



JOURNAL

VOL. I, 1989

of the *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*

The Bersha Procession: A New Reconstruction

IN THE LATE Old Kingdom in Egypt, wooden models of offering bearers, servants, and scenes of daily life began to supplement or even replace the paintings of similar subjects found on tomb walls. Such models continued to be popular throughout the Middle Kingdom. Most were crudely made, but a few were carved and painted with care and skill. Perhaps the finest of these is the model procession of a man and three women discovered during the Museum's excavations at Deir el-Bersha in 1915. Since 1921, when the bulk of the objects from this expedition arrived in Boston, the procession has been reconstructed twice as missing pieces were located among the Bersha model fragments in the Museum's basement storage.

The first reconstruction occurred in 1941 (fig. 1). A more recent reconstruction (fig. 2) came about in the fall of 1987 as a result of the reexamination of the Bersha material in preparation for the Museum's 1988 exhibition "Mummies & Magic: The Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt." The alterations not only enhance our appreciation of its composition and craftsmanship, they also supplement evidence for redating the procession and other contents of the same tomb from late Dynasty 12 to the last reigns of Dynasty 11 of the Middle Kingdom.¹

In the spring of 1915, the Harvard University–Museum of Fine Arts Expedition, directed by George A. Reisner, spent several months at the site of Deir el-Bersha in Middle Egypt, excavating a series of rock-cut tombs with deep burial shafts.² By far the largest and most intact of the burials were those in a shaft numbered 10A by the excavators. The tomb contained the funerary equipment of Djehuty-nakht, a governor of the district called the Hare Nome, and of a woman with the same name, probably his wife, who held the titles "hereditary noblewoman" and "king's ornament."³ Although the shafts in this necropolis originally were cut into the floors of rock-cut chapels, the earthquakes and quarrying that have damaged so many of the tombs in the area have completely destroyed the chapel over shaft 10A.

When the tomb was first discussed in print in 1921, Dows Dunham dated it to about 2000 B.C., approximately one hundred years after the beginning of the Middle Kingdom according to the chronology he used.⁴ By 1950 Cyril Aldred dated the coffins and model procession from the tomb to late Dynasty 12.⁵ In his 1968 publication of the paintings on one of the coffins, Edward Terrace compared the style of painting he found there with the paintings in the nearby tomb of Djehuty-hotep (tomb 2), which is securely dated to the reign of Senwosret III, in the second half of Dynasty 12. In his view the paintings of the two monuments were sufficiently similar in the use of color and the attention to

ANN MACY ROTH and CATHARINE H. ROEHRIG were formerly *Research Assistants, Department of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*



Fig. 1. Bersha procession, from Deir el-Bersha tomb 10A (Djehuty-nakht), early Middle Kingdom (post-conquest Dynasty 11, 2061–1991 B.C.), 1941 reconstruction. Painted wood, H. 45.5 x W. 10.0 x L. 68.5 cm. (18 x 4 x 27 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts–Harvard University Expedition, 21.326.

detail to justify dating tomb 10A to the same reign.⁶ On the other hand, Klaus Baer, analyzing the textual evidence for the six governors of the Hare Nome named Djehuty-nakht, dated all but the last (the owner of tomb 1) prior to Dynasty 12. This would place the Djehuty-nakht of tomb 10A more than 150 years before Terrace's suggested date.⁷ Edward Brovarski came to a similar conclusion in 1981, dating the tomb to the end of Dynasty 11, based on the style and paleography of the coffin decoration.⁸

The burial chamber, which seems to have been used originally for the female Djehuty-nakht, was apparently reopened at least twice in ancient times. At the first reopening, the body and burial equipment of the governor were added. During this entry the coffins of the woman were dismantled and stacked against the west wall of the chamber to make room for the new burial. The tomb was reopened a second time by robbers.⁹ These intruders broke open the coffins of the governor, unwrapped and dismembered both bodies, and left the wrappings, bones, and burial equipment strewn about the chamber. They also dragged some of the burial equipment out into the shaft where it was partially burned.

One of the interesting features of Bersha 10A was the large number of models found in the tomb. More than thirty model scenes and at least fifty-five boats formed part of the burial equipment. During one of the

Fig. 3. Bersha procession *in situ*, Deir el-Bersha, 1915.





Fig. 2. Bersha procession, 1988 reconstruction.

reentries (probably the final one, judging from the chaos), most of the models were thrown between the nested coffins of the governor and the east wall of the chamber. Smaller pieces of these models were scattered over the entire chamber. Because of this rough treatment, most of the models were found in pieces; however, it has been possible to reconstruct or, at least, identify many of the scenes and to determine that the group includes all of the most common types of models and some that are quite rare.¹⁰ Two or more examples of most scenes are represented, suggesting that a separate set was provided for each of the burials.

Although most of the models are crudely carved and painted, the model procession found in tomb 10A is of the highest quality. This group of figures, a man followed by three women, represents servants bringing offerings for the funerary cult of the deceased. The model was found upside down near the bottom of the heap between the governor's outer coffin and the east wall of the tomb. The four figures were still attached to the baseboard, but the upraised arms of the two central women had become detached. The offerings they carried had also been separated from the model, with the exception of the wings of one duck, which remained clasped in the right hand of the second woman. In spite of the confusion evident in the excavation photograph (fig. 3), the two baskets can be seen on the floor on either side of the procession. The basket on the right is missing three of its five beer jars. According to the expedition's object register, three pieces were also found near or beneath the model: the *hes* vase (a tall ceremonial vessel), a piece described as a "short handle or scepter,"¹¹ and the body of one duck. These, as well as one of the missing arms and the second duck (found near the southwest corner of the governor's outer coffin), were replaced on the model by the excavators.¹²

By the time the procession reached the Museum, the other arm and all of the beer jars had been found. For years it was exhibited with the man holding the *hes* vase in his left hand and the "scepter" in his right, the two women in the center each carrying a basket and a duck, and the last woman empty-handed.

In 1941, during an attempt to reconstruct other models from the same tomb, a carefully painted, semicircular object was found among the model fragments. It was flat and hollow, with an opening on its straight side, and painted to look like an animal skin stretched across a frame. Because of its quality, Dunham associated the piece with the procession. He identified it as a mirror cover that fit over the flat end of the "scepter" (actually a mirror handle) that had been placed in the right hand of the man by the excavators.¹³

The discovery of the mirror case made the procession more complete, but the offerings carried by the third woman were still missing. Because of the unusual position of her arms – both bent up sharply in front of her, one hand in a fist, the other with the palm turned up over her shoulder – the only suggestion put forward was that she might be holding a calf.¹⁴

In the fall of 1987, while studying the models from Bersha 10A, we discovered model fragments that completed the procession:

The Chest. The first fragment that came to light was half of a painted model chest of much higher quality than most of the other model fragments from Bersha.¹⁵ The chest is yellow with wavy black lines imitating wood grain. Diagonal lines are painted across the top to represent a cord tied around the knob in the center to seal the chest. A dowel

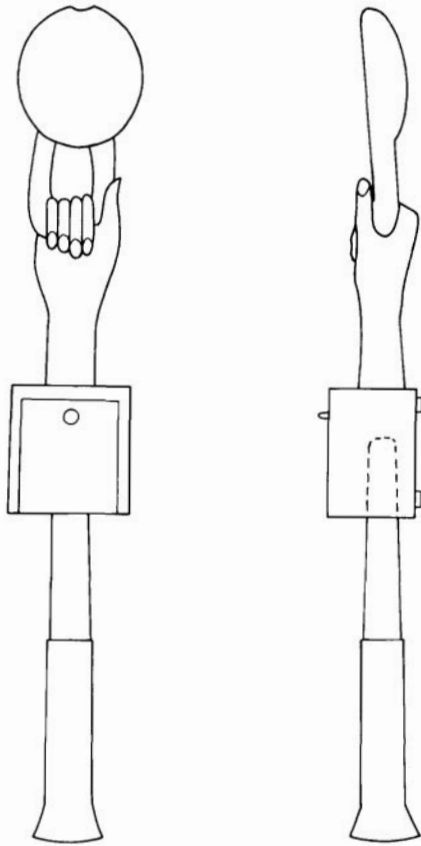


Fig. 4. Two views of the wooden model incense burner from the Bersha procession. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts—Harvard University Expedition, 20.1124. (Drawing: Yvonne Markowitz.)

in the side of the chest and two holes in the bottom suggested that it was originally attached to a model figure, and the only figures of a similar quality were those in the procession.

Three of these figures were already fully burdened according to the previous reconstruction, and only the last woman in the procession carried nothing. Her left hand is turned palm upward over her shoulder, and there is a dowel hole in the left side of her head. Above the hole is a faint horizontal line where something has abraded the black paint of her hair. When the chest fragment was balanced on her palm, the peg fit into the hole in the side of her head, and the abrasion line matched the upper edge of the chest's lid.¹⁶

It may seem odd that this restoration was not made earlier, either by Dunham or the original excavators, since the quality of the chest is so striking that it was assigned a field number and was carefully drawn in the Bersha excavation register. However, the chest was found in the debris of dismembered models lying between the governor's outer coffin and the south wall of the tomb, that is to say, at the opposite end of the coffin from the procession. The chest was also found before the procession was uncovered. These differences in location and time of discovery may explain why no connection was made between the chest fragment and the procession. The same may be said of the mirror case. It was found at the opposite end of the coffin before the discovery of the procession, and was separately drawn and registered.

The Incense Burner. In 1968 Terrace mentioned a finely carved, wooden model incense burner of a distinctive type, in which a human hand holds the handle of the bowl where the incense would have been burnt.¹⁷ Since the censer was also from Djehuty-nakht's tomb, Terrace commented on the similarity of its hand to the hand of one of the women in the procession, and suggested that both were created by the same artist.¹⁸ For many years the incense burner was exhibited in the same room as the procession.

On examining this incense burner more closely, we saw that it was not, as had been assumed, merely a miniature ceremonial object like the many small *hes* vases found strewn about the tomb. It was made in two pieces: one included the bowl for the incense, the delicately carved hand and wrist, and a cube representing the box used for storing the incense; the other part was a short handle, flaring at one end and reduced in diameter at the other so that it could fit into a hole in the cube (fig. 4).

The only conceivable purpose for making such a small model incense burner in two pieces would have been to fit it through the hand of a model figure. Again, the only model of comparable quality from Bersha 10A was the procession. All of the right hands in the procession were closed: those of the women were too tightly closed to admit the incense burner, and the right hand of the man already held a mirror.

Since the field records indicated that the mirror had been restored by the excavators, we decided to remove it. The mirror handle proved to be much smaller in diameter than the hole in the man's fist and had been wedged in place by a small sliver of modern wood. The entire handle had been painted black in ancient times, including the part that had been covered by the fist. When the incense burner was inserted into the man's hand, it was firmly held in place with no need of wedging. The narrow section of the handle was just long enough to fit through the man's fist and into the hole in the front half of the incense burner.

Although these circumstances are in themselves sufficient to justify the new reconstruction, other evidence supports it even more strongly. The shaven head, pale skin color, and long kilt of the man suggest that he was a priest; the *hes* vase and incense burner were both important implements in the rituals enacted for the dead (see fig. 5) and make a far more logical combination than the vase and the mirror that the man held for so long.

Still more convincing support comes from a strikingly parallel model procession from the Theban tomb of Meketre, dating from the last reign of Dynasty 11, and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig. 6). In both of these processions, the first of four figures is a man with a shaven head, who wears a long white kilt and carries a large *hes* vase over his shoulder. With the restoration of the incense burner to the Bersha procession, each man now also carries the same type of incense burner in his right hand. Because they hold these two ritual objects, it seems likely that the men represent the tomb owners' chief priests. Adding further to the similarity, the two women following the priest in the Bersha procession are almost exactly paralleled by the final two women in the procession from the tomb of Meketre. Two other figures of women carrying the same combination of offerings were found among the Meketre models: one is now at the Metropolitan Museum and the other is at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.¹⁹

It is astonishing, and speaks well for the care of Reisner's assistant Lyman Story, that the rather nondescript handle of the incense burner was saved so that it could eventually be reunited with the more elaborate section. The two pieces, both found on the west side of the governor's outer coffin, were discovered on different days. Story saved both pieces, but he clearly had no idea what they were: the handle was registered as "head of pin" and the burner as "small hand and wrist on stand, hand holding mirror? fine work."²⁰ Under the circumstances it is not surprising that the incense burner was not immediately identified as part of the procession.

The Mirror and the Mirror Case. The reunion of the incense burner and the priest, while cause for celebration, left a problem. If the priest did not carry the mirror and its case, where did this piece fit? The care

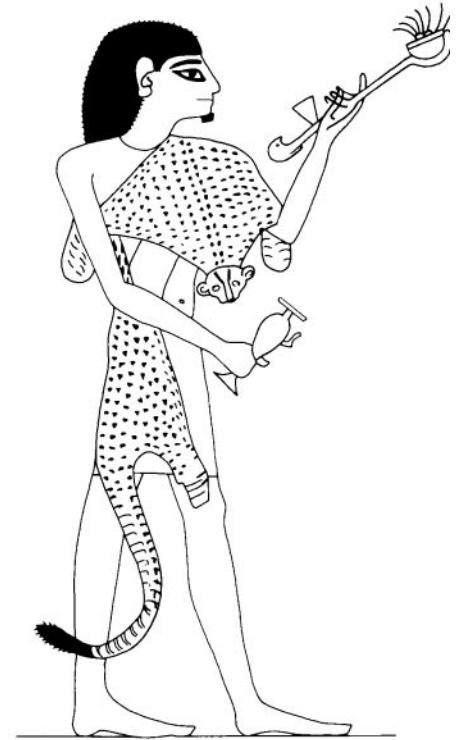
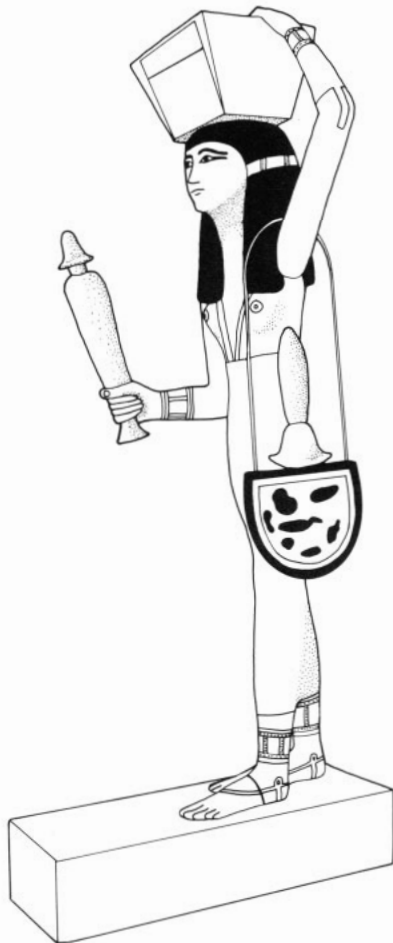


Fig. 5. Priest with incense burner and *hes* vase, after a scene from the papyrus of Hunefer. British Museum, London, 9901/5. (Drawing: Ann Macy Roth.)

Fig. 6. Procession of offering bearers, from the Theban tomb of Meketre, early Middle Kingdom (post-conquest Dynasty 11, 2061–1991 B.C.). Painted wood, H. 27.0 x W. 7.5 x L. 47.5 cm. (10½ x 3 x 18½ in.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund and Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1920, 20.3.8. (Photograph: Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art.)



Fig. 7. Female offering bearer, from the Theban tomb of the noble Mentuhotep, early Dynasty 12 (1991–1784 B.C.). Painted wood. Formerly Staatliche Museen, Berlin, 13. (Drawing: Ann Macy Roth.)



with which it was constructed and the fine quality of the painting identified it as part of the procession. Unfortunately, the Meketre procession offered no clue in this instance, since no mirror survived there. We found the answer in a parallel model formerly in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin (fig. 7),²¹ in which a woman carries a mirror and case by means of a strap looped over her shoulder. This model was excavated in the tomb of the steward Mentuhotep in the Asasif, dated to the beginning of Dynasty 12.²²

In all likelihood, the mirror in the Bersha procession was also carried by a strap rather than by its handle: if a real mirror were held horizontally, as the model mirror in Dunham's reconstruction was, the mirror case would be more likely to slip off.²³ Furthermore, the mirror case painted on the inside of the governor Djehuty-nakht's outer coffin is supplied with a strap handle similar to that in the Berlin model. (See figure 8, which also shows a painted chest full of beaded belts, and baskets similar to those carried by members of the procession.)

The last woman in the Bersha procession clasps a thin piece of wood in her left hand. It seemed possible that this dowel was meant to hold the strap of the mirror case in place. The Museum's Research Labora-

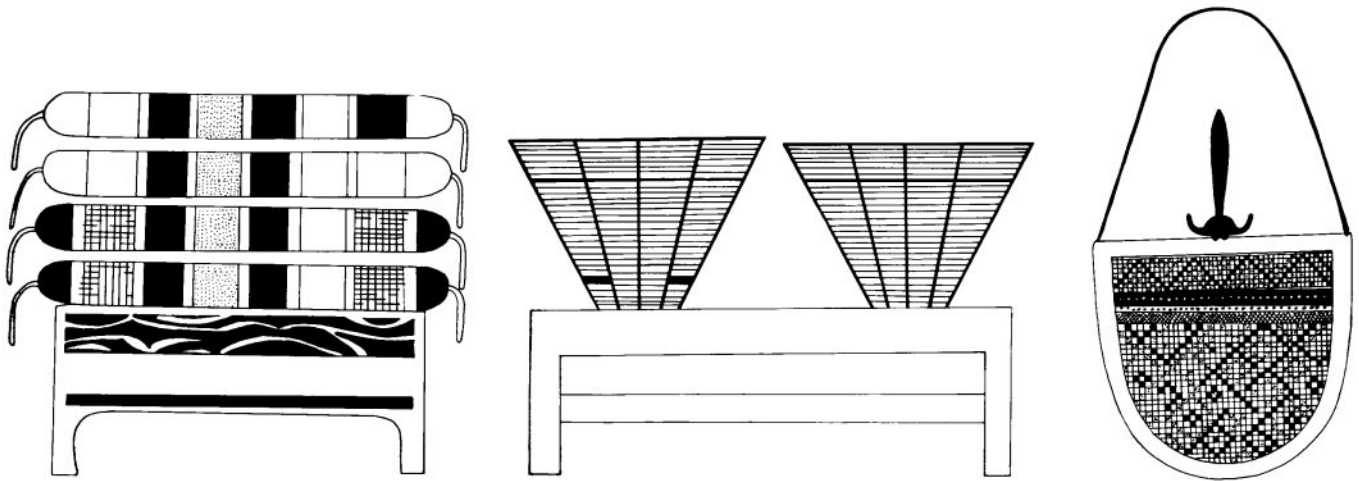


Fig. 8. Details of the *frieze d'objets* on the inside of the outer coffin of the governor Djehuty-nakht, from Deir el-Bersha tomb 10A. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts-Harvard University Expedition, 20.1823. (Drawing: Ann Macy Roth.)

tory was able to find bits of linen cord anchored in the clenched hand by the dowel. Similar fragments were found in one corner of the mirror case, confirming our hypothetical placement.

Base of a Basket. The final piece we were able to place on the model is a small, flat rectangle of wood with beveled edges and two small holes near the center. One side is unpainted, but on the other, the long edges are painted black and the central section is yellow with three fine black lines across it (fig. 9). Although the fine workmanship suggested that this piece belonged to the procession, its function and placement puzzled us until we noticed that the basket on the head of the first woman was set at an angle to accommodate the extra height of the woman's hand. The angle would have been even more noticeable were it not for a thick glob of glue between the head of the woman and the basket. The basket on the head of the other woman had a separate base that was painted on its underside. The bottom of the first woman's basket was unpainted, and it seemed likely that the enigmatic piece was the missing base of that basket. Not only did the yellow and black paint lines on the basket match those on the flat piece, but when the basket was removed, the holes in this piece corresponded to holes in the basket and in the woman's head as well, confirming our hypothesis. When the basket was reattached, the added height allowed it to be mounted straight and still fit the steadying hand.

Fig. 9. Base of a basket from the Bersha procession, Museum Expedition number 15-5-499. (Drawing: Ann Macy Roth.)

As a result of these additions and changes, the original appearance of the procession has been reconstructed with considerable certainty. The only parts that have not been found and have been restored in modern materials are the strap of the mirror case and the front half of the chest carried by the last woman. The length of the new strap was based on the Berlin parallel and the height of the other objects.

Although the pattern of painting on the restored portion of the chest is somewhat conjectural, the exact dimensions of the original chest

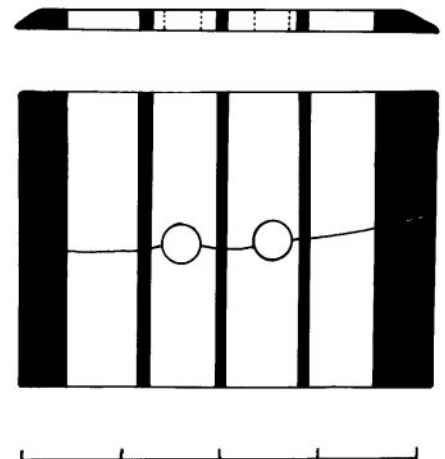




Fig. 10. Female offering bearer from the wall decoration in the unpublished tomb of Watet-khet-Hor at Sakkara, Dynasty 6 (2400–?2250 B.C.). (Drawing: Ann Macy Roth.)

could be determined from the position of the central knob on the lid of the surviving part. In view of the care taken to remove even the smallest fragment from the tomb, and the thoroughness with which the fragments have been studied over the years, it seems likely that the missing half of the chest was one of the pieces destroyed when the robbers set fire to the objects in the shaft.

The restored Bersha procession shows the care the artist took in balancing the composition. Each figure carries something at hip level on the right. On the left the viewer's eye is carried upward by the angle of the *hes* vase to the baskets on the heads of the two central figures, and down again by the chest carried by the last woman. The figures are carved following the canonical proportions and using the frontal stance common in Egyptian art, but the variation in hairstyles and offerings renders each figure an individual.

The fact that offerings are carried at hip level on the right side and higher on the left recalls the tradition of depicting such processions in two, rather than three, dimensions. Although there is no diminution in the detail and fineness of carving on the proper left side, the procession was clearly meant to be seen from the proper right side. Translated into two dimensions from this vantage point, the procession would face the viewer's right, the dominant direction of all Egyptian art and writing, in the absence of conditions requiring a reversal.²⁴ Since the convention used in two-dimensional Egyptian art shows the torso and waist frontally and the legs in profile, it is always the more distant leg that is shown striding forward (fig. 10); in the Bersha procession it is the left leg that strides forward and is thus meant to be the more distant. The same principle applies to the left arms of the first and last figures, which are positioned slightly forward, making them visible when viewed from the right side. Further, the distribution of the offerings allows them to be seen from the right side with very few of their parts obscured: enough is shown of the chest and the *hes* vase to make their character clear.

The high quality of artistry evident in the Bersha procession was probably not fortuitous. In general, processions of offering bearers of this type tend to be better made than the other models found with them. The separate models of women with baskets and ducks, now in New York and Cairo, are very carefully carved and painted, as is the woman carrying the mirror, in Berlin. Even among the Bersha models, the other model offering bearers are of noticeably better quality than the figures in the boats or in the agricultural scenes. The greater care expended on models of offering bearers must be related to their magical function, which was clearly to provide the tomb owner with funerary offerings. Presumably, the scenes of daily life were less important.

Strangely, the order and contents of processions such as those from Bersha and the tomb of Meketre are not paralleled in tomb reliefs.

These processions seem to have represented in condensed form all the basic commodities required for the afterlife: in this case, priestly services in the form of the *hes* vase and the incense burner; bread, beer, and fowl; and a mirror and chest containing a few items of personal adornment. These items are usually supplied in processions of offering bearers on tomb walls, but not with such economy. The Berlin woman seems to illustrate the ultimate in compact processions: her *hes* vase represents ritual objects, her mirror symbolizes personal adornment, and food offerings are painted on the top of her basket.

The tradition of such models seems to have lasted only a short period. All the closest parallels date from the end of Dynasty 11 and the very beginning of Dynasty 12. The period in which incense burners of this shape were represented is similarly limited. In sum, the parallels suggested by the new reconstruction of the Bersha procession lend strong support to the Dynasty 11 date suggested by Baer and Brovarski. This earlier date makes it clear, if any proof were needed, that the renaissance of classical Egyptian art, normally associated with the middle of Dynasty 12, had already begun by the end of Dynasty 11.

NOTES

We would like to thank Peter Lacovara and Timothy Kendall for their encouragement and suggestions, Edward Brovarski for permission to republish the procession, and Pamela Hatchfield for the actual reconstruction and conservation work on the model.

1. That is to say, post-reunification Dynasty 11.
2. Although Reisner was the official director, he was actually at the site only briefly. The excavations were supervised by Lyman Story.
3. Or "One who is ornamented by the King," as has been suggested by Del Nord, "Hkrt-Nswt = 'King's Concubine'?" *Serapis* 2 (1970), pp. 11–13. The title seems to imply that the woman held a position in the royal entourage.
4. Dows Dunham, "The Tomb of Dehuti-Nekht and His Wife," *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 19 (Aug. 1921), p. 43.
5. Cyril Aldred, *Middle Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1950), p. 44.
6. Edward L. B. Terrace, *Egyptian Paintings of the Middle Kingdom* (New York, 1968), pp. 51–52.
7. Klaus Baer, unpublished notes on chronology, distributed to his classes at the University of Chicago in 1976.
8. Edward Brovarski, "The Bersheh Nomarchs of the Intermediate Period and

the Middle Kingdom," in *Studies in Ancient Egypt, the Aegean, and the Sudan: Essays in Honor of Dows Dunham* (Boston, 1981), p. 29, fig. 13 (coffins: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 20.1822–27).

9. Dunham, "Tomb of Dehuti-Nekht," p. 43, suggests that the robbery took place during the Roman period.

10. For example, there are two scenes of brickmakers, a type very rarely found.

11. Dows Dunham, "Two Recent Installations in the Egyptian Galleries," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 39 (Feb. 1941), p. 10, states that the "handle of this mirror was found in place in the man's hand," a statement repeated by Edward L. B. Terrace, "The Entourage of an Egyptian Governor," *Bulletin: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 66 (1968), p. 8, but contradicted by the field register and *in situ* excavation photographs.

12. Several photographs of the reassembled procession were taken at the site.

13. Dunham, "Two Recent Installations," p. 10.

14. Aldred, *Middle Kingdom Art*, p. 45. Terrace, in *Egyptian Paintings*, caption to plate XLV, conjectured that "whatever the lady in the rear carried, it was apparently held with both hands."

15. We are especially indebted to Peter Lacovara who brought the chest fragment to our attention, thus starting the reconstruction process.

16. The hole in the box that would have corresponded to the hole in the woman's palm was in the section of the box that is now missing. This missing half was restored by Pamela Hatchfield.

17. Terrace, "Entourage," p. 21. Henry G. Fischer, "Varia Aegyptiaca," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 2 (1963), p. 33, lists only two other examples of this type. Claude Sourdive, *La Main dans l'Égypte pharaonique* (Bern, 1984), pp. 312–314, lists fifteen examples of incense burners in which the hand is closed and the handle does not end in a hawk head. All of these examples are from Upper Egypt and date from late Dynasty 11 through the first half of Dynasty 12.

18. Terrace, "Entourage," p. 21.

19. The offering bearer in the Metropolitan Museum (20.3.7) carries a basket containing meat; the one in the Egyptian Museum (Journal d'Entrée 46725) carries a basket of beer jars.

20. Unpublished excavation register, Egyptian Department, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

21. Formerly Staatliche Museen, Berlin, 13. For a photograph of this offering bearer, see Christine Lilyquist, *Ancient Egyptian Mirrors from the Earliest Times through the Middle Kingdom*, vol. 27 in the series entitled *Münchener Ägyptologische Studien* (Munich, 1979), fig. 52.

22. Georg Steindorff, *Grabfunde des Mittleren Reiches in den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin I. Das Grab des Mentuhotep* (Berlin, 1896), p. 40 and pl. 11. The date is taken from Bertha Porter and Rosalind L. B. Moss, *The Theban Necropolis: Part 2. Royal Tombs and Smaller Cemeteries*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., rev. and augmented (Oxford, 1964), p. 622, in the 7 volume series, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings*.

23. Only one example could be found that depicts a person carrying an encased mirror by its handle: Norman de Garies Davies, *The Tomb of Antefoker* (London, 1920), pl. xxvi. Here, the mirror is carried by a man (itself an unusual circumstance) in a two-dimensional scene, which may have rendered the practical difficulties less obvious. In his other hand the man carries a small chest like that carried by the last woman in the Bersha procession.

24. The most thorough discussion of this orientation toward the right is in Henry G. Fischer, *Egyptian Studies II: The Orientation of Hieroglyphs* (New York, 1977).