Chapter 7

Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition Contributions to Old Kingdom History at Giza: Some Rights and Wrongs

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the work and achievements of the Giza Archives Project at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, over ten years (2000–2011), supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Examples illustrate the value of the Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition's massive archaeological archive for reconstructing aspects of Old Kingdom history. Some of the pitfalls for researchers arising from the Expedition records created by George Reisner and his staff are also highlighted. Current progress by the Giza Project at Harvard includes ongoing archaeological efforts by an international Giza consortium, as well as new modes of presenting Giza in 3D as a research and teaching tool.

1 Introduction

The symposium that is the subject of this volume was conceived to focus on big picture topics related to Old Kingdom history and research. For the site of Giza, I would like to consider some of the approaches the Giza Project has been experimenting with in recent years. Until recently, our focus has centered on the Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition, directed by George A. Reisner between 1905 and 1942. The goal of Reisner’s excavations, as he saw it, was—first and foremost—to enhance our knowledge of Egyptian history: “The main purpose of the expedition has always been historical research. The objects found, although necessary for the continuation of subscriptions, have always been regarded by the expedition as a by-product of historical research.”1 In the pages that follow I will summarize five discrete topics relating to the study of Giza, past and present: 1) Some HU–MFA contributions

to Giza research; 2) hu–mfa data problems; 3) Small research details with larger historical implications; 4) Visualization as a research tool; and 5) “Giza international,” a plea for data sharing.

2 Some HU–MFA Contributions to Giza Research

Aspects of social and mortuary development demand a reasonably large dataset to provide meaningful conclusions (Fig. 7.1). The Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition corpus was in its time the largest collection of archaeological data from Giza, and is rivaled today only by the assemblage compiled by Mark Lehner and his team from Ancient Egypt Research Associates, although of course with a contemporary, interdisciplinary, and thus very different, focus. The Giza cemeteries are so large that, in order to avoid documentary chaos, Reisner numbered the cemeteries east and west of the Great Pyramid. This four-digit numbering system is still in use today, and remains one of his most practical contributions to accessing the site. Streets progress from lower numbers (1000s) in the west to higher numbers in the east (7000s). By this method one can discern instantly that G 1000–6000 numbers represent Western Cemetery tombs, while any tomb with a G 7000 number belongs in the Eastern Cemetery (Fig. 7.2). Major mastabas bear “round numbers” such as, moving from south to north: G 4410, G 4420, G 4430, G 4440, with the next row (further east) increasing by a factor of one-hundred: G 4510, G 4520, G 4530, G 4540. Subsidiary and/or intrusive

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2 See http://www.aeraweb.org, with lists of publications collected there.

3 Some tomb renumbering has, nevertheless, introduced some confusion into the Western Cemetery. For example, the Cemetery en Echelon, the nucleus cemetery closest to the Khufu Pyramid, was renamed from the 2000s to the 5000s, e.g., Seshemnefer 11’s tomb was originally mastaba G 2200, but now bears the number G 5080. Similarly, part of the cemetery east of the large mastaba G 2000 (= Lepsius 23) was originally given G 2000s numbers that duplicated those further west, excavated in 1915 by Clarence Fisher and published in The Minor Cemetery at Giza; see Roth, A Cemetery of Palace Attendants, 3: “Confusingly, Giza mastabas numbered from 2086 through 2099 occur in Clarence Fisher’s 1924 publication of the tombs he excavated at the far west end of the Western Cemetery, duplicating the numbers of mastabas in the cluster studied here. Reisner apparently renumbered Fisher’s mastabas as 3086 through 3099 after their publication. All of Reisner’s notes and records, as well as subsequent publications by other scholars (including the Porter and Moss Topographical Bibliography), use Reisner’s numbers.”

4 One exception is the G 6000 cemetery, occupying its own space southwest of the mastaba of Hemiunu (G 4000); see Weeks, Mastabas of Cemetery G 6000.