselves to us in exactly the positions one would expect: the sand, blown by the wind and accumulated into a slope within the chamber, has preserved at its place in the niche the statue of the Sheikh, in spite of the fact that the base and the feet had rotted away. The statue of the woman, not being supported by the sand, tumbled down when the feet were destroyed, and what remained over, namely the trunk, slipped down the slope of sand to the entrance of the chapel.

It is a little surprising to find that no work exists in which the Sheikh el-Beled (see Plate XXVII) has been properly published. Moreover, when one tries to collect a little precise information on the subject, one soon perceives the obscurity in which the question is enveloped. First of all, in what year was the discovery made? In the biography of Mariette published in the *Bibliothèque Égyptologique*, Maspero reports that during the year 1860 Mariette, "leaving the search for sarcophagi and statues of the Old Kingdom in the Pyramid-fields under the care of Vassalli and Gabet, hastened straight to the Upper Egyptian sites.... The famous Sheikh el-Beled, the statue of Ra'nūfer, that of Userkaf and twenty others were unearthed almost at the same minute¹." The Sheikh must consequently have been found in 1860, but Mariette was not there at the time of the discovery.

The discoveries of statues made in the course of the excavations executed under the direction of the great French archaeologist were notified at once to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, on the basis of the letters which he addressed to his colleagues. For example, in the *Comptes Rendus* of 1860, the following lines may be read²: "M. Mariette has also found at Saqqâreh some twenty statues resembling in style and workmanship the famous scribe squatting on his heels which visitors to the Louvre so much admire; there is the same feeling, the same truth to nature, the same polychromy, sometimes obtained by artificial means, sometimes by the use of naturally coloured materials such as the milky quartz and the rock crystal used with such good effect for the white of the eye and the eye-ball respectively." In the *Revue Archéologique* of the same year³ may be read the extract of a letter from Mariette to E. de Rougé in which he says, among other things, the following: "Before leaving Saqqâreh, I will mention to you the discovery, made also in this necropolis, of a few private tombs in which I have found some twenty of those statues of ancient art, which are so admirably typified by the squatting scribe of the Louvre. A certain Ranofré, amongst others, a priest of the temple of Ptah, contemporary with the Fifth Dynasty, has ornamented his tomb with life-size statues which are not inferior to the scribe...."

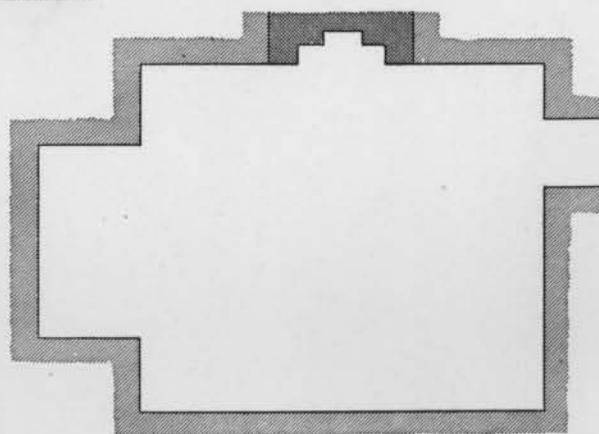
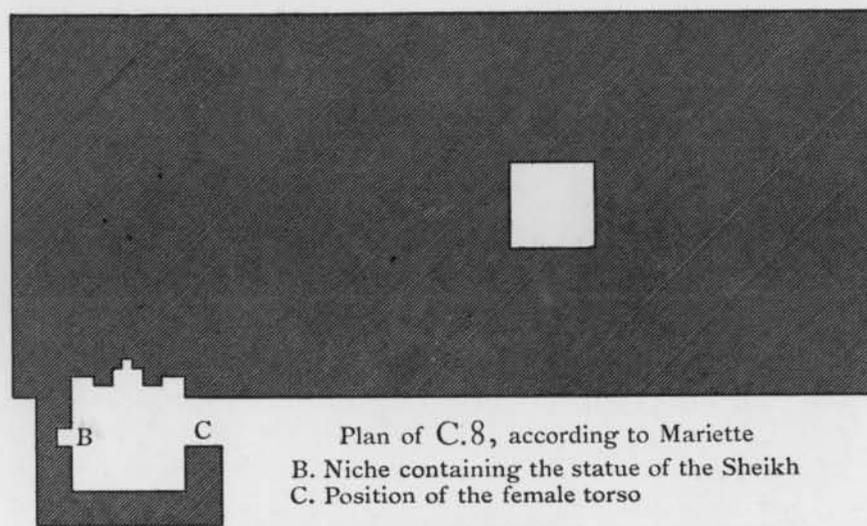
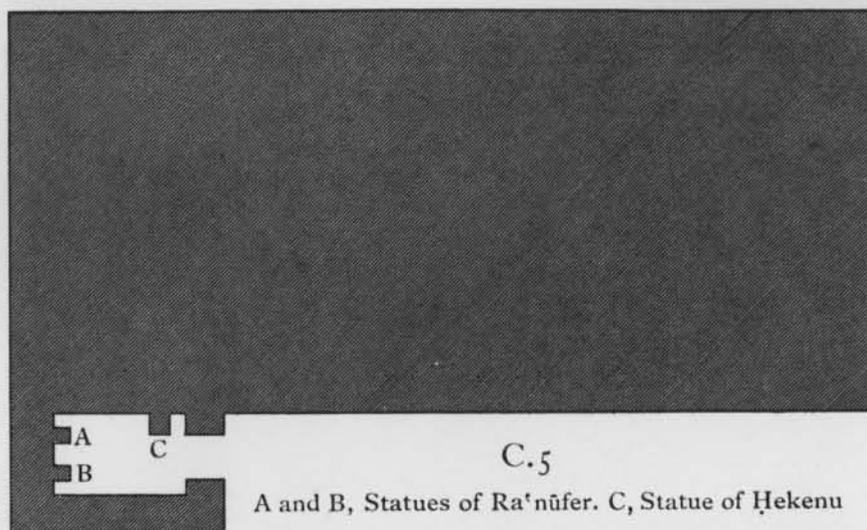
Let us emphasize the fact that Mariette mentions Ra'nūfer, but does not allude to the Sheikh el-Beled! Nevertheless, it was certainly in this year that he was found, according to the words of Maspero which we have quoted and of which we have confirmation in a passage of Vassalli's book on the Egyptian excavations⁴. Mariette's collaborator attributes to the campaign of 1860 the discovery "of a beautiful wooden statue of a standing man,

¹ See A. MARIETTE, *Oeuvres Diverses*, Vol. I, pp. cviii—cix.

² Vol. IV, p. 73. See too E. DE ROUGÉ, *Analyse d'une communication faite par M. de Rougé sur les fouilles dirigées par M. Aug. Mariette dans la vallée du Nil en 1859-60* in *Oeuvres Diverses*, Vol. IV (*Bibliothèque Égyptologique*, Vol. XXIV), pp. 34-5.

³ *Nouvelle Série*, Vol. II, 1860, p. 23.

⁴ L. VASSALLI, *I Monumenti istorici egizi, il Museo e gli scavi d'antichità eseguiti per ordine di S. A. il Vicereè Ismail Pascià. Notizia sommaria*. Milan, 1867, pp. 16-17.



The Chapel (on a larger scale) in which the Sheikh was found, according to Murray, Saqqara Mastabas, Part I, Pl. XXXII

holding in his right hand (*sic*) the bâton of command, whose eyes, made of a transparent glassy paste and set within bronze eyelids, give to the face a most life-like expression. This statue," he adds, "is one of such high artistic merit, that it may be considered the masterpiece of the Egyptian Museum." The Photographic Album of de Rougé's Mission (1863-64) confines itself to the observation that this statue is remarkable for the finesse of its execution and the naturalness of its pose¹. In de Rougé's Report we read the following: "The portraits of these antique statues, of which we have brought back some excellent specimens (photographic), show even to those least disposed to admit it, that the first principle of early Egyptian art was nature herself, faithfully observed and already at that time skilfully reproduced.... Such is the praise we can give to the artists of that early age, equally when they content themselves with the use of limestone, when they employ the splendid woods which grew in the Valley of the Nile or, finally, when they attacked the hardest rocks²." The Sheikh's name is not even mentioned! In December 1864 Renan manifests his enthusiastic admiration for the wooden statue: "It is a marvel without equal, this wooden statue of the Boulaq Museum, to which, when it was found, the fellâhîn unanimously gave the name Sheikh el-Beled 'the Sheikh of the village.' It is really the statue of a certain Ptah-Sé, son-in-law of the king. The statue of his wife was found close to him³." Let us notice that Renan puts down the discovery to the fellâhîn and not directly to Mariette. I have not been able to find any earlier document in which the name of Sheikh is given to the wooden statue. Renan believes him to have been the son-in-law of the king, evidently confusing him with the Ptah-shepses of the large biographic stela found by Mariette at the same period. Later, during the Paris exhibition of 1867, when suddenly the whole world talked of this masterpiece of Egyptian art, the name Ra-em-ké was given to it. If Renan believed him to be the son-in-law of the king, Fr. Lenormant knew that he was probably of humble descent, though he had nevertheless the honour, or misfortune, to receive as wife a girl of royal blood⁴. By 1887 the legend that he was a Superintendent of Works seems well-established. Maspero writes on the subject⁵: "With the Sheikh one descends several degrees in the social scale. Ramké was Superintendent of Works, probably one of the heads of the *corvées* who built the Great Pyramid, and belonged to the middle classes. He has contentment and bourgeois self-sufficiency written all over him. One sees him standing and surveying his workmen, with a stick of acacia in his hand." In 1895, in his great Ancient History, the same author tells us that "Kaâpirou, the Sheikh el-Beled, was probably one of the heads of the *corvées* who built the Great Pyramid⁶." In 1911 he adds the following traits⁷: "He was a boorish-looking, strongbacked, squat man, short in the leg, with energetic but common features; he spent his days more often in the office than in the open air, and after the age of fifty suffered from that superabundance of flesh which attacks men of his class and temperament."

¹ DE ROUGÉ, *Album photographique*, no. 96.

² DE ROUGÉ, *Rapport sur la Mission accomplie en Égypte en 1863-1864*, in *Oeuvres Diverses*, Vol. IV (*Bibliothèque Égyptologique*, Vol. XXIV), p. 320.

³ E. RENAN, *L'Ancienne Égypte*, in *Mélanges d'histoire et de voyages*, Paris, 1878, p. 44.

⁴ FR. LENORMANT, *L'Antiquité à l'exposition universelle—L'Égypte*, in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, no. 23, 1867, pp. 154-7.

⁵ MASPERO, *Archéologie égyptienne*, 1st edition, pp. 209-10.

⁶ ID., *Histoire ancienne*, Vol. I, pp. 407-8.

⁷ ID., *Histoire générale de l'Art Égypte (Ars Una)*, p. 88.

We see that, if the history of the Sheikh is brief, his legend tends to develop, bringing ever new confusion into the interpretation of this famous monument. Various names are attributed to him: Ptah-Sé, Ra-em-ké or Ramké, Ka-aper or Kaâpîrou, not to mention Hotep-her-ichou, of whom we shall speak later and whose name was taken from an offering-table discovered in the same tomb.

Opinions differ as to the date when he lived, some favouring the first half of the Fourth Dynasty (Mariette¹ and Maspero²), and others the end of the Fifth (Bissing³ and Borchardt⁴). He has been made the son-in-law of a king, a Superintendent of Works, a head of *corvées*, and the attempt has been made to define with precision his physical and moral characteristics. We shall see in good time how much of all this can be retained.

The wife of the Sheikh (Pls. XXIII and XXVII, left) has not received much more satisfactory criticism. I have quoted above an extract from Mariette's posthumous book, stating that the torso of the woman was found at the entrance of the chamber. The same statement appears already in the guide to the Boulaq Museum of 1864⁵. Renan, in the article from which I quoted, after speaking of the Sheikh, says that the statue of his wife was found close to him. Lenormant, in the notice of the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, repeats the same statement and tries, curiously enough, to give an exact characterization of the disposition of the woman: "It is enough to look at the head of the woman to realize that it was she who wore the breeches in that household. With all his administrative importance, Ra-em-ké, to judge by his portrait, was a good sort of fellow, easy-going, and at the same time weak in his private life. The face of his wife reveals a different character. She has tightly closed lips, hard features and a haughty, imperious expression. Looking at them both, the portraits of the woman and her husband, one can easily guess that the latter played the rôle of a sort of prince-consort, singing very low beside his wife." Arthur Rhoné writes in 1877: "That venerable ancestor had with him his wife, whose bust lay at a little distance; a very charming figure of wood, whose distinguished type indicates a finer and more aristocratic race than that of the master of the house; the physiognomy is a little sardonic and capricious. May she perhaps have been, as has been suggested, a woman of foreign race or of superior rank, some daughter of a king given in marriage to a person of small importance, as was sometimes done in those days?" Maspero in the first edition of his *Archéologie Égyptienne*⁷ expresses himself thus: "The image of his wife, which he had caused to be buried beside his own, is unfortunately much damaged. It is no more than a trunk without arms or legs. It is impossible not to recognize in her a good type of Egyptian lady of the middle class, with common features and a peevish expression." The same author, when publishing the torso⁸, repeats that it was found by Mariette in the same tomb in which he discovered the Sheikh el-Beled. In the second edition of the *Archéologie Égyptienne*⁹ the unfavourable diagnosis of the woman is accentuated, this being the picture that we get of her: "She is of haughty bourgeois stock, common, peevish, rude to those who come in contact with her: she is the image of several fellâhîm women I have met in the

¹ For example in the *Album du Musée de Boulaq*, notices of Pls. 18 and 19.

² For example in the great *Histoire ancienne*, Vol. I, p. 408, n. 1.

³ FR. VON BISSING, *Denkmäler ägyptischer Sculptur*, notice of Pl. 11.

⁴ BORCHARDT, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵ A. MARIETTE, *Notice des principaux monuments exposés.....à Boulaq*, 1864, p. 162, no. 371.

⁶ A. RHONÉ, *L'Égypte à petites journées*, p. 82.

⁷ Paris, 1887, p. 210.

⁸ *Le Musée Égyptien*, Vol. I, Pl. XIV, with pp. 13-14.

⁹ Paris, 1907, pp. 214-5.



THE TWO STATUES OF RA'NŪFER IN THE CAIRO MUSEUM

of the tomb¹." That is a decisive piece of evidence, taken direct from Reis Roubi's own lips at a moment when the clearing of the tomb could hardly fail to revive his recollections.

It will be remembered that Mariette declared the statue of the Sheikh to have been found upright at the back of a niche, which in his sketch of a plan appears to be a narrow opening in the wall facing the entrance-door. One cannot help being very much surprised, on examining Miss Murray's scrupulously exact plan (see Plate XXV, bottom)², to find that Mariette's little niche has become a large one, occupying nearly the whole wall. In face of this fact will it be found too daring to assume, as I have done above, that there must have been two statues and not one, representing Ka'aper in two kinds of dress and coiffure? The Sheikh has no wig and wears the long garment with the fold at the side. The second statue, in accordance with my previous remarks, ought to exhibit him wearing a wig and short loin-cloth, one part of it perhaps goffered, this being the ceremonial dress.

I have asked myself whether it would not be possible to find among the statues of the Old Kingdom in the Cairo Museum the counterpart of the Sheikh. I propose to recognize it in the torso No. 32 (Plate XXVII, right; the head alone, Plate XXVIII)³.

Let us first of all note that on several occasions Maspero has chanced to mention the torso immediately after the Sheikh and his wife⁴. Borchardt, in his Catalogue, describes first the bust, then the woman and then the Sheikh. One might easily believe that the two authors were struck by certain analogies of technique presented by the three pieces. The torso No. 32 is cut out of a piece of wood in the same way as the woman; the arms of the torso are joined to the body by means of pegs like those of the Sheikh. The incrustated eyes have been described by Borchardt in identical terms in the cases both of the torso and of the Sheikh. In both, again, the nipple of the breast is made by means of a small wooden plug fitted into the chest, a rather rare technical procedure which is employed in the case only of the right breast of the woman. An argument which I do not desire to press is the coincidence that the legs are missing here just as in the case of the Sheikh. Finally, the provenance of the torso is given by Borchardt, who tells us it was discovered at Saqqâreh in January 1860. It will be remembered that 1860 is precisely the year in which the Sheikh was discovered⁵.

The torso shows us a personage wearing a wig and dressed in exactly the kind of garment that is needed to enable us to reconstruct, in connection with the Sheikh, a pair consisting of two figures reproducing the varieties of statues we have noticed in the tomb of Ra'nûfer, as well as in the burials of Dahshûr, Assiût and Mêr.

The conclusions of this article may be rapidly formulated as follows:

1. We have been able to observe that at Assiût, at Mêr, at Dahshûr and at Saqqâreh it was the custom to place statues of the dead in the tomb, representing him in two aspects differing as regards his hairdress and his garment. (a) The first type shows us the person in question without a wig, the hair shaved off, or the cranium covered by a skull-cap; the dress is a long tunic hiding the knees, of which the extremity is held in the right hand or turned back at the right side. (b) The second type wears a wig, of which one perceives

¹ MURRAY, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

² *Op. cit.*, Pl. XXXII.

³ BORCHARDT, *op. cit.*, p. 31 and Pl. VIII.

⁴ MASPERO, *Guide*, 3rd edition, p. 53; *Archéologie Égyptienne*, 2nd edition, p. 215.

⁵ Vassalli quitted Egypt in May 1860 in order to join Garibaldi's army. See Maspero's biography of Mariette (above p. 228, n. 1), p. cxi, n. 1.



2



1



3

THE STATUES PRESUMED TO COME FROM MAŞTABA C.8 AT SAĶĶĀREH

1. The Sheikh el-Beled. 2. The female Torso. 3. The male Torso No. 32



HEAD OF THE WOODEN TORSO, CAIRO, No. 32

two kinds: (α) the curled wig following the general line of the head, and (β) the wig with locks widening out over the shoulders. The garment in this case is the short loin-cloth, often pleated at the side.

2. In the tomb of Ra c n u fer at Saqq a reh we have been able to examine the exact position occupied in the chapel by the two stone statues of Ra c n u fer accompanied by the statue of his wife Hekenu¹.

3. In comparing the arrangements of this latter tomb with that of the Sheikh el-Beled, we have seen that it was possible to remove all doubts as regards the wife of the Sheikh, and to indicate the possibility of the presence of a second male statue in the tomb.

4. The examination of the documents relating to the discovery of the Sheikh has revealed the obscurity and uncertainty attaching to this question. Mariette was not present when the discovery was made, and his sketch of the chapel is faulty.

5. The excavations of the Egyptian Research Account fortunately give us more precise information. The tomb dates from the Fourth Dynasty, and the defunct was a priest and was called Ka c aper.

6. Finally we have seen that it is not too rash to suppose that the bust No. 32 of the Cairo Museum belonged to the same tomb. If we admit this thesis, we are thereby enabled to assume for the Sheikh a pair of statues for the man, supplemented by the statue of the woman, comparable to the set of statues in the tomb of Ra c n u fer.

The most serious objection to my thesis, and one which will certainly be brought, is the great difference that exists between the two heads which I propose to attribute, notwithstanding this fact, to Ka c aper. I hope to have the opportunity of showing in another article that this objection is not as vital as it might seem to be at first sight, and that the problem of the portrait-statues of the Old Kingdom will have to be dealt with in a different way than has been done up to the present. The hypothesis that the difference in age explains the difference of features in statues of one and the same person does not solve the difficulty satisfactorily². In conclusion, I will beg those who disagree with me to examine critically the different statues of Khephren found in the temple of his pyramid³.

¹ Two male and one female statue occur in many cases. In the tomb of Nakht at Assi t the statuette of a woman rested upon one of the two great statues of the men. Cf. also the two statues of Sepa and the one of Nesa in the Louvre. In the statue-chamber of the tomb of Hesy at Saqq a reh there are still three bases, the disposition and size of which suggest a similar grouping, see QUIBELL, *Excavations at Saqqara* (1911-12), Cairo, 1913, Pl. I. I cannot here discuss the question of the double statues or the double stela e , nor yet of the pseudo-groups of the Old Kingdom.

The sculptor of the tomb of Ti, in the inscription relating to the transport of statues, has desired to mark the difference existing between two types of standing statues. The determination of the word for "statue" shows us three statues, in conformity with the rule by which the triple representation of the determinative or of the word-sign serves to indicate the plural. These three statues are, nevertheless, different; one is seated, the other two are standing. In the case of the latter, it will be remarked that the first one wears the round wig that follows generally the contour of the skull, and the garment with the triangular apron; the second has the broad wig widening towards the base, and the cloak shows the transverse fold. It is not quite the same state of affairs as on the statues with which we have been concerned, but the distinction is an analogous one. See STEINDORFF, *Das Grab des Ti*, Pl. 61, left door-post.

² W. SPIEGELBERG, *Die Darstellung des Alters in der älteren ägyptischen Kunst vor dem Mittleren Reich*, in *Zeitschr. f. ägypt. Sprache*, Vol. 54, pp. 67-73.

³ L. BORCHARDT, *Die Statuenfragmente aus dem alten Reich*, in HÖLSCHER, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Chephren*, pp. 89 foll., with Pl. XVI.