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# Two Archaic Egyptian Sculptures

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There are few surviving large examples of early Egyptian sculpture. Almost all of these became known as the result of excavations undertaken at the end of the nineteenth century when actual evidence of the beginnings of Egyptian civilization was first produced. We must still depend to a great extent upon small works in ivory, faience, and stone to gain an impression of the appearance of the people who were responsible for the formative stages of Egyptian culture. It is, therefore, of considerable interest that in recent years we have been able to add to our collection two important examples of sculpture of the Early Dynastic Period. These were executed on a sufficiently large scale to stand comparison with the series of portraits of the Pyramid Age which come from the work of the Museum's expedition at the Giza Pyramids. Both the heads in question are about two-thirds life size, one stone, the other carved in wood with the back portion hollowed out like a mask.

The wooden face (Figs. 1 & 2) presents a difficult problem of identification, but it can be suggested that it formed part of a statue composed of various pieces of wood joined together. It is said on good authority to come from the first excavations of Emile Amélineau in the royal cemetery at Abydos in 1895 that led to the better known work of Sir Flinders Petrie at the same site.<sup>1</sup> The face is in surprisingly good condition although cracks still show slightly at the bridge of the nose and across the right eye where the four pieces of the face were fitted together in our laboratory after it was accidentally broken some time before it came to us. The wood has been impregnated with wax to strengthen it, probably at the time it was discovered. The surface is somewhat abraded, particularly in the area of the eyebrows and cheeks, but the carving of the nose and mouth retains its clarity, and the archaic curls of the moustache and beard are still well defined. The eyes were evidently inlaid in the empty sockets as was frequently done in Egyptian statues of wood or metal.

While the mask does not appear to have been mentioned anywhere in Amélineau's excavation reports, the fact that wooden statues were placed in the royal tombs at Abydos is known from Petrie's discovery in the tomb of King Zer of a small portion of the right breast of a smaller wooden statue (Fig. 3).<sup>2</sup> The surface of the wood retained a wash of light color on which a series of necklaces were painted. Still more relevant to our wooden face is a small flat piece of wood carved with the pendant curls of a headdress which Petrie found in the Dynasty I tomb of King Wedymu (Fig. 5).<sup>3</sup> The flat back of this thin piece made it difficult to visualize as part of a statue until the discovery of our hollowed out face suggested the idea that a head of this type might really have been built up of various pieces of wood. That it is



1. Profile view of Egyptian wooden face, Dynasty I, ca. 3000 B.C.  
H. 6 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. Gift of J. J. Klejman. 60.1181.

2. Front view of wooden face.



3. Fragment of breast of wooden statuette.  
*Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.*



4. Bearded man on ivory piece.

not a mask is clear from the small fragment of the neck which recedes inward below the bearded chin (Fig. 5). One can gain an impression of the complicated way the hair might have been dressed on the missing portion of our head from the figure of an Asiatic-looking bound man carved on a small piece of ivory, which Petrie found in another of the First Dynasty tombs at Abydos (Fig. 4).<sup>4</sup> The flat wooden fragment with the curls would then have extended down towards the right breast of the figure (Fig. 5). It is most likely that the wooden face came from one of these tombs excavated at Abydos by Amélineau — perhaps even from that of Wedymu where Petrie found the Ashmolean wooden fragment with the curls. Whether they both belonged to the same statue cannot of course be proved, but at least it seems likely that our head came from a figure with a similar coiffure.

It still remains to identify this figure. When one examines the various representations of different types of people who formed the population of Egypt in Early Dynasty times, it is clear that the king and his court are generally pictured as clean-shaven, although Pharaoh has already assumed the artificial royal beard attached by a chin strap (see Fig. 10). Much as we should like to think of our bearded head as giving us a likeness of one of the First Dynasty rulers of Egypt, it seems improbable that it can have belonged to a royal figure. Indeed it does not seem to have been the custom to place statues of the king in the underground chambers of the tomb, but rather in a temple such as was attached to the superstructure in the Old Kingdom funerary monuments. At Abydos there was an ancient temple of the old Jackal God of the Dead which lay near the cultivation at some distance from the royal tombs.



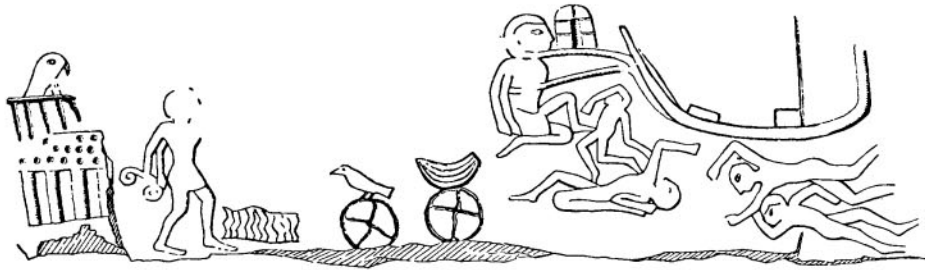
5. Wooden statue fragment of hair with curls placed in hypothetical reconstruction with wooden face.  
*Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.*

In this building Petrie found two very small but precious ivory statuettes which are justly famous, one the seated figure of Cheops (now in Cairo), and the other a striding cloaked figure of an Early Dynastic ruler (British Museum). Another known source of very early royal sculpture is the old shrine at Hierakonpolis where so much other material pertaining to the period we are discussing was recovered. Finally at Saqqara, Walter B. Emery recently discovered the bases and feet of two striding wooden statues which were about two-thirds life size and which he thought to be royal.<sup>5</sup> They were still in place in a recess opening into one of the rooms of an elaborate chapel attached to one of the large First Dynasty tombs.

It also seems unlikely that our figure was the statue of a god. There is no evidence to suggest that statues of divinities were placed in tombs at this time. In fact there is scanty evidence for the existence of early statues of gods at all, except for the three very large but badly damaged figures of the fertility god Min found in his temple at Coptos.<sup>6</sup> The battered head of one of these, which alone survived, shows a beard running along the preserved side of the face. A much smaller stone figure, formerly in the Macgregor Collection and now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, has a very long beard stretching down over the chest and may well represent a god.<sup>7</sup>

Although also bearded, our wooden face does not resemble either of these; it shows considerably greater skill in handling the plastic form of the essential features. Rather than a king or god, it suggests one of the men of the northeastern edge of the Delta who (with two other different appearing types of inhabitants of northern Egypt) were subjugated by the kings of the south. I would further suggest that our wooden face belonged to a figure squatting with one knee raised — a characteristic pose for a prisoner or conquered enemy — like the Nubian figure of an early rock carving (Fig. 6), or the limestone statue in Cairo from Hierakonpolis.<sup>8</sup> The evidence may not yet be sufficient to settle this complex problem of identification, but what I should like to suggest in the following pages is that the people represented in these and other examples are the inhabitants of Egypt itself and her immediate neighbors rather than (as is so often claimed) invaders from more distant parts.

It was not until toward the end of the Predynastic Period, about 3100 B.C., that craftsmen had attained the means of representing human figures with sufficient detail and accuracy to allow one to judge of the various types portrayed. Our source material (consisting largely of ceremonial slate palettes) comes mostly from the south in Upper Egypt, particularly from Hierakonpolis and Abydos, although at least one of the carved slate palettes is known to have come from the eastern edge of the Delta in the north.<sup>9</sup> It has generally been agreed that a large part of this representational material is concerned with recording various steps leading to the unification of Egypt in Dynasty I, that is the subjugation of the north by the southerners who dedicated their monuments in the old shrine at Hierakonpolis, as well as at Abydos from which some of the slate palettes are said to have come. One of these, however, appears to picture a triumph of the people of the western half of the Delta over their eastern neighbors. Egyptian tradition held that the southern king Menes, the first



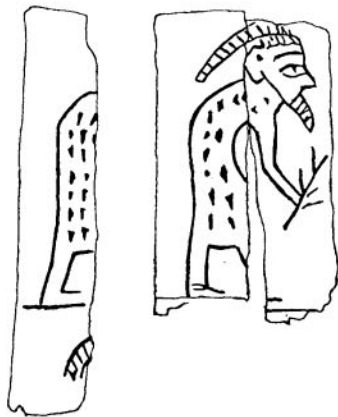
6. Rock carving of King Zer from near Wady Halfa.

king of Dynasty I, completed the unification of the country and founded Memphis. This clear traditional picture of events has been considerably clouded, partly by the lack of detailed material evidence and partly by two modern theories. One of these predicated a Predynastic union of the country through a conquest of the south by the north. It was based largely on the interpretation of fragmentary allusions to myths concerning the gods and has been largely discarded in the face of accumulating evidence to the contrary. The second theory, with several variations which are still warmly argued in the absence of any clear proof, attempts to explain various signs of influence from Western Asia as having been introduced by invaders arriving by ship through the Red Sea and suggests that a new master race was responsible for the achievements of Dynasty I. The plausible objection has been raised that the actual objects known to have come from abroad could have reached Egypt by being passed along from hand to hand in trade over the natural land corridor through Syria and Palestine well known to have been employed in historical times. It was from this direction, as well as southwards from the Sudan and westwards from Libya, that the explicitly recorded later invasions of Egypt came, and toward which Egyptian armies set out for conquest. As we shall see, it is dangerous to use as support for this second theory the representations on two early monuments — the painted Hierakonpolis tomb and the carved ivory handle of the Gebel el Arak flint knife.

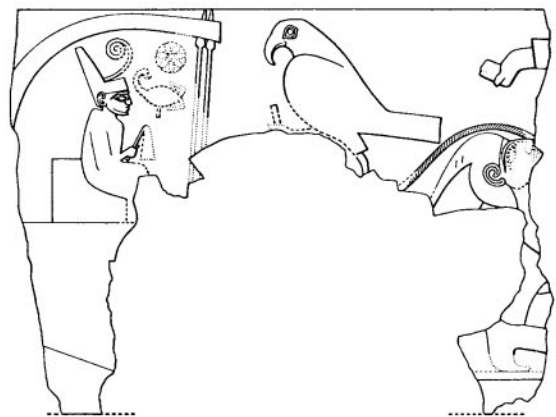
As the Nile valley became habitable it was settled by people converging upon it from neighboring areas in the west, south, and northeast. It is a matter of written record that this continued in historical times, either through slow infiltration or by organized invasion. Some of the first attempts at writing which have been preserved already indicate three designations employed in later records for the principal sources of the different peoples who entered Egypt. These generally appear as a pictographic sign placed above the flat oval which signified land. For instance, the vertically placed throwing stick stands for the word later meaning Libya and appears on a portion of an early palette dating from shortly before the beginning of Dynasty I.<sup>10</sup> A further reference to this region adjoining the western edge of the Delta is to be found in various representations of men wearing the long spotted robe favored by the later Libyans, a rather sparse beard that juts out sharply, and a peculiar lock

of hair projecting from the top of the head (Fig. 7).<sup>11</sup> On a recently reconstructed mace-head of the Scorpion King found long ago at Hierakonpolis, the god Horus in the form of a falcon holds in his claws a rope fastened to the nose of a large kneeling figure with such a hair lock and an arm flung up in the fashion known from later portrayals of enemy chiefs dominated by the king (Fig. 8).<sup>12</sup> This representation anticipates the Libyan scene in the temple of King Sahura of Dynasty V, which was copied by Pepy II in Dynasty VI and long afterwards in the seventh century B.C. by the Kushite king Taharqa in the Sudanese temple at Kawa.<sup>13</sup>

The men with this curious hair lock on several early monuments have been called the “pig-tailed people” and sometimes associated with the eastern desert tribes, but it seems more likely that this is an early way of representing the long side lock which hangs down over the shoulder of the Libyans as they are later pictured — whether they are wearing a long robe or simply a belt and sheath with a kind of harness of crossed straps bound around the chest. It is apparently this later form of the side lock which is worn by the men overpowered by the so-called foreign invaders on the Gebel el Arak knife handle.<sup>14</sup> The bearded figure on the other side of the handle, wearing a kind of turban and a long skirt, and quelling two rearing lions which flank him, might well have been derived from such a figure on an imported Mesopotamian cylinder seal,<sup>15</sup> and need not reflect the presence in Egypt of an actual person from abroad. This seems particularly true since the figure here must be some mythical hero (as is suggested by his less expertly depicted precursor in the Hierakonpolis tomb painting) and since he does not appear in this fashion dominating lions in Western Asiatic depictions. It has long been suggested that the so-called foreign ships here and in the Hierakonpolis paintings (where the funeral of an early ruler of the south seems to be pictured) may simply represent a second of two types of Nile boat and not one of Mesopotamian type. It certainly seems just as likely that the Gebel el Arak knife handle represents a local struggle between the inhabitants of Upper Egypt and their Libyan neighbors from the west. A similar

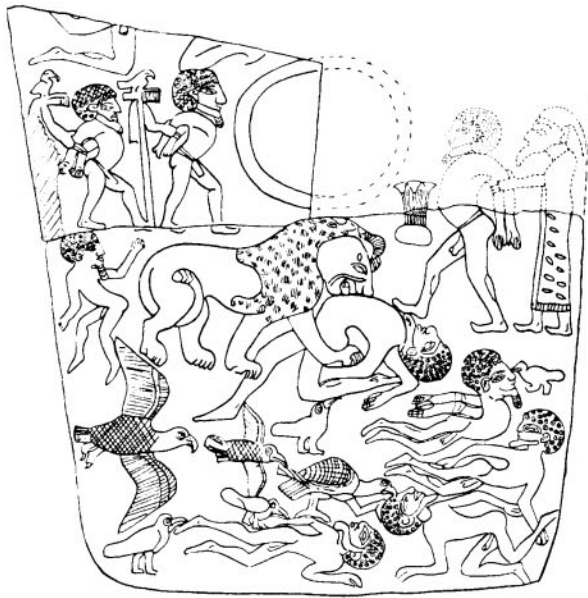


7. Ivory plaque with Libyan and part of another plaque. *Gift of Egypt Exploration Fund. 01.7369.*



8. Mace-head of Scorpion King.





9. One face of the "Battle" palette, with suggested restoration.



10. Palette of King Narmer.

struggle between the two halves of the Delta where the Libyans had already settled in the western portion is depicted on the "Battle" palette (Fig. 9). Here a series of curly-headed bearded people are being subjugated, bound, and captured by an adversary represented through a variety of royal symbols. It seems clear that the conquered people are the local Delta inhabitants and the conqueror an Upper Egyptian ruler. On the far right of the fragment is a robed figure of which the upper portion is broken away. On the basis of an analogy with the small ivory plaque mentioned above (Fig. 7) on which a man I suggest to be a Libyan is clearly represented, the figure on the "Battle" palette can be convincingly reconstructed. It is not easy to determine the relation of his arms to the bound figure in front of him. He appears to be driving him forward as a captive and indeed the edge of the palette is too close to allow for his own arms to be tied behind him. In front of the captive is the land-sign from which rises what appears to be a bundle of reeds—clearly another designation of a locality. It has been thought to be the column *lwnw*, a not very precise appellation for tribesmen, but if there were papyrus heads at the top of the stalks (as restored with the upper part of the adjoining figure in Fig. 9) the broken sign could have named the Delta people who seem to be represented by the other curly-headed men with short beards. These men lie dead at the mercy of the vultures or are dominated by symbols of royalty, such as the lion mauling one of them in the center of the group or the paired standards with human arms bearing a hawk and an ibis and seizing captives at the upper left (Fig. 9).<sup>16</sup> An example of an actual king in

triumph dispatching an enemy with his mace is to be found on the palette of King Narmer (Fig. 10). Is it not possible, then, that the suggested Libyan (as restored in Fig. 9) stands for the western Delta allies of an Upper Egyptian ruler (say the Scorpion King) who has already begun the subjugation of the rest of the north?

Certainly the representative type of conquered Delta inhabitant on the later Narmer palette is a full-bearded man without curly hair like those of the desert tribes who throughout Egyptian history entered the northeastern frontier to pasture their herds or to settle in the eastern Delta. It is this figure who brings us back to our bearded wooden face, and who is so obviously his closest parallel. Not only is it this man who is being struck down by the mace of the triumphant Narmer, but in the famous ideogram which sums up this triumph, it is such a head that protrudes from the land-sign out of which the papyrus grows (Fig. 10).<sup>17</sup> The falcon Horus, symbolizing the king, perches with one claw upon the papyrus and with a human hand secures the captive by a rope attached to a ring in his nose. The curly-headed local Delta people only appear on the reverse side of the Narmer palette as two men who bind the long twisted necks of panther-headed monsters, evidently to symbolize the union of Upper and Lower Egypt.<sup>18</sup> On a carved ceremonial mace-head of the earlier Scorpion King, the Delta people are symbolized by the limp bodies of the crested plovers which hang down from the standards of the gods of various districts which anticipate the later emblems of the different provinces of the country.<sup>19</sup> The crested plover stands for the word "rebel" and later for the common people of Egypt and evidently here represents the conquered people of the north. It seems likely that in these small commemorative monuments the contrast has been emphasized between the curly-headed settled farming population and the full-bearded easterner represented in our wooden head who, like his western counterpart the Libyan, was of more recent nomadic origin. Both the Libyan and our Asiatic bedouin probably represented the more aggressive elements in the population of northern Egypt which produced warlike leaders who dominated the more sedentary population. Perhaps each attempted to gain control over his half of the Delta, or at least figured prominently in the resistance to the early kings of Upper Egypt who gained power in uniting the whole country.

One further element in the population, which figures less prominently in the early records and does not directly concern our present problem of identification, nonetheless forms part of the overall picture of the historical situation we have described. This was the Nubian in the far south, and he appears on the rock carving already mentioned of the First Dynasty King Zer near Wady Halfa at the Second Cataract (Fig. 6).<sup>20</sup> In this case the Horus frame containing the king's name dominates a captive who holds behind him a bow standing for the name of his land, Ta-Sety. In addition the composition shows a few scattered dead, a ship, a round hut, and the still primitive pictographs for the names of two towns.

The second example of Early Dynastic sculpture is the stone head from a hard limestone statue of a king wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt (Figs. 11 and 12).<sup>21</sup> It bears a strong resemblance to the two seated figures of King Khasekhem found at the turn of the century in the temple of Hierakonpolis near the southern border of Egypt (Figs. 13 & 14) and almost certainly represents the same ruler.<sup>22</sup> There is a connecting link between this statue and the monuments discussed above since the two better preserved royal statues both have bases decorated with extraordinarily freely drawn bodies of slain northerners (see Fig. 13) and clearly refer to a similar, if later, historical event. Apparently the union of the country established in Dynasty I was disturbed by rebellion in the succeeding Dynasty — a rebellion finally put down by Khasekhem and his successor Khasekhemuwy toward the end of Dynasty II. In this later instance the sculptor was more interested in the amazingly supple lines of his contorted figures than he was in catching the likeness of a particular physical type. However, on the front of the Ashmolean statue (Fig. 13) he varied the method used in the Narmer palette for indicating the site of battle by showing papyrus plants growing from the head of a bound man pierced by an arrow. On both statue bases numerals record the large number of the slain.

Unfortunately the face of our stone head is badly damaged (Fig. 15), as are those of the schist figure in Cairo (Fig. 14) and the limestone one in Oxford (Fig. 16). The Oxford statue has been restored with the head slanting slightly backwards. This is less disturbing in three-quarters view (Figs. 13 & 16) than it is when seen in profile. The proper set of the head is clear from the profile view of the Cairo statue (Fig. 14). There a marvellous, fresh liveness of interpenetrating lines has been created in the curve of the throat and back of the neck as they cross the base of the crown and the upper edge of the king's robe. The right half of the face and crown of this statue are lost and the nose is missing on all three of the heads. The boldly rounded projection of the crown below the ear and the way in which it fitted low down on the neck is the same in all three, as is the treatment of the eyes. In our new head it is this aspect which lends such a strong resemblance to the long known statues, although the hooded effect of the eyelid is a little less pronounced and the eyes are not as carefully worked as in the other heads. It may be that they have not received the last finishing touches since the ears seem to be roughly blocked out without their details being carried to completion. Even so, and in its battered state, our new head creates that impression of crisp, youthful freshness that is the great charm of the few surviving examples of sculpture of late Dynasty II and the reign of Zoser in Dynasty III.

It is not easy to assess what specific stylistic changes have occurred in the two centuries between the making of the wooden head and these portraits of King Khasekhem. The absence of the nose on the stone head and the gaping space left for the inlaid eyes on the wooden one make effective comparison virtually impossible. The only notable difference is in the treatment of the eyebrows: in the earlier head they have been indicated by a conventional stripe slightly raised from the surface, whereas one of the interesting features of the work of Khasekhem's sculptor is the naturalistic modeling of the brow and the absence of the extension at the corner

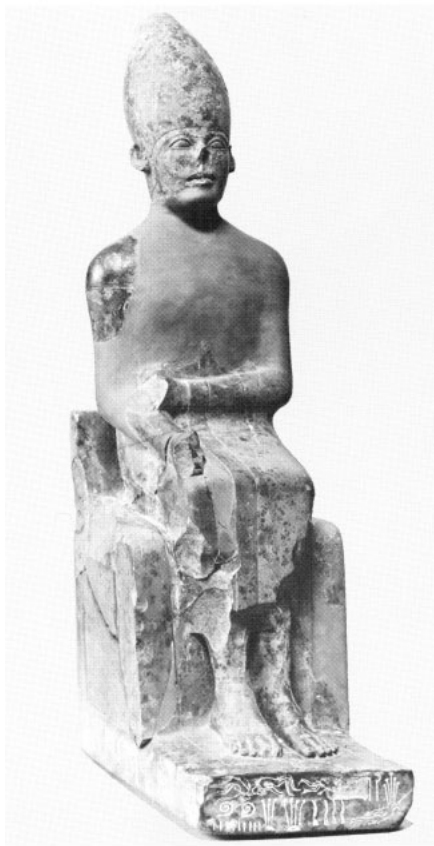


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11. Royal head, probably Khasekhem, Dynasty II, indurated limestone. H. 13 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.  
*Edwin E. Jack Fund. 58.324.*



12. Right profile view of royal head.



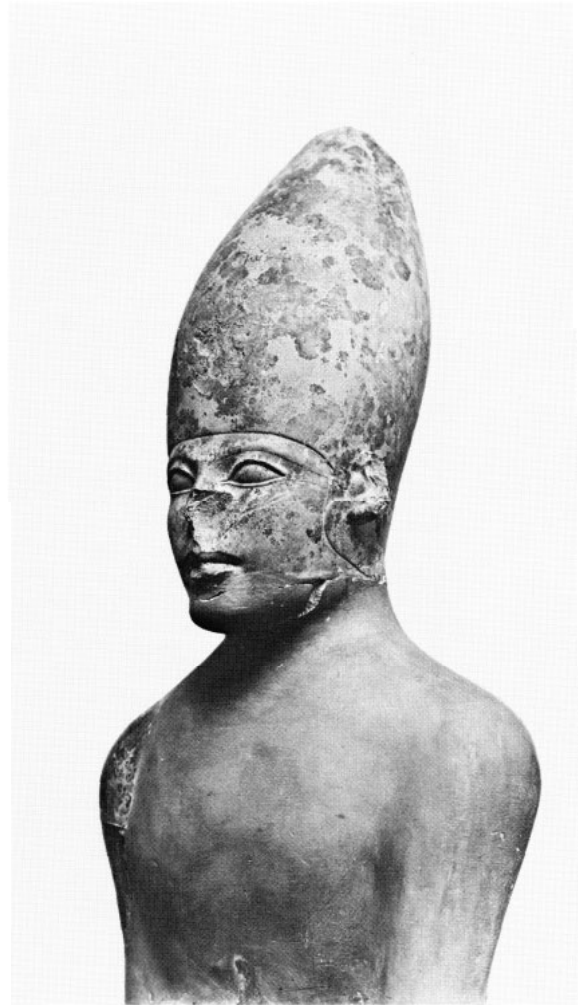
13. Limestone statue of King Khasekhem.  
*Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.*

14. Profile of upper part of schist statue of King Khasekhem, Cairo Museum.  
*Photo courtesy of Paul Mallon.*





15. Left profile of royal head.



16. Head of limestone statue of Khasekhem.  
*Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.*

of the eye — so often raised in a conventional indication of the long stripe of eye-paint. This receives a particularly subtle treatment in the Cairo portrait (Fig. 14). The unusual preservation of the nose on our wooden face gives it perhaps its most striking quality. Whether or not we are correct in our identification of this man as coming from the northeastern Delta or the suggestion that he was originally a squatting prisoner figure, his face is certainly a vivid evocation of an early Egyptian who lived in the vital formative period of Egyptian history.

NOTES

1. 60.1181. *Gift of J. J. Klejman*. Wood. H. 6 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. Formerly in the collection of Madeleine Rousseau who obtained it from a member of the Amélineau family. A photograph of the face appeared in Mlle. Rousseau's book, *Introduction à la connaissance de l'art présent*, Paris, 1953, p. 122, Fig. 140. *Illustrated Handbook*, MFA, Boston, 1964, pp. 172, 173. See also W. S. Smith, *MFA Bulletin*, 58, 1960, pp. 96, 97.
2. *Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*. H. 2 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (enlarged in Fig. 3). W. M. F. Petrie, *Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty*, II, London, 1901, Pl. XII.
3. *Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*. H. 3 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. Petrie, *op. cit.*, Pl. XL.
4. Petrie, *op. cit.*, Pl. XVII.
5. Walter B. Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty*, III, London, 1958, p. 13, Pl. 27. *Archaic Egypt*, Baltimore, 1961, Pl. 27. Barry J. Kemp, "The Egyptian 1st Dynasty Royal Cemetery," *Antiquity*, 41, 1967, pp. 22-32, cites other early examples of statue niches at Saqqara. He presents a plausible argument for the tombs at Saqqara being those of members of the court rather than royal. This is in sequence to his discussion of the evidence from Abydos. "Abydos and the Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 52, 1966, pp. 13-22.
6. W. M. F. Petrie, *Koptos*, London, 1896, p. 7, Pls. III-V; S. Giedion, *The Eternal Present, Vol. I, The Beginnings of Art*, New York, 1962, pp. 204-205, Figs. 137-138; *Vol. II, The Beginnings of Architecture*, New York, 1963, pp. 84-85, Figs. 40-43.
7. W. S. Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, Baltimore, 1965, Pl. 4.
8. J. E. Quibell, *Hierakonpolis*, I, London, 1900, Pl. 1.
9. Henry G. Fischer, "A Fragment of a Late Predynastic Relief from the Eastern Delta," *Artibus Asiae*, 21, 1958, pp. 64-88. Hans W. Müller, "Bericht über im März/April 1966 unternommene Erkundungsfahrten," *Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, Sitzungsberichte*, 1966, Heft 8, pp. 3-20.
10. J. Capart, *Primitive Art in Egypt*, London, 1905, p. 236, Fig. 175.
11. A complete figure on an ivory plaque, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Reg. No. 01.7369 and part of another plaque, with portion of a similar robed figure above and the pigtail of a second below. W. M. F. Petrie, *Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty*, II, London, 1901, Pl. IV.
12. A. J. Arkell, *Antiquity*, 37, 1963, pp. 31-35, Fig. 1; Quibell, *op. cit.*, Pl. XXVI A.
13. W. S. Smith, *Interconnections in the Ancient Near East*, New Haven, 1965, Figs. 80, 186.
14. Smith, *Art and Architecture*, Frontispiece.
15. *Ibid.*, Fig. 5.
16. A newly discovered fragment (now in Munich) of a similar composition shows a curly-headed man trampled by a hound-like animal which should represent the wolf-god of Assiut, the "Opener of the Ways" who appears on one of the standards preceding the king in procession on several of the archaic monuments from Hierakonpolis and in later iconography (H. W. Müller, *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 84, 1959, pp. 68-70). At first it might appear that this fragment could be fitted above on the right of our Fig. 9, but the bird on the other face would then be too high to fit into the design of giraffes flanking a palm tree, with accompanying similar birds, which decorates the reverse of the combined Oxford and British Museum fragments which form Fig. 9. The Munich piece must be part of a very similarly decorated palette.
17. A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, Oxford, 1927, drawing of palette on p. 7.
18. W. S. Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, Oxford, 1946, (2nd edition 1949), Pl. 29.
19. Smith, *Art and Architecture*, p. 17, Fig. 4.
20. A. J. Arkell, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 36, 1950, p. 28, Fig. 1.
21. 58.324. *Edwin E. Jack Fund*. Indurated limestone. H. 13 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. Formerly in the Michailides Collection. *Illustrated Handbook*, MFA, Boston, 1964, pp. 172-173. W. S. Smith, *Ancient Egypt as Represented in the Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston, 1960, p. 14, Fig. 1. *Annual Report*, MFA, Boston, 1958, p. 48, illus.
22. Quibell, *op. cit.*, Pls. XXXIX-XLI. Quibell and F. W. Green, *Hierakonpolis*, II, London, 1901, Pl. XLVII.