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THE NORTHAMPTON STATUE OF SEKHEMKA

By T. G. H. JAMES

THE fine limestone seated statue illustrated on pls. I and II represents a high official named Sekhemka. At present it is exhibited in the principal picture gallery of the Central Museum in Northampton. Until recently it was kept in relative obscurity in the Abington Museum in the same town. The records of the Northampton Museums and Art Gallery contain no precise information concerning its acquisition, but it is known that it was presented in about 1870 by the third Marquis of Northampton. A further grain of information is provided by a press cutting, dated 1899, describing the contents of the Abington Museum, which states that 'in the Egyptian Room are specimens of papyri . . . a case of small Egyptian articles collected by Spencer Joshua Alwyne Compton, President of the Royal Society, and other Egyptian figures'.¹ Spencer Joshua Alwyne Compton, the second Marquis of Northampton, was a distinguished amateur of the arts and sciences, and, in addition to being President of the Royal Society, was also a founder member and President of the Royal Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. He made a journey to Egypt in 1850, the year before his death, and it was on this journey in all probability that he collected the Egyptian antiquities which eventually found their way to the Abington Museum.² There seems to be no good reason for doubting that the statue of Sekhemka, presented by the third marquis, was acquired by his father on the same journey.³

In height the piece is 75 cm., the length of the base from front to rear being 43 cm. The thickness of the base at the front is 5.5 cm. and the height of the seat at the back is 28 cm. Sekhemka is represented in a traditional attitude, seated on a simple block-seat, holding on his knees a partly unrolled papyrus.⁴ An inscription incised on the top of the base, beside the left foot, describes the subject of the statue as *Inspector of scribes of the house of the master of largess*,⁵ *one revered before the great god, Sekhemka* (𓆎𓆏𓆑𓆒). He wears the usual tight-fitting wig with rows of curls, carefully cut, which still bear considerable traces of black paint. The features of the face, although

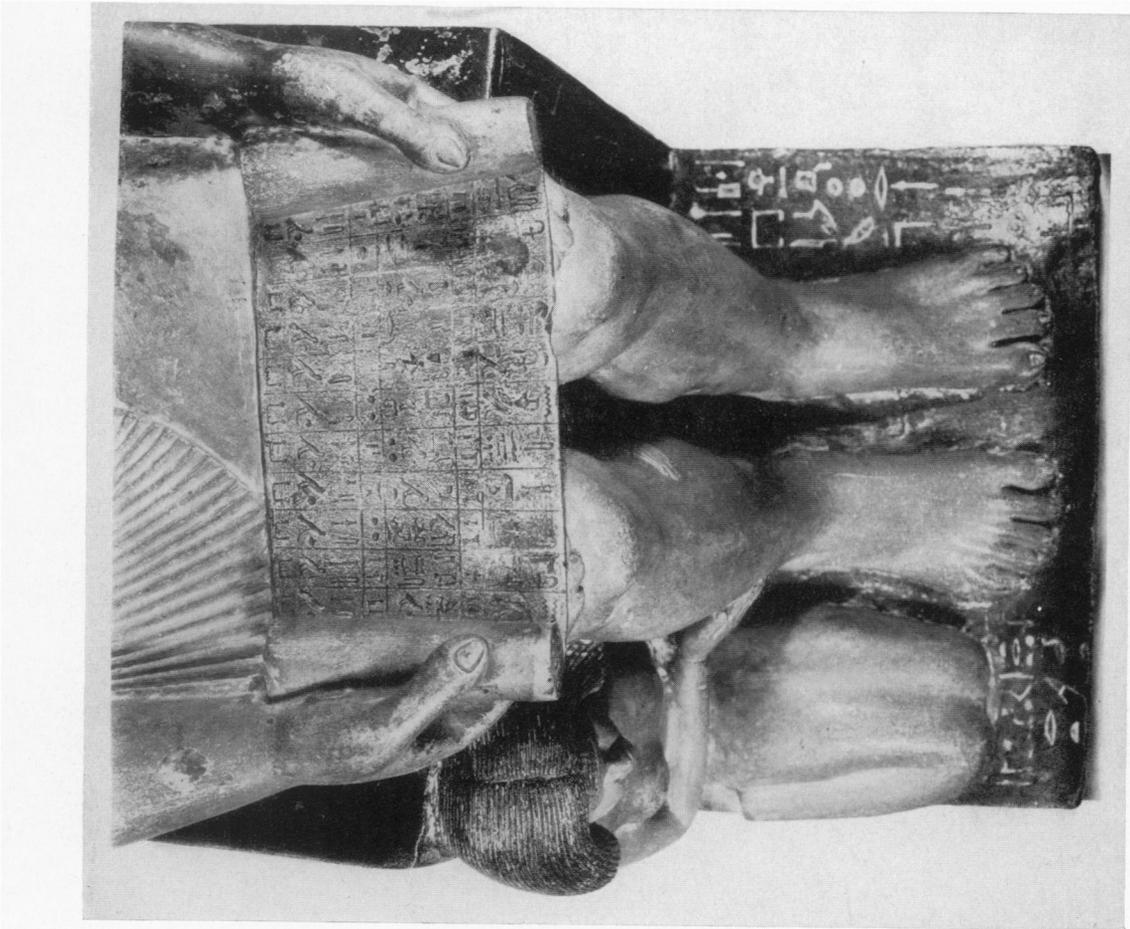
¹ For these details I am much obliged to Mr. W. N. Terry, Curator of the Central Museum, Northampton, and to his Senior Assistant, Miss J. M. Swann, who also gave me much assistance on a visit to Northampton in Aug. 1962. To the committee of the Museums and Art Gallery, Northampton, I am grateful for permission to publish the piece here. The photographs were taken by the Northampton photographers H. Cooper & Son. Dr. R. L. B. Moss first drew my attention to the statue and encouraged me to write this article.

² Details of the life and career of the second marquis can best be found in the obituary notice in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, n.s. 35 (Jan.-June 1851), 425-9. He died in Jan. 1851.

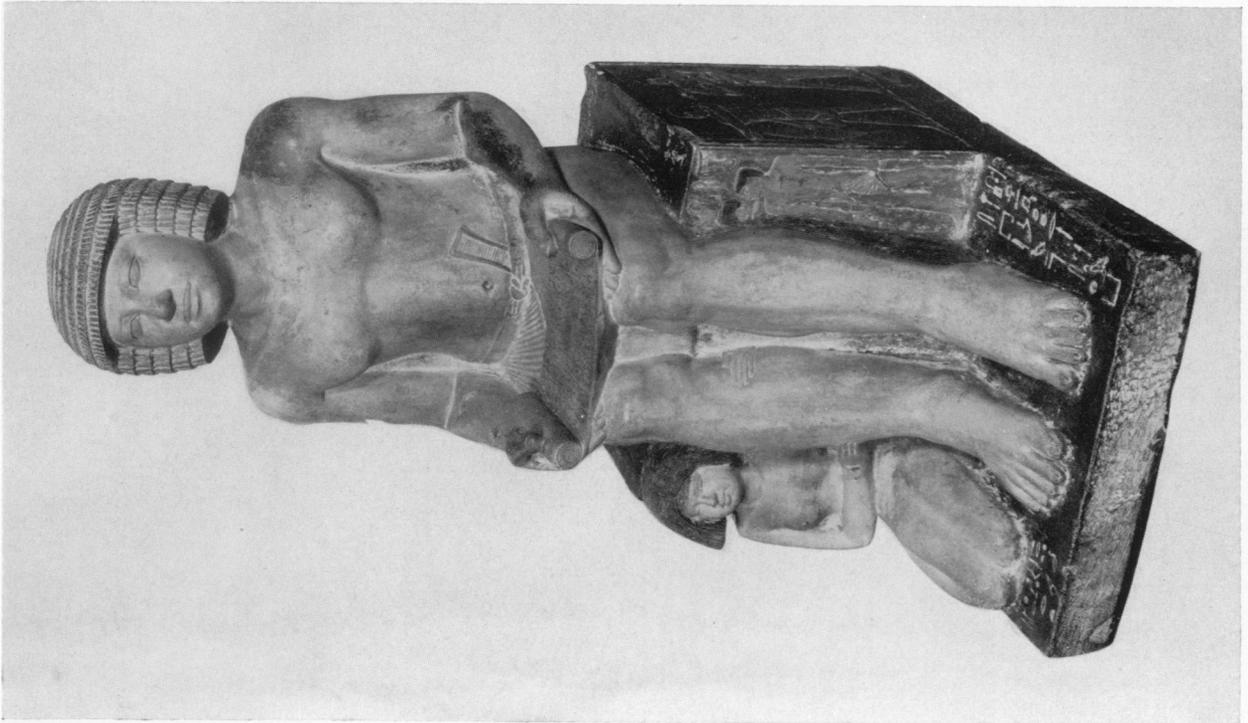
³ The excavations published in Northampton, Spiegelberg and Newberry, *Report on some excavations in the Theban Necropolis* (1908), were sponsored by the fifth marquis, a grandson of the second marquis.

⁴ For the simple seated figure, see Vandier, *Manuel*, III, 64 ff., who can, however, cite only one example in stone of a seated figure holding an unrolled papyrus on his knees, cf. *ibid.* 66 and pl. xx, 3.

⁵ The meaning of *hry-wdb* remains under debate; for the fullest discussion, and for the meaning used here, see Gardiner, *JEA* 24, 83 ff.



b.



c.

THE NORTHAMPTON STATUE OF SEKHEMKA

conventionally conceived, are finely expressed. The eyes, which look slightly down, are not inlaid, but the pupils are painted black; they are sharply outlined and the brows are subtly moulded, not carved in relief. The nose, which is undamaged, is the least attractive feature of the face; it is short, broad, and slightly turned up; it has drilled nostrils. On the other hand, the mouth is beautifully modelled and the lips are carefully outlined. There is a fullness in the cheeks which endows the face with a youthful

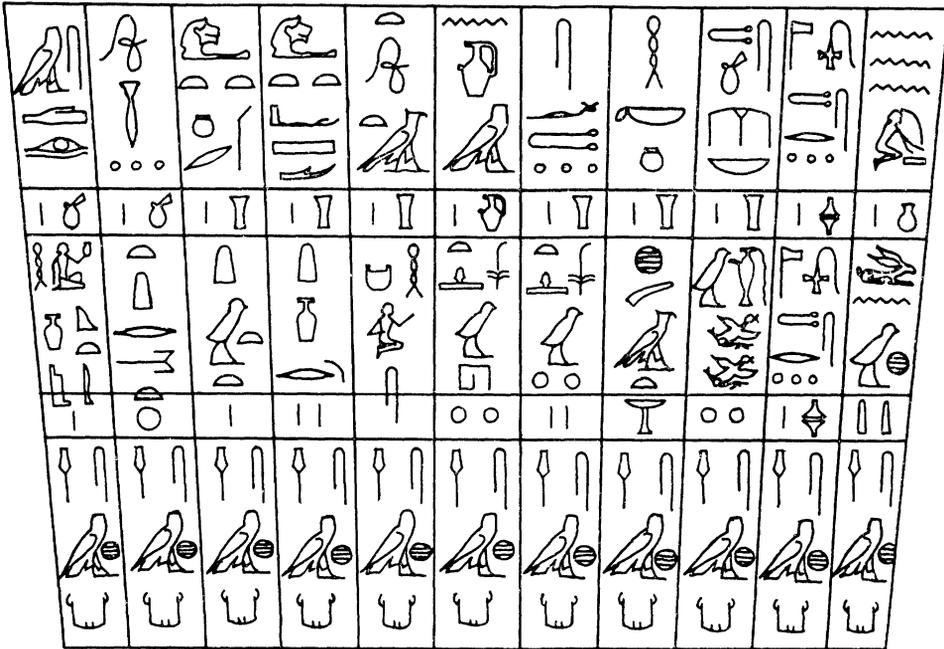


FIG. 1

appearance, scarcely modified by the gentle furrows running from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth. It cannot be claimed that this face, which presents an almost circular shape from the front (the profile is very much stronger), is a portrait.

A short kilt is the only garment worn by Sekhemka. One side (the right), as is so often the case, is pleated, while the other is left plain and smooth. Otherwise the body is represented nude. It is fully modelled without being over-muscular; the collar bones are clearly indicated with no undue emphasis; the chest is full and clearly separated from the rest of the torso, the nipples being shown as incised circles. Forearms and hands rest in a very natural attitude on the thighs, and the hands in particular are beautifully rendered. After the manner of much Old Kingdom sculpture, the legs are somewhat heavy, but their muscular and bony structure is more satisfactorily realized than is usually the case, while the ankles are relatively shapely.

Twenty-two items are included in the offering-list inscribed on the open papyrus on Sekhemka's knees (pl. I, *b*). The two rolled parts of the papyrus are carved with great verisimilitude, the convolutions of the rolls being shown precisely. The text, which is incised, is arranged in three registers, each of eleven divisions; the two upper registers contain the items of the offering-list, and the bottom register, Sekhemka's

name repeated in each division. Fig. 1 gives a hand-copy of the text; the twenty-two items are those normally found at the beginning of the standard offering-lists of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties:¹

- Register I: 1. *Water-pouring*
 2. *Fumigation*
 3. *Festival perfume, one jar*
 4. *hknw-oil, one jar*
 5. *šft̄-oil, one jar*
 6. *nḥnm-oil, one jar*
 7. *twꜣwt-oil, one jar*
 8. *First quality cedar-oil, one jar*
 9. *First quality Libyan oil, one jar*
 10. *Green eye-paint, one bag*
 11. *Black eye-paint, one bag*
- Register II: 1. *Cloth strips, a pair*
 2. *Fumigation*
 3. *Cool water; two pellets (of natron)*²
 4. *An offering-table*
 5. *Royal offering, two cakes (?)*
 6. *Royal offering of the hall, two cakes (?)*³
 7. *Sitting*
 8. *Breakfast: bread and beer*⁴
 9. *One ttw-loaf*⁵
 10. *One t-rth-loaf*
 11. *One nmšt-jar of beer*⁶

In the repeated writings of the name in the bottom register, the 𐎢-sign is regularly written with two small ticks in place of the swellings representing the muscles of the upper arms. This is an early case of a graphic peculiarity not uncommon in Middle Kingdom texts.⁷

To the right of Sekhemka's right leg is the figure of a lady, carved to a smaller scale, who is described in the text incised on the base in front of her knees as *She who is concerned with the affairs of the king, one revered before the great god, Sitmeret* (𐎢𐎠𐎢𐎠𐎢𐎠). She is represented sitting with her left leg bent beneath her body, her right leg, which is also bent, being set to one side of her body so that her weight settles on the left leg.⁸

¹ For many examples, see Selim Hasan, *Giza*, vi, part 2, plates.

² A conflation of two items in longer lists.

³ In later lists usually 'Royal offering which is in the hall' (*imy wšht*). The two circular signs in the numeral and determinative compartment probably indicate that the offering consisted of two cakes or of something similar, cf. the preceding item.

⁴ The two strokes here do not indicate that this item is doubled; one stroke belongs with 𐎢 and one with 𐎠.

⁵ The reading of this item has been much questioned, cf. Caminos and James, *Gebel es-Silsilah*, 1, 49.

⁶ This item normally is *ḏšrt nmšt* 'a *nmšt*-jar of *ḏšrt*-drink', cf. Selim Hassan, *Giza*, vi, part 2, 295 ff., from which also note the common determinative of a seated man holding up a jug or bowl, here placed at the head of the item.

⁷ See the remarks of Kitchen, *JEA* 48, 159.

⁸ This position of the legs is found for both wife and daughter in the famous statue-group of Akhy (Cairo 44), cf. Aldred, *Old Kingdom Art*, fig. 50. Also cf. Brooklyn 37.17E, see *Bull. Brooklyn*, 13 (1952), 11 and figs. 5. 6.

Beneath the ankle of the right foot appear the toes of the bent left leg. The thighs and the legs below the knees are very much elongated in proportion to the body; in height from the base the figure is 23.5 cm., while the distance from knee to back is 19 cm. The effect of this elongation is not, however, to distort, but to add elegance to what is in fact a very beautiful figure. The pose, which might be considered somewhat awkward to adopt, is made to appear natural and easy. Sitmeret is shown wearing a heavy wig (painted black), and on her brow is a line of small neat circular curls.¹ Her face is modelled with a round fullness similar to that of Sekhemka's face; her nose is small and snub, her mouth pouting. One arm extends behind Sekhemka's right leg, which the hand grasps affectionately; the other is bent across her body and touches the same leg lightly with outstretched fingers. She wears the characteristic long dress of which no paint details remain apart from traces of blue where the shoulder straps and neck-line were shown between the breasts and behind the right arm; there are six or seven blue lines. The bottom edge of the dress is carved where it lies on the right ankle. This ankle carries an anklet and the right arm a wristlet, both of which are shown in relief, carrying traces of black paint. Her breasts are full, but not over-emphasized, the nipples being indicated in relief. The division of the legs between the thighs is clearly marked.² There is no indication of the relationship between Sitmeret and Sekhemka, but the intimate posture in which she is shown, leaning gently against his leg, makes it probable that she was his wife.³

The front of the seat to the left of Sekhemka's leg bears a figure of a man, walking left, holding a lotus-flower in one hand. He is *the scribe of the house of the master of largess, Seshemnefer* (𓅓𓅓𓅓𓅓), who may have been Sekhemka's son.⁴ The figure and the hieroglyphic signs are carved in fine low relief. A considerable part of the figure retains its original red paint; the hair is black, as is the whole of the seat.

An unusual feature of this statue is constituted by the scenes carried on the two sides and back of the seat, each surface containing representations of offering-bearers.⁵ All are dressed alike, with tight curled wigs and short white kilts, the ties of which are set, unusually, at the back. The red colour on the bodies is well preserved, so too the black of the wigs and background. On the right side, of two offering-bearers, walking right, the first carries two papyrus-flowers with long stems, and a goose held by its wings; the second bears a small calf in his arms (pl. II, *a*). The back of the seat shows three men walking right (pl. II, *b*), the first holds two long strips of cloth, the second

¹ Cf. the figure of Iti, wife of Sekhemka, owner of Saqqara mastaba C. 19, in the statue-group Louvre A. 102, *Encyc. phot. de l'art. Les Antiquités égyptiennes du musée du Louvre* (ed. Tel), pls. 34. 35; also the figure of Ni-kau-nebu, wife of Ni-ka-Rē, in the group-statue Brooklyn 49.215, cf. Cooney, *Bull. Brooklyn*, 13 (1952), 3 and fig. 1.

² The division is clearly indicated also on the female figure of the group Brooklyn 37.17E, see Cooney, *op. cit.*, fig. 5.

³ For the type see Vandier, *Manuel*, III, 83-84 (section XIII Bb); W. S. Smith, *Eg. Sculp. and Paint. in the O.K.* 78-79.

⁴ This possibility is suggested not only by the position of the figure (one sometimes occupied by a figure in the round of the son of the statue-owner), but also by the fact that this figure alone of the eight carved in relief on the sides of the seat, is given a name and title.

⁵ For other examples, see W. S. Smith, *op. cit.* 80 f.; Cooney, *op. cit.* 15 with figs. 7. 8. 9.



a.



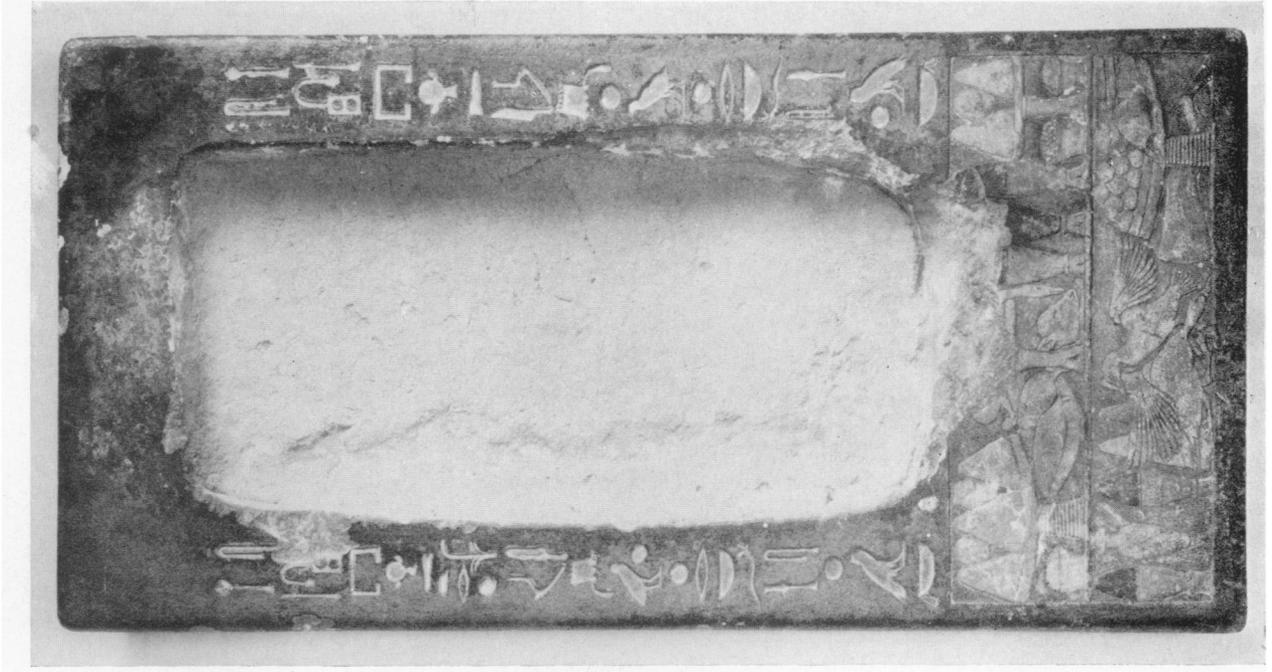
c.



b.



a. THE BROOKLYN STATUE OF SEKHEMKA (acc. no. 37.23B)



b.

offers incense from a censer,¹ while the third carries two vessels for ritual liquids. On the left side two offering-bearers, walking left, carry geese (pl. II, *c*); the first holds his goose in front of him, grasping it by the neck and crossed wings; the second holds his goose closely in his arms. All the figures in these scenes are carved with much modelling of muscular detail, in a rather heavy style.

A fortunate error in the dispatch of some photographs brought this statue-group to the attention of Mr. Bernard Bothmer of the Brooklyn Museum, who, on examining the photographs, recognized a similarity between the inscription naming Sekhemka and that on the base of the badly damaged statue no. 37.23E at Brooklyn (pl. III).² The statue itself is made of diorite³ and it is mounted in a limestone base which bears on its top two lines of inscription to the left and right of the statue-socket (pl. III *b*): on the left, *Inspector of scribes of the house of the master of largess, one revered before his lord, Sekhemka*; on the right, *Inspector of scribes of the house of the master of largess, one concerned with the affairs of the king, one revered before his lord, Sekhemka*. In the matter of the principal title and of the name, there is an identity between the two pieces. It is true that in the name Sekhemka on the Brooklyn statue, the element *k* is written \curvearrowright , while on the Northampton group it is written \sqcup , but this variation is common and of little significance. There is also a close similarity between the cutting and forms of the hieroglyphic signs in the texts on the bases of the two statues.

The Brooklyn Sekhemka is represented seated on a simple block-seat similar to that found in the Northampton group, but left rough and undecorated. It is, above its limestone base, 29.7 cm. high and 25.8 cm. deep from front to back. The right hand is placed on the right knee, the fist grasping the conventional baton, the thumb uppermost; the left hand is laid flat downwards on the left knee.⁴ The head and half the torso are missing; a circular hole has been cut into the break on the left side—no doubt the mark of an attempt further to break up the piece. In front, the base of the statue proper is rounded. Despite the damaged condition of the piece, it still exhibits signs of having been a striking sculpture. The hard stone, which was not much used for private statuary in the Old Kingdom, presented a greater challenge to the ancient sculptor than the regular limestone. The result lacks detail and finish, but has good modelling and considerable strength. It is difficult to compare it with the Northampton statue in view of the difference of material and of size, and the absence of the head. Attention may, however, be drawn to the fullness of the chest and the clear division made between it and the rest of the torso—features found also on the Northampton statue. Even if both statues represent the same man, there is no reason to suppose that they were carved by the same sculptor. On the contrary, the two materials might well require two

¹ Cairo 35205 (mentioned by Smith, *op. cit.* 81) carries figures of offering-bearers like those on this side of the seat; one carries an incense-burner, and another strips of cloth.

² I am grateful to Mr. Bothmer for details of the piece, and to Mr. Cooney and the trustees of the Brooklyn Museum for permission to publish it here, and for the photographs reproduced on pl. III.

³ Vandier, *Manuel*, III, 65, n. 3, notes that the base is painted to simulate basalt. It is more probable that the colour of the base was intended to match the colour of the diorite of the statue.

⁴ This position of the hands, found first in the statue of Hemiunu, varies at Saqqara in the Fifth Dynasty, with one in which the fist of the right hand is laid, palm downwards, on the right knee, cf. Reisner, *Mycerinus*, 125; Smith, *op. cit.* 78; also Vandier, *Manuel*, III, 65 ff.

sculptors. Yet there can be no doubt that the makers of both were very accomplished craftsmen.

Apart from the two lines of text mentioning Sekhemka, the base of the Brooklyn statue (which is 41·4 cm. long by 20·5 cm. broad by 8·3 cm. thick) carries a panel of fine low relief-work on the upper surface in front of the statue-socket (pl. III *b*). The decoration, arranged in two registers, consists of representations of the customary food and drink offerings which formed elements of the feast to be enjoyed by the deceased.¹ Part of the upper register has been damaged along the edge of the statue-socket. The components of the design are arranged with the skill and feeling for pattern commonly found in the depictions of such groups in the wall reliefs of Old Kingdom tombs; the carving in detail is here also very good, the group of ducks in the lower register being especially noteworthy. Much colour is preserved on the various offerings and the base otherwise has been painted black to imitate diorite or basalt (as has been mentioned above).

The suggestion, made here, that the Northampton statue and the Brooklyn statue represent the same man is not susceptible of absolute proof; it may further not be possible to establish any connexion between this Sekhemka and others of the same name whose tombs are known at Gîza and Saqqara. A tentative identification of the owner of the Brooklyn piece with that of the famous Louvre 'scribe'² was based on the supposition that the latter came from the tomb of a Sekhemka at Saqqara.³ The belief that the Louvre 'scribe' belonged to the mastaba of Sekhemka (Mariette's number C. 19) was shown by Capart to be a misinterpretation of the evidence;⁴ equally mistaken, therefore, is the identification of the Brooklyn Sekhemka with the 'scribe'. There remains, however, the possibility that the Sekhemka of mastaba C. 19 was the same as the owner of the two statues published here. Among the titles preserved on the false door stela in that tomb is *hrp zš pr hry-wdb*, 'director of scribes of the house of the master of largess'.⁵ This connexion with the *pr hry-wdb* makes the identification somewhat possible, but the title *šhd zš pr hry-wdb* of the Northampton and Brooklyn pieces is not identical with that found in mastaba C. 19. A further obstacle to the identification is presented by the names of the wife (Iti) and the son (Kawehem) of the Sekhemka of C. 19, which are to be found on a family group-statue now in the Louvre—one of four statues discovered by Mariette in C. 19.⁶ The places on the Northampton statue approximately equivalent to those occupied by Iti and Kawehem on the Louvre statue-group are filled by Sitmeret and the official Seshemnefer. These two are not stated to be the wife and son of Sekhemka, but the relationships are probable;⁷ further, their presence effectively prevents the equating of the two Sekhemkas.

¹ A photograph of this relief was reproduced in the booklet *Egyptian Art in the Brooklyn Museum Collection*, fig. 17. ² *Ibid.*, see the note on fig. 17. ³ Cf. Porter and Moss, *Top. Bibl.* III, 113.

⁴ *JEA* 7, 186 ff. See also W. S. Smith in Reisner, *Tomb Development*, 402; Vandier, *Manuel*, III, 122 ff.

⁵ Mariette, *Mastabas*, 150.

⁶ The group-statue is Louvre A.102, cf. Vandier, *Manuel*, III, pl. xxxi, 6; *Encyc. phot. de l'art. Antiquités égyptiennes du musée du Louvre* (ed. Tel), pls. 34, 35. The other three statues are A. 103, A. 104, and A. 105, see Vandier, *op. cit.*, pls. xlv, 4, 5 and xlvii, 6.

⁷ On groups of the kind discussed here, see Cooney, *Bull. Brooklyn*, 13 (1952), 1 ff., and note the remarks on p. 12 concerning Brooklyn 37.17E, an uninscribed Old Kingdom group of man with woman (wife ?) and child (son ?).

In spite of the good case that can be made against identifying the Sekhemka of Northampton and Brooklyn with the Sekhemka of mastaba C. 19, there remains a nagging doubt which is reinforced by the fact that the Northampton and Brooklyn statues were acquired apparently at about the same time as the excavation of the mastaba C. 19 by Mariette. According to the details furnished by Capart in his discussion of the name of the Louvre 'scribe', Mariette arrived in Egypt on October 2, 1850, and discovered mastaba C. 19 in the course of excavating the Avenue of Sphinxes in front of the Serapeum between November 1, 1850 and January 1, 1851.¹ It has already been shown above (p. 5) that the Northampton statue was probably acquired by the second marquis on his visit to Egypt in 1850. Precise details of the acquisition of the Brooklyn piece are not available. It formed part of the collection of Dr. Henry Abbott who lived in Egypt for many years, returning with his collection to New York in 1851.² His collection was put on exhibition in the Stuyvesant Institute in 1853 and, in the catalogue issued in 1854, the Brooklyn statue of Sekhemka can be identified as item 167: 'A marble statue, unfortunately imperfect, of a keeper of volumes, an officer of high rank; on each side of the pedestal is an inscription of hieroglyphics of very early style, and on the front are offerings most beautifully carved. From Sakkarah.'³ In 1843 an earlier catalogue of the Abbott Collection had been compiled by Bonomi, but no mention of this statue can be found in it.⁴ It may therefore be concluded that Abbott acquired the piece between 1843 and 1854, when the New York catalogue was published. The date of acquisition may further be limited to the period between 1846, when the Bonomi catalogue was published, and 1851, when Abbott transferred his collection to New York. It is possible that he obtained the statue from Saqqara in about 1850. The identity of this date with that of the discovery of mastaba C. 19 by Mariette is, unfortunately, purely coincidental. It can be shown that the Marquis of Northampton was in Egypt early in 1850, whereas C. 19 was not discovered until late in the same year.⁵ Consequently there is little possibility that the Northampton and Brooklyn statues came from mastaba C. 19. On the other hand, it does appear likely that they were acquired by their respective owners about the same time, a possibility which reinforces the opinion that the two statues represent the same man.

Like many other pieces in the Abbott Collection, the granite statue of Sekhemka is described as having come from Saqqara, and there seems no reason to doubt this fact. Abbott was a resident in Egypt for many years, and had the opportunity not only of

¹ *JEA* 7, 186. Detailed references to primary sources for this information are given by Capart.

² Dawson, *Who was Who*, 1.

³ *Cat. of a Collection of Eg. Antiquities the Property of Henry Abbott, M.D.* (New York 1854), 17. A later edition of this catalogue was reproduced verbatim by the New York Historical Society (who had purchased the whole Abbott Collection, later transferring it to the Brooklyn Museum), in its *Cat. of Eg. Antiquities* (New York, 1915), in which the statue of Sekhemka is no. 169 (p. 13).

⁴ *Cat. of a Collection of Eg. Antiquities the Property of Henry Abbott, Esq., M.D.* (Cairo, 1846). On p. 35 the contents are dated 1843 and the name Joseph Bonomi appended.

⁵ In the obituary notice of the marquis in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, N.S. 35 (Jan.-June, 1851), 427, it is stated that he hurried home from Egypt to preside over the annual meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute at Oxford. This meeting took place between June 18 and 25, cf. *Archaeological Journal*, 7 (1850), 317.

acquiring good antiquities from dealers and other collectors,¹ but also of seeking them out at the principal sites. His statements on provenance may, therefore, have greater reliability than is often the case with nineteenth-century ascriptions of origin. Apart from Abbott's explicit statement, Saqqara as the provenance is favoured by the style and quality of both statues of Sekhemka. The merits of the fifth-dynasty school of sculpture, which existed to serve the needs of the Memphite necropolis, have rightly been much praised.² There are good reasons for regarding the Northampton and Brooklyn pieces as products of this school on stylistic and iconographic grounds. Both pieces, but particularly the Northampton group, show a high standard of workmanship and finish, while yet lacking the outstanding individual characteristics found in some of the work from Saqqara of early Fifth Dynasty date. A date late in the Fifth Dynasty is suggested by the fact that the eyes of the Northampton piece are not inlaid, by the type of the same piece, which is a family group, and finally, by the presence of carved relief on the sides of the seat.³ It may be the case that the Northampton statue of Sekhemka cannot be included in the small group of master sculptures which especially distinguish Old Kingdom art; it remains, nevertheless, a piece of fine quality. There can be little doubt that the Brooklyn statue of the same man was originally also a splendid small-scale work. It is a matter of regret that the tomb of this Sekhemka is unknown; it might well contain fine reliefs, if one may judge from the quality of the statues provided for his burial.⁴

¹ See Dawson's remarks, *JEA* 35, 161, n. 8.

² See, for example, W. S. Smith, *Art and Arch. of Anc. Eg.* 66 ff.

³ For the analysis of the characteristics of late Fifth Dynasty sculpture from Saqqara, see W. S. Smith, *Eg. Sculp. and Paint. in the O.K.* 77 ff.

⁴ For the various other burials made for officials named Sekhemka, see Porter and Moss, *Top. Bibl.* III, and W. S. Smith in Reisner, *Tomb Development*, 390 ff.; Baer, *Rank and Title*, 129-30.