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# Out of Ruins: Contextualizing an Ancient Egyptian Spectacle of Architectural Reuse

Luiza Osorio G. Silva 

*Architectural reuse was common in ancient Egypt. Modern interpretations of this practice, particularly in royal contexts, usually ascribe it either a practical or ideological function, only rarely considering it possible that different motivations were involved. This type of approach is particularly true for the reuse of Old Kingdom blocks by the Middle Kingdom king Amenemhat I in his pyramid at Lisht, a case often classified as solely utilitarian. However, an approach that prioritizes not only the ancient Egyptian worldview and royal ideology, but also how this case of reuse fits into cross-cultural considerations of monumentality, demonstrates the necessity to look at this practice more holistically. This study focuses in particular on the possibility that the transportation of reused materials by Amenemhat I was a spectacle of construction used to showcase the king's legitimacy and authority at the start of a new dynasty.*

## Introduction

To you comes granite unhindered. Destroy not the monuments of another; you should hew stone in Tura! Build not your tomb-chamber from ruins, for what is done will be what will be done! (Parkinson 1997, 222)

It is no secret that the concept of reuse—of temples, tombs, cult, statues, coffins—was commonplace in ancient Egypt. When it comes to interpreting reuse in the royal sphere, scholars often gravitate to either a utilitarian or an ideological classification, only rarely suggesting that both motivations may have played a part. This paper investigates an example of royal architectural reuse from Egypt, conducted by the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055–1650 BCE) king Amenemhat I in his pyramid at Lisht. This case of reuse, which has been studied frequently, is often dismissed as conducted solely for practical, economic reasons. The approach employed here, which situates this case study not only in the ancient Egyptian context but also in broader considerations of monumentality, demonstrates that the dismissal of an ideological motivation is unwarranted while raising new questions about royal architectural reuse both

in Egypt and outside it. Rather than discounting either economic or ideological motivations, which are themselves not mutually exclusive, this paper demonstrates that the scholarly interpretation has not thoroughly considered the ramifications of the movement of the reused elements across the landscape. The possibility that the transportation of Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2160 BCE) blocks across considerable distances to the site of Amenemhat I's pyramid served as a legitimizing construction spectacle reminds us of the power of performance to effect political authority, of the paradoxical longevity and frailty of monuments, and of how the preserved record obfuscates just as much as it reveals about ancient practice.

## Architectural reuse in and beyond Egyptian royal ideology

The so-called *Teaching for Merikare*, the origin of the introductory quotation, is essentially a treatise on kingship that enumerates a series of instructions for how to be a successful ruler (Parkinson 1997, 212). It is framed as advice from an unknown Herakleopolitan king of the First Intermediate

Period (c. 2160–2055 BCE), Khety, to his successor Merikare. Part of a literary genre classified as ‘instructions’ or ‘teachings’ (*sebayt*) both by modern scholars and the ancient Egyptians, these texts are interpreted as reflections of what the Egyptians thought the correct order governing society and the cosmos should be (Lichtheim 2006, 5; Parkinson 1997, 7–8). In this text, a king tells his successor that he should treat his subjects fairly and honour the gods and his predecessors, including by building his own monuments from newly quarried stone rather than the ruins of older royal buildings.

However, architectural reuse did happen—and it happened often. Royal reuse could be conducted for different reasons: due to economic considerations such as the availability of construction materials and the ease of their extraction, to erase monuments of previous kings, and presumably sometimes also to honour their memory (Brand 2010). In order to understand the meaning of royal reuse in ancient Egypt, it is necessary to evaluate how it fits into the ideology of kingship. Though the royal institution itself was understood as constant, it was also dynamic, as different kings reigned over time. The ancient Egyptian understanding of time and history, in which events were modelled after the initial moment of creation, means that kings actively tried to fit into past models to contextualize themselves in this idealized progression of events. This is also highlighted in the *Teaching for Merikare*: ‘emulate your forefathers, your ancestors, and work will be done [successfully] with [their] wisdom!’ (Parkinson 1997, 218). Kings emulated these eternal models by copying age-old reliefs, adding their names to old monuments and re-carving their predecessors’ statues to look like their own. By incorporating the old into the new, they accessed the timeline of kingship through materials and ideas seen as integral to its definition and perpetuation. But being an Egyptian king did not only mean fitting into predecessors’ achievements, as the notion of surpassing those who came before was also a substantial element of royal ideology (Vernus 1995).

Though reuse, therefore, was not a foreign concept to Egyptian kings, they did not frame it as such. The passage from the *Teaching for Merikare* highlights this dissonance between modern terminology and ancient meaning: monuments were not to be built out of ruins; that was not the point. Other terms, such as ‘usurpation’, ‘appropriation’ and ‘spoliation’, have been used in Egyptology and broader architectural reuse studies to characterize similar practices with different motivations (for broader theoretical considerations, see Ashley & Plesch 2002; Kinney

2011; Nelson 2003; for a discussion of these terms in Egyptology, see Eaton-Krauss 2015). All three can have negative connotations and are frequently used to express a definitive or forcible transfer of ownership. The term ‘reuse’, a more neutral word that indicates no inherent incentive, is used here for the sake of clarity and simplicity, and because it probably most accurately describes the processes taking place in the reign of Amenemhat I.

Ancient Egypt is well known for its enduring monuments. From the dawn of the Egyptian state, they shaped a political landscape that stood for a materialization of ideology instrumental to articulating and preserving the power of kings (DeMarrais *et al.* 1996; A. Smith 2003, 20, 151). Monuments are some of the best windows into certain (usually elite) parts of the ancient world because of their common survival in the record, but it is important to remember that they are also vulnerable precisely because of their longevity (Osborne 2017). Some do not only change in meaning over time, but also in their material composition. Although many themes pertain to monumentality, the ones most relevant to this study of royal architectural reuse include the construction process—which encompasses both the origin of the reused elements and their transportation to the site of the pyramid—and how this reuse might have been understood by the king who commissioned it and the builders, as well as outside audiences (for broader discussions of such themes, see e.g. Buccellati 2019; Hagenauer & van der Heyden 2019; Osborne 2014; Pauketat 2000). For the latter, it is imperative to consider the potential meaning of the movement of the reused elements, as well as how visible it might have been.

Distance has the capacity to endow objects with power (Helms 1993; Hilsdale 2021, 256), and transportation spectacles are therefore useful lenses through which to consider the movement of reused architectural materials. Moveable monuments such as obelisks and Neo-Assyrian *lamassu* have been discussed through this lens of performance by scholars who have highlighted that movement situates them in different agendas of power (e.g. Hilsdale 2021; Parker 2004; for Neo-Assyrian reliefs, see Barnett *et al.* 1998). The actual construction of monuments, often including the transportation of building materials, is also cross-culturally recognized as a significant demonstration of political authority—an ‘ideological deployment of royal pomp and circumstance’ (Hilsdale 2021, 228). In ancient Rome, construction spectacles were entertaining public displays indicative of imperial might: of the emperor’s ability to amass large quantities of resources (both human

and material) and construct a geography of power that would endure and serve as a reminder of its architect (DeLaine 2002). In the late 1500s, Pope Sixtus V also programmatically transported obelisks to sites of Christian importance in Rome, thus showcasing the power of the Church and his connection to Roman emperors of old (Grafton 2002). In the New World, Inca construction processes had the potential to awe and indoctrinate subjects through mechanisms such as feasting, as evidenced by both Inca and Spanish accounts (see e.g. Bray 2018; Dean 2011). Specifically, the movement of stone blocks could serve not only as a demonstration of power, but also as a concrete transfer of power and sanctity from one place to another (Ogburn 2004). Large-scale building programmes in Upper Mesopotamian Iron Age cities were also performative, festive events that materialized state ideologies through mechanisms such as feasting. At Carchemish, the Bronze Age past was tangibly incorporated into the present without being erased, a significant message about the continuity at that site, not only to modern but also probably to ancient audiences (Harmansağ 2013, ch. 4. For a farther-flung but informative example of a similar phenomenon, see Flood 2003). The public nature of these construction events mattered because it maintained the effectiveness of monuments through the articulation of mythologies of the state (Harmansağ 2013, ch. 4), thus re-affirming its traditions (Inomata 2006, 805). Additionally, the embodied experience of participating in or witnessing the construction of monuments, of taking part in ritual performance, has the capacity to maximize their potential for the construction of cultural memory through the involvement of the senses (Hamilakis 2014; Jackson & Wright 2014; see Assmann 2008; Connerton 1989). In order to understand such a complex instance of construction as that of Amenemhat I's Lisht pyramid, then, both the material and immaterial potentialities of the reuse need to be taken into account.

If we are to use the *Teaching for Merikare* as a framework for this example of ancient reuse, it is important to note that the dating of this text is uncertain. The only remaining copies date to the Eighteenth Dynasty (New Kingdom, c. 1550–1292 BCE) or later, and the current scholarly consensus seems to point to a Middle Kingdom (Twelfth Dynasty) composition (Demidchik 2011; Parkinson 1997, 5). If the text was composed in the Middle Kingdom, it is possible that it served a legitimizing purpose by framing the Herakleopolitan period as a time of chaos. The narrating king comes across as a wise ruler, a common feature of so-called

'teachings', but he admits that 'vile deeds' happened in his reign (Parkinson 2002, 252–3). Most importantly, the excerpt above reveals a worry about the preservation of predecessors' monuments, therefore providing a compelling backdrop for a consideration of architectural reuse in the time of Amenemhat I—not long after the reign of Merikare. Royal ideology manifest in official discourse is not necessarily equivalent to reality, so using this text in an examination of royal architectural reuse also allows for a consideration of the real vis-à-vis ideal aspects of kingship, an often ignored line of questioning.

### The contested case of Amenemhat I

Amenemhat I was the first ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty in the Middle Kingdom, which followed the First Intermediate Period, a period of decentralization and loss of royal power.<sup>1</sup> The mechanisms behind his rise to the throne are debated, but he is generally thought to have been the previous king's vizier. Though he is credited with founding the new capital of Itjtawy, he is also known for emulating the glory of Old Kingdom kings while establishing the foundation for a new dynasty. Amenemhat I is lauded as a restorer of traditions (e.g. Berman 1985, 3; Callender 2000, 147; Goedicke 1971, 6), a reputation derived from his titulary that identifies him as a 'repeater of births' (*wehemmesu*) (Leprohon 1996, 165; Postel 2004, 281, 289), as well as from his additions to several temples across Egypt (for a catalogue of much of the known material evidence from Amenemhat I's reign, see Hirsch 2004, 171–86). The ancient text *Prophecies of Neferti*, a likely legitimization tool, also paints him as the harbinger of a new era. His return to old models is visible in the art style and purposeful archaism employed during his reign, a practice continued by his successors. One of the potentially clearest examples of his reinvigoration of Old Kingdom kingship is the tangible reuse of parts of older monuments in his constructions (e.g. Brand 2010, 3; Gilli 2009, 107; 2015; Goedicke 1971, 6). This interpretation, of course, is directly opposed to the royal recommendation supposedly made from one king to another a mere 50 years before.

Amenemhat I's Lisht pyramid (Fig. 1) hearkened back to the form and size of late Old Kingdom pyramids, another deliberate connection between his reign and those of previous kings. The complex included pyramid and valley temples, a causeway, and tomb shafts reserved for the burial of royal women (for more on the architecture of the pyramid complex, see Arnold 2015). The pyramid



**Figure 1.** *The pyramid of Amenemhat I at Lisht, with a modern cemetery in the foreground that shows the continued significance of the site. (Photograph: courtesy of Ernesto Graf.)*

is partly composed of reused blocks from the early Twelfth Dynasty, as well as the Old Kingdom. The reused Twelfth Dynasty elements include blocks from Amenemhat I's short-lived earlier pyramid, also at Lisht—an understandable reuse of material, since this second pyramid was begun later in his reign (Arnold & Jánosi 2015, 56; Jánosi 2016, 1, 4–12). More importantly for our purposes, the pyramid is also an 'almost inexhaustible source' of reused blocks from Old Kingdom structures (Goedicke 1971, 2; for catalogues of these blocks, see Goedicke 1971 and the in-depth study of the Lisht monuments in Jánosi 2016). The quantity of Old Kingdom material has in fact not been fully ascertained, since the blocks are so embedded in the monument that identifying all of them would require dismantling the pyramid (Berman 1985, 70). Many of the blocks were discovered in the foundations and core of the pyramid, in the foundations of the pyramid temple, or scattered throughout the site, which has made it difficult for excavators to identify exact findspots (Jánosi 2008, n. 26; 2016, 13). Furthermore, it is expected that the

inscribed and decorated material represents only a fraction of the total of reused blocks, since a lack of decoration or texts makes it challenging to identify them as such.

While some scholars have claimed that the blocks could have come from local temples (e.g. Arnold 1996; W. Smith 1949, 157; see Jánosi 2016, 13), it is improbable that they originate from monuments close to Lisht or in Lisht itself. Such a suggestion presupposes the existence of a building or buildings in that area built by several Old Kingdom kings, which would probably imply a divine rather than mortuary temple. It is doubtful that any such major temple existed at Lisht before the Fayum became an important centre in the Middle Kingdom (Goedicke 1971, 5), though it is possible that kings a bit earlier than the Twelfth Dynasty were already prioritizing the Fayum for the creation of new agricultural land (Moeller 2016, 249–52). Instead, the inclusion of royal names on several blocks, as well as stylistic trends and motifs, suggest that they originate predominantly from Old



**Figure 2.** *Map of the main sites mentioned in this article.*

Kingdom royal funerary monuments at Giza and Saqqara (Fig. 2). The complexes from which the blocks seem to have been taken include those of Khufu and Khafre (Fourth Dynasty), Userkaf, Djedkare-Isesi and Unas (Fifth Dynasty) and Pepy II (Sixth Dynasty) (Goedicke 1971, 4; Jánosi 2008, 59; 2016, 13). Uphill (1984, 205) added Pepy I to this list, but his name has not been definitively found on any blocks. However, it is possible that other kings, including Pepy I, should be added to the list, since a significant number of blocks currently inside the pyramid have not been accessed (Jánosi 2008, 59). The partial cartouche identified as that of Pepy II could have instead belonged to Pepy I. Additionally, a block seems to mention the name of Pepy I's pyramid and might thus have come from the king's mortuary complex (Jánosi 2016, 27–8).

Besides royal names, the blocks feature imagery including ceremonial scenes, the presentation of offerings, agricultural scenes and nautical scenes (see Jánosi 2016; also Goedicke 1971). Some of these themes, particularly ceremonial scenes including

the king—who is preserved on some of the fragments—would not have been found in private tombs of the period. The same has been claimed by Jánosi (2008, 59), since the king was not pictured in private funerary contexts until the New Kingdom (Baines 1990, 21) (for a description of blocks featuring the king and his family, see Jánosi 2016, 75–84; for blocks featuring royal names and emblems, see Jánosi 2016, 87–94). The assumption thus tends to be that these reused blocks come solely from royal contexts (e.g. Brand 2010, 3; Ćwiek 2003, 348, n. 1436; Gilli 2015), but iconographic elements such as nautical scenes were not restricted to that sphere. Additionally, an architrave that lists an official's titles and displays carvings of lesser quality seems to originate in a private tomb (Goedicke 1971, 149–50).

Most scholars seem to agree that these funerary monuments were poorly preserved at the time of the stones' reuse and that Amenemhat I did not order their destruction (see Uphill 1984, 205, 232, for an earlier perspective on the issue). Different possibilities for their dilapidation have been provided,

including the instability of the First Intermediate Period and an earthquake. The former interpretation largely derives from later literary sources, such as the *Prophecies of Neferti* and the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, or contemporary autobiographical inscriptions; such texts had a legitimizing function for kings and officials, and recent re-evaluations of the period have called into question their reliability as historical sources (e.g. Moreno García 2015). An earthquake might explain the reuse of elements such as architraves, which would not easily have been reached had they still been in their original positions (Ćwiek 2003, 347). Jánosi (2008, 63) has also suggested that the Herakleopolitan kings of the First Intermediate Period could have reused the Old Kingdom blocks in their residence close to the Fayum, a not impossible but somewhat disquieting proposition in light of the *Teaching for Merikare* text.

If the origin of the blocks seems at this point widely accepted, it is still unclear why Amenemhat procured them in the first place. Some scholars claim, unconvincingly, that it was simply utilitarian reuse due to the apparent randomness and haphazard positioning of the blocks inside the pyramid (e.g. Cimmino 1996, 124–5; Ćwiek 2003, 347; Jánosi 2008, 6; Oppenheim 1999, 318). It has also been suggested that the blocks were taken to Lisht to allow Amenemhat I's artists to copy the Old Kingdom relief style (Goedicke 1971, 5), and that the inhabitants of Giza and Saqqara were required to provide a certain amount of stone for the construction project (Arnold & Jánosi 2015, 56). While neither option can be ruled out, it is imperative to note that most of the pyramid core was constructed of limestone taken from local quarries, as well as mud bricks and loose debris (Bard 2015, 198; Jánosi 2008, 61; Verner 2005, 533). It is perhaps the case that shipping already quarried blocks from farther away on the river would have been more efficient than sending them by land over shorter distances, but the around 50 km between Giza, Saqqara and Lisht would have needed to be travelled over both land and water (see Figure 2). While transport on the river would have taken place in barges, that on land occurred on sledges pulled by large teams of men and/or oxen (Köpp 2013; for a more general discussion of transportation on both land and water, see Cotterell & Kamminga 1990). It is thus arguable that any efficiency that might have been gained in transporting the blocks over water would have been diminished by the stretches of longer land travel than those from the quarries at Lisht itself (which were located at the edges of the plateau, less than 5 km away from the pyramid) (see Arnold 1988, 14–15). In constructing the earlier pyramids of

Giza, kings looked to local quarries for most of the required limestone (e.g. see Verner 2005), while farther quarries such as at Aswan were used for valuable stone (in this case, granite). There is thus precedent for the use of local materials for the bulk of pyramid construction (see Lehner 1997, 206–7), while materials with a distinguished value were sought in farther locations that required more effort in their transportation. This seems to have been the case at Lisht, not only with the Old Kingdom blocks but also with white limestone used for the pyramid's casing transported from the Moqattam quarries also close to Giza (Verner 2005, 533). Attempting to classify this example of reuse as solely utilitarian, even if that played a role, is thus simplistic.

The fact that in the *Teaching for Merikare* a king warns another against despoiling the monuments of his predecessors makes architectural reuse an undeniable ideological concern—regardless of whether logistical considerations also played a role. Whether this passage is a reaction to a real historical event or a blanket admonition, should we expect that kings would have shared these concerns and followed these recommendations? Uphill (1984, 205, 232) pegged Amenemhat I as a looter of his predecessor's monuments, despite his claims to have been the opposite—a renewer of births. How naïve would we be to expect a king's throne name and righteous pronouncements to match his *de facto* rule? When discussing the possibility that the Herakleopolitan kings could have been responsible for despoiling the Old Kingdom monuments, Jánosi (2008, 63) claimed that in that scenario Amenemhat I would have used the blocks 'comfortably and in certainty of his purpose [...] as an act of piety and restoration of the glorious past.'<sup>2</sup> The assumption that Amenemhat restored Old Kingdom traditions when reusing previously reused blocks, but not when taking blocks from ruined monuments, is contradictory.

The argument for ideological reuse relies on the fact that what mattered was the origin of the blocks in Old Kingdom monuments and their collective presence at Lisht. Goedicke claimed that all individual reused blocks were important because they had been carefully chosen and curated (Goedicke 1971, 7, 151), but that is unlikely, to judge from their often generic imagery, the possibility that some came from private contexts and their random (sometimes upside-down) placement inside the pyramid (Ćwiek 2003, 347; Gilli 2009, 96; Oppenheim 1999, 318). However, there is still reason to think their reuse was prompted by an inherent value of the blocks themselves, even if it might also have been carried out due to economic reasons.



**Figure 3.** Defacements on a block from the reign of Userkaf, found in Amenemhat I's Lisht pyramid. (Photograph: © The Metropolitan Museum, open access.)

The continued potency of the Old Kingdom blocks is suggested by the fact that some were purposefully defaced (Fig. 3). Animals (such as snakes and vultures) were disfigured and human faces and other body parts were crossed out (Goedicke 1971, 12, 74, 89; Jánosi 2008, n. 24; 2016, pl. 4). A similar erasure of human faces during royal reuse took place in the Second Intermediate Period at South Abydos (Cahail 2014, 206). *Damnatio memoriae* was not uncommon in ancient Egyptian royal contexts, but the fact that kings' names were largely left intact (with an exception of the name and titulary of Djedkare-Isesi: see Jánosi 2016, 18–19, pls. 8–9) shows that no systematic erasure took place. Defacement, and particularly the mutilation of hieroglyphs, was also common in non-royal contexts, usually interpreted as necessary to neutralize dangerous images, such as snakes (e.g. Russo 2010 has written of the need to neutralize signs of the horned viper by picturing it without a head). Less obviously harmful images, such as human figures, could also be disfigured, which implies that their intact presence was thought of as threatening in some way (Roth 2017, 292). In his publication of these blocks, Goedicke claimed that the defacement would 'undoubtedly' have been undertaken by the workmen who transported them to Lisht in order to neutralize the power of the dangerous images (Goedicke 1971, 12, 89). It is also possible that the defacement occurred before the blocks were removed from their original structures, or in the time between their falling into ruin and their reuse. Even so, it is worth considering that the workmen transporting the blocks might have felt the need to erase certain images—perhaps due to superstition or fear of the

reliefs—and exciting to think that they might have contributed to the layers of meaning at such a royal site. This would suggest that the imagery on those blocks, and the blocks as a whole, were still meaningful despite the probable unkempt state of the monuments from which they originated. They were not mere building materials.

As suggested by other scholars, the blocks might have stood for a transfer of legitimacy from the funerary monuments of the old kings, as well as for a tangible connection between the old kings and the new (e.g. Lehner 1997, 168; Wildung 2003, 75). This is reminiscent of Inca practices, where the transportation of stones could transfer power from site to site. By incorporating the Old Kingdom blocks into the very foundations of his pyramid, Amenemhat I ensured that they remained effective by making them useful once more, especially if the funerary temples from which they originated had fallen into disrepair. In doing so, he fulfilled the promise in his throne name of 'repeater of births'. It was not the point to honour specific kings, but rather to resuscitate Old Kingdom kingship by making it the foundation of Middle Kingdom kingship. A thought-provoking parallel is the motivation behind the reuse of previous emperors' reliefs in the Arch of Constantine, which has also been the subject of debate (e.g. Elsner 2000; Kinney 1997) and which inspired my interpretation. This suggestion might also offer a more nuanced consideration of the private blocks at Lisht, as they might be part of a broader revitalization of Old Kingdom traditions taking place in private elite contexts. In the private sphere, this is suggested by the incorporation of Old Kingdom blocks in the mastaba of Reherdjersen at

Lisht and in the small pyramid of Reherischefnacht at south Saqqara (Berger el-Naggar & Labrousse 2005; Gilli 2009, 109; Jánosi 2008, 40, 61, n. 40). It is possible that this reuse was not only restorative, but also meant to showcase Amenemhat I's ability to gather fragmented pieces of kingship and put them back together, and in so doing to surpass the achievements of those who came before him.<sup>3</sup>

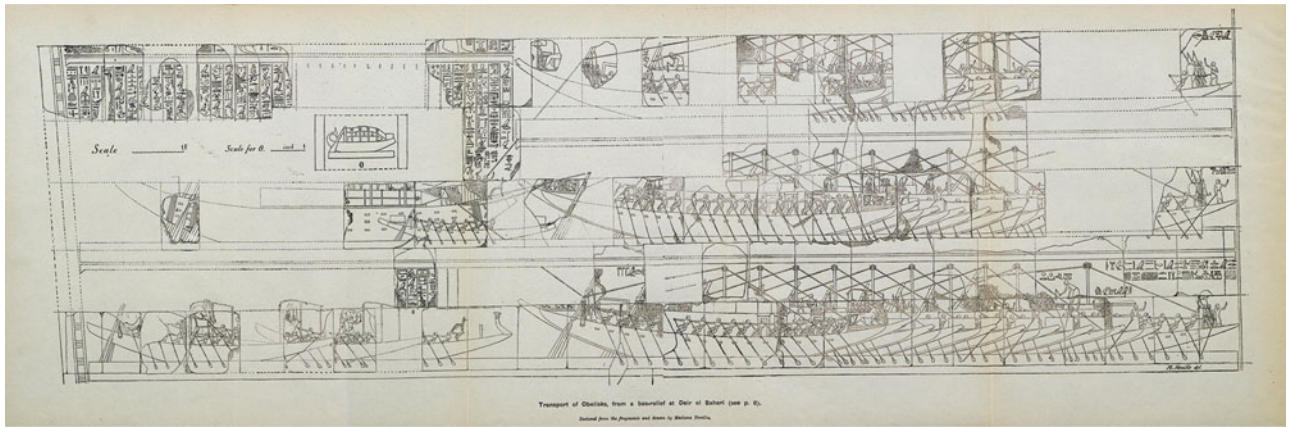
That Amenemhat I was deriving legitimacy from his predecessors by incorporating their monuments into his own is possible—perhaps likely. It is less clear how that connection would have been made known, since the blocks would largely not have been visible inside the pyramid, another reason why some view this case as simply utilitarian. But to expect that the blocks needed to be visible to be meaningful would be a mistake, since legibility—of texts and images, as well as ideas—seems to not have been a major concern in royal and divine contexts. Many inscriptions and reliefs, such as those that wound around columns in dark temple halls, were not meant to be seen by human audiences. A lack of a human audience for this reuse is therefore not an argument against its ideological significance, and it is even possible that the blocks' invisibility was part of their meaning. Roth has stated that in Egypt the purpose of 'nesting forms and concepts' was 'to add historical and symbolic reinforcement and resonances that enhanced the whole' (Roth 1998, 1003), and Bestock (2019) has discussed the invisibility of the Early Dynastic Abydos royal tombs, stressing that it could be deliberate rather than accidental. That deliberate invisibility conveyed deep meaning has also been discussed by Riggs, who suggests that Egyptians hid and concealed statues and dead bodies to establish their sanctity and 'transform mundane, or even impure, matter into something pure and godlike' (Riggs 2014, 3). She also claims that the performance of wrapping 'was as important as what was being wrapped' (Riggs 2014, 23). The reused Old Kingdom blocks, too, underwent a 'wrapping' as they were added to the Lisht pyramid. Foundation rituals of temples and tombs are well documented (Blackman & Fairman 1946; Karkowski 2016; Weinstein 1973), and it is possible that officiating ceremonies took place upon the concealment of the blocks, or that their inclusion in the pyramid functioned as a foundation deposit (this has been previously suggested by e.g. Goedicke 1971, 5–7; Varille 1946).

It is also imperative to consider that the process of transporting the blocks to Lisht might have been integral to their power. As discussed above, construction spectacles are a cross-cultural phenomenon

with the potential to materialize and perpetuate state ideology and authority through performance. The effectiveness of ancient Egyptian cultic processions for the construction of community values and cultural memory is acknowledged (e.g. Accetta 2013; Heffernan 2012), but not much has been said regarding the performative potential of royal rituals (for an exception, see Morris 2013; for the importance of performance for subjection, see A. Smith 2011). However, it is not difficult to believe that Egyptian kings would have wanted their construction endeavours to be admired. From the royal sphere, a painting in the burial chamber of Tutankhamun suggests that the transport of funerary materials to the royal tomb would have been a significant event (Baines 2014, 12), though probably not accessible to a large public. There is also evidence that such displays were relevant to larger groups of people: representations from Hatshepsut's reign in the Eighteenth Dynasty that depict the transportation of obelisks on the Nile make it clear that their move was an affair of great complexity that required considerable resources, including manpower (Fig. 4) (Naville 1908, pls. CLIII–CLIV). That the scene is carved in her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri alongside other impressive deeds, such as her famous expedition to Punt, is reason enough to classify it as an occurrence of great importance. Accompanying inscriptions corroborate that assumption: 'there is a festival in the sky, Egypt is rejoicing ... when they see this monument everlasting (which the queen) erected to her father (Amon)' (Naville 1908, 3). Iconographic elements also point to the prominence of the occasion. The depiction of empty thrones on ceremonial boats perhaps suggests that the queen and her co-regent Thutmose III accompanied the procession, and a line of gods above the main transport scene links it to the divine realm. The transportation of these monuments was not only an extravagant, but also a ritually significant affair.

More evidence for the prestige associated with the movement of materials comes from private contexts. The transportation of stone blocks is documented in several commemorative funerary reliefs and paintings, as well as recounted in accompanying texts. These images show that wooden sledges, which were usually pulled by people but sometimes also by pack animals, were generally used to carry large stone blocks or sculptures (for examples of such reliefs, see Köpp 2013, 5–6, 22; Newberry 1895, 25; Shaw 2013, 528–9). The best-preserved example comes from a Twelfth Dynasty tomb from Deir el-Bersha (Fig. 5) (the full sequence of reliefs can be found in Newberry 1895, pls. XIII–XVI). The scene,





**Figure 4.** Reliefs showing the transportation of Hatshepsut's obelisks. (After Naville 1908, pls. CLIII–CLIV; scan from Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg.)



**Figure 5.** Painting showing the transportation of Djehutihotep's statue. (Photograph: M. De Meyer. © KU Leuven, Dayr al-Barsha Project.)

which details the transportation of a statue of the official Djehutihotep, is split into five episodes. Djehutihotep himself, along with some of his attendants, is shown following the statue in procession;

he is described by the excavators as 'richly appraised', perhaps signalling the importance of the occasion (Newberry 1895, 17). The scene is accompanied by an inscription that emphasizes the event's significance:

Behold, wonderful to the minds of men was the dragging of valuable stone [...] (and) difficult (would it have been even) for a mere square block of sandstone. I caused to come troops of goodly youths in order to make for it the road [...] I came to bring it, my heart enlarged, the townsmen all rejoicing: exceeding good was it to see more than anything. [...] Their speech was full of my praises (and) of my favours of-before-the-king, my children in splendour adorned after me. My country-fold shouted praises. (Newberry 1895, 18–19)

As the inscription makes clear, transporting this statue was a mark of the official's status and of his ability to commission such a monument and bring it to his tomb (a recent reconstruction of the event shows crowds of spectators lining the procession: Monnier 2020, fig. 9). Praises were exclaimed, offerings were made, incense was burned, oxen were killed—it was a sensorially stimulating experience, not only for the honoured official but also for the rows of men dragging the statue and for the watching community members. Kings' statues would probably have been similarly transported (Wildung 1984, 158–60), and it is fair to expect that increased fanfare would have accompanied such operations.

Both this sequence and Hatshepsut's confirm that the process of transporting monumental building materials, obelisks and statues required enormous numbers of workmen and resources, and often both land and river travel. Hatshepsut herself might have been present during the transportation of her obelisks, and Djehutihotep certainly was at his statue's procession; the inclusion of such scenes in mortuary contexts implies that these events and the glory associated with them were meant to last forever. Both accompanying inscriptions also explicitly mention audiences who celebrated the transport with joyful exclamations and the presentation of offerings. Much like the Inca or Iron Age Anatolian cases, the movement of materials in Egypt could be accompanied by feasting and performances that served to strengthen political and ideological ties. Though the reliefs cannot be assumed to be completely faithful representations, perhaps particularly due to their divine and funerary settings, it is obvious that these events were remarkable and deserving of recording.

The transportation of blocks from Old Kingdom funerary temples to Amenemhat I's Lisht pyramid would have involved stretches of both land and river travel, as well as large numbers of workmen (Goedicke 1971, 5). An extensive number of blocks from Old Kingdom funerary monuments has also

been discovered in the Nile Delta, at least some of which were moved there at this time (Jánosi 1998). Other blocks not discovered in secure Twelfth Dynasty contexts may have been moved by New Kingdom kings, but a Middle Kingdom reuse is just as plausible (Uphill 1984, 199). Though the Middle Kingdom activity in that region, particularly at the site of Ezbet Rushdi (Czerny 2015; Forstner-Müller *et al.* 2004, 106; Moeller 2016, 252–62), has not been securely dated to a specific king, evidence suggests that some of it took place in Amenemhat I's reign. This evidence includes the discovery of an inscription at Ezbet Helmi: 'Sesostris III made as his monument erecting a doorway of Zaza(t) of Amenemha(t) by renewing what was made by ... Amenemhat I' (Habachi 1954, 451; Szafranski 1998, 101). Blocks found in the Delta include the names of several Old Kingdom kings, and the overlap between this list and that of blocks found at Amenemhat I's pyramid is inescapable: Khufu, Khafre, Unas, Pepy II and perhaps Pepy I (Jánosi 1998, 60, abb. 6; Szafranski 2006; Uphill 1984, 199). This case of reuse has been interpreted as solely utilitarian, since the Delta is notorious for a lack of stone available for use as building material (Uphill 1984, 203, 205). Yet, the possibility that construction spectacles added a meaningful dimension to the transportation of blocks gives us room to question that assumption, or at least to concede that it is perhaps too simplistic. It also serves as a reminder of how much we do not know about ancient practices due to the types of evidence that survive in the archaeological record.

While no preserved texts refer to a ceremony similar to that of Hatshepsut or Djehutihotep during the movement of reused blocks in the reign of Amenemhat I, it is feasible that something of the kind took place. Additionally, a fragmentary papyrus from the Twelfth Dynasty settlement of Lahun, founded not long after the reign of Amenemhat I, may refer to a festival involving the 'raising of obelisks' (papyrus fragment UC32371: Collier & Quirke 2006, 120). Admittedly, the allure of the transportation of finished obelisks or statues might be higher than that of stone blocks detached from their original buildings. However, a relief from the Fifth Dynasty pyramid causeway of Sahure suggests that we should not place decorated stone blocks and finished monuments in such distinct categories when it comes to their potential for prompting celebration. This scene involved the dragging of the pyramid's capstone, which John Baines claims would have been a 'ready vehicle for "dramatized" performance' due to the large numbers of people involved and the inherent

significance of the event (Baines 2006, 266–7). The capstone is arguably more remarkable than limestone blocks—though stone itself held deep symbolic significance in Egypt (see e.g. Aufrère 1997)—but the fact that only the pyramidion is mentioned does not mean that similar fanfare would not have accompanied the rest of the construction. At any rate, it would be difficult to deny that a procession of a significant quantity of royal material, even if reused, has the potential to be extraordinary. This is especially the case if the restoration of previous monuments and traditions was considered a cornerstone of the king's reign. Of course, whether this potential spectacle was part of the purpose of the reuse and whether it would have been effective in inducing the wonder of witnesses are two different considerations. The latter requires a longer discussion than fits here about the nature of audience and ancient 'propaganda', but one can argue that this distinction may not have mattered to the king. Djehutihotep himself lived in the Twelfth Dynasty, and though he served some of Amenemhat I's successors rather than the king himself (Newberry 1895, 3), it is perhaps of note that our best evidence of the importance of such transportation spectacles comes so shortly after Amenemhat I's reign.

### Discussion and conclusion: remembered ruins

When discussing the well-known architectural reuse by Ramses II of the Nineteenth Dynasty (New Kingdom) at the new capital of Per-Ramses in the Nile Delta, Gilli claimed that it was 'unique in the history of Pharaonic Egypt as the reemployment of earlier materials was not solely dictated by economic reasons' (Gilli 2016, 167). The discussion above has demonstrated the unlikelihood that Amenemhat I's reuse of Old Kingdom blocks was solely utilitarian, but unfortunately statements such as Gilli's remain common in Egyptology. The famous reuse of so-called *talatat* blocks from constructions commissioned by the Eighteenth Dynasty king Akhenaten by different kings at the end of the Eighteenth and in the Nineteenth Dynasties has been approached similarly, and it should also not be seen so simplistically (e.g. Brand 2010, 4; Redford 1978; for a more nuanced view of the reuse, see R. Smith 1970). Though the details of this case are beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to highlight that Akhenaten, now commonly referred to as the 'heretic pharaoh', instituted a religious reform repudiated by his successors, leading to the destruction of temples and the reuse of their architectural elements (for more information on Akhenaten and his reform, see

Hornung 1999; Kemp 2012; for details about the reuse, see Roeder 1969). At the prominent Karnak temple complex and at the behest of the Eighteenth Dynasty king Horemheb, these *talatat* were incorporated into the interiors of pylons, which means that their reuse—similarly to the Lisht case—would not have been visible after the construction process. However, this is again no reason to dismiss potential ideological motivations, evident in the way some of the decorated blocks were placed inside the pylons: the image of Akhenaten's queen Nefertiti, for instance, was arranged upside down, so that she was 'crushed' (Smith & Redford 1976, 34). It is also possible that there was a public component to the reuse, used to showcase Horemheb's repudiation of Akhenaten's reign and religious beliefs (a modern reconstruction of the scene includes an officiating ceremony led by the king; R. Smith 1970, 649). The motivations behind this instance of reuse and that conducted by Amenemhat I at Lisht are simultaneously similar and different: while both may have been undertaken due to economic reasons, their potential ideological inclinations—which may have been showcased in construction spectacles—seem ultimately to have had different end goals, one of commemoration and the other of erasure.

Royal reuse in ancient Egypt was unsurprisingly conducted for reasons that could differ based on factors such as historical moment and context. Gilli's notion that Ramesside kings reused ancient materials in their constructions in order to integrate the past into the present may seem preposterous in light of Ramses II's fame as a usurper, who often erased previous kings' names to replace them with his own and used his predecessors' monuments as stone quarries (including Amenemhat I's pyramid, in fact) (Jánosi 2016, 5). Perhaps it is useful to return to the *Teaching for Merikare* here once more, since it highlights the contradictions between the ideal and the reality of ancient Egyptian monuments, which were sometimes plundered for building material. That this practice is featured and denounced in that text means it was inherently ideological, whether we wish to see it as such or not. What remains for us is to question how certain instances of reuse fit in that ideology. By interpreting Ramses II's reuse as a pious restoration of old constructions, are we wilfully ignoring the monuments we know he destroyed when procuring stone? Should we believe ancient kings when they say that to despoil old monuments was reprehensible?

The *Teaching for Merikare* ultimately acknowledges the frailty of ancient Egyptian royal monuments, even though that is likely far from its

original intention. That is also quite far from the common—and usually unstated—assumption that those monuments will last forever, as their creators say they were meant to. But it is precisely this longevity that makes monuments inherently frail, in both symbolic and material terms (Osborne 2017). This fragility is why attempting to understand how they were made monumental at the time of their creation and throughout their use is key. Performances such as construction and transportation spectacles are known to have been deployed for such purposes in cultures as far removed in both time and place as Iron Age Anatolia, ancient Rome and pre-Columbian America. In the case of Amenemhat I, we do not know if they took place—but we can assume that the reuse of Old Kingdom blocks by the first king of the Middle Kingdom changed the meaning of those blocks, perhaps at the same time restoring their power and showcasing the king's ability to surpass his predecessors. They probably also added to the meaning of the new monument they were used to construct, whether the initial motivation to procure them was utilitarian or ideological, or both. Such performances as the ones discussed here are so ephemeral that they by and large do not survive in the record, but the possibility that they occurred helps us understand better how more permanent, but by no means timeless, monuments endure(d) in cultural memory. Monuments may be frail, but their distinct parts often remain potent after their fragmentation. And in the case of Amenemhat I, he may have built out of ruins—but by doing so he made them ruins no longer.

### Notes

1. Though the First Intermediate Period is still considered by many a period of collapse (e.g. Hamdan *et al.* 2016), recent re-evaluations have shown that it was a time of growth and dynamism for certain parts of Egyptian society (e.g. Moeller 2005; Moreno García 2015).
2. 'Amenemhet I. konnte diese Blöcke, die bereits ihren originalen Kontext verloren hatten, bequem und in der Gewißheit für seine Zwecke verwenden, durch den praktischen Nutzen zugleich auch einen Akt der Pietät und Restaurierung gegenüber der glorreichen Vergangenheit zu setzen.'
3. I thank Guilherme Borges Pires for this suggestion.

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Luiza Osorio G. Silva  
University of Chicago  
Division of the Humanities  
Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations  
Chicago, IL 60637  
USA  
Email: [losilva@uchicago.edu](mailto:losilva@uchicago.edu)

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### **Author biography**

*Luiza Osorio G. Silva* is a PhD candidate in Egyptian Archaeology at the University of Chicago, writing a dissertation on the experience of Middle Kingdom kingship outside of the royal court. Her main research interests include kingship and legitimacy, monumentality, and the contexts and audiences for Egyptian art.