

FALSE-DOOR STELE OF MEREF-NEBEF

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In September 1997, the Polish-Egyptian Archaeological Mission at Saqqara, directed by Prof. Karol Myśliwiec, working in the area west of the pyramid of Djeser, discovered a funerary stele of the Old Kingdom.¹

PROVENANCE: Saqqara, northeastern corner of the area excavated in 1997, square I/E, northeast of eastern mud-brick wall.²

DIMENSIONS: Height: 88.4 cm; width: 111.2 cm; thickness: 40.8 cm.

MATERIAL: White, slightly yellowish, fine-grained limestone of compact structure.

DESCRIPTION: The upper part of the stele³ is missing, the surface of the lower part is badly eroded. The upper part of the preserved fragment is broken off at several places. The back of the stele is plain.

The main field is framed with a *torus*, composed symmetrically, and divided into three jambs on each side. The inscriptions and figural representations are

carved in sunk relief, about 5 mm in depth. The inscription on each of the inner jambs consists of one vertical column of signs (A and D). The text on each middle jamb (B and E) also consists of one vertical column, but the name of the owner is written horizontally in this case. On each outer jamb, there are two columns of text (C1-2 and F1-2) and again, the name of Meref-nebef is written horizontally at the bottom of the text (C3 and F3).

On each jamb, below the text, a small figure of the owner of the stele is represented standing with a stick and a *hrp*-scepter. The man wears a long curled wig, *wsh*-collar and a knee-long stiff skirt. In front of the owner's face, the sign *ꜥ* (R9) is carved, a fact which is difficult to explain.⁴

In the middle part of the stele there is a door marked, decorated with two *wdꜣt*-eyes. The drum (G) was inscribed with the name and title of the owner, remains of which are still visible.

¹ Cf. K. Myśliwiec, *PAM IX, Reports 1997* (1998), p. 92, fig. 2; Myśliwiec, *Nowe oblicza Sakkary* (Tuchów 1998), fig. 19, 20. The author hereby would like to express sincere thanks to the Director of the mission, Prof. Karol Myśliwiec, for permission to publish this stele and for his help during the study of this monument.

² Cf. K. Myśliwiec, T. Herbich, Polish research at Saqqara in 1987, *EtTrav XVII* (1995), pp. 177-203; K. Myśliwiec, *PAM VII, Reports 1996* (1997), pp. 103-109; Myśliwiec, *PAM IX*, op. cit., p. 90f.

³ Concerning this category of monuments: A. Rusch, *Die Entwicklung der Grabsteinformen im Alten Reich*, *ZÄS* 58 (1923), pp. 101-124; A. Badawy, *La stele funéraire sous l'Ancien Empire, son origine et son fonctionnement*, *ASAE* 48 (1948), pp. 232-243; S. Wiebach, *Die ägyptische Scheintur (=HAS 1)* (Hamburg 1981).

⁴ The usual lecture of the sign R9: *bd* (natron) does not seem to make sense. One would rather expect a title or name in this place, but the sign does not occur in any title or name in the inscriptions decorating the tomb itself.

TEXT

A) Left inner jamb:

[...]-*p^c h3hty-^c smr wcty Mr.f-nb.f*

[Pr]ince, Count, Sole Friend, Meref-nebef;

B) Left middle jamb:

[...]-*t hry sšt3 n Pr-dwlt Mr.f-nb.f*

[...] Master of Secrets of the Robing-Room,⁵ Meref-nebef;

C) Left outer jamb:

1. [...] *sb3 Hr hntypt im3h(w)*

[... Administrator] of the “*sb3 Hr hntypt*”-domain,⁶ honoured one,

2. [...] *i]m3hw hr 'Inpw Tpy-dw.f*

[... h]onoured by Anubis-Who-Is-Upon-His-Hill,

3. *Mr.f-nb.f*

Meref-nebef;

D) Right inner jamb

[...]-*p^ct h3ty-^c smr w^cty Mr.f-nb.f*

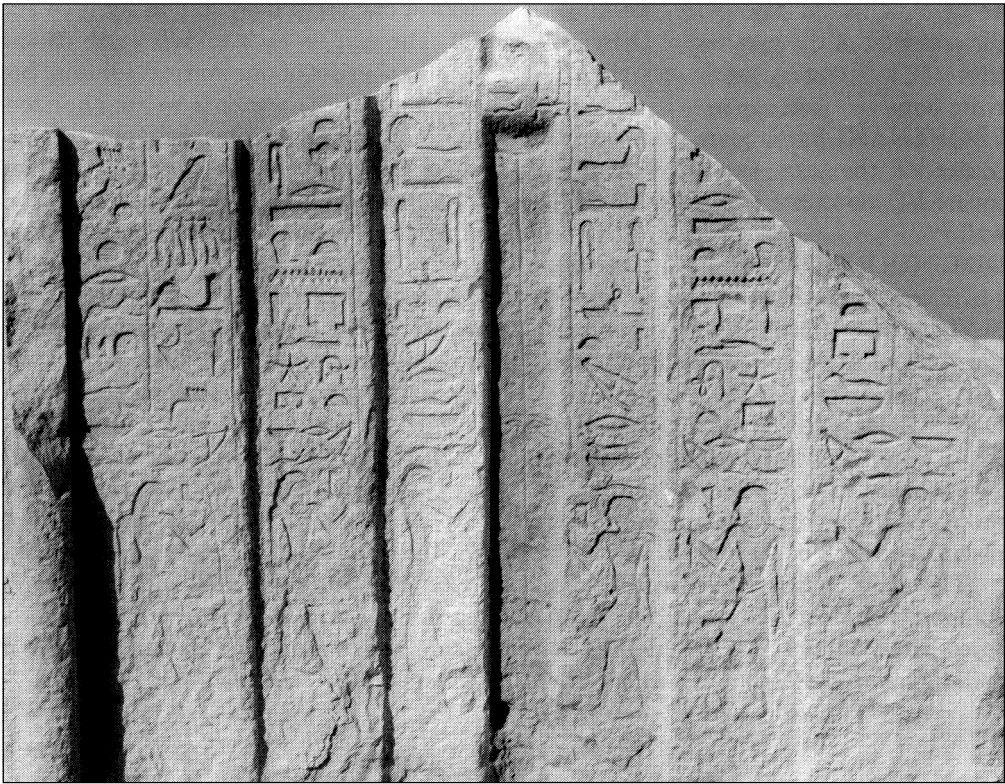


Fig. 1. Stele of Meref-nebef
(Photo: Z. Kość)

⁵ Master of the Secrets of the Robing-Room: cf. A.M. Blackman, *JEA* 5 (1919), pp. 148-165; W. Helck, *Untersuchungen zu den Beamtentiteln des ägyptischen Alten Reiches* (= AA 18) (Glückstadt 1954), pp. 43-44, 66, 68; N. Strudwick, *The Administration of Egypt in the Old Kingdom* (London 1985), 312.

⁶ ‘*d-mr sb3 Hr hntypt*’ - Administrator of the „*sb3 Hr hntypt*”-domain: Wb V, 430 [8]; Helck, op. cit., p. 68; E. Martin-Pardey, *Untersuchungen zur ägyptischen Provinzialverwaltung bis zum Ende des Alten Reiches* (=HAB 1) (Hildesheim 1976), pp. 45, 50, 52.

[Pr]ince, Count, Sole Friend, Meref-nebef;

E) Right middle jamb:

[...] *hry* [s]št3 n Pr-dw3t Mr.f-nb.f

[...] Master of [Se]cret of the Robing -
Room, Meref-nebef;

F) Right outer jamb:

[...] *t.f nb*

[...] *r nsw*

Mr.f-nb.f

G) Drum:

smr wty [Mr.]f-nb.f

Sole Friend [Mer]ef-nebef.

COMMENTARY:

B and E: The title *hry sšt3 n Pr-dw3t* appears in the inscriptions in the chapel of Meref-nebef⁷ (in the sequence: *iry-p^{ct} - h3ty^c - smr wty - hry-hbt - hry sšt3 n Pr-dw3t*) as well as on its façade (*iry-p^{ct} - h3ty^c - smr wty - hry sšt3 n nswt m st.f nb - smr hrp^ch - hry sšt3 n Pr-dw3t*). In

the case of this false door stele, the existence of the *t* sign above *hr* indicates, that *hry sšt3 n Pr-dw3t* could be preceded only by the title *smr wty*. Inscriptions on both the middle jambs can be reconstructed as follows: *iry-p^{ct} - h3ty^c - smr wty - hry sšt3 n Pr-dw3t*.

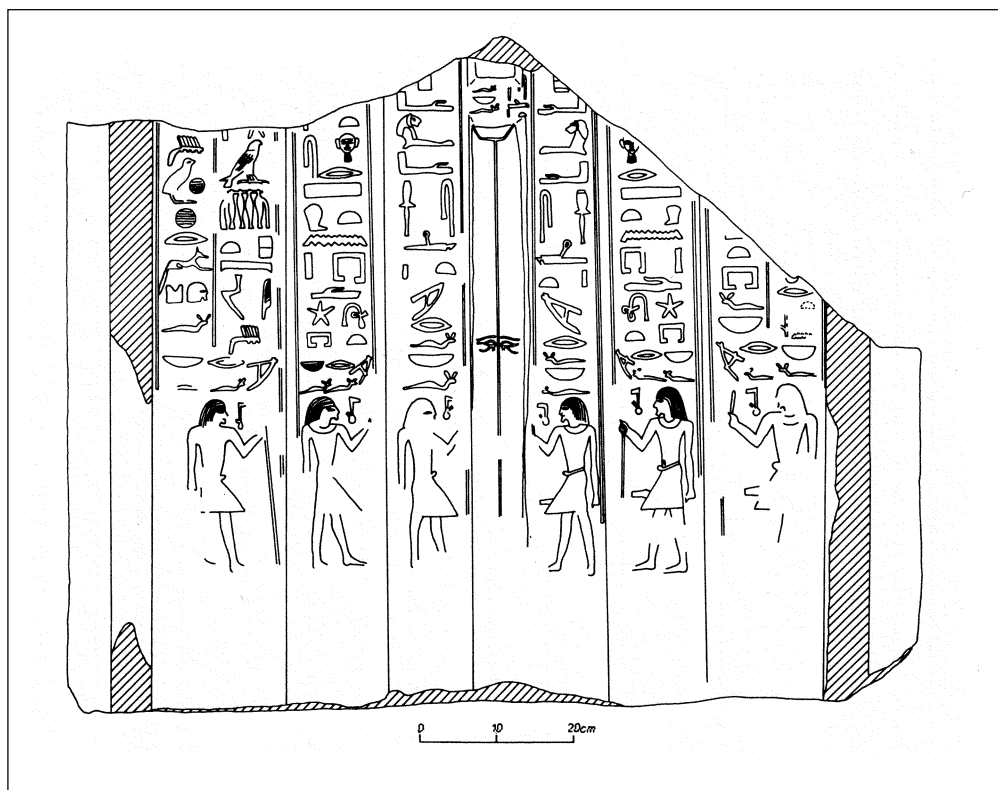


Fig. 3. Stele of Meref-nebef
(Drawing K. Kuraszkiwicz)

⁷ Myśliwiec, PAM IX, op. cit., p. 96, fig. 4.

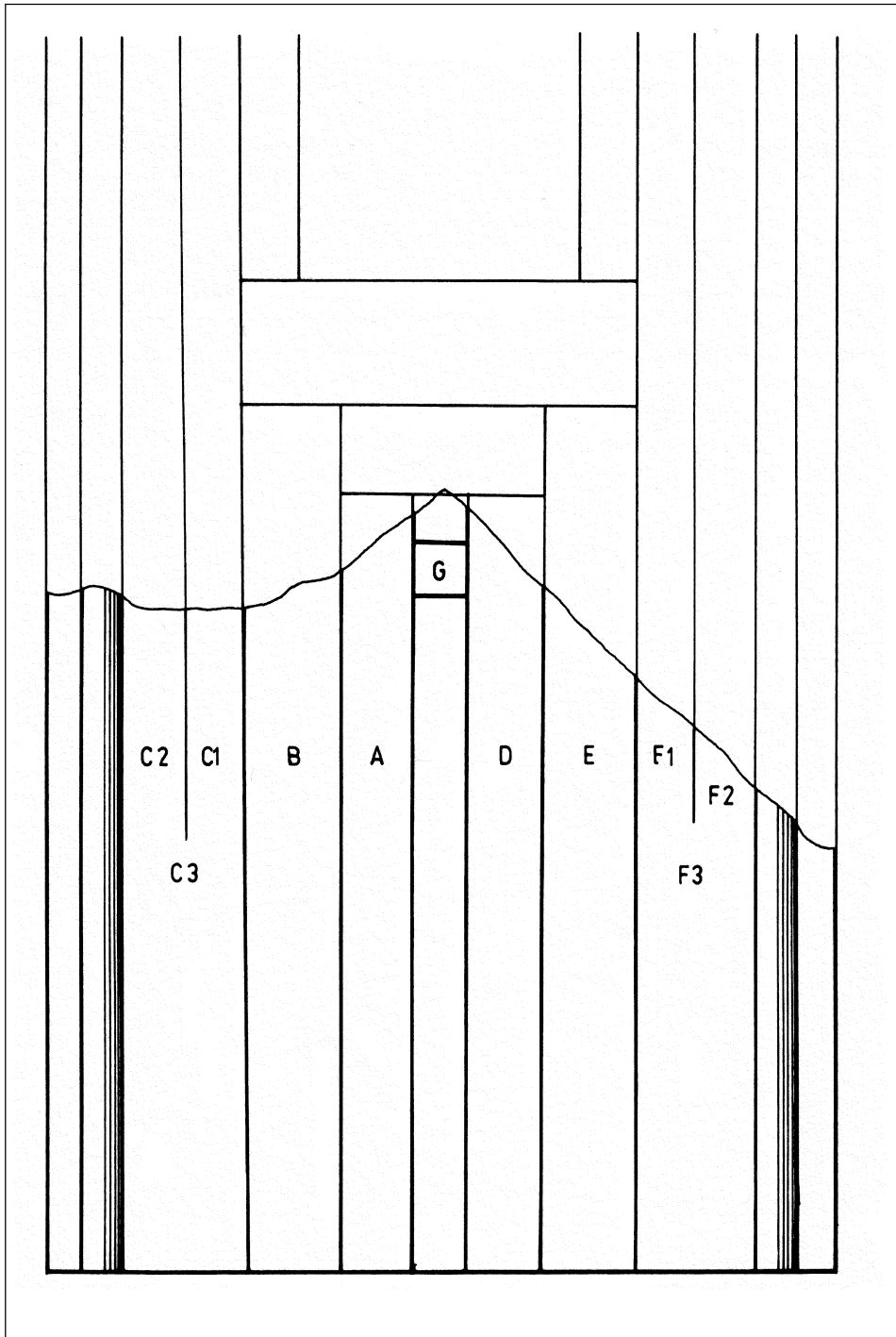


Fig. 4. Schematic drawing of false-door decoration
(Drawing K. Kuraskiewicz)

C1: The words *sb3 Hr hnty pt* should belong to the title *ḏ-mr sb3 Hr hnty pt*, which appears in the chapel, following the sequence: *iry-p^ct - h3ty-^c - smr w^cty - iry nfr-h3t - imy ib nb.f - hry sšb3*. The same title is mentioned on the southern "jamb" of the façade. There it follows the titles of the vizier: *iry-p^ct h3ty-^c h3ty sšb3 Bty*.
F1: The sign *pr* could be a determinative of the word *st* in the phrase (...) *n nswt*

m st.f nb, which occurs accompanying various titles of the tomb owner.⁸ However, in these cases the word *st* is written without a determinative.

2: The sign *r* should belong to the phrase [*im3hw h*]*r*, resembling column C1; seen below it traces of the hammered out word *nswt*.⁹

G. Traces of the sign *mr* and the title *smr w^cty* can be seen.

CONCLUSION:

It seems that nearly all the titles of Meref-nebef (mentioned in the inscription on the stele) were in his times (i.e., in the late Old Kingdom) merely honorific in nature.¹⁰ The surviving part of the stele does not bear any administrative or court titles which could be associated with any real function in the service of a king.

The fragmentary and selective sequence of titles observed on the stele cannot be precisely dated.¹¹ The only certain dating element is a pair of *wḏ3t*-eyes in the middle part of the stele, unknown

before the end of the sixth dynasty.¹² The false-door stele of Meref-nebef most probably belonged to the small cult-chapel added to the east wall of the tomb superstructure.¹³ This, as well as the paleography and style of the relief, indicates that the stele is relatively late and should be dated to the end of the sixth dynasty.

The vizier named Meref-nebef is not known from historical records. The tomb and the stele found by the Polish-Egyptian Mission have provided the first evidence of this dignitary.

⁸ e.g. *hry sšb3 nswt m st.f nb, smr w^cty imy ib n nsw m st.f nb*.

⁹ In many places of the tomb the word *nswt* in the phrase *im3hw hr nswt* is hammered out for unknown reasons. In one case (on the southern side of the chapel's entrance), it was replaced with the word *smi*t (desert, i.e., necropolis), see Myśliwiec, Nowe oblicza, op. cit., fig. 34. This phrase was used almost exclusively by the family and the nearest attendants of the king (cf. G. Lapp, *Die Opferformel des Alten Reiches* (=SDAIK 21) (Mainz 1986), p. 212, § 362.

¹⁰ Strudwick, op. cit., p. 312.

¹¹ E.g. according to K. Baer, *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago 1960).

¹² Wiebach, op. cit., pp. 160-163.

¹³ The chapel was excavated in the 1998 campaign, see report by K. Myśliwiec in this volume.