

The Tomb of Mereruka: a document on his life and character

Naguib Kanawati

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Abstract: A purely metaphoric/symbolic interpretation of the depictions in Old Kingdom tombs is questionable considering the specific events and practices that are often depicted. In particular the decoration in the Tomb of Mereruka provides an understanding of the life and character of the tomb-owner who is seen to be a man of power and wealth. His emphasis on security seems to have contributed to the growth of violence in ancient Egypt.

Wall scenes in Egyptian tombs of the Old Kingdom depict scenes of daily life, including agricultural pursuits, fishing, fowling, animal husbandry, various workshops, preparation and consumption of food, games and entertainment and rarely, war scenes. The paradox of representing activities from life in a tomb is not easy to explain, and accordingly diverse and frequently opposing theories have been put forward to interpret them, with strong conviction by the proponents of each theory.

Some believe that such activities took place in a Hereafter identical with actual life, others think that the scenes represent posthumous visits to the land of the living, or show a man-in-death watching life's manifestations, or that they depict a fictitious and symbolical domain to compensate the dead for actual loss, while some suggest that they are the summing up of a life's achievements. Furthermore, some scholars believe that with very few exceptions, such as war scenes, there is no story told in these pictures, and the accompanying inscriptions do not link events or explain their development; they are typical sayings belonging to typical situations.¹

These views do not take into account the very specific events recorded in many tombs, such as the rendering of accounts in the tombs of Mereruka and Khentika at Saqqara (Duell, 1938: pl. 38; James, 1953: pl. 9), or Ibi at Deir el-Gebrawi (Davies, 1902: pl. 8), where the names and titles of the culprits are clearly identified and the nature of the punishment depicted. One can also look at the incident of the fighting boatmen shown in the tomb of Inumin at Saqqara, where the usually amusing game apparently turned very rough, with two men resorting to the obviously painful hold of grasping each other by the genitals. All the characteristic features of each man are shown and the fight is watched by the tomb owner and his wife (Kanawati, 2006: pls. 16-17). The same applies to the circumcision scene in the tomb of Ankhmahor at Saqqara where the progress of the procedure is clearly shown (Kanawati and Hassan, 1997: pl. 55), and to the bullfighting scenes in the tombs of Tjetiqer and Kheni at El-Hawawish (Kanawati, 1980:fig. 10; 1981: fig. 20), where the tomb owners and the overseer of

the herd stand and watch the action in a relaxed posture. That this was a specific fight and not a typical one, which could have occurred at any time and in any place, may be concluded from the fact that two of the bulls preparing to attack each other, were named, 'Beloved of his lord' and 'The beautiful head' (Kanawati, 1980:fig. 10).

In more recent years a growing tendency to interpret wall scenes in a metaphoric/symbolic context is observed. Thus, the spear fishing of the *Tilapia*, the most common species in the Nile River, was linked to its mouth-brooding habits, which was associated with fertility and rebirth in the Hereafter (Brewer and Friedman, 1989:2). Similarly, bed making scenes have been associated with resurrection, the transportation by a palanquin was seen in a funerary context as a parallel to the funerary procession, and the scenes of bullfighting were interpreted as symbolizing the deceased overcoming his opponent and maintaining his leadership in the Netherworld. Even playing the *senet*-game was associated with the difficult passage from the realm of the living to that of the dead; as for 'painting the seasons' which only appears in the tombs of Mereruka and Khentika, it was linked to control over time.² Some scholars have already argued strongly against such metaphoric interpretations, warning of the lack of strong, unambiguous, contemporary textual evidence in its support.³

It is not the intention here to discuss the highly controversial topic of the purpose, or the *raison d'être*, of tomb scenes and whether they were depicted for the direct benefit and enjoyment of the deceased himself and to guarantee the fulfillment of his/her needs after death, or as a form of communication with visitors to the tomb in order to persuade them to present offerings. In either case, the tomb owner needed to record the wealth and power he amassed during his life and perhaps also specific events which reflected his character or demonstrated his importance. The extent of the use of symbolism in tomb scenes of the Old Kingdom is open to question, and presuming a purely metaphoric/symbolic interpretation for most of these scenes is hazardous. Not only would such interpretation challenge the specificity and historicity of the illustrated events, but



Figure 1: The entrance to the Tomb of Mereruka at Saqqara (Photo: the editor 1976)

it reduces the significance of tombs as one of the richest sources for the study of life in ancient Egypt.

The Egyptian did not separate inscriptions from scenes, they complemented each other, with some themes or events being better narrated and others being better illustrated. Even within the same scene an action represented may be accompanied by inscriptions, such as names, titles, descriptions and dialogues. Autobiographies also are often included in tombs containing these scenes; yet while we accept the biographies as recording historic events, for no good reason we are less ready to consider the scenes as having similar purpose. A careful study of these scenes cannot only enrich our sources for the study of the history of the Old Kingdom, but also greatly enhance our understanding of Egyptian manners and customs of the period. Perhaps it can in addition inform us about the characters of the important tomb owners who shaped the events of their time. Assuming that these officials had the final say in the choice of the scenes depicted in their tombs and their details, they should reflect some aspects of their personality. The tomb of Mereruka will be used as test case (Figures 1 & 2).

The unusual complexity and richness of Mereruka's mastaba was traditionally explained by the fact that he was a vizier and son-in-law of King Teti, founder of the Sixth Dynasty (approx. 2345 BC). Yet Egyptian history is full of viziers and sons-in-law of kings who were buried in a less lavish style. This applies even to Mereruka's immediate neighbour, Kagemni, who occupied the same position and was married to a daughter of the same king, Teti (Harpur and Scremin, 2006: *passim*). So, why was Mereruka so distinguished?

Although it is possible that Mereruka left an extensive biography, as did many of the great men around his time, only a very small section of his façade inscriptions has sur-

vived; the rest has unfortunately been quarried away (Duell, 1938: pls. 3-4). Remaining, however, are a large quantity of wall scenes and some accompanying texts inside a massive chapel, which is formed of three separate sections, one for him (A), the second for his wife Waatetkhetor/Seshseshet (B) and the third, a later addition, for their son, Meryteti (C) (Duell, 1938: pl. 1; & Figure 2). A careful examination and analysis of these scenes and inscriptions, as well as the architectural design of the tomb, may answer some of the questions related to the apparently unusual wealth and importance of this vizier (Kanawati, 2008: *passim*).

Mereruka held eighty-four titles, the highest number of responsibilities entrusted to an Old Kingdom official (Duell, 1938: *passim*). Like other viziers and higher officials his list of titles included honorific, administrative and religious ones, some of which have never been combined in the hands of another man. Among these are the offices of vizier, overseer of various departments and priesthoods of many deities, including the influential post of the high priest of the Sun-god, Re. Mereruka was also in charge of the newly introduced responsibility of overseer of the protection of all royal palaces, a position attested only during Teti's reign. The king came to the throne by marrying the daughter of his predecessor, Wenis, but the transition was apparently not smooth and was opposed by some strong men. The last two viziers of Wenis were punished and lost their tombs, which were reallocated to two children of a king, possibly of Teti. The king also adopted the throne name *Sehetep-tawy* 'He who pacifies the Two Lands', which hints at the presence of troubles. Evidence suggests that the relationship between the monarchy and the priesthood of Re was not at its best, and the unusual appointment of the vizier himself, Mereruka, to the position of the high priest of this cult might be an attempt to bring its priesthood under control (Kanawati, 2008: *passim*). In

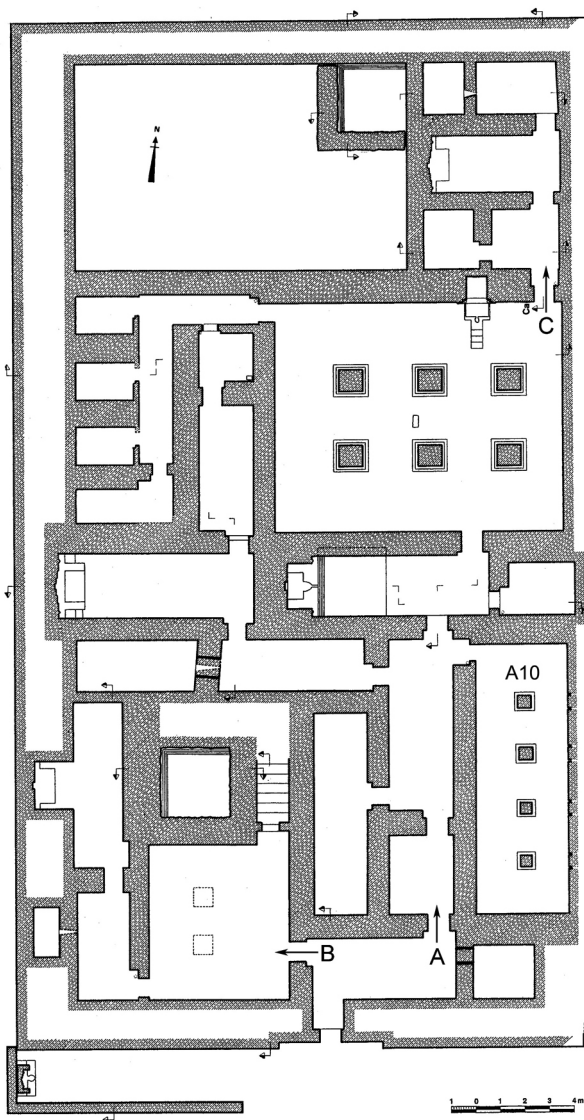


Figure 2: A plan of the Tomb of Mereruka showing the entrances to sections A, B & C (ACE Saqqara expedition).

such circumstances the introduction of an office related to the protection of all palaces is understandable, but why entrust it as well as practically everything else to Mereruka?

Mereruka was believed to be a self-made man who rose in his administrative career, married King Teti's daughter, Waatetkhethor also called Seshseshet, and accordingly became the king's trusted man. Yet Teti had many daughters, perhaps as many as nine, and none of them or their husbands enjoyed the privileges which Mereruka and his wife experienced, including their remarkable tomb. Our research shows that this vizier was not a self-made man who came from a humble background. His mother, whose tomb was discovered by the

Australian Centre for Egyptology in the Teti Cemetery, was the daughter of the very high official Seshemnefer II of Giza, and her brother Seshemnefer III, Mereruka's uncle, became a vizier late in the Fifth Dynasty under Djedkare. Also, Waatetkhethor was not just a daughter of Teti, but his eldest daughter by his official queen Iput, daughter of his predecessor, King Wenis. It appears also that Teti had only one son, Nebkauhor, who died prematurely and was buried in the tomb of Akhethotep/Hemi, the disgraced vizier of Wenis. This presumably occurred early in Teti's reign and before his own cemetery was inaugurated (Kanawati, 2008: passim). In such circumstances the husband of the eldest daughter of the king by his official wife (as in the case of Teti himself before Mereruka) or their eldest son becomes the heir apparent, at least until the king produces a male heir, should he do so.

From the beginning Mereruka was not an ordinary vizier but a possible future king or, more likely, the father of the future king. Waatetkhethor was young, judging by her constant representation with the head-band and streamer associated with youth, and she was not Mereruka's first wife, for he already had grown-up sons by a previous wife. It seems likely that Waatetkhethor's young age delayed the production of her first child, which happened a few years later and after the decoration of the tomb was well advanced. A son, Meryteti, was born and was included in the decoration as a later addition (Duell, 1938: pls. 5, 8, 23, 46). To avoid any genealogical confusion he was not described as Mereruka's son, but as 'eldest son of the king of his body' and 'lector priest of his father', two titles borne by heirs apparent. In her own chapel (section B), Waatetkhethor was represented on a throne-like seat (Figure 3) attested again only in the tomb of Queen Mersyankh III of the Fourth Dynasty (Dunham and Simpson, 1974: figs. 7-8), and was accompanied by this son, Meryteti.

However, it seems that late in Mereruka's life, before the decoration of his tomb was completed, a son, Pepy (I),



Figure 3: Accompanied by her son, Waatetkhethor sits on a throne-like chair with the lion motif, symbol for the monarchy (ACE Saqqara expedition).

was born to Teti and as a result Mereruka and his family lost their special status. The last part to be decorated in his chapel, room A10, shows a sudden and drastic decline in the quality of art, perhaps reflecting a decline in his resources, and only there Meryteti is described as 'his son', i.e., Mereruka's (Duell, 1938: pl. 88). A chapel was then added (section C) for Meryteti within the mastaba of his parents, since it became unlikely that he would be buried in a pyramid. But the size of this chapel and the standard of its decoration are modest (Kanawati and Abder-Raziq, 2004: *passim*). Soon after, Mereruka died and the positions he once accumulated were never again put into the hands of one man. Evidence excavated and/or recorded and published by the ACE seems to support a claim made by the Egyptian historian, Manetho, who wrote in the third century BC that King Teti was assassinated (Waddell, 1980: 53). An ephemeral king, Userkare, usurped the throne perhaps for one year before Pepy I, the young son of Teti, regained the kingship. This was presumably with the support of strong officials, who either remained loyal to his father or had lost some privileges with the accession of Userkare (Kanawati, 2003; *passim*). If these changes reflect the struggle for power between the monarchy and the priesthood of Re, it seems that Pepy I, or his advisors, succeeded in dealing with the problems. Early in his reign he changed his name from Pepy/Nefersahor to Pepy/Meryre, i.e. Pepy/'beloved of Re'.⁴ The relationship with the priesthood of Re appears, at least on the surface to have been peaceful for the remainder of the Sixth Dynasty. But there were other problems developing, and following this dynasty the so-called Old Kingdom started to crumble.

For most of Teti's reign Mereruka was the most important man after the king; in fact, as the father of the heir apparent (before Pepy I was born) his status was almost similar to that of a king. It is true that Teti acknowledged the heir apparent Meryteti as 'eldest son of the king, of his body',

but in reality Meryteti was surely known as being the physical son of Mereruka. Furthermore, despite this designation Meryteti was depicted with Mereruka and Waatetkhetor in positions reserved for sons. The choice of Mereruka to play this important role is curious. He was not one of the first viziers who probably helped Teti in establishing himself on the throne, since Neferseshemre and perhaps Kagemni held this office before Mereruka. The latter's marriage to the princess, which was not his first marriage, probably took place after the death of Teti's first son Nebkauhor and with the aim of producing a male heir apparent. But why Mereruka in particular?

This vizier was the descendant of a strong, noble family, the Seshemnefers; yet such an advantage must have applied to many men at the time. In addition he was considerably older than the princess; she was rather young, while he was already married and had grown-up sons. When he died before the end of Teti's relatively short reign (12 years?), he was a middle-aged man or older according to his skeletal remains (Firth and Gunn, 1926: 26). Mereruka must have been known to possess certain abilities or characteristics which were deemed necessary at the time. If this vizier had any say in the choice of the themes represented in his tomb and in the included details, these may shed some light on his personality.

On the east side of the entrance passage to his chapel Mereruka appears seated in front of an easel and painting a representation of the three seasons of the year (Duell, 1938: pl. 6). Regardless of any metaphoric significance of the scene, the depiction of the vizier before an easel, which is attested again only in the case of the vizier Khentika (James, 1953: pl. 10), hints at his artistic ability. Almost certainly Mereruka was not involved in the actual decoration of his tomb, but probably he bore some responsibility for the selection and layout of the scenes.

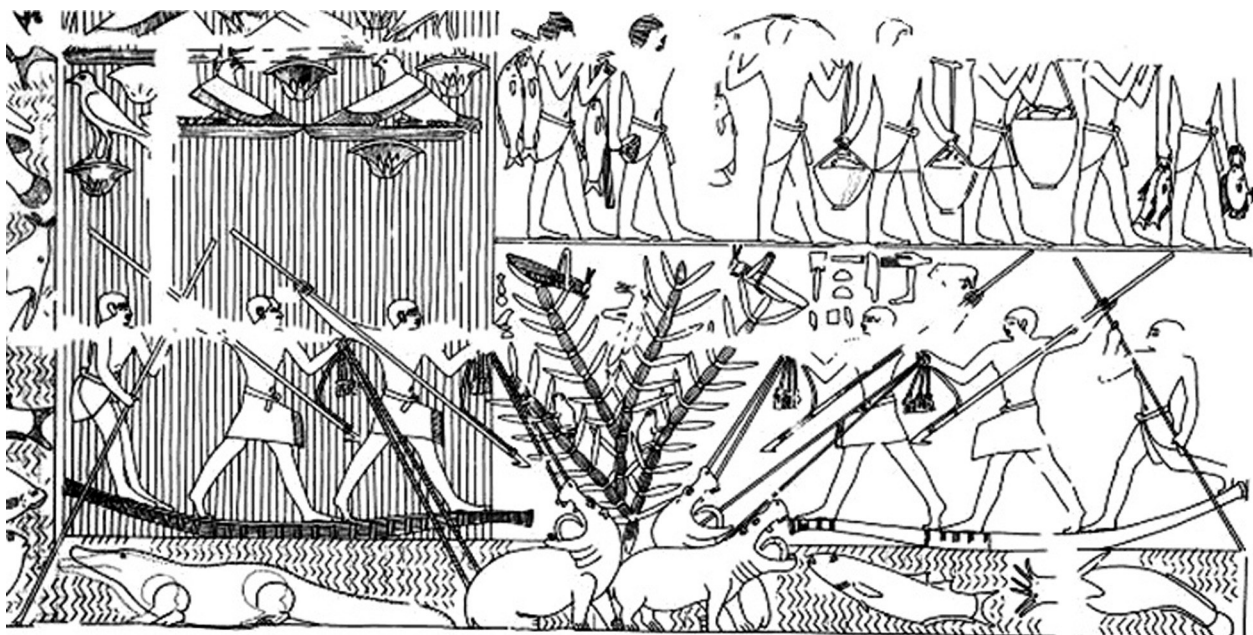


Figure 4: In front of Mereruka's boat men are attacking three agitated hippopotami with numerous harpoons (ACE Saqqara expedition).



Figure 5: *Nine dogs are viciously attacking a Nubian ibex from every direction (ACE Saqqara expedition).*

The creation of the position of overseer of the protection of all royal palaces suggests that Teti felt threatened, and Mereruka's appointment as the first holder of this office must indicate the king's knowledge of and trust in his abilities in this particular sphere. Security appears to have become of paramount importance at the time, and an examination of the scenes in Mereruka's own chapel clearly demonstrates an unprecedented level of security. Wherever the vizier and his wife appear they are accompanied by guards, the number varying in accordance with the possible level of danger. Thus, when the couple are in the open, as for example in a spear fishing trip or standing by the river bank watching fishermen at work or in the fields viewing agricultural pursuits, they were accompanied by up to an estimated forty-two guards (Duell, 1938: pls. 8-9, 41, 167-168), a number which coincides with that of the Egyptian provinces.⁵ In a desert hunt and despite the fact that the animals are shown inside a fenced reserve, guards stand not

behind the couple, but between them and the fence (Duell, 1938: pls. 23-25). Even in the rather intimate situation where the princess entertained her husband by playing the harp while seated on a couch presumably inside their house, they were accompanied by some male guards/attendants for him and female ones for her (Duell, 1938: pl. 94).

In addition to his clear preoccupation with security, the scenes in Mereruka's chapel illustrate an unusual level of aggression. The harpooning of three hippopotami which appeared in front of his boat in the spear fishing trip (Figure 4) and the fight between a hippopotamus and a crocodile in the fowling scene demonstrate excessive violence (Duell, 1938: pls. 12, 19). Cruelty appears even more graphically in the desert hunt scene where nine dogs were allowed to tear apart a Nubian ibex (Figure 5), while being watched by Mereruka and his wife (Duell, 1938: pl. 24).⁶ The depiction of one of Mereruka's men grabbing an Egyptian



Figure 6: *The defaulter is being held against a whipping post and beaten by policemen (ACE Saqqara expedition).*

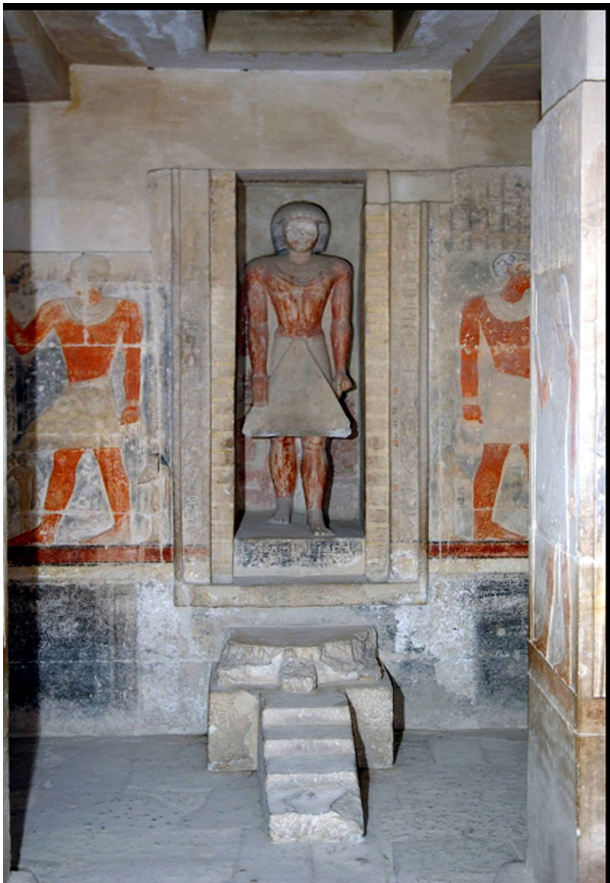


Figure 7: Entering the large pillared hall the visitor is face-to-face with the imposing statue of Mereruka (ACE Saqqara expedition).

mongoose by the tail, preventing it from catching some fledgelings, might hint at his watchfulness (Duell, 1938: pl. 19).⁷ Yet Mereruka's severity is nowhere more apparent than in the rendering of accounts scene. There, the heads of the estates present their accounts before the scribes, while a defaulter is being held against a whipping post and beaten by two policemen (Duell, 1938: pl. 36). This was the first time corporal punishment was represented in tomb scenes (Figure 6).

As the visitors proceed through the rooms of Mereruka's chapel they cannot fail to observe his harsh character, an image which he probably wanted to project. Once they reach the innermost part of the chapel, the pillared hall, A13, they are confronted by his larger-than-life statue placed in a niche high up in the north wall, opposite the entrance, with a flight of steps leading down to the floor of the hall (Duell, 1938: pls. 123, 148). The instant effect was that of reverence, if not fear, which may have been Mereruka's aim when he planned the decoration programme of his chapel (Figure 7).

On almost every wall of his multiple-roomed chapel Mereruka appears with his wife Waatetkhethor. No other official has represented his wife so regularly in his tomb. The vizier might have been deeply in love with his young wife and he did not hesitate to display this in the scenes in his chapel. Twice the couple is shown walking hand in hand, and once they appear on a couch while she is playing the harp for him (Duell, 1938: pls. 14, 91, 94), highly unusual representations of intimate moments in tomb scenes (Figure 8).⁸ However, the frequency of Waatetkhethor's depiction

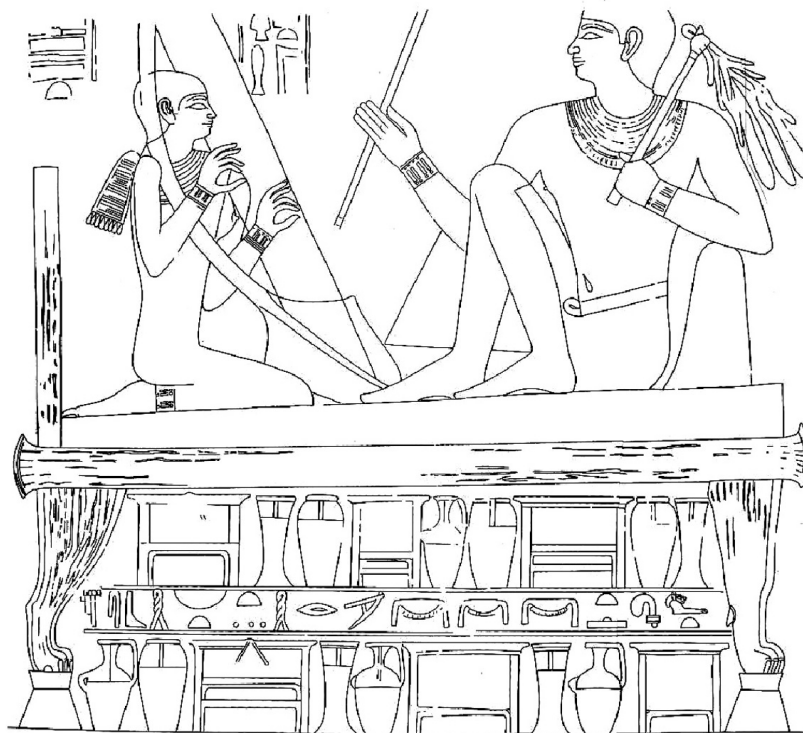


Figure 8: Waatetkhethor playing the harp for Mereruka on a couch, a rare example of intimacy in Egyptian art of the Old Kingdom (ACE Saqqara expedition).



Figure 9: Display of grief in a funerary procession possibly connected with the transportation of Mereruka's coffin to his tomb (ACE Saqqara expedition).

in Mereruka's chapel might not be due to his feelings alone, but also to his desire to emphasize and publicize their union. It is through his marriage to the princess that this vizier was elevated to such an extraordinary status and was given unprecedented powers. But it might be significant that in Waatetkhethor's own chapel, section B, her husband was never depicted.

Two themes represented in the large pillared hall, A13, seem to demonstrate Mereruka's desire to record the love and esteem his family and retainers had for him. On the north wall of this hall he depicts himself in three successive panels as supervising work, then presumably taken ill and being supported by a son and an official, and finally being carried in a palanquin with all members of his family accompanying him (Duell, 1938: pls. 149-158). On the opposite south wall a funerary procession is depicted. While this was probably not Mereruka's own funeral but the transportation of his coffin and funerary furniture as part of the preparation of the tomb, it was nevertheless a sad occasion and a reminder of the actual burial. There, we see men and women in a state of excessive grief, lamenting, fainting and tearing their hair and dresses (Figure 9). Men even threw themselves in the river behind the boat carrying the coffin in a demonstration of the worthlessness of life after Mereruka (Duell, 1938: pl. 130). It is interesting that a man as tough as Mereruka felt the need to record the people's love towards him. Perhaps even tyrants, or particularly tyrants, need to think that they were loved and appreciated.

Mereruka played an important role during the reign of King Teti, but he may have also left his mark on the Egyptian administration and way of life for the remainder of the Old

Kingdom. His severe personality and his harsh punishment of defaulters appear to have been emulated in the latter part of the Sixth Dynasty. Thus, we see in the tomb of his successor, Khentika, two men held against a whipping post and beaten (James, 1953: pl. 9), while in the tomb of Henqu II at Deir el-Gebrawi a man is similarly punished and another is being conducted with a yoke around his neck and his hands shackled to a heavy object to prevent him from escaping (Kanawati, 2005: pls. 27-28, 55).⁹ The treatment of the culprits is even harsher in the tombs of Tjeti-iqer of El-Hawawish and Ibi of Deir el-Gebrawi, where the guilty men are stripped naked, stretched on the ground and beaten with sticks (Kanawati, 1980: fig. 9; Davies, 1902: pl. 8). The downfall of the Old Kingdom at the end of the Sixth Dynasty, a short time after the stability and richness which it apparently enjoyed under Teti, is difficult to explain. If the admonitions of the Egyptian sage Ipuwer reflect historical reality and if they describe the conditions associated with the collapse of this kingdom, then we have the picture of a social revolution.¹⁰ One wonders if the harsh social conditions at the time might have contributed to the downfall, even though the collapse of regimes is usually the result of a complicated web of causes and effects.

Naguib Kanawati AM
Professor of Egyptology
Macquarie University
NSW

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Endnotes

- 1 For a summary of these opinions see Groenewegen – Frankfort, 1972: 28-36, also Moscato, 1963: 80; Gaballa, 1976: 28ff.
- 2 These interpretations have been discussed in detail by a number of scholars in Fitzenreiter and Herb, 2006: passim.
- 3 See in particular R. Van Walsem, in *ibid*, pp. 297-305.
- 4 The king appears to have ordered his officials to change his name from Nefersahor to Meryre wherever it was inscribed in their tombs, as it is shown in the tomb of Inumin at Saqqara (Kanawati, 2006: pls. 7a, 44).
- 5 With such a number, it could be surmised that the guards were selected from the different provinces to avoid any possible collusion.
- 6 The same scene appears again in the tomb of Mereruka's son, Meryteti (Kanawati, 2004: pls. 6, 46) and Inumin, a near contemporary of Mereruka (Kanawati, 2006: pls. 13, 47).
- 7 The same is shown again only in the tomb of the vizier Mehu, an immediate successor of Mereruka (Altenmüller, 1998: pl. 11).
- 8 The only similar representation is found in the tomb of Pepi at Meir (Blackman, 1953: pl. 45).
- 9 It is ironic that on the wall adjacent to this scene Henqu II inscribed a biography where he says, 'I did not put fetters on any man' (Kanawati, 2005: 72, pl. 66).
- 10 Scholars differ in their views on the historicity of this document (Lichtheim, 1973: 149-163).