The Menkaure Triad, Numerical Thinking, and Divine Configurations in Ancient Egypt

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In the numerical thinking of the ancient Egyptians, numbers served as a system of classification that was simple, but permitted complex thematic variations in the concepts of unity, difference, and plurality. The number three, for example, was considered the plural par excellence, and triads of gods were used to express familial relations (e.g. Osiris-Isis-Horus), modality (e.g. Khephri-Re-Atum), and unity (e.g. Amun-Re-Ptah). The statue of King Menkaure (of the Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4), the goddess Hathor, and the deified Hare nome is one such triad (Boston MFA 09.200). The statue was one of many excavated by George Andrew Reisner in 1908 in the temple of Menkaure’s funerary complex at Giza. The triad reveals the power structure of the Old Kingdom, exemplifies the religious beliefs of ancient Egyptians, and conforms to the aesthetic and artistic norms of ancient Egypt.

First and foremost, the statue affirms the king as a figure of great importance to Egyptian society; one who deserves to be immortalized in a hard and durable material for eternity. King Menkaure can be identified by the following royal icons: the mace, the White Crown of Upper Egypt, the wraparound kilt (shendyt), and the short tapering beard which adorns his chin. That he

2 Ibid, 33.
is depicted as the tallest figure might indicate the growing power of the Egyptian king from the Early Dynastic Period through the Old Kingdom. Initially, the king and his court, the “Followers of Horus,” traveled throughout Egypt to collect taxes, redistribute economic goods, and impose their rule on their subjects. Over time, the king and his residence became increasingly significant, while the importance of the provinces and their leaders waned. By the Old Kingdom, the top-down autocratic system of government developed during the Early Dynastic Period had become fully institutionalized: power was concentrated firmly at the center and kings were able to marshal the manpower and material to build pyramids from Dynasty 3 onwards. With all his concomitant monument-building, it is unsurprising that Menkaure also chose to represent his person and emphasize his importance through statuary.

Figure. The Menkaure Triad (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

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Besides the king, the statue also represents another aspect of the Egyptian state – the nome. The Hare nome has been personified as a female figure who wears a striated tripartite coiffure, a long tight-fitting dress, and a distinctive rabbit standard on her head. The depiction of this nome is in line with the division of the overall Egyptian territory into nomes, an outcome of the Old Kingdom process of internal colonization. Yet, the portrayal of the nome is also indicative of a system of provincial government that became more formalized and complex already in the Early Dynastic Period. As evidenced by how nomes were based upon natural flood basins along the Nile Valley, the logistical and economic demands imposed by state building projects necessitated the development of the provincial administration. These nomes, while important at the regional level, were ultimately less significant than the king, who governed the entire country. This is evident in the statue, for Hare is the smallest of the three figures featured.

Much as the statue shows how the king’s power was rooted in the profane world through the management of resources across Egypt, it would be remiss to omit the divine basis of Menkaure’s rule. The king is seen to be equal, if not superior to, the deities he is portrayed with. Not only is Menkaure shown as the tallest, but the features of his royal visage are replicated in the features of Hathor and Hare. Moreover, the king is embraced, in a gesture more so of association than of affection, by Hathor, the king’s divine mother and protector. Hathor, depicted as a human female with a headdress of cow’s horns and a sun disk, was associated with fertility, creation, birth, and rebirth. As such, her appearance in this triad guarantees the rebirth of the king. Like Hathor, the presence of Hare evokes a primordial historic-religious situation which legitimizes the rule of

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7 Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 47.
Menkaure. Hare recalls the Early Dynastic Period idea of gatherings of all Egyptian gods around
the king as their supreme deity and leader.10 In this manner, the statue asserts the king as a divinely
ordained representative in a polytheistic world.

This assertion had its roots in the religious development of the Early Dynastic Period. As
the state elevated the artificial construct of state religion to a position of preeminence, and as local
religious traditions declined through a lack of support, the king became seen as god.11 This was
because in the primordial and continuous struggle between the opposing forces of order (maat)
and chaos (isfet), the king’s defining and principal duty was not to serve merely as the head of
state, but to also serve as the guardian and defender of all creation. Such a belief concerning the
king’s role had two practical implications. Firstly, it minimized opposition to the king’s rule and
the institution of kingship. Such actions would have been blasphemous and nihilistic. Secondly,
the portrayal of Egypt’s neighbors as the forces of chaos, and the king as the protector against
them, created a strong national identity.12 Given the religious justifications for why the king was
crucial to Egypt’s survival and prosperity, Menkaure was understandably portrayed as a tall,
imposing figure armed with a mace.

Lastly, there is much to be said about how the statue was carved, and not just what was
carved. The faces and the anatomy of the figures are expertly rendered, as are the painted elements
such as facial cosmetics, mustache, necklaces, and details on the belt. The statue also shows how
artists were clearly comfortable with working with group statues, which had appeared already in
the reign of king Djoser of Dynasty 3 and which were attested throughout the Old Kingdom. The
artists had even worked around the problem of carving the thin and fragile shaft of Menkaure’s

10 Dieter Arnold, “Old Kingdom Statues in Their Architectural Setting,” in Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids
12 Ibid., 58.
mace by resting it on Hathor’s throne. In this way, the statue shows how Egyptian craftsmanship had reached a significant level of artistic mastery by Dynasty 4.

Additionally, the statue evinces how norms of style and proportion had developed by the Old Kingdom. The first of these was the well-defined attitudes (or body positions which suggest an action or state of mind) of Hathor seated, and Menkaure and Hare standing. By this time, statuary attitudes included seated, so as to receive offerings, standing to perform ceremonies or to be accompanied by gods, or kneeling to make offerings to the deities. The second norm reflected in the statue is its cubic form. Just as in private statuary, the subjects in this statue are placed on a base and supported with a back pillar. The third convention followed was asymmetry, which was emphasized along with frontality and axiality. The ears, eyes, and lips are slightly asymmetrical, as is the forward stride of the left foot. Lastly, the female figures of the statue are proportioned according to the Old Kingdom ideal of beauty, and fashioned with the subdued elegance that makes this period a highpoint of Egyptian visual art. Thus, the statue typifies artistic and aesthetic practices which characterized Egypt centuries before and after.

Overall, the triad appears highly similar to countless other Egyptian statues. Like the other triads found at Menkaure’s temple, it is a greywacke sculpture which depicts Menkaure connecting with Hathor and a personified nome through an embrace or by holding hands. However, it is the only one where Hathor is seated in the middle and not where the king is between Hathor and the personification of a nome, with all three figures standing. As such, the Hare-Hathor-Menkaure

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triad provides an interesting complication of the king’s central role in the Egyptian state and cosmos.

About the author

Formerly an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles, Wen Li Teng is a transfer student at the University of Chicago. Wen Li is currently pursuing a major in History.