RECASTING ANCIENT EGYPT IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT:

TOWARD A MODEL CURRICULUM USING ART AND LANGUAGE

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CHAPTER SIX

WRITTEN LANGUAGE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

One facet of the ancient Egyptian communication system (viz., the visual arts) has been treated fairly extensively in the foregoing chapters. Now we are compelled to examine the other facet of this system by looking at art's complement, written language.

In some academic circles today, and in most popular belief, the inaccuracy persists that Africans, particularly those of ancient times and/or from so-called "primitive" societies, were and are non-literate and that the continent of Africa did not develop a formal writing system of its own. The implication is that written language was not a contribution of African peoples. To dispel this misinformation, following a line of investigation and examination that looks at the cultures and civilizations at the source of the Nile valley arguably about 40,000 years ago, I will present updated evidence that Africans indeed had formal and informal written scripts and complete languages. For instance, the ancient Ethiopian Empire's Ge'ez and Amharic scripts, Sudan or Nubia's Meroe script, and the great civilization of Egypt with its hieroglyphics are examples of both formal and informal writing, that is, systematic as well as sign communication systems. However, since the information of written language covers such an extensive historical period, the decision has been made by the researcher to focus particularly on Egypt, because the Egyptians have the most complete history of written language available to modern scholars. Consequently, the following broad areas become central to this research: a working definition of language; the historical context that precedes written language in Egypt; features of informal and formal writing (grammar and function); and the legacy the ancient Egyptian language has left for the

Greeks and Romans and—by extension—all European cultures which in modern times have expropriated large parts of the extracultural space of Nile valley cultures for expansion and civil organization.

Definition of Language.

It is commonly accepted today that language is a complex phenomenon accounting for numerous forms of communicative behaviors. For example, writing, speech, all forms of non-verbal communication, signs, symbols, pictograms, and ideograms contribute to the linguistic complex. With these images in mind, the modern "speech-act" theory espoused by scholars in poetics and semiotics offers a corrective to the abstract individualized concept of language. Thus, students of linguistics, philosophy, aesthetics, criticism, anthropology, and the arts now have a way of moving beyond the realm of language as an autonomous, self-contained, and grammatical system into the arena of language as a sociocultural practice. Language then, can be defined as: all communicative behaviors that help the participant to construct and convey information that is meaningful, shared, organized, and dynamic.

Adding to the foregoing definition of language, Umberto Eco (1976) offers a most succinct definition of language through the use of semiotics. He conceives of language as a variety of systems of signification and communication (from verbal language to gesture, from visual images to body positions, from music to fashion). In this modern view of language, Eco's semiotic theory argues that there are a wide range of "languages" influenced by different conventions and laws that can be investigated at the elementary level, such as words, colors, physical formants of sounds, geometrical or topological shapes, and—at the more complex level of text and discourse—narrative structure and figures of speech. Most important to note is that the composition of any text requires productive labor to display features such as articulation of pseudo-combinational units, vectorializations, programmed stimulations, and stylizations (Eco 1976 :260).

Arguably, the written language of the Egyptian hieroglyphics is one of the best examples of what Eco and other deconstructivists conceive language to be. In the hieroglyph the semiotician is presented with fertile ground for the examination of sign/function communication.

A Short History Of Writing in Africa

In literature and popular text books it is the exception rather than the rule to find the African as contributor to the history of the written text. African cultures are generally considered exclusively oral. However, many African scholars have successfully challenged this narrow view of ancient Africa's literacy. For example, Gerald Massey (1881) and Theophile Obenga (in Van Sertima 1989), among others, argue that

to rediscover the African past, in the widest sense, ancient African cultures can speak for themselves when language, religion, myths, art, and symbols are the sources of information.

As a precursor to formal written language, archaeological evidence bears out that Nilolithic man—and in fact man from all over Africa—reserved public and sacred spaces which were clearly designated to communicate messages, both social and religious. These messages, one conjectures, were for teaching and possibly for the benefit of posterity. Many examples of visual communication in the form of ideograms, pictograms, scripts, and writing can be cited from the walls of rock art of the Atlas Mountains, the desert east of the Nile river just below the Delta, the central Sahara, East Africa, Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania, West Africa, Southern Africa, and Central Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe. In these "early ideograms," according to Rosalind Jefferies, although men were more frequently depicted,the images of women were unmistakably outstanding in postures of great significance. An instructive example is the many illustrations of women's roles: they are depicted in leadership roles, as heads of communities, as leaders in ritual ceremonies, as healers, hunters, warriors, as primordial Mother Creator with power of fertilizing and nurturing, as Giver of Life, and as mediators between the Spiritual and the concrete physical worlds. In essence, woman was the symbol associated with the protection and survival of the race (Rosalind Jefferies, in Van Sertima 1988).

As Africans sought more permanent communities around defined cultural practices, the need to succinctly perform written communication arose. Hence, definitive language systems were devised to capture their mythologies, religious beliefs, code of ethics for society, laws, and everyday life experiences. To gain a critical understanding of the written ancient African text, one must bear with the following discussion.

Chronology of the Informal Script

The situation of the informal written script in Africa can be traced to pictograms and ideograms. Pictograms were drawings used to convey messages, while ideograms were ideas conveyed in drawings. These early evidences of informal modes of writing mark the starting point for the evolution and change of record-keeping in ancient Africa.

As was alluded to earlier, archaeologist Mary Leakey (1971) recorded that in Tanzania, dating back to approximately 40,000 B.C. and earlier, pictograms and ideograms were employed to communicate messages. In addition to these finds in Tanzania, explorer Henri L'Hote found in the Sahara Desert, in Algeria, in Lybia, in Mali, and in the Sudan other examples of cave painting dating back to about 8000 B.C. The Zimbabwean and South African examples were much more recent, with a date of approximately 4000 B.C. Picture writing continued its

steady evolution into what some historians call "historic" times.

Notably, in "historic" times (or predynastic Egypt), the most sophisticated development of pictograms and ideograms can be seen on the Nubian incense burners from ca. 3300 B.C. discovered in old Sudan at a place called Ta Seti. Although numerous pictorial records can be cited throughout the period from 40,000 B.C. to 4000 B.C., it was not until the discovery of the picture writing of Ta Seti that the attention of archaeologists, historians, and linguists was captured.

Among the many painted vessels excavated at Ta Seti, the Qustul collection studied by William Flinders Petrie (1923), Bruce Williams (in Van Sertima 1989: 90-104), and others, holds the greatest significance. According to Williams, the incense burners from this collection encapsulate information about records of victory in battle, the rise of rulers to the throne, castles, temples, and, above all, the presence of the development of an official religion. He points out that the falcon-Horus symbol of the pharaoh—which would be the definitive symbol of royalty—was already developed. To illustrate the precursors of dynastic Egypt, Williams selects the popular *Archaic Horus Incense Burner* (see plate 30). Williams describes the three-ship galleon depicted thereon as follows: The first ship is the vessel with a captive held in submission. In the middle ship (even though the image is unfortunately almost destroyed) Williams detects the outstanding white crown of Upper Egypt and the falcon's tail in front of it, the falcon being another symbol of kingship. The third ship carries a rosette, which is yet another symbol of royalty before the first dynasty (Van Sertima 1989: 96-97).

In my research, this burner is critically important in the context of the documentation of ideas. Significantly, this incense burner was etched "in the sunken silhouette style related to rock drawing" (Van Sertima 1989: 96). The decision to remove the message from its stationary position (a rock wall) to a mobile object (an incense burner) could lead one to conjecture that the ancient Africans, Old Sudanese, Nubians, and ultimately the Egyptians were most conscious of the dispersal of the message, regardless of what it was. Hence the employment of the incense burner as a vehicle to convey a message, as opposed to the walls of a rock cave (which limited the broadcasting of the message), was a conscious and deliberate movement by the ancient Africans. Equally significant are the three clearly demarcated segments on the Horus Incense Burner, which can be read as three chronological sequences, as it were, from left to right. I would also suggest that the seeds of more elaborate media such as books and manuscripts were already planted in this artifact from the predynastic epoch of Egyptian history. (A more detailed discussion about the function of the text is forthcoming in this chapter.)

The question to be pursued is whether the unfolding evolution of documentation has any effect on what some scholars, including Gerald

Massey (1881), claim as the beginning of formal writing, the hieroglyphics (or *medu neter*) in northeast Africa about 3100 B.C.E. in Khemet. Massey posits that formal writing—in Egypt—precedes cuneiform (the script of the Sumerians in Mesopotamia), Sanskrit (the early writing in India), and the Chinese calligraphy found on bones.

In an effort to advance the argument for the ancient Africans' contribution to writing, other predynastic examples further chronicle this evolution. Aside from the very explicit pictograms, such as the one mentioned above of the Nubian Incense Burner, decorated pottery and pot marks provide the rudimentary beginnings of the hieroglyph. Following in the tradition of egyptologists such as Petrie and W.B.Emery (1961), William Arnett's (1982) work attempts to illustrate how such motifs were the "early means of expressing ideas or words" which were later used in the hieroglyphic lexicography (p.5).

Arnett believes that the incised markings on Predynastic and Protodynastic pottery are not mere decoration for adornment, but probably represent the idea of ownership (the property of someone) and authorship. Adding to the corpus of ideas about the significance of pot markings or pictures, John Wilson (in Hoffman, 1991) argues that the inscriptions served to indicate "that a standardized picture may be used as a symbol to convey words and that words which cannot easily be pictured may be conveyed phonetically by the rebus principle" (p. 293). It is significant that generally the markings occupied only a small selected area on the pottery and they did not compete with already decorated painted spaces. The speculation here locates pot marks as representing the need for people of the Nile Valley region to develop a parallel system of communication to complement the brilliant artistic narratives they are known for. Indeed, the late Predynastic Egyptians and Nubians were on the verge of developing a system of writing.

Against this background of the need to document ideas and words, it is important to examine these expressions without the use of the more elaborate pictorial narratives that characterized the modus operandi of communication. For example, in Predynastic Egypt, there were many symbols used to represent land, territory, region, country, and district. Arnett identifies several examples of the symbolic representation that indicated land of some sort. The symbol is "represented as a grid pattern with six parallel vertical lines [which are] intersected by three horizontal lines" (p.8) (see plate 31). He attempts to convince the reader that these motifs found at Tarkhan, Naqada, and Ka-Ap's at Abydos are related to the hieroglyph *sp›t*. Another example given by Arnett which conveys a geographical meaning, common in historical times and certainly still widely used today, is the *niwt*, an encircled Ⓧ. This symbol represented crossroads and was also used to indicate village or town. The *sp›t*. and the *niwt* belonged to the rubric of geographical expressions.

Added to the *sp›t.* and *niwt*, the semicircle represented one of the most basic ideogrammatic concepts of the predynastic and later Dynastic epochs. Henry Scott (1968) shows us through his illustrations that the semicircle symbolized a loaf of bread, a staple of the Predynastic peoples and their successors. Given the importance of bread, the semicircular symbol held a very important place in their repertoire of symbols. There are many examples of ideograms and pictograms, too many to chronicle in this work, but one cannot neglect to identify the overwhelming geometric characteristic of the symbols, such as straight lines, semicircles, circles, angles, and variants. In either instance, whether it was geographical or geophysical, the use of a geometrical shape was very common. Thus we find that hill slope (◺), according to Scott and others, was rendered as a triangle. Further, a joined series of triangles without bases (i.e., ∧∧∧) represents water as well as the phonetic symbol for the consonant *n* which is pronounced as "n"(as in *noon*). Similarly, the oval shape (⬭) used to represent mouth is the phonetic symbol for the consonant r, which is pronounced as "r" (as in *right*).

In the final analysis, the so-called "primitive" hieroglyph on pots and palettes, which some have identified as approximately 3,000 motifs, allow egyptologists to identify the beginnings of political identity and geography through the symbol of the crown (both white for lower and red for upper Egypt). According to Arnett, the hawk motifs found on Badarian pottery and palettes of predynastic times are remarkably similar to the hieroglyphic hawks which evolved into falcons (see plate 32), and were used on standards to identify the "Followers of Horus," the king, in late predynastic times and throughout pharaonic rule for almost three thousand years. Other significant motifs which are clearly from predynastic Badari and Naqada were continued on standards and in the hieroglyph corpus of dynastic Egypt. These include the jackal, the hawk, the cow, the bull, and the serpent. In addition to these motifs (hawk, serpent, and jackal) functioning in politico-royal capacities, they also served to represent deities and spirits sought by the people for daily protection. One can speculate on two major steps toward organized and civilized societies: (1) that there was an attempt to recognize people along lines of distinct groups (society); and (2) that there was a corpus of ideas that contributed to their belief system (the cow for instance, symbolized the Sky goddess, Hathor, who was worshiped in dynastic times).

The argument that the pictograms and ideograms of predynastic Egyptians indeed subscribed to the Egyptian writing system is very controversial and it is difficult to find any consensus, for the very definition of writing is constantly challenged by those embroiled in this controversy. However, regardless of the function of pot marks, palette reliefs,

and paintings, Petrie and other egyptologists have shown us that the connection between the forerunner (Predynastic motifs) and the full-fledged Egyptian hieroglyphics cannot be totally denied. More careful investigation is still needed to put this issue to rest.

Even more tenuous is the argument over the racial identity of those who peopled the region of the Nile Valley, before and during dynastic Egypt. The claim of my research, *The Ancient African Tradition of Writing*, by implication, places me at the center of this controversy. Since this argument is well documented earlier in this text, I shall direct the reader to those sources that address the issue of racial origin most persuasively. For example, the controversial "Dynastic Race" theory advanced by those who would trace the origins of the pre-dynastic and dynastic Egyptians to either Aryan, Asiatic, Hamitic (white), or mixed races (see Hoffman 1991: 293), has been constantly challenged and debated by many African historians such as George G. M. James (1954), Chancellor Williams (1976), Yosef ben-Jochannan (1989), Cheikh Anta Diop (1976, 1989, 1991), and a long list of researchers of the African historical contributions to human civilization.

One must be aware that there are still some people who will continue to argue that Predynastic and Dynastic Egyptians were not Africoid despite overwhelming evidence from Egyptian mythology, linguistic links, physical human characteristics, many examples of cultural unity of ancient Black Africa (e.g., matriarchy, royalty, symbolism, art, and religion) and scholars invoking the writings of ancient Greek eye-witnesses such as Herodutus, Strabo, and Diodorus Siculus. Those who argue that the ancient Egyptians were Africans, especially in the Predynastic and Old to Middle Kingdoms, and those who oppose this position, simply reflect how sharp disagreements are an integral part of history and academia at large. Regardless of the stance, what cannot change is that ancient Egypt was by definition an African civilization, and that even today Egypt remains part of Africa.

Beginnings Of Formal Writing in Africa

Now that the backdrop for the hieroglyph has been set, we can proceed to examine the formal writing system of the Egyptians.

Students of the hieroglyph and egyptologists have identified The Narmer Palette of 3100 B.C. as one the oldest surviving historical records of early Egypt (see plate 33 A and 33B). According to Lenore and Henry Scott (1968), among others, The Narmer Palette is a commemorative piece which affords some insight into the period just before the First Dynasty in Egypt. Bruce Williams (in Van Sertima 1989) tells us that the palette depicts the king's victory (*recto*) and the political unification (*verso*) of Lower and Upper Egypt into what marked the beginning of 3,000 years of continuous civilization, which is the longest

known period for any culture (p.90). The palette displays a number of fully developed hieroglyphs. For example, in the main scene (*recto*), the king (believed to be Narmer-Menes) is wearing a White Crown, which represents Upper Egypt. He is shown defeating his enemy. Just above him to the right, there is a vignette which depicts a falcon holding a rope leading from a man's head. Significantly, the head is combined with the "land" sign (see plate 33 B) and with the papyrus plants (which represented the inhabitants of the northern, papyrus-growing delta land). On the opposite (*verso*) side of the palette, the king is wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt. Narmer is accompanied by standards and servants while reviewing the slain enemy. What we find on this palette is not a mere story of political unification of the two lands but also readable characters from the hieroglyphic repertoire such as the *crown* (a common hieroglyhic determinative) which signified royalty, the *falcon* or symbolic representation of the god-king (a bilateral), and the symbol for *land*.

Among the phenomena of ancient Egypt, writing developed much faster than any other area of the culture. The hieroglyphs were recorded everywhere, from monuments to everyday objects and personal letters. The abundance of written material indicates that there was already an appreciable level of literacy in early Egypt. What gives this speculation some support is the fact that the profession of scribe and its designated deity, Thoth, the patron god of writing and wisdom, were already highly revered. The scribe was kept busy, according to David Silverman (1991), copying religious treatises, legal documents, love poetry, and cures for veterinary problems (pp.1-2). In addition to these records that have survived, George James (1954) refers us to the several papyri of mathematics (namely, the famous Moscow papyrus); medical papyri with diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis; and the Pyramid Text, commonly called *The Egyptian Book Of the Dead* (which was translated by Wallis Budge in 1920). These texts are among the numerous writings left behind by the writing culture of ancient Egypt. Even though modern findings of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics are voluminous, the body of extant texts represents only a fraction of this highly literate culture. At the center of this culture were the highly regarded scribes. In fact, Silverman points out that the word *sesh*, "scribe," was among the most frequently used titles in ancient Egypt. Scribes constituted a very sizable bureaucracy of the ancient civilization of Egypt (p.33).

Concerning the deity of writing, according to Budge, the ancient Egyptians believed, from as early as predynastic times, that Thoth (also referred to as Tehuti) was a "self-begotten and self-produced" god who was responsible for the calculations and stability of the heavens, stars, and the earth; that he had mastered the laws of both "physical and moral conceptions" and that he had knowledge of "divine speech." Tehuti was also credited as the inventor of the sciences and arts, "lord

of books," "scribe of the gods," and "mighty in speech." He was viewed as the author of many of the funerary works which enabled the deceased to gain everlasting life. Tehuti's ability to write set him apart from even the highly revered Osiris, the god of the underworld, and Ra, the Sun god of whom he was the heart, i.e., mind, reason, and understanding (Budge 1969: 400-403). The textual evidence shows that Tehuti, the god of words, occupied quiet a prominent place in Egyptian culture, a telling indication of the importance attached to the spoken and written word.

The documentation of writing in ancient Egypt after 3100 B.C is copious. According to Lionel Casson (1965), in the earliest times, Dynastic Egypt possessed the all-important prerequisite tool for the advancement of successful centralized rule. The vehicle used to propel the transition of the political machinery from two separate lands into a unified nation of Egypt was writing. It was most important in the new epoch of Egyptian history to keep records, issue instructions, record poems, stories, essays, and narratives which, formerly, would have been committed to memory. *Literature was born in Egypt.* In addition to the aforementioned records, Casson reports that methods of calculating, say, time and space paralleled the development of writing. In this regard, the Egyptians were able to compute taxes accurately, survey the land with precision, measure weights and distances, create the calendar, and calculate time. Writing allowed for the genesis and advancement of medical sciences for which the Egyptians have received worldwide renown and recognition, even among skeptical classicists. Also, through the use of the pen, the early pharaohs were able to direct monumental projects, such as harnessing the Nile river by way of a system of tributary canals that reclaimed once flooded land (p. 14).

The fact that the ancient Egyptians have documented so many areas of their culture is ample reason for the researcher to investigate, though briefly, the features of the Egyptian hieroglyphics. In the earliest times, located by Silverman and Casson, the hieroglyphs were used to represent an idea, a word, a person, or a thing in a concrete and recognizable form. As the writing developed, Casson observes, most of the signs adopted phonetic values. Signs were used to stand for sounds and when combined with other hieroglyphs, the combinations were able to "spell out words that had nothing to do with what the pictures portrayed" (p. 141). An instructive example would be if one combined the picture of a *bee* with that of an *eagle*, resulting in the phoneme "beagle," or the combination of a *bee* and a *leaf* to be read "belief." In effect, the hieroglyph became much more than pictograms, which merely represent what was depicted, but rather, the combination of signs lent itself to the equivalent of what the linguist regards as phonetics.

Interestingly, Egyptian writing did not proceed at random. In fact, there are some clear lines of development which the written text fol-

lowed. Generally speaking, egyptologists have identified five generic stages of written language development in ancient Egypt. W.V. Davies (1987) cites the first stage, called Old Egyptian (2650—2135 B.C.), as the period when the first continuous texts appeared. At the second stage, Middle Egyptian (2135—1785 B.C.), the idiom appeared. (Also during this stage, the written text of the First Intermediate Period of the Middle Kingdom is regarded as "classical," as it was used in literary, religious, and monumental inscriptions until the time of Graeco-Roman domination over Egypt. However, the structure of the language remained close to that of Old Egyptian.) The third stage, Late Egyptian (1550—700 B.C.), saw the documentation of everyday language, particularly in secular documents. Late Egyptian was different from the former stages, notably in its verbal structure. As a continuation in the development of Late Egyptian, its successor, the Demotic written script, lasted from 700 B.C. to 5 A.D. The final evolution of the hieroglyph was called the Coptic script, and it is the only stage of the language where "vocalic structure is known and from which distinguishable dialects are recognized" (p.9). Despite the several styles of writing and other structural features throughout the course of almost three thousand years, all the script styles have had some noticeable relationship to the hieroglyph (see plate 34).

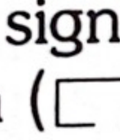
Development of the Hieroglyph

Now that some chronology of the evolution of the hieroglyph has been established, a close look at some of the features and functions of the written language in the early stages is appropriate. The early Egyptian "alphabet," unlike that of Europe, was not borrowed from another culture; the Egyptians simply selected 24 of their own heiroglyphs to represent 24 different consonantal sounds (see plate 35).

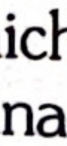
Most historical linguists are clear that there were no written vowels, but some caution must be exercised about such an extreme formulation, since a few letters seem to function in Egyptian like vowels do in English. These "semi-vowels" (a description Joseph and Lenore Scott [1968] give to the anomalies) are still technically considered consonants. Nonetheless, although the true vowels were omitted in writing in the early stages, the Egyptians inserted vowels in their correct places in spoken language, just as in today's Arabic, and other Semitic languages such as Hebrew (p.13).

Not unlike other areas of Egyptian life, there were some definite principles that governed the writing system. According to W.V. Davies (1987), the hieroglyphs are known to have three major types of signs, each of which functions differently. The first type of sign is identified as the *"logogram,"* which represents a complete word; second is the *"phonogram,"* which defines a sound—the phoneme of the language,

as it were; the third type of sign, the *"determinative,"* was used to make sure that a word's precise meaning was grasped. A point to be noted here is that logograms and determinatives are concerned with "sense" or "meaning" rather than sound and, as such, they are generically classified as *"semograms."* However, Davies cautions us that there are many instances of overlapping between categories where it is not always easy to distinguish semogrammatic and phonogrammatic usage. Even more complex is the fact that within each category, "sense-signs" and the "sound-signs," there are further variations. The superficially drawn lines of three categories of demarcation, then, are mere boundaries to give a sense of a working definition (p.32).

Examples which illustrate the three categories of the early hieroglyph might aid our understanding of the major principles that governed this writing system. Davies' example shows the simplest form of the logogram would be a word that is "directly represented by a picture of the object it actually denotes" (p.32). A disc with a small circle as its center signifies "sun" ( ) and a rectangle with one of its long sides broken () depicting the floor plan of a house, signifies "house" (pr). It is clear that a writing system that simply relied on logograms would be impractical, since thousands of signs would have been required to accommodate a very extensive vocabulary. Even more difficult, it would be very troublesome avoiding unclear and ambiguous definition for words that are not easily represented by pictures. In order to eliminate any ambiguity, it seems logical that the Egyptians had to devise another sign-vehicle to avoid possible confusion. That sign-vehicle was the phonogram.

Phonograms were derived, according to Davies, from "a process of phonetic borrowing, whereby logograms were used to write other words, or parts of words, to which they were unrelated in meaning but with which they happen to share the same consonantal structure" (p.31). By combining phonograms, or sound pictures, scribes were able to form a rudimentary version of a word. For example, "to express the three consonants for their word for crocodile, which may have been pronounced as "meseh, miseh or emseh" after vowels were added, the Egyptians combined three single consonant signs" (Lionel Casson1965: 152) (see plate 36). It is highly possible that a purely visual symbol of a crocodile may have been added for emphasis.

The purely visual symbol added to a word for emphasis is the third major category in the Egyptian writing system. Like phonograms, determinatives were also derived from logograms. These symbols were placed at the end of many words to ensure that the exact meaning was extrapolated. For example, a word indicating a person is walking, running, or advancing toward an object is followed by the determinative () which represents legs (Scott 1968: 22). Besides the function of the determinative just mentioned, the determinative served at least two other

important functions. First, if an intangible thought were to be expressed, a sign was needed to show that the idea was abstract. For instance, when the Egyptians wrote a word associated with hearing, the ear of an ox was often used. Second, since the written Egyptian text consisted of signs in a continuous sequence without a break for spacing, the determinative which usually followed the ends of the words served as breaks between recognizable words and sentences. A rubric, written in red, while the rest of the text was in black, sometimes served as the indicator for the beginning or ending of a sentence (Scott 1968: 23).

Direction of Writing

Generally speaking,the writing of texts in the hieroglyph was not done in a haphazard manner. Jaroslav Cerny (1952) has identified four different directions in which the text could be (and was) written: (1) from right to left, horizontally; (2) left to right, horizontally; (3) from right to left, vertically; and (4) left to right, vertically. To eliminate any confusion as to how a given text should be read, some rules were established. The reading direction was determined by the direction in which the "animals" and "people" were "facing" in the hieroglyphs. For example, if the faces were turned toward the left, that meant the text proceeded from left to right (see plate 37). Significantly, the right-to-left orientation was the most usual. Many experts have suggested that the preference for right-to-left orientation might have been influenced by the fact that most people are right-handed. In addition to the direction, one had to take into consideration that when one sign was placed above another, the top sign must be read first. Overall, a very deliberate sense of design and layout characterized the hieroglyph whereby the signs were not merely written in a linear sequence, but were displayed in an arrangement of "imaginary" squares. It is clear that the ancient Egyptians viewed the hieroglyph as more than writing but also as art. In fact, in Egyptian the symbol for "writing" was the same as that used to denote "art."

Having enunciated some of the features of writing orientation, it seems appropriate to examine briefly some typical sentence structure and grammatical features. It must be noted, however, that the discourse on Egyptian grammar is voluminous and complicated. To find rules and formulae to explain the grammatical structure of ancient Egyptian relegates its study to distortion. To avoid such distortion as well as long explanations of grammar and the many issues of Egyptian grammar, this research will address only a few important issues.

What follows is merely an abbreviated introduction to the grammatical structure of early Egyptian. According to Wallis Budge (1966), W.Davies (1987), and other scholars of Egyptian linguistics, sentences in Egyptian are loosely grouped into verbal and nonverbal. (Students

familiar with ancient Egyptian will know that the verb form is most problematic and controversial.) Davies declares that context is the most important factor in defining distinctions such as "tense and mood and the difference between main and subordinate clauses," which are not always clearly expressed in writing. His examples seek to illuminate the relationship between subject and predicate in nonverbal sentences which generally are not expressed in writing. In a literal English translation, an Egyptian text reads: "the sun in the sky." The verb *is* or *was* is omitted. But within the stated context, the verb *is* or *was* may seem appropriate to insert here. "The master in the house" is another example which illustrates the importance of how verbs are understood within a given context (p. 43). The 'absence' of the verb should not be a surprise; rather it is consistent with the implied vowel in early Egyptian.

In the instance of the verbal sentence, Davies also posits that "the predicate is the verb, most typically one belonging to the so-called suffix-conjugation," of which the basic pattern is verb stem + suffix pronoun (p.43). Joseph Scott (1968) adds that most of these sentences begin with a verb such as "ran, love, or wish" followed by the "subject," or person performing the action, for example, *I, you, boat,* or *it.* Next comes the received action of the person or object. Hence the normal verbal sentence sequence reads as follows: verb, subject, object (p. 58).

Morphology: Gender and Number

John B. Callender (1975) points out that in Egyptian nouns are identified by either of two genders, male or female. Male nouns have no special ending, but female nouns are identified by the half disc, which is equivalent to the *t* sound. For example, the male noun *sinw* means "doctor, physician" and *rri* means "boar, pig." In the case of the female gender, the noun *hijmt* means woman and *sndwt* means "kilt, skirt." With respect to number, Egyptian grammar distinguishes three: singular, plural, and dual. The plural ending for masculine is *w:* for example, *snw* means brothers; singular for brother would naturally be *sn.* For feminine case the plural ending is *wt,* thus, "sisters" would be *snwt;* singular case of sister *snt*). The dual form is used for pairs of things. The masculine dual ending is *wy,* thus, "two brothers" is *snwy.* In the actual hieroglyph, two male figures would be preceded by two parallel lines. In the feminine case the dual ending is *ty,* thus sisters would be *snty.* In the hieroglyph, one would see the half disc and two parallel lines before the representation of two kneeling women (p. 14).

According to Davies (1987), adjectives adapt their "gender and number from the noun they describe and are placed after the noun." For example, "good man" is *s nfr* and "good woman" *st nfrt;* "excellent brothers" is *snw ikrw,* "excellent sister" *snwt ikrwt* (pp.41-42).

Grammar

The corpus of Egyptian grammar is expansive, as is English grammar. Items of grammar include the articles, demonstrative pronouns, personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, dependent pronouns, prepositions, verbs, features of syntactic categories, and so forth. Since the present work cannot do justice to the full range of the grammatical features of the hieroglyph, the reader is referred to the voluminous works of Wallis Budge as well as Alan Gardiner's *Egyptian Grammar*, which lay out in detail the grammatical features of ancient Egyptian.

What did the Egyptians Write?

We know by now that the Egyptians spent enormous effort and time concretizing their ideas in writing. From the collection of books, manuscripts, papyri fragments, the pyramid texts, funerary texts, and inscriptions found on monuments all over Egypt, we have a wealth of testimony as to what this great civilization taught about itself. The following discussion will survey the functions of symbolism, mythology, religion, philosophy, the sciences, literature, and self-description in ancient Egypt.

The complex of philosophy, mythology, religion, and symbolism is viewed as the foundation of Egypto-Nubian civilization by many modern scholars of African history. Some of these scholars include George G. M. James (1954), Cheikh Anta Diop (1974; 1981), Theophile Obenga (1989), Yosef ben-Jochannan (1989), and Ivan Van Sertima (1989).

Obenga (in Van Sertima 1989) cites the translation of the "Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts" of the fourth, fifth, and sixth dynasties, as exemplary of what the Egyptians thought about the "universe before the present universe." The translation reads: "When I was born in Nun before the sky existed, before the earth existed, before that which was to be made firm existed, before turmoil existed, before that fear which arose on account of the Eye of Horus existed" (p. 291). This statement, Obenga declares, is a description of the beginnings even before the creation of the world. It is in fact the myth the Egyptians used to explain the concept of nothingness and being, which became the foundation of their philosophy and religion. Pharaonic Egyptians had long been contemplating the "radical question of questions" about the origins of this world, the cosmos, and the events that led to man's appearance. According to *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (the oldest illustrated book in the world: 1700—1200 B.C.), before there was the universe, Creator-God, Nothingness, and Chaos, there was Nun. Nun was represented by "an abyssal water" which contained all the raw material, the preconditions as it were, for the emergence of life. The primordial water bore a kind of "latent consciousness" that allowed itself to manifest creation of "all which exists or will come into being" (p. 292). What is truly radical about the idea of Nun, is that the ancient

> Africans of Egypt, from the Old Kingdom (2780—2260 B.C.) were capable of conceiving and articulating a stratus that preceded the universe as we know it today; a stratus that was formless, the "non-created," that which is amorphous. It is out of Nun that all things proceed, proclaims pharaonic thought, "the gods, and the stars, the earth and the sky, the world of the living and the dwelling place of the dead," that all dimensions of human existence had a commencement, except the abyssal water which is placed in its own absoluteness (p. 292).

Of note also, Anta Diop (1991) and Obenga observe, is that Black African thought on primordial beginnings is centered around "water." Obenga emphasizes that "water" plays a seminal role in the cosmogonies of, for example, the Dogon of Mali, the Bambara, the Akan, and the Bantu-speaking peoples of Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa. Since a full explication of all these various African cosmogonies is beyond the scope of this work, a paraphrasing of Ogotemmeli Dogon's experience will serve as representative testimony for other cultures within Africa. Although Ogotemmeli used the words "Water" and "Nummo" interchangeably, he posited that "without Nummo...it was not even possible to create the earth, for the earth was molded clay and it is from water (that is, from Nummo) that its life is derived" (p. 298). In fact, in all African cultures (and Egypt is no exception), both ancient and modern water gods and water libation play an active part in religious proceedings. Hence the abyssal water about which the Egyptians wrote represents one of the many strands linking them to other parts of Africa, "the cultural unity" for which Anta Diop (1978) argued most convincingly.

Returning to the Pyramid Texts, Obenga notes that emerging from the primeval waters (Nun) is *Ma'at*. *Ma'at* represents "that which must be," a "part of the cosmic order, part of Truth and Justice... the Supreme Virtue... and a guide and measure of all human activity" (p. 317). In the hieroglyph, *Ma'at* is read as "the elevated notion of moral perfection." The ancient Africans of Egypt maintained that all men and things in society must conform to the cosmic order for Ma'at to retain balance in the universe. The *Ma'atian* ethics has manifested itself in the art, monuments, writing, social order, sciences, and religion of ancient Egypt. The awareness of "order and beauty" is especially exemplified in pharaonic art.

According to George James (1954), architects of the temples and pyramids had to be trained (at the temple school) in the sciences, in history, in the lore of the great Egyptian hierophants, in control of thought and action, in a life of virtue—in short, in the *Ma'atian* principles of Truth and Justice. Also trained in the *Ma'atian* principles, Obenga writes, was the Egyptian scribe, who was no mere recorder of events and experiences, but rather wrote in accordance with the precepts of Truth and Justice—in accordance with *Ma'at* (Obenga, in Van Sertima 1989: 317).

To bring precision to the concept of *Ma'at* outlined above, perhaps what is most germane to this discussion is what Maulanga Karenga (in Van Sertima 1989) refers to as the recognition and pursuit of a shared moral ecology "with the indispensable goal and standard for a righteous person and society" (p.373). The ancient Egyptians recognized that the cosmic order and social order had to be comprehended and practiced to maintain balance in the universe.

Among the various facets of the ancient Egyptian world-view emerging from the Pyramid Texts is the drama of creation. The creation myth of Isis (the first egg; mother and woman), Osiris (the first king, the dead man deified), and Horus (the falcon king), Budge (1969) acknowledges as wholly African in origin. The Trinity of Isis, Osiris, and Horus set the foundation for almost five thousand years of Egyptian religion. A paraphrasing of the Creation myth positions Isis as the virgin that gave birth to her brother and husband Osiris and from this union came their son, Horus. As the myth explains, Osiris was later slain by his envious brother, Set (known as the evil one, equivalent to Satan in Judaeo-Christian tradition), because of his great influence and dominion over many lands. The courageous and bereaved Isis searched for Osiris' body, which was dismembered into fourteen pieces and scattered over the earth. Upon recovery of his body, she resurrected him, and Osiris ascended to the netherworld. She raised her son Horus to avenge his father's death and ultimately take Osiris' place on earth.

In this abridged version of the creation myth, one can discern many cultural features of Africa, both ancient and modern. The female symbolism is most interesting on two counts: first, woman is seen as primary and not as an appendage of man (as she is in the "Adam and Eve" creation myth in the Bible); second, the concept of matriarchy is established in Egypt through this creation myth. Students of African history know that the female bloodline is all important when it comes to ascending the throne. Anta Diop (1990), in a brilliant study of the role and history of matriarchy in Africa, found that the seemingly all powerful presence of the pharaohs was tempered by that of the queen mother (see his *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* for a detailed account of matriarchy). Also derived from this myth is the mother-and-child image and the subsequent madonna-and-child (Mary and Jesus) image which came to dominate Greek, Mediterranean, and later European religious practices. Thus, the African creation myth ultimately set the religious and social tenor for some four thousand years of civilization.

Brevity must temper the discussion of the much heralded religious and funerary literary texts, since no one piece of work can do justice to the existing corpus of writing that represents the Egyptian thinking on religion. For this reason I have refrained from any lengthy philological and religious discussions. My objective is simply to spur the interest of those who wish to investigate in greater detail.

The first translation of the Pyramid Texts in modern times is credited to Maspero (1882), but it was not until 1910 that Kurt Sethe's work became the major source for understanding the orthography, grammar, and vocabulary of the Pyramid Texts. To provide some system for understanding the literary character of the text, Sethe divides it into *Utterances*. These utterances, Faulkner (1969) points out, were clear instructive messages as to how certain hymns, rituals, and funerary procedures were to be executed. For example, Faulkner cites the recitation of the mummification of the corpse and presentation of food and water: "I give you your head, I fasten your head to the bones for you... I give him his eyes, that he may be content—a *htp*-offering"(p. 2). These two utterances are among several examples that one might find carved on the sarcophagus of the dead king. Another example illustrates The Ritual of the Opening of the Mouth": " O Osiris, I bring to you your son whom you love, who will split open your mouth"(p. 4). Other examples give directives for a libation spell, presentation of food to the dead, resurrection of the king, the king's ascension to the sky as a star, the king's union with the sun-god, his role in the beyond, and so forth. For those whose are interested in the mythology and religion of ancient Egypt, Wallis Budge's work *The Gods Of The Egyptians* (1969) is a good source.

The remarkable reflections of the ancient Egyptians were not restricted to the Pyramid Texts, but were also expressed in the so-called Ebers and Smith medical papyri. Charles Finch gives us some idea of the enormity of these papyri when he cites Homer as saying that the medical knowledge of the Egyptians was far in advance of any other people. Finch also dispels the false claim of Hippocrates to the title "Father of Medicine" (which will not be detailed here; see Finch's work on *The African Background in Medical Science).* The medical procedures of diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment are numerous and complex. For example, there are written accounts of head injuries, and their examination, diagnosis, and treatment. But what is most interesting in the context of this research is the written language and medical vocabulary used to describe anatomy and pathology of the human organism almost 3,000 years before Hippocrates. Some of the Egyptian anatomical terms that have survived from the medical papyri are: *djnnt* = cranium; *djadja* = head; *wpt*=vertex, hat; *hr*=forehead; *hr*=face; *maa*=temporal region; and *ks*=bone. Finch's account of the procedures and nomenclature recorded in the medical papyri of the Nile Valley is yet another testimony to the important role writing played in documenting the findings of the ancient Africans of Egypt.

Literature

Literature was by no means a secondary concern in ancient Egypt. The monuments and the several art forms (which I have detailed earlier) are

usually praised, while the corpus of literature is either omitted or marginalized. John Foster's (1992) translation attempts to address the reasons for the underestimation of the anthology of Egyptian poetics. He argues that the Western vision of Egyptian literature and culture is colored by two "major hindrances": the Bible, and the glorification of Greece above all other cultures. Foster believes that these two bastions of Western thinking contribute to the West's historical posturing toward Egypt — and, one suspects, to the rest of Africa as well. How else are we to account for the failure to ponder the mind of a civilization that excelled in architecture and the other visual arts? It would seem logical that that same mind was capable of producing literary masterpieces. Wiedemann (1902) and Foster confirm through their investigations that ancient Egyptian literature indeed paralleled the elegance and richness of the visual arts with its honored words in prayers and hymns, stories, and love songs. The poets in particular, cites Foster, "delighted in the working (or playing) with the nuances of words and meaning, and in the sounds of images of the language"(p. xv).

Some examples of Egyptian poetics will help illuminate the classical contributions, brilliance, imagination, and consciousness of the ancient Egyptians, whose works preceded those of Homer and Shakespeare. Foster's collection from some of the translated poems and hymns is a good starting point along the road to recovering the figurative language and many of the major devices that characterize good poetry: sound harmonies, the special imagery of the Nile Valley, eloquence, and above all, the art of skilled craftsmen with words. Here are a few samples of ancient Egyptian poetics.

"The Instruction for Merikare", in the format of a hymn, was for the son of a king in the twenty-first century B.C., probably Khety of the Tenth Dynasty. This hymn, about the Creator-God as supreme among all the gods, states that God was responsible for the creation of all humankind, and that man was created in God's image, in a universe founded upon justice (Ma'at). This hymn also confirms the fact of monotheism in Africa, which is often misunderstood because of the numerous deities. The author of the hymn insists:

> The generations come and go among mankind,
> and God, who knows all natures, still lies hidden.
> None lift a hand against the powerful,
> and everywhere the eye sees ruin;
> One worships whatever god is met upon the way
> made of enduring stone or born of metal.....
> It is you who create the new creature in Woman,
> shape the life-giving drops into Man..

Among the many observations Foster makes about Egyptian literature, this genre stands out. He insists that the Egyptian corpus is almost entirely a verse literature, where most of the instructions, admonitions, laments, hymns, prayers, and an appreciable body of fiction, bear the marked characteristic of verse presentation. Notable also is the "couplet verse" composition where two lines are used to complete a verse sentence (p. xvii). (See Foster's *Echoes of Egyptian Voices* for a full account of this hymn and others that are similarly composed.)

Cogently, the example of "The Tale of Sinuhe" helps to dispel the inaccurate notion that all of Egyptian literature was formulaic religious text. This tale is considered by some scholars to be the finest piece of literature associated with Egypt. Foster identifies this narrative as salient for understanding ancient Egypt because it encapsulates many of the cornerstone values and principles that governed Egyptian social life. The story, told in the first person, chronicles the life of a trusted emissary who exiled himself before an attempted coup against his king. In exile, Sinuhue recounts the greatness of his king and laments his cowardly act of leaving his king in the time of greatest need. Sinhue subsequently returns to Egypt in his waning years and is greeted by his king and family whom he once served. A complete reading of this poem will lead one to realize that Shakespeare's forerunners had perfected their craft from as early as the Twelfth Dynasty in the twenty-first century B.C. (Foster 1992: 85).

Wiedmann (1902) also offers many examples of narratives from several papyri in which travel and adventure are the main subject. Like all people of ancient times, the Egyptians were fascinated by stories of foreign travel. Diplomats, as well as merchants, frequently left their homes to do business outside of Egypt. Among the many stories of foreign travel, the "Story of Saneha" and the "Shipwrecked Sailor" of 1250 B.C., are the most popular. Like other narratives, the "Shipwrecked Sailor" was told in the first person. While on a journey to the royal mines, the narrator's ship was embroiled in a storm, in which all his crew perished and he was the only survivor. On a plank, he managed to seek refuge on an island. The survivor was subsequently seized by a gigantic snake-like creature which took the sailor to its home and had him give an explanation of how he landed on the island. After an exchange of information between the sailor and the creature, the sailor was advised to remain on the island for four months and await the passing of a vessel that would rescue him. As predicted, the arriving ship brought the sailor many valuable gifts of gold, frankincense, jewelry, and other precious items which he took on his return to the pharaoh. This narrative, along with other similar stories, reminds us of the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor which was written much later.

Besides the stories mentioned above, Egyptian literature was punctuated by love songs, romance stories (remarkably similar to the

Western classic of Romeo and Juliet), ghost stories, tales of magic, lost jewels, foreign conquest, and stories of ordinary people's daily lives. It might be worthwhile to investigate how similar many of these stories are to the Greek epics and masterpieces.

This work does not pretend to chronicle all the various written texts of the ancient Egyptians. As a matter of fact, whole areas of writing have been omitted or merely mentioned in passing. For example, there is a large body of writing in the sciences that has not been addressed, such as the mathematics papyri, astronomy, geology, and psychiatry. Legal and civic journals in great numbers have also survived. However, what most urgently needs attention now is the fact that the body of written texts from ancient Egypt can be put on the continuum with the written tradition in Africa. In this regard, linguistic and typological material will be used as evidence to couch this position. The argument to be presented is not new.

Typology

The ancient testimonies of Herodotus, Diodorus, and Homer were some of the first evidence that identified authorship of the many ancient Egyptian texts as African in origin (see Chancellor Williams 1976; ben-Jochannan 1989; George M. James 1954; Anta Diop 1974). Unfortunately, over time their testimonies were challenged and relegated to the realm of hearsay and untruth. However, it was Gerald Massey's (1881) two-volume work, *Book of Beginnings* which forced modern scholars to rethink their position on the origin of the authors of the more than seven hundred thousand books seized by the invading Greek forces around 632 B.C. Massey argues that experts in philology, mythology, comparative religion, or Egyptology cannot be viewed as authentic if they neglect the study of phenomenology of types. He insists that typology is the foundation of all human symbolism, myth, language, and religion, and that by engaging in such an investigation one can illuminate the hidden development of man.

Massey presents examples which connect the ancient Egyptians to the southern reference, as the lands of their birth place and "land of the gods." Furthermore, in Egyptian the word *Af rui ka,* (the ultimate etymological root of the word *Africa*) signifies "birth place." More significantly, the many recorded customs that were celebrated by the Egyptians comprise yet another typological source to buttress the argument for the African origin of the ancient Egyptians. For example, the primacy given to the matrilinear order in ancient Egyptian mythology, where the paradigm of female goddesses (e.g.,Isis, Hathor) dominated, is unmistakably African. (Anta Diop's [1990] *Cultural Unity of Africa* offers a comprehensive discussion of matriarchy and its connection between Egypt and the rest of Africa.) The "Great Mother" (cited above

by Massey, Rosalind Jefferies, and Obenga) is another example of the preeminence given to the female of the species in Egyptian thought, as in the rest of Africa, especially as she relates to the beginnings of primeval man—the motif of the "virgin mother."

With Great Mother as the primal creator, she gave birth, embodied and typified the elements such as darkness, light, air, fire, earth, water, and blood. Thus one sees in Egypt the obese water cow as an image of nature that represented the female principle. According to Finch (in Van Sertima 1989), the serpent—which was (and still is) a very common symbol both in Egypt and in the rest of Africa—represented, on the one hand, darkness and death, and on the other hand (when the serpent had its tail in its mouth) eternal life. In addition to the above attributes, since the snake is capable of shedding its skin, that act was used to symbolize renewal and resurrection, which dominated Egyptian religion and mythology. Significantly, the pharaohs of Egypt wore the serpent on their crowns and so did the ancient kings of Mali, Benin, and southern Africa. Another example which Massey used to demonstrate the typological connection between Egypt and the rest of Africa is the *hawk*. The *hawk* emblem personified the pharaoh as representative and protector of Egypt. In the remote past of Africa, as far back as prehistoric times, the *vulture* (which belongs to the same family tree as the *hawk*) of the cave paintings was also known as the "Mother Killer" who would do "whatever was necessary for her race to survive" (cited by Rosalind Jefferies in Van Sertima 1989: 98). One also sees a parallel between the use of the *falcon* in Egypt and a *bird of prey* in prehistoric Africa, as well as the paradox of the pharaoh who was usually male representing the dominant female paradigm of Africa. Other symbols such as the nocturnal cats and water are ties that bind the Egyptian image makers to their ancestral African past. Even though the inhabitants of the Nile Valley had advanced to a dynastic civilization, their use of symbols to elucidate a comprehensive world, both concrete and abstract ideas, was still grounded in the constellation of signs and symbols bequeathed by their predecessors. The hieroglyph, Massey argues, clearly shows the rich past of the ancient Egyptians.

Linguistic Comparisons

Equally persuasive, although by different methods, are the linguistic connections posited by Obenga, Massey, and Diop. Diop's findings will be highlighted here. In the context of language, the research of the African scholar Cheikh Anta Diop—*The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* (1990), *Civilization or Barbarism* (1991), and *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974)—argues convincingly that there are several unifying areas of cultural similarity throughout Africa, of which written language is the most striking. Diop presents an exhaus-

tive number of philosophical terms from ancient Egypt that have survived in the Senegalese language, Wolof. For example, the Egyptian word *Nun*, which represents "the muddy and black primordial water," has its equivalent in Wolof *Nwl* = "black," *Ndoh um nwl* = "the water of 'Black,' of the black (river), of the Nile." Other examples include *Ta* (Egyptian)= "earth", *Ta* (Wolof) = "inundated earth, the very image of Egypt, of the Nile Valley," *Ta tenen* = "The earth that rises, the first mound that appeared within Nun," *Ten* (Wolof) = "a formed mound (in clay), as God made to create Adam; emergence, earth mound"; *Geb* (Egyptian) = "the earth, the divine," and *Gab* (Wolof) = "to dig the ground" (pp. 358-359). Such cases do not merely establish similarity of vocabulary, phonology, and meaning, but also clearly illustrate parallels between two African languages—one ancient and one relatively contemporary—and a more exact understanding of how Africans formulated their thoughts on the beginnings of the universe.

Similarly, in mathematics there are examples of parallel vocabulary in ancient Egyptian and in Wolof. For instance, *k(a)w* Egyptian ="height", *kaw* (Wolof)= "height; *s(e)k(e)d* Egyptian= "a slope" and *seggay* (Wolof)= "a slope"; *hsb/or/hsp* (Egyptian)= "simple cubit", *hasab* (Wolof) = "cubit"; and *pss* (Egyptian) = "to divide", *patt* (Wolof)= "to divide" (p. 277).

Other African languages also bear many similarities to Egyptian in terms of texts, vocabulary, and phonology, but they are too many to chronicle here. (See Diop, Massey, and Obenga for many such examples of cross-cultural and inter-cultural linguistics.) Earlier reference was made to the philosophical concept of water in Egyptian and in Wolof and how it is remarkably similar in meaning and usage across the two cultures. In addition to *"water"*, *Nun* (Egyptian), *Nommo* (Dogon), one can point to the similarities in the names *Amma* "water-god" (Dogon), and *Amon*, "water-god"(Egyptian). Ultimately, a much more in-depth study of the linguistic structure and world-view of ancient Africans would surely shed more light on the African beginnings of writing and the impact that had on other cultures.

Summary and Conclusion

This research has been an interdisciplinary intervention, scaffolded with arguments from history, philology, and linguistics. I believe that the approach taken here is useful for understanding a whole people's general world-view and specific motives for thinking and writing. If Egypt has now been recast in an African context, it is by virtue of its own thinking and writing. Our examination of the ancient Egyptian texts of mythology, philosophy, typology, religion, and popular literature (poems, love songs, epics, and everyday narratives), as well as the scientific papyri, reveals a corpus of work that is unmistakably African in

origin and in nature. By examining the many facets of the Egyptian text, the old assumption that Egyptian writings were predominantly religious contemplations has given way to the broader and more complex basis of a grand African civilization. To build a convincing argument for the African character of the written record of ancient Egypt, a two-tier strategy was used: (1) a chronological continuity from the Africa of approximately 40,000 B.C. to the predynastic (4000 B.C.) and dynastic (3100 B.C.) cultures of ancient Egypt was traced; and (2) the southern cradle of Africa was taken to be the starting point for the journey of signs, symbols, ideas, beliefs, and social behavior that culminated in the "classic" Egyptian hieroglyph.

In the effort to place ancient Egypt on the continuum of the African tradition of writing, Gerald Massey's theory of the use of typology as a critical and essential tool was most instrumental in the illumination of the connectedness between the hieroglyph and other modes of sign-system communication in Africa. Obenga's exposition on ancient Egyptian thought and its kinship to currents of thought in other parts of Africa has also served to define the African stamp on the Egyptian text. While Diop's comparative linguistic study of the current Wolof and ancient Egyptian has also helped to cement my position, it must be noted that other scholars have presented and still are uncovering evidence linking other African languages from West and Central Africa with the pharaonic tongue. In the final analysis, to pursue an argument which orients Egypt towards any other geographical space but Africa would seem unpromising at best.

And yet, despite all the evidence presented above, and much more that could not be included here due to sheer volume, some scholars still insist that the ancient past of this seminal civilization was not African. There is a continual denial of the African nature and character of ancient Egypt, as well as an ongoing attempt to marginalize the voice of people of African ancestry from commenting upon the many important cultural contributions of Black Egypt, among which writing is paramount. It is important for the voice of all people to be heard. But it is impossible for people's voices to be heard if the echoes of the past are not known. Even more tragic, in the case of people of the African diaspora, disconnection from their ancestral roots has seriously impaired their ability to create texts that speak of their lives in the context of a long and connected past.

The working definition of language posited earlier in this work maintains that language is a construction of the shared matrix of all-encompassing communicative behaviors that help the participant convey information that is meaningful, shared, organized, and dynamic. The Egyptian hieroglyphs aptly exemplify this definition. In the spirit of Eco's theory of semiotics, one could anticipate an intensive study of the hieroglyph from the semiotic point of view of written languages, formalized

languages, visual communication, and cultural codes (1976: 11).

Given such an understanding of language, wherever African peoples are found, especially among those aware of the ongoing efforts at assimilation and indoctrination into an absolute Western hegemony, there are efforts to create counter-hegemonic texts that are more representative of the "hyphenated" African experience. Unfortunately, the African-American and African-Caribbean texts, for example, are frequently relegated to folklore and therefore are not viewed as serious literature by comparison with works that represent the canon of Western civilization. However, African peoples need not feel inferior about their own culture's contribution to world literature. For it is now common knowledge that Homer and many other revered Greek writers were influenced by the Black people of Egypt. If African peoples are going to take full advantage of the rich body of works bequeathed to them—and to all mankind—by the ancient Egyptians, they must revisit the writings of their ancestors so that a substantive legacy can be left for future generations of African people to build upon.

Consciously, African-American and African-Caribbean people have made some attempts at constructing a core constellation of written texts, primarily in the area of literature. Also, a growing body of writings is becoming more pronounced in every aspect of the African experience, both on the continent and in the Diaspora, in recent times. However, writers and thinkers must be aware of two important landmarks: **(1)** The African tradition of writing goes back beyond Egypt, the Sudan, and Ethiopia. In fact, the written tradition of more recent times extends to East and West Africa and includes: Senegal and Mali's *Manding* script, Liberia's *Via* script, Sierre Leone's *Mende* script, Cameroon's *Bamoun* script and Nigeria's *Nsibidi* script. In addition, according to Williams (1976), the principal learning centers of West Africa (15th and 16th centuries A.D.) at Djenne, Gao, and Timbuktu/Sankore University have left behind a legacy of writing in medicine and surgery, letters, grammar, and so forth (p. 219). **(2)** Writing in ancient Africa was not restricted to mythology and religion but encompassed the full range of human experience.

In the final analysis, image makers from the African diaspora and the mother continent are fairly successful at keeping alive and developing the sense of the African mind. However, writers and thinkers must be charged with the responsibility of making available to people the optimistic and life-affirming philosophy that characterized the writing and thinking of Nile Valley cultures. I believe that the continuity of African peoples must be closely linked to an understanding of their past, if they are to contribute to the corpus of work started several thousand years ago. In this introductory study, the seeds for further research into the African literary tradition have only been planted.

Plate 1. Narmer Menes (Aha), the first historic King of Egypt and the creator of the dynastic system; circa 3168 B.C.
Drawing by Reba Ashton-Crawford.

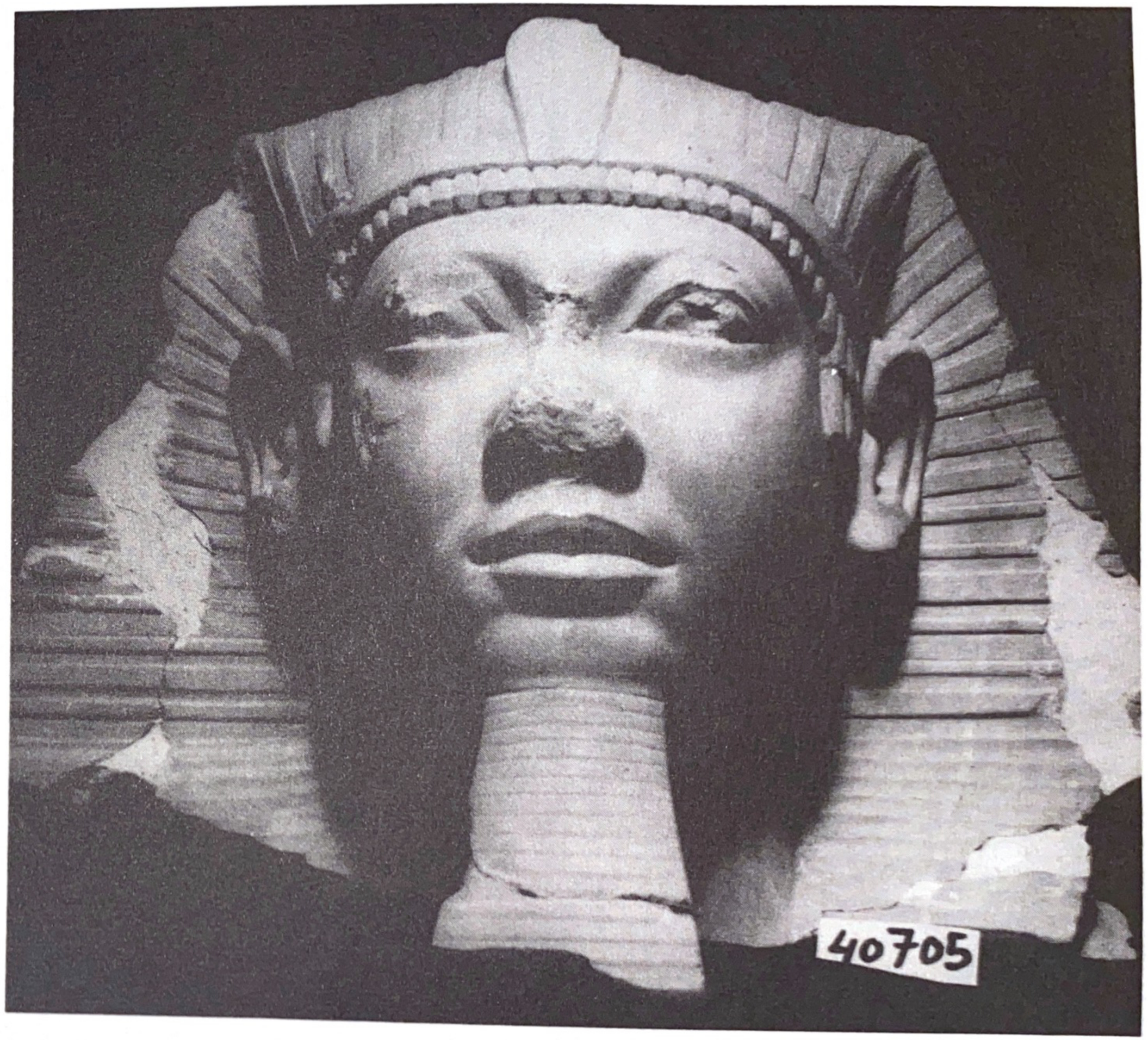


Plate 2. Khafre or Chephren, builder of the Second Great Pyramid of Gizeh. *Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*

Plate 3. Akhenaten and family, from a relief at Tell el-Armana. This scene depicts the worship of the Sun God, Ra.
Courtesy of the Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt.

Plate 4. Portrait of Akhenaten, Pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty.
Courtesy of the Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt.

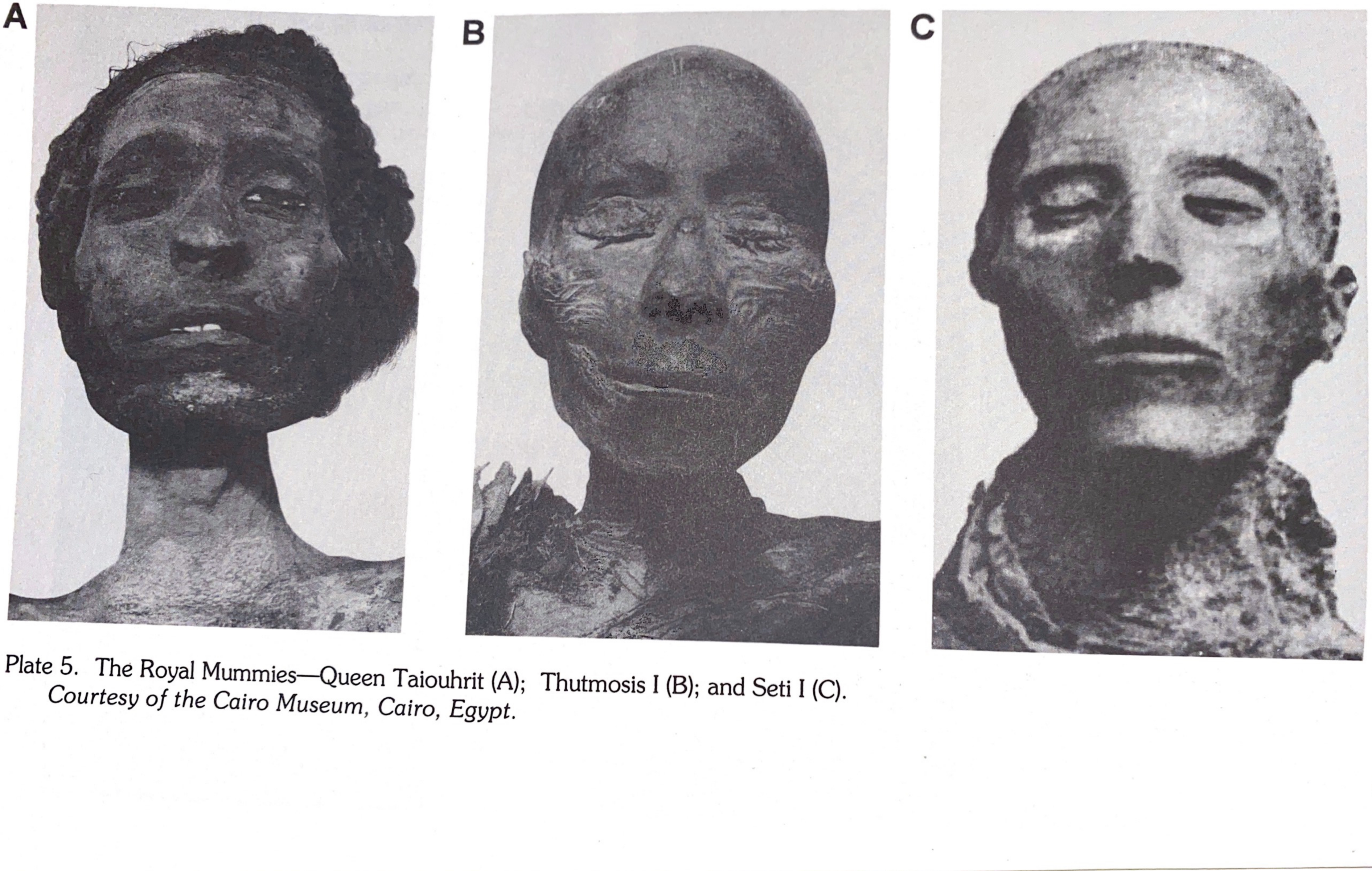


Plate 5. The Royal Mummies—Queen Taiouhrit (A); Thutmosis I (B); and Seti I (C).
Courtesy of the Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt.

Plate 6. Palette of King Narmer Menes, obverse view; circa 3168 B.C.
Courtesy of the Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt.

Plate 7. Palette of King Narmer Menes, reverse view; circa 3168 B.C.
Courtesy of the Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt.

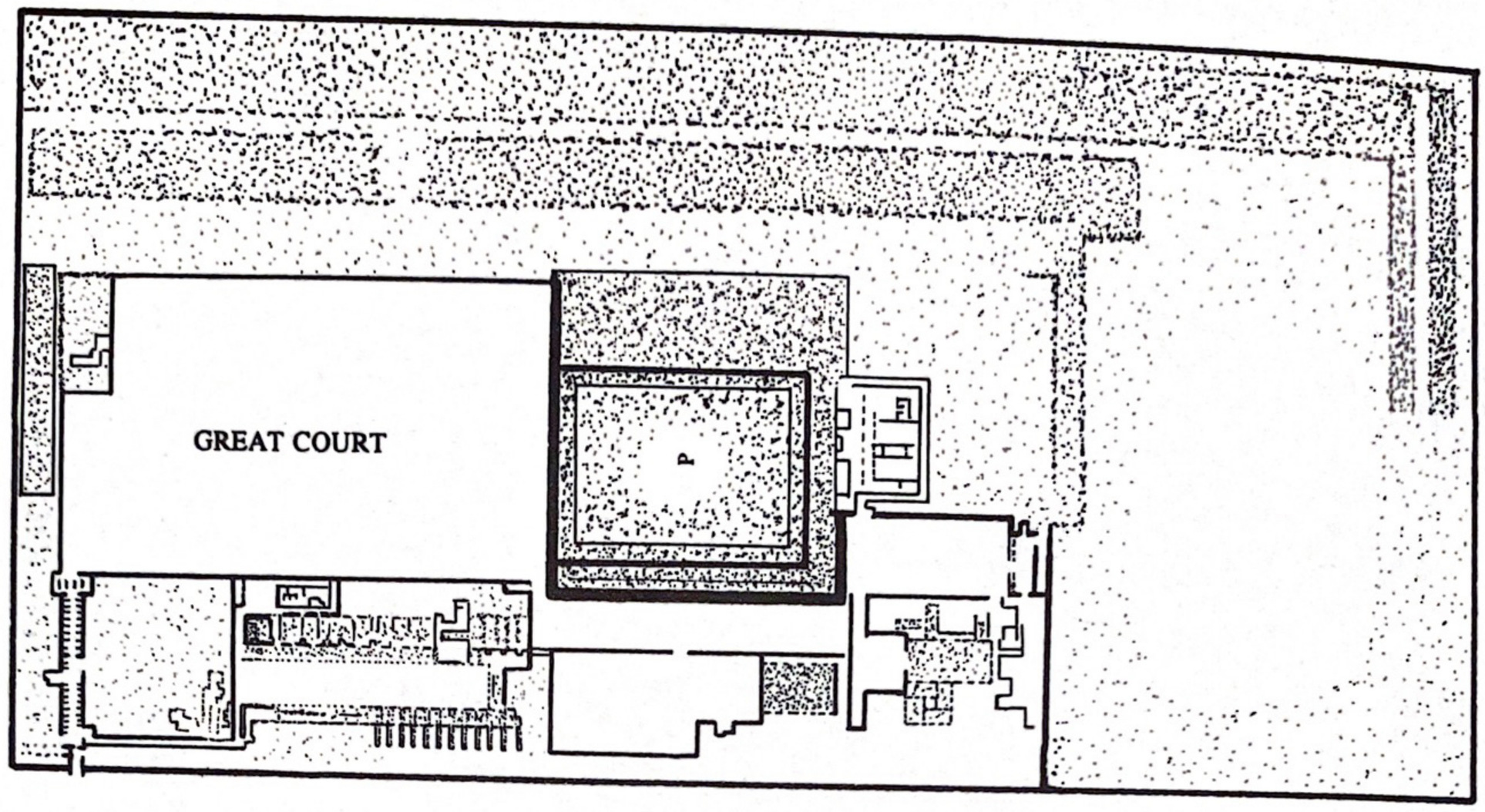


Plate 8. Step Pyramid and Complex at Saqqara.
Drawing by Reba Ashton-Crawford.

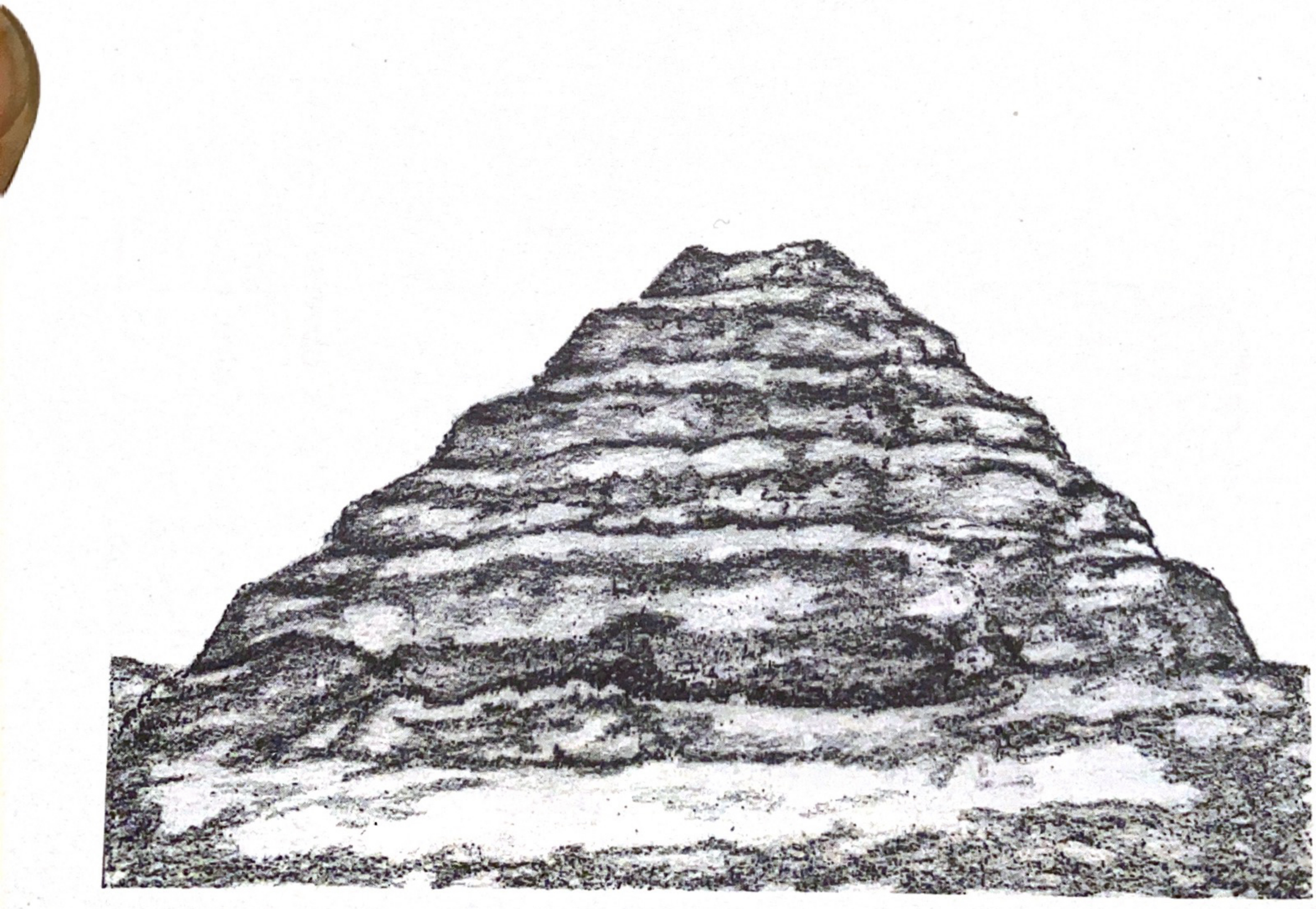


Plate 9. Step Pyramid of Djoser.
Drawing by Reba Ashton-Crawford.

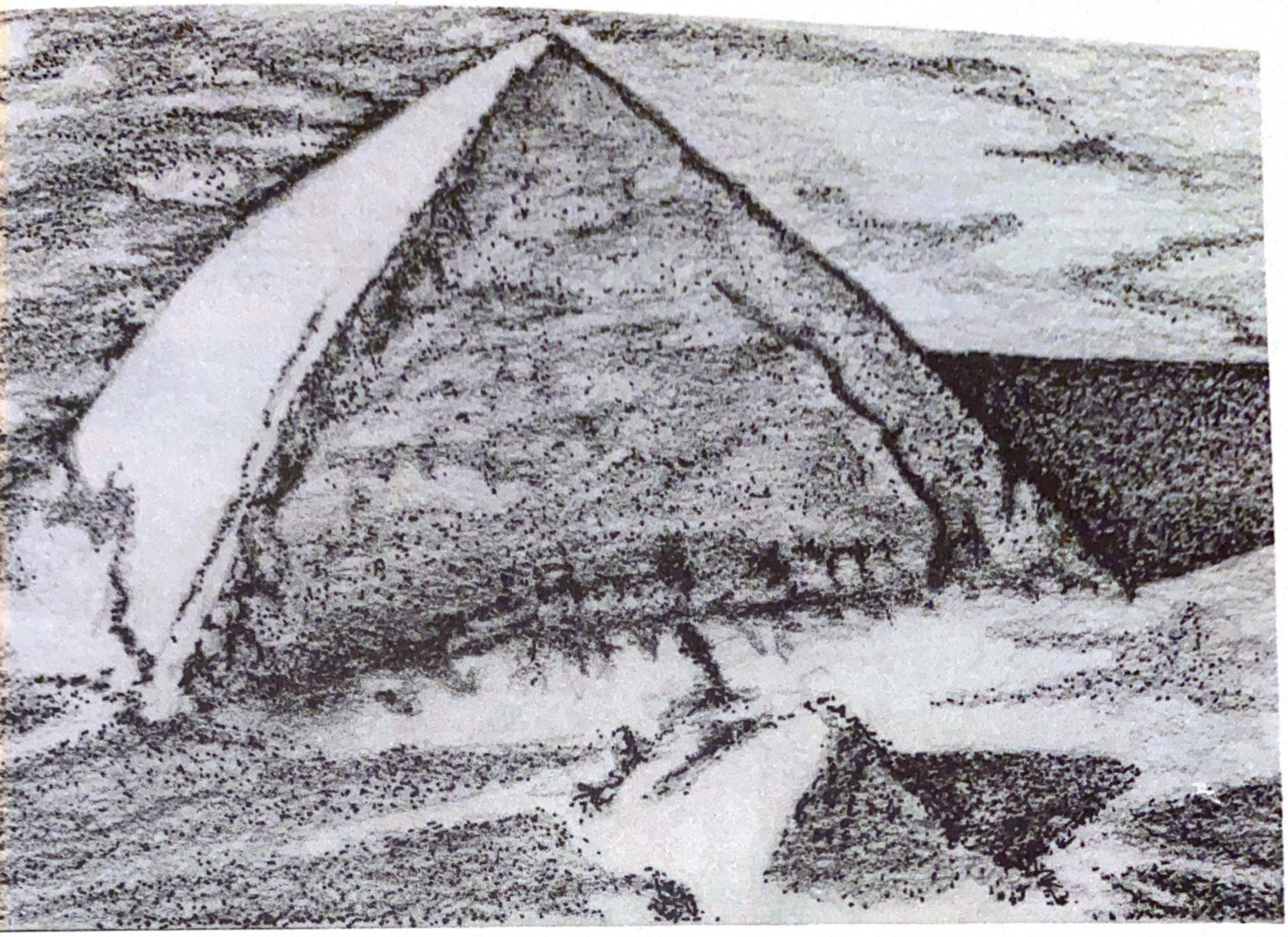
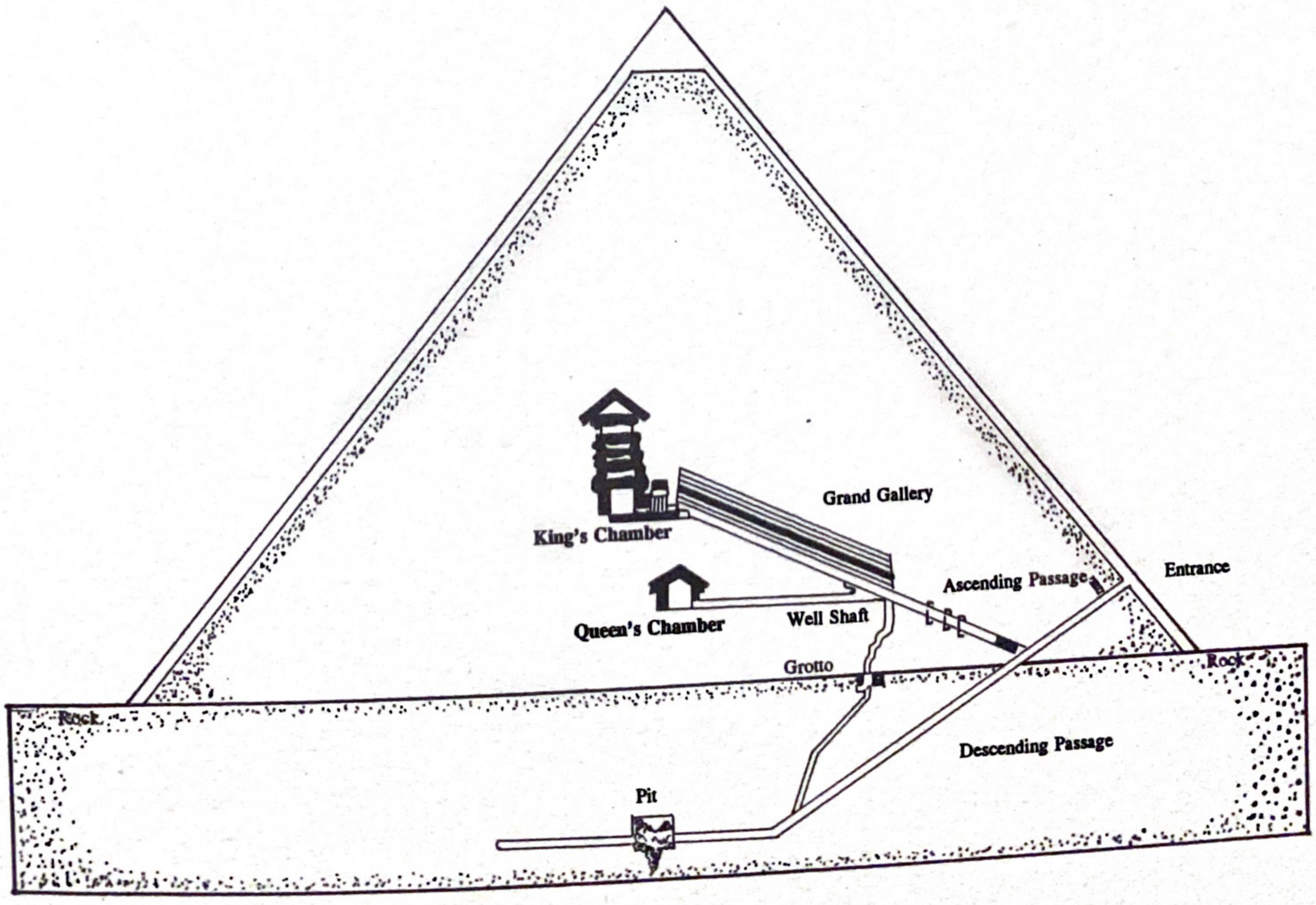


Plate 10. Bent Pyramid at Dahshur, built by Seneferu of the Fourth Dynasty.
Drawing by Reba Ashton-Crawford.



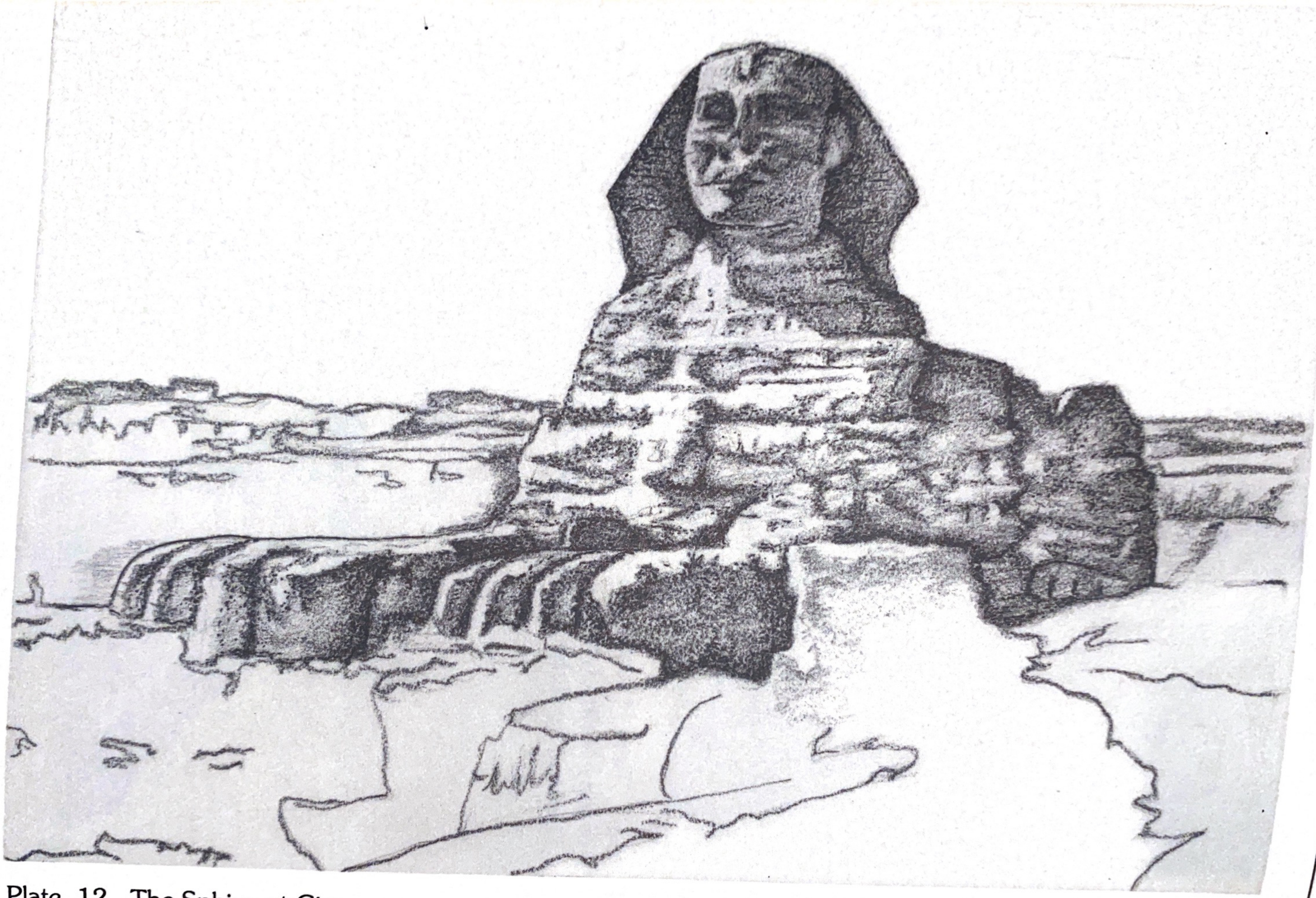


Plate 12. The Sphinx at Giza.
Drawing by Reba Ashton-Crawford.

Plate 13. The avenue of the ram-headed sphinxes at Karnak.
Drawing by Reba Ashton-Crawford.

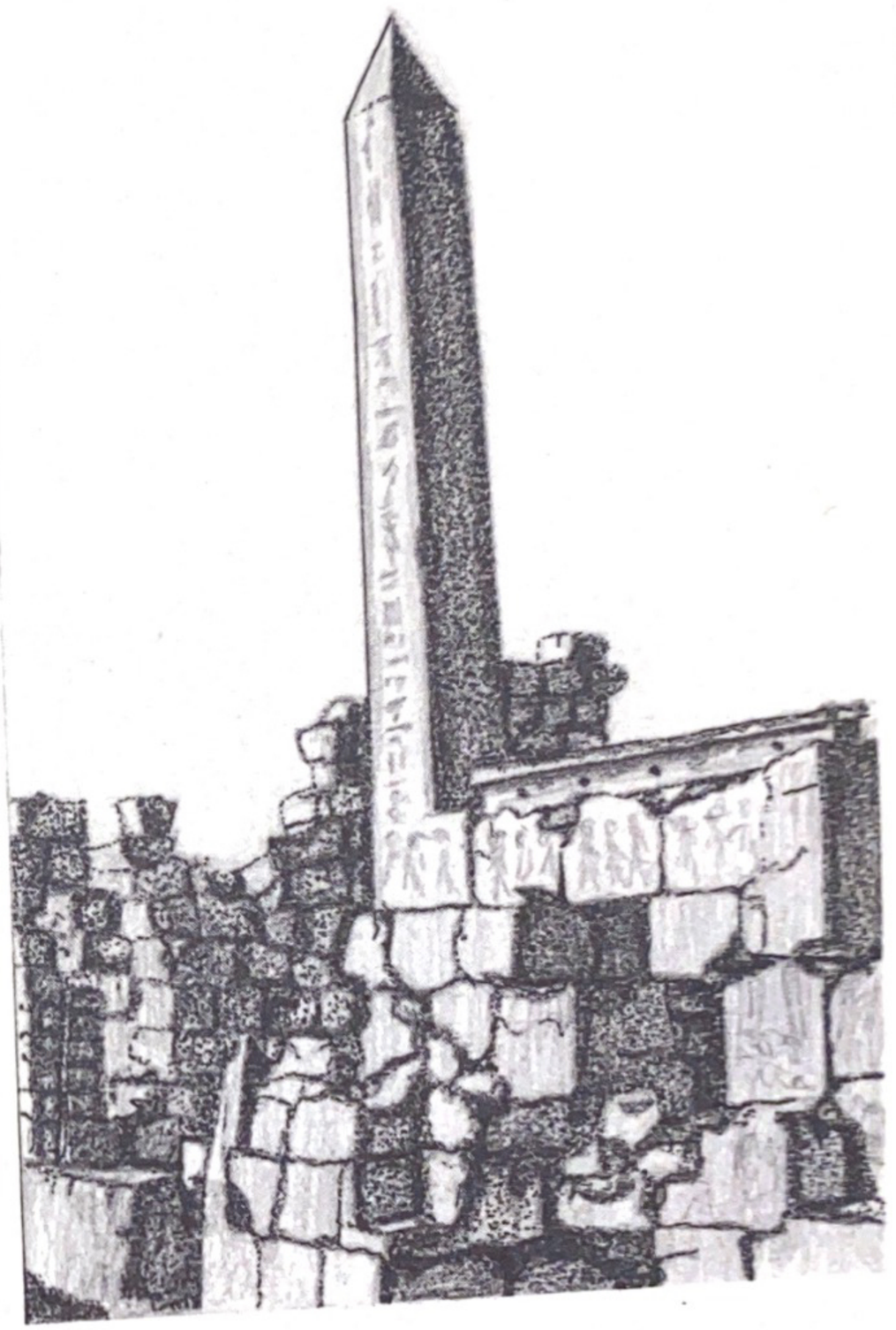


Plate 14. An Obelisk.
Drawing by Reba Ashton-Crawford.