**Scribe Statues**

To examine this topic, I focused mainly on the famous ‘Louvre Scribe’ statue shown in slide one. The statue is limestone, painted with three different colours, and 53.7cm high- this height might relate to the Egyptian measurement of the cubit. The statue sits on a semi-circular base. The right hand has the thumb and forefinger held together in a writing position, and the space between the fingers is hollowed out suggesting that the scribe could have held a writing instrument at some point, perhaps made of a perishable material like reed. The carving is extremely fine; the ears are partially disengaged from the head and the space between the arms and the body is hollowed out. The eyes are inlaid with white magnesite which is naturally veined with red, making them astonishingly lifelike. The pupil is inlaid rock crystal. An inlaid copper band surrounds the eyes.

The mouth is unusually thin, with the musculature around the mouth, the philtrum and the bony structure of the face beneath the skin easily perceptible. The line of the collarbones is carved and the statue has a very fleshy torso marked by rolls of fat. This realistic rendering of a well-padded body is maintained even at the back of the statue, as shown by the swags of fat on either side of the spinal groove. This attention to detail at the rear is interesting when one considers the frontality of this statue- it was probably never viewed from the back and perhaps only the front was visible to a viewer. The nipples on the front of the statue are inlaid wood. In keeping with the fleshy appearance of the statue, there is not much musculature visible in the arms, but the hands and arms are carved extremely carefully, which is perhaps connected with the scribal pose. The nails of each of the fingers are carved individually and both hands are hollowed out and the palms creased.

The feet are more naturalistically treated than is usual in Old Kingdom Egyptian statues; the right foot is turned out to face the viewer (see slide two). Unusually, only three toes are shown; the bottom two presumably to be thought of as hidden in the base of the statue. Some work has been done to determine the method of construction used for the eyes. X-rays have shown that the rear of the eyes is unpolished and covered with a layer of organic material that seems both to act as an adhesive and also to make the iris appear coloured from the front. There is a perforation of a few millimeters in depth at the rear of the rock crystal; this serves as the pupil. The copper banding is not in fact a band but more like a ‘pocket’ for the magnesite of the eye; the shape can be seen in the photograph in the bottom right of slide two.

The scribe has no inscription and although ‘excavated’ by Mariette from Saqqara (perhaps- see later) it has no proper provenance known so we can say nothing about the identity of the person depicted other than that he must have been a member of the high elite.

Scribe statues are one of the rare types of Egyptian statuary which does not have a royal equivalent, and is also unusual as it shows the subject in action, not at rest. There are over 60 examples from the Old Kingdom, appearing in the fourth dynasty but mostly from the fifth and sixth dynasties. This scribe’s flabby appearance was interesting to me; as can also be seen in the statue of Hemiunu and that of Setka in slide 3, the well-fed appearance of an administrator who was rich and skilled enough to have a life free of strenuous labour seems to have been an ideal in the Old Kingdom. Yet we never see this ideal in depictions of the king at this time, since he is always strong and youthfully muscled. This difference in ideal underlines the differences in the way kings and private citizens were thought about and liked to present themselves.

Christiane Ziegler of the Louvre dates the seated scribe to dynasty four, partly on its similarity to the scribe statue of Setka (slide three) and also the similarity of the thin-lipped mouth of Djedefre (slide four). The other Louvre scribe statues in slides three and four are dated to dynasty five. The unusual turned out foot with three toes visible is also only paralleled by the famous Cairo statue of the dwarf Seneb (slide 5). I would dispute this dating on a number of grounds: firstly, the statue of Seneb is of disputed date, with estimates ranging from late fourth to sixth dynasty. The use of the unusual feature is certainly striking but since we have no firm date for Seneb we cannot use it as dating evidence for the seated scribe. Secondly, the Louvre scribe has his arms disengaged from his body, a feature which Setka certainly doesn’t have, but the fifth dynasty Cairo seated scribe shown in slide 5 does. The Louvre scribe also has inlaid eyes, again a feature which is not exhibited by Setka but is by the Cairo seated scribe, dated to the fifth dynasty. The research into the full corpus of scribe statues by Scott in 1989 suggests that all the securely dated fourth dynasty examples of the scribe statue are made of hard stone (not white limestone like the Louvre scribe), have the standard full, flaring Old Kingdom wig (as Setka does but not the Louvre scribe), and that all are ‘king’s eldest sons’: admittedly the Louvre scribe has no inscription but since the inscription does not seem to have been lost or damaged it seems a little strange that a king’s eldest son would be given an unfinished statue. I would also point out that the outside leg of the Cairo seated scribe (slide 5) is broken, and I can see no reason from the remains why that leg could not be turned out in the same way as the Louvre scribe’s and Seneb’s are. Even if Seneb is to be dated to the late fourth dynasty, this would not preclude an early fifth dynasty date for the Louvre scribe, or a date at the very end of the fourth dynasty but whose stylistic features fit much better into fifth dynasty trends. It should also be borne in mind that fourth dynasty examples of the scribe statue are far rarer than fifth dynasty ones. The use of the technology of inlaid eyes certainly seems to point to a fifth dynasty date (cf. for example the Sheikh el-Beled statue).

A note on the provenance of this statue: Mariette discovered the seated scribe with several other Old Kingdom statues in his excavations at the Serapeum in the mid-19th century. He does not note which building in which they were found, only that they came from north of the alley of the sphinx. A well known enemy of Mariette’s, Prisse d’Avennes, not long after claimed that Mariette had in fact bought them from a Jew in Cairo, M. Fernandez, who got these statues from Abusir. Ziegler suggests that even if this is not true, the few notes we do have from Mariette’s excavations suggest that he could have come across a stash of statues left by a local antiquities dealer to recover later. Therefore, unfortunately, the provenance of the seated scribe remains mysterious and cannot help us with the dating question.