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Position of Early
Grave Stelae

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STUDIES PRESENTED TO
F. LL. GRIFFITH

THE POSITION OF EARLY GRAVE STELAE

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(With Plate 51)

THE inscribed stones found in association with the early Egyptian tombs are of two sorts, those whose original purpose is a mark of ownership and those which serve functionally in connexion with the funerary ceremonies carried out at the grave. It is obvious that the stones bearing marks of ownership also serve for the recitation of formulas and may even bear such formulas inscribed upon them. The objects of the other class, the offering stone, the offering table, the two stands with basins, the ablution tanks are clearly utensils used during such ceremonies and stand detached in the offering place. The two obelisks of Dynasties V and VI which also stand detached in front of the offering place or in front of the doorway are to be assigned, I think, to the second class of monuments. They are often uninscribed but are occasionally inscribed like the altars, stands, &c. of that class.

The grave stelae of Dynasties III to VI which are essentially in origin marks of ownership are as a rule attached to the offering place of the mastabas to which they belong, and their positions have been fully determined. The position of the round-topped grave stelae of Dynasties I and II is still in doubt. The types of offering places of the tombs of Dynasties I–VI may be summed up as follows:

- (a) The open-air offering place; in the multiple-niched mastaba a long corridor-like space was marked off along the valley side by the enclosing wall of the mastaba which is farther away on this side. Each of the niches is in the form of a false-door. This type predominates in the mastabas of Dynasties I and II but occurs later.

The smaller two-niched mastaba may have an enclosing wall like the multiple-niched mastaba; or a space along the front may be marked off as an offering place by a crude-brick wall which at the ends is built against the mastaba; or the chief (southern) niche may have a space around it enclosed by such a wall. These three types of open-air offering place are attested from the latter part of Dynasty I to Dynasty IV. The niches are all of the false-door type.

The larger twin-mastaba (Dynasties III–IV) with the separate burial places for husband and wife usually has a separate enclosure about the chief (southern) niche of each pair. It is possible that some of the later crude-brick offering places of this type were roofed with wood. The niches are of the false-door type. The earliest stone-lined niches (Iynefer; the original offering place of Neferma'at of Medum) belong to mastabas of this type, and are to be dated to early Dynasty IV.

- (b) The early roofed-corridor offering place; probably in Dynasty II and certainly in Dynasty III, the open-air offering place was converted into a roofed corridor along the valley side of the mastaba (Hesyra).

- (c) The cruciform chapel; the earliest interior chapel is the cruciform chapel of the crude-brick mastaba developed and used at Medum and Saqqarah. The earliest stone-cased or partially stone-cased interior chapels were of this type and occur in the reign of Sneferuw (Neferma'at addition, Khabauwsohar, Rahotep, Methen).
- (d) The exterior roofed L-shaped crude-brick chapel; the earliest of the stone mastabas at Giza have exterior crude-brick chapels roofed with logs or a crude-brick vault. These have an L-shaped offering room with a wide niche, and slab-stela set in the mastaba wall in the niche but no false-door.¹
- (e) The exterior L-shaped stone chapel; the stone mastabas immediately after the last named in time had exterior stone chapels with L-shaped offering room and single false-door.
- (f) The interior L-shaped chapel; almost immediately came the interior chapel with L-shaped offering room and single false-door. Some of the mastabas with interior stone chapel have a second outer chamber or chambers with vestibule and store-room (or rooms), and almost all have at least an exterior chapel of crude-brick with open court and magazines. The inner chapel came in in the reign of Cheops.
- (g) The interior stone chapel with *two* false doors; the later stone mastabas of Dynasty V at Giza were developed from the last-mentioned type of mastaba. The most notable development was the introduction of the L-shaped offering room with *two* false doors.
- (h) The multiple-room offering place developed in the rock-cut tombs of the family of Chephren at Giza. Most of these are from the reign of Mycerinus but some may be from the reign of Chephren himself. They were a cheaper form than the stone-built mastabas of Cheops and required less than a year to prepare.
- (i) The multiple-room chapels in stone-built mastabas follow the rock-cut chapels about the latter part of Dynasty V and during Dynasty VI.

The chief feature of all forms and types of mastaba chapels in Dynasties I–VI was the false-door. The false-door was set in the back wall of a niche, deep in Dynasties I–IV and shallow in Dynasties V–VI. The false-door itself consisted of entablature, cross-bar, and inner niche with a round beam (drum) at the top. The false-door was from the earliest times constructed of crude-brick and wood, or of small blocks of stone, but from the beginning at least of Dynasty IV, it became usual to carve the false-door in a monolith which formed the back of the niche while the sides of the deep niche were made of two other stones set upright. The change from the deep form of niche to the shallow took place in the rock-cut tombs of the family of Chephren at Giza. The rock-cut tombs were much less expensive than the stone-built mastabas of the royal family and

¹ The cruciform offering room has the niche directly opposite the entrance. The Giza chapels which I call L-shaped have a long room with the entrance at one end of the outer wall and the offering niche at the other end of the opposite wall. The earliest examples of the L-shaped room are those of the Zoser complex at the Step Pyramid. The cruciform room was the predominant type at Medum and Saqqarah during

Dynasty IV while the contemporary Giza mastabas developed from the L-shaped type. The *Hm-ıwnw* mastaba at Giza has an interior chapel built in an addition to the older core. This chapel is of the corridor type (cf. *b* above) covering the two-niches in the face of the mastaba. Possibly the two-niche interior chapel at Giza was derived from the *Hm-ıwnw* example.

were obviously adopted for reasons of economy. Thereafter it became customary even in stone-built mastabas to carve the whole niche in a single stone in this shallow form. These false-doors, often called stelae, were many of them surrounded by a moulding and surmounted by a hollow cornice as if they represented the façade of a building. The false-door, and in particular the form with hollow cornice, was to continue in use in the later periods.

The false-door of Dynasty IV has incorporated in it a form of inscribed stone which occurs detached from the false-door itself. This is the tablet set in the space above the cross-bar (the entablature). The false-door of Yeduw (G 7102) represents this as a white tablet set in granite, as does the false-door of Prince Meryeb (G 2100). In all the earlier false-doors it is raised above the surface of the space in which it occurs as if it were a separate stone set in the structure. This tablet shows a representation of a man seated at a table of half loaves of bread, with titles, name, and offerings including the early type of compartment list. The representation, and the form and size of the stone are like those of the slab-stela. The slab-stelae occur in Dynasty IV in the Cheops mastabas with exterior crude-brick chapels, and were set in the face of the mastaba between the sides of a niche in the crude-brick wall, but not high up (about breast high). This last winter Mr. Firth found four or five of these slab-stelae of a primitive appearance among the mastabas of the archaic cemetery at Saqqarah (Dynasties III-IV?) but none actually in place. These latter may have been set over false-doors like the tablets. I consider it probable that the Giza slab-stelae were also intended, ultimately at any rate, for a place in the entablature of false-doors. I imagine they were the products of the royal workshop of Cheops and were presented to the owner along with the mastaba core to which they were attached. These cores are all situated in the Far Western and Southern Cemeteries of unified plan and the owners generally left the slab-stelae in place building the crude-brick chapel around them, or in cases where the owners added later an exterior stone chapel, the slab-stela was covered with a protecting stone and hidden behind the west wall of the chapel. The early form of the compartment list occurs not only in the slab-stelae and in the tablet of the early false-door but also in the middle panel (Khabauwsokar) and on the side jambs of the niche (Rahotep). The earliest of all examples of this list is that on Plate XXI of Quibell's *The Tomb of Hesy* in which the jars of perfumed ointment are shown standing on shelves in a row of cupboards with swinging doors. I therefore call this early form of the compartment list the 'cupboard list'. From this was derived the form of the well-known compartment list of Dynasties V and VI which gives mainly lists of food and drink.

The rectangular tablet of the false-door is obviously the form from which was derived the long rectangular stelae found in the rock-cut tombs of Dynasties VI-X set in the rock wall of the offering chamber above the burial pit. The person seated at table of bread, the inscription, the ideographic

list of offerings are similar features of both types of stelae. But the cupboard list is wanting from these later grave stelae as it is from the false-door tablet of the later Giza mastabas.

Another part of the false-door which was made, in Dynasty III at least, of a separate piece was the back of the inner niche which represents the wooden door-leaf or leaves of the false-door. In the tomb of Hesy this middle panel was found in five cases to consist of a carved wooden board showing Hesyra standing or seated at a table of bread (panel No. 5). In the middle panel of the niche of Khabauwsokar (Dynasty IV, Sneferuw), the chief person is also shown seated at table, but while in one niche of Prince Iynefer, he is shown seated, in the other niche he is standing. Thereafter the usual middle panel shows the chief person standing facing to the right with staff and wand. On the shallow false-doors of Dynasties V and VI, when the middle niche has become rudimentary, the representations are confined to the jambs representing the outer surfaces of the inner and outer niches. These may be only the standing figure of the man on all panels, but figures of the wife or of the wife and children are not uncommon. It is from the lower panel scenes that I would derive the *tall* rectangular grave stelae of Dynasties VI-X. These tall stelae were found at Naga-'d-Dêr set like the long rectangular stelae in the walls of the rock-cut offering chambers above the burial pits. The type of the tall rectangular stela of the Middle Kingdom with representations of the family below was probably derived from these stelae of Dynasties VI-X.

The false-door represents an actual structure in crude-brick and wood and all of its parts have, therefore, rectangular outlines determined by the character of the structure. The rectangular form is a natural form to craftsmen who have mastered the quarrying of limestone and have learned to set hard stones in built walls. Thus the use of rectangular stones for small stelae and decrees presents no difficulty whether it arose from the tablet of the false-door or from the natural form of quarried limestone blocks.

In direct contrast to these rectangular forms there appears in Dynasty I the round-topped grave stela, the position of which with reference to the mastaba has never been satisfactorily explained. The use of the round-topped stela after the pyramid age is well known. It was used for royal decrees, dedicatory inscriptions, boundary stones, memorials of royal victories, grave stelae, votive inscriptions. It has been found set against the wall, erected in a stone socket in the middle of a floor space, cut on rocks, and cut or painted on the walls of tombs. But in all cases it appears as if detached from the building in which it occurs, not as a structural part of the masonry. The round-topped form used for similar purposes (except for grave stelae) is known also in Babylonia as early as Naramsin, in other countries of western Asia and in Arabia. In the Semitic area, inscribed stones of this type or of a ruder form are named *masseba*. They appear to have been set up to mark a place where some manifestation of

divine power has taken place, or to commemorate some event or fulfil a vow to some deity. It has often been assumed that some of the rude uninscribed stones set upright for these purposes were of a very early date, and in that case the suggestion lies near at hand that the better made round-topped stela was a natural development of the upright stone. The material in Mesopotamia, however, is later than the pyramid age in Egypt, and the other Semitic monuments are still later, most of them after the Middle Kingdom. It remains to make an examination of the early Egyptian material previous to the end of Dynasty VI.

The round-topped stelae are as follows:

1. Nine royal grave stelae of Dynasty I–II.
2. About one hundred and sixty-seven round-topped private grave stelae of Dynasty I.
3. The two uninscribed round-topped stelae in the temple of the pyramid of Medum.
4. The two round-topped stelae inscribed with the name (?) *Bw-nfr* at the tomb of Rahotep at Medum.
5. The round-topped private stela in the Bankfield Museum of Halifax (late Dynasty III or early Dynasty IV). See Gardiner, *J.E.A.*, vol. iv, p. 256.
6. The round-topped stela of Shepseskaf establishing the offerings in the temple of his father Mycerinus.
7. The round-topped decree of Pepy I from Coptos.
8. The round-topped stelae of Shepseskaf-ankh.¹

The stelae of the above list which were found in place were the two stelae in the temple of the Medum Pyramid, the two stelae inscribed with the name (?) *Bw-nfr*, in front of the mastaba of Rahotep, and the two stelae of Shepseskaf-ankh. The two uninscribed stelae of the temple stand on bases in front of the offering place with an altar between them. They are thick stones with the tops rounded in both directions. The two stelae with the name (?) *Bw-nfr*, stand free also on each side of the last addition to the tomb of Rahotep in an open-air offering room (exterior). They also are thick stones and have been likened by Mariette to obelisks. In position, these four stelae resemble the small obelisks of Dynasties V–VI which were found at Giza standing on each side of the offering niche in the offering room or on each side of the doorway to the offering room. These obelisks are either uninscribed or inscribed with title and name and occasionally with a *dy nswt htp* formula as well.

The earlier grave stelae with rounded tops are thin flat stelae obviously of a different form from the thick stelae. The stelae of Shepseskaf-ankh are of this thin type. They were found in position adapted in form to the structure of which they were a part. The mastaba (G 6040) was nearly perfectly preserved. The mouths of the burial shafts opened in the top of the very high stone mastaba.

¹ The boundary stones found by C. M. Firth at the temple of Zoser must be noted on account of their significance, but are not of course round-topped stelae. See Firth, *Annales*, xxv, pp. 149, 159.

A sloping ramp led up from the north and turning east towards the south end of the west side gave a convenient access to the top of the mastaba. This ramp was used for the burial procession on the day of burial.¹ The sides of the ramp were guarded by two low parapets (one on each side), and at the end of each parapet (at the entrance to the ramp) a small round-topped stela was set, conforming in shape to the section of the ramp and inscribed 'the steward, Shepseskaf-ankh'. Both inscriptions face to the right (Pl. 51).

On the slab-stelae and the inscriptions of the false-door, the name is essentially a mark of ownership and as such was of course used in the various formulas, *dy nswt htp, wpt r3, s3h-t, &c.* The two stelae of Shepseskaf-ankh at the entrance to the ramp prepared for the funeral procession were also clearly marks of ownership and probably intended to give the name to be used in the recitations of the formulas used at the burial. The round-topped stelae of Dynasties I and II are also devoid of any formula or any list of offerings whether ideographic or cupboard-list.² The name on the early round-topped stelae while certainly a mark of ownership was without doubt used in whatever formulas were customary in that time.

The determination of the positions of the round-topped grave stelae of Dynasties I and II was rendered difficult by the state in which Sir Flinders Petrie found the royal tombs, plundered for treasure, destroyed for *sebakh*, and excavated by his incompetent predecessors. Sir Flinders was unable to find any evidence of the existence of mastabas, but the evidence from other sites (Naqâdah, El-Kab, Naga-'d-Dêr, Tarkhan, Saqqarah, Giza, and Abu Roash) is overwhelmingly conclusive that all primary graves of Dynasties I and II had superstructures of the mastaba type, built of crude-brick (one possibly of stone at Abu Roash). In the case of the tomb of Menes at Naqâdah, no underground chambers were found and it seems that the burial chamber must have been in the mass of the mastaba (cf. the pyramid of Cheops and the Kerma tumulus, K III). The mastabas of early Dynasty I (including Zet and Merneit) had underground chambers without stairway entrance and the mastaba was necessarily built after the burial. In all the private mastabas of Dynasty I the superstructure covers a greater area than the burial apartments. The private mastabas of Naga-'d-Dêr across the river from Abydos had an enclosing wall which was slightly farther away on the valley side and had a doorway at the south end. These were multiple-niche mastabas but with plain compound niches (not of the palace façade type of the Menes tomb). A number of the more elaborate multiple-niche mastabas of early Dynasty I at Saqqarah and Tarkhan also had the remains of enclosing walls. The walls like the enclosing walls of later

¹ There was another slope leading up to the top of the mastaba G 7150 (Khufu-khaf II), but the inscription in this case was on the back of the mastaba above the beginning of the slope.

² The round-topped stela of Halifax is not to

be included with these early stelae. It is certainly not earlier than Dynasty III and may be of Dynasty IV. The workmanship is of the provincial type and is in no case a conclusive indication of date.

dynasties are undoubtedly to be reconstructed with rounded tops. In all mastabas on primary sites (nucleus mastabas), the enclosing walls should, I think, be assumed. In the cases of smaller mastabas in a complex of mastabas, the open-air offering place was often bounded by the faces of the surrounding superstructures. In all probability the royal tombs of Dynasty I at Abydos and Naqâdah all had enclosing walls with open-air offering places (in the Giza pyramids, each pyramid has an enclosing wall around the pyramid which in some cases includes the pyramid temple). The problem at Abydos is complicated by the rows of subsidiary graves around each of the royal tombs of Dynasty I. These were certainly intended for the family and adherents of the king to whose tomb they were subsidiary, and many if not all were so used (cf. the cemeteries of mastabas at Giza subsidiary to the pyramids of Dynasty IV, and the tombs of the enclosure of the Step Pyramid at Saqqarah). In the case of the tombs of Semerkhet and *Qry-ʿs*, the small compartments containing partly offerings and partly subsidiary burials (*sati*-burials) were obviously part of the substructure of the tomb and must have been covered by the mastaba of crude-brick (or crude-brick retaining wall filled with gravel). I therefore reconstruct all the royal tombs with mastabas which cover the subsidiary graves, in spite of the fact that the subsidiary graves of private mastabas (mastaba at Giza, cf. Petrie's *Giza and Rifeh*, Pl. vi) are outside the mastaba. I have worked over the field of tombs at Abydos and have found it possible to draw in mastabas with enclosing walls and open-air offering places for all the tombs of Dynasty I. Unfortunately space does not permit me to explain that reconstruction here. I may say that I reconstruct the mastabas of Peribsen and Khasekhemuwy with roofed corridor offering rooms with painted walls (type of Hesyra).

Sir Flinders Petrie concluded that the royal stelae were standing isolated in front of the burial place on the basis of the Medum stelae, but the exact parallel would set them one on each side of the offering place with an offering stone between them (that is inside the enclosing wall). The two stones of Peribsen he found at the south-west corner near the entrance to the burial place. The stones are reversed as to their form and have the signs facing to the right on both, as if they had stood at the ends of two parallel walls each with a slight batter on the outside and rounded tops. But no such parallel walls leading to the burial entrance were observed by Sir Flinders. It is of course possible, due to the condition of the site, that the remains of such walls were so badly destroyed as to escape observation. The assumption that this tomb had a painted offering chamber would have made the use of such stone stelae at the offering place unnecessary and we should thus have a parallel to the use of the Shepseskaf-anekh stelae.

The royal stelae of Dynasty I are as follows:

1. Stela of Zer; position not reported in *Royal Tombs* II.
2. Stela of Zet; found in tomb by Amélineau.

3. Two stelae of Merneit; found by Petrie, 'fallen into tomb on the east side'.
4. Stela of Semerkhet; found by Amélineau.
5. Two stelae of *Qꜣy-ꜣ*; one found in the tomb by Amélineau; one by Petrie lying 'on the ground level on the east side'.¹

The two stelae of *Qꜣy-ꜣ* have the signs facing one to the left and one to the right. Of the two stelae of Merneit, one faces to the right and the direction of the other is not reported. The single stela of Zet and Semerkhet have the signs facing to left and that of Zer has signs facing to right. Thus it appears that Petrie's assumption that the stelae were in pairs is obviously correct, and it seems probable that the signs faced in opposite directions on the two members of each pair. Petrie's assumption that they stood east of the mastaba would place them not far from the doorway in the enclosing wall, and, if the Medum examples be followed, in front of the chief offering niche (the southern niche). Thus they would have stood not far from the doorway in the enclosing wall. They are not thick stones of the *masseba* or obelisk types but rather flat thin slabs. It may, therefore, be suggested that in Dynasty I these round-topped stelae stood one on each side of the doorway through the enclosing wall. It is the one place where the form of the stela is adapted to the structure of the mastaba or its appurtenances. The reversal of the direction of the signs in each pair would conform with later custom as to doorway inscriptions.

The private stelae present a great difficulty. The subsidiary compartments intended for burials were in some cases (and perhaps all) marked in red paint on the southern wall with the names of the prospective owners. The great majority of the stone stelae were found scattered through the compartments and seem to have been placed in the compartments either as a more permanent mark of ownership than the red painted names or as a substitute for the painted names (which were in that case omitted). By the conclusion that these subsidiary graves were covered by the mastabas of the kings, the existence of separate mastabas over these compartments is excluded. If the stelae had stood in rows along the face of the royal mastaba the greater part of them would have been found on the surface or in the outside rows of compartments.

¹ There are also two fragments of stelae of Nar-mer found at Abydos; both are doubtful. See *Abydos*, Part I, p. 8, Pl. XIII and Amélineau, *Nouvelles Fouilles*, vol. I, Pl. XLII.



a. Mastaba G 6040; tomb of Shepseskaf-ankh; view of processional slope
(cut by later mastabas) looking south



b. Eastern stela of Shepseskaf-ankh in position