Predynastic periods, Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom
1.24 Two relief slabs of Nyankhnesut

Limestone.
Old Kingdom, early Dynasty 6, c. 2323 – 2291 BC.
Left panel: H. 64.5 cm, W. 23.5 cm, D. 5.5 cm.
Right panel: H. 61.5 cm, W. 29.5 cm, D. 5.0 cm.
Provenance: Saqqara.

The village of Saqqara has given its name to the central part of the necropolis of Memphis, the capital of Ancient Egypt for most of its 3000-year history. This huge city of the dead, the largest anywhere in the world, stretches from Abu Roash, just north of Giza, to Medum, some 75 km further to the south. The part which we now call Saqqara is the area closest to the city of Memphis itself. Among the vast number of tombs from all major periods of Egyptian history that have been built there, hundreds of so-called mastaba tombs date to the Old Kingdom, particularly Dynasties 5 and 6, and many of these have been decorated with painted reliefs. The decipherment of the hieroglyphic script by Jean-François Champollion in 1822 gave rise to a sudden increase of scholarly and public interest in Egyptian antiquities, and museums in Europe began to acquire these in large numbers. Many monuments, particularly at Saqqara, were dismantled and the reliefs, statuary and other parts of the tombs were removed by local dealers and sent to Europe and later also to America, usually without any record being made of their provenance or position within the monument in question. This practice flourished particularly in the 1820s and 1830s, but continued to a lesser degree for nearly a century.

The tomb of Nyankhnesut, from which the present reliefs come, “holds the rather sad dispersion record among ancient Egyptian tombs”, close to sixty pieces are scattered among museums and private collections all over the world. Many of these pieces, including the two relief slabs presented here, passed through the hands of the dealer Dr Jacob Hirsch. The tomb appears to have been discovered around 1917 and was said to be “already in ruins” at that time. The exact location of the tomb within the necropolis remained unknown until January 2000, when it was rediscovered by the inspectors of the Saqqara office of the Supreme Council of Antiquities close to the north-west corner of the enclosure of Sekhemhket. It is a fairly large mastaba measuring some 20 m from the entrance to the rear wall of the innermost chamber; there are five rooms and a long corridor.

The chambers within Old Kingdom mastabas are normally decorated in raised relief, and the pieces belonging to Nyankhnesut in various collections are no exception. Sunk (incised) relief is usually limited to the façade of the tomb and to door jambs, lintels, pillars, and the false-door stela which was the focal point of the offering chapel. The original location of the two relief slabs in the present collection cannot yet be established with certainty. As can be seen on some of the excavation photographs published so far, the lower parts of the jambs of the false door stela, most of which is still in situ against the west wall of the innermost room (F), have been sawn out and at first sight this appears to be a likely provenance for the panels. The measurements of the jambs do not agree with those on the panels, however, and the inscriptions carved on the panels do not continue directly from those in situ on the false door. The spelling of the name of Nyankhnesut on the panels is also different to that used throughout the inscriptions on the false door. By contrast, this spelling and the layout of the signs, as well as the standing figure of Nyankhnesut underneath, are exactly similar to that on two square pillars in room D of the mastaba. The latter appear to be complete, however, and we can therefore only assume that our panels come from a further, no longer extant square pillar elsewhere in the mastaba or in adjacent, as yet unexplored rooms nearby.

The decoration of the two slabs is simple: each has a standing figure of the tomb owner facing inwards; above him are four hieroglyphs spelling his name, Nyankhnesut. Above the name on the left-hand panel the feet and tail of a bird-sign can be seen, possibly part of the writing of one of Nyankhnesut’s many titles, “overseer of secrets”. As is so often the case with high officials of the Old Kingdom, many of the titles enumerated in the tomb link him with the court and with the king personally (“confidant of the king in his every place”); some of them may be honorific rather than real titles. On the other hand, Nyankhnesut bore several priestly titles, and this may have been his chief occupation in life. Thus he was “chief lector priest”, “sem priest”, “overseer of the secrets of heaven” and “greatest of seers in Heliopolis”, i.e. high priest of the sun god Re.

These priestly functions are reflected in the different costumes Nyankhnesut is seen wearing on each panel. On the left he wears the simple kilt with triangular apron knotted at the waist which was fashionable at the time. Wrapped around his left shoulder, chest and back is the distinctive sash of a cult priest, the end of which is tucked into the kilt. In his right hand Nyankhnesut holds a horizontal object, most likely the end of a
1.25 False-door stela of Ankhef

Limestone.
First Intermediate Period, (c. 2150 – 2040 BC).
From Ehnasya el-Medina.
H. 92 cm, W. 56 cm, D. 8 cm.

The false door is one of the most characteristic elements of an Ancient Egyptian tomb, particularly in the Old Kingdom. It was originally part of the north exterior wall of the mastaba, but in the course of time was moved inside the tomb to the west wall of the offering chapel. Many tombs have more than one false door, however, and some have them both inside and outside. The false door is an imitation in stone of a real door made of wood and reed matting. It can be hewn directly out of the rock face in the case of a rock-cut tomb, or constructed of separate building blocks in free-standing mastabas. Often they are made of a single slab of stone, and in this case the term false-door stela is often used. The material is usually limestone; pink granite is very occasionally used as well, but only by the highest echelons of society with close connections to the king. Sometimes pink granite was imitated by painting a limestone false-door stela a mottled pink.

The false door marks the transition between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. Through it the deceased’s ka (spirit) can step forward and receive the food-offerings which his relatives or the professional ka-priest bring him every day. For this purpose an offering slab is usually put in front of the false door.

Over the course of the years many typological changes affected the false door, but the most important elements were nearly always present: the actual door in the centre, with a drum, imitating a rolled-up reed mat, above the opening; a panel above the door with a depiction of the deceased seated at a well-supplied offering table, and a single or several sets of doorjams inscribed with offering formulae and the name and titles of the deceased. Below these inscriptions there is usually a representation of the tomb owner standing, often holding a staff and a sceptre and dressed in clothes that express his status in life. On many false-door stelae a so-called torus moulding, a rounded edge imitating a bundle of reeds tied together with ropes, is added around the frame of the door. Above it is the hollow cavetto cornice decorated with stylized palm leaves.

Most of these elements can still be seen on the magnificent false-door stela of Ankhef, which dates from the period after the Old Kingdom. It is made of limestone,