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Archaizing Alterations:

A Study of the Architecture and Reliefs of the Funerary Complex of Nebhepetra Mentuhotep at Deir el-Bahri

King Nebhepetra Mentuhotep is the famed reuniter of Egypt and first king of the Middle Kingdom. Through his defeat of the Herakleopolitan rulers, the Egyptian state became unified once again and access to the previous artistic capital of Memphis was capable (Shaw 151). As many scholars have suggested, this newfound access and availability of resources to a unified Egypt allowed for the reinvigoration and flourishing of artistic styles (Robins 90). The best document for examining the change of Thebes from utilizing a provincial style to one of national esteem is the mortuary complex of Mentuhotep at Deir el-Bahri. Because of the phased building construction, these discrepancies in styles become illuminated when studying both the relief and architecture present in the temple. These two art forms act as the best tools to illustrate not only the formation of a new style through innovation, but also the length to which the king wished to associate himself with the rulers of the past by employing archaic elements.

Architecture of the Mortuary Complex of Nebhepetra Mentuhotep

To begin a discussion about the archaizing and amalgam of styles that King Mentuhotep employs in his mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri, the site must first be

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properly described. Upon a cursory glance, the complex looks like a very large *saff* tomb. These tombs are characterized by a wide but shallow court and are fronted by a series of pillars. Similarly, Mentuhotep's complex at Deir el-Bahri has a large court framed by a wall which defines the temple precinct.

The court actually has multiple sets of walls. The first and older is a rough fieldstone wall which runs along the eastern edge of the complex. This wall emphasizes an "original axis" which was abandoned during later stages of the building process. The subsequent stone walls, measuring approximately 3.145 m high, outlined the rest of the court (Arnold 10). This wall had five gates, two on the western edge, one each on the north and south, and a large gate on the eastern wall acting as the terminus for the causeway. Finally, a set of brick walls surrounded the stone wall. The first brick wall had a comparable height and width to the stone ones and the outermost wall, the parapet wall, and has a height of 1.05 m and outlined the other two walls on the outermost exterior (Arnold 16). The complex does indeed have a causeway and it is thought also a valley temple, which was later destroyed by Ramesses IV for his mortuary temple (Lehner 167).

The court of the complex itself contains a couple interesting features. A garden is completely preserved and is a rare find in temple complexes. Excavations suggest that the garden must have consisted of two rows of large trees flanking the processional way, a group of smaller trees behind the larger trees, beds for flowers in between two large trees in the southern row, and a lone large tree in the north

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part of the court. The trees planted were tamarisks and sycamore-figs (Wilkinson 3).

Another feature of the court is the Bab el-Hosan, or "Gate of the Horse," named after the horse of Howard Carter who discovered it. It has been suggested that this subterranean passageway, which first took form as an open trench and then a tunnel with a shaft and chamber, was originally planned to be the royal tomb. In a later phase of the complex this was turned into a cenotaph. When excavated, the cenotaph yielded an Osiride statue of the king wrapped in linen (Arnold 24).

The final part of the court worth mentioning is the ramp connected to the temple itself. It has been estimated that the total length is about 29 m (Arnold 32).

The temple complex was built at the base of the cliff, designed as a t-shaped terraced structure built of masonry and also partly carved into the rock. The lower colonnade of the complex consisted of two rows of thirteen columns each on the north and two rows of eleven columns to the south. The columns, which are square in shape, were originally 11 or 12 ft. tall, made of sandstone, and were covered in a white colored wash (Naviile, I, 23). Inscriptions exist on both the northern and southern colonnades, where the hieroglyphs are colored yellow in the outer row of the colonnade and blue in the inner row (Naviile, I, 23). The columns in the upper colonnade are reconstructed to be slightly smaller than the colonnade beneath. The upper colonnade surrounds the ambulatory on three sides (Naviile, I, 27).

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The ambulatory, or hall, is situated on the terrace of the second level of the complex and can be directly accessed by the ramp through the upper colonnade. The pillars in this hall were octagonal, with eight rows of columns on either side of the central axis of the hall.

In the center of the hall exists an enigmatic structure. In the original excavation reports, Naville & Winlock suggest that because of the existence of a “rectangular mass of stones” this structure was Mentuhotep’s pyramid around which the ambulatory circled (Naville, I, 28). One reason for this suggestion was from a later text, the Abbott papyrus, referring to the complex as *mer*, or pyramid (Lehner 166). However, Arnold repudiates this theory on the basis of three claims. First he states that this tomb does not resemble the Memphite architecture most closely and that it rather more likely mimics its more recent Theban ancestors. Next, he suggests that the use of *mer* by the Ramesside period, the time at which time the papyrus was composed, may have been a general term for tomb. This is supported by the fact that Theban *saff*-tombs of the First Intermediate period also are described in the papyrus with this terminology and there is absolutely no evidence of pyramidal structures. Finally, Arnold points out that that a pyramidal structure suggested by Winlock could not have been supported on the terrace and would have buckled without support from the pressure (Arnold 34-35). Instead he suggests that this was a solid building capped by a cornice (Lehner 167). Alternatively, Stadelmann reconstructs this as an Osirian mound, an idea where the

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primeval mound and tomb of the god Osiris are combined. He makes an interesting parallel to early mounds found in archaic mastabas (Lehner 166).

Along the western wall of the ambulatory exists six chapels or shrines dedicated to the King's wives. Continuing west along the axis of the complex, past the ambulatory, is the middle court. This court has octagonal columns as well. There are two rows, each with eight pillars (Naville, I, 34). Six shaft tombs belonging to the shrines to the women directly east in the ambulatory are situated beneath this colonnade.

Moving further west, this colonnade, which acts as sort of a portico, opens to a rectangular open court, 65 ft. x 75 ft. Along the northern and southern sides, the court has six octagonal columns. The central axis of the complex opens to a dromos, or entrance passageway, leading to a hypogeum, in this case the royal tomb in the center of this court (Naville, I, 35).

From this passageway to the west there is a hypostyle hall with ten rows each of eight octagonal columns. At the center of the rock face on the western wall is a small niche which once contained a shrine and was surrounded by a cella, 22 ft. by 10 ft. (Arnold 36).

The burial chamber, which was accessed by this dromos, is built about 50 m below the level of the court and at the end of a 150 m tunnel (Lehner 167). The chamber is faced in great granite blocks with most of the floor space being taken up

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by an alabaster shrine. The space between the shrine and walls of the chamber were filled with slabs of black diorite.

Finally, the last parts of the complex architecture to consider are the phases in which it was built. As noted in the description, a fair amount of peculiarities exist in the layout of the tomb. These oddities lend themselves to be described through multiple building phases. Dieter Arnold has produced a hypothesis that the complex was constructed in four phases, which he letters A, B, C, and D (Arnold 40).

Phase A includes the only trace of the original superstructure, the fieldstone wall running to the east of the present stone wall. This is thought to have outlined the limits of some unknown structure or even to act as a sort of fence to cut off the area from the rest of the valley (Arnold 40).

The next phase of building activity, B, includes the construction of the Bab el-Hosan, what is thought to be the predecessor of the later royal tomb, as it was left unfinished and then closed. The other structures built in this phase were the tombs and funerary chapels of the queens (Arnold 41)

In phase C, the most important piece of construction was that of the royal tomb. During this phase the Bab el-Hosan was closed and deemed a ceremonial burial with the Osiride statue. The only parts of the temple that were not completed in this phase were the Upper and Lower Colonnades (Arnold 42). There is evidence

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that the construction of the temple coincides with a change in the king's royal titulary to Horus *sm3-t3wy*, or the uniter of two lands (Arnold 42).

Finally, in phase D, the temple was enlarged with the addition of the lower and upper colonnades and the decoration was probably completed (Arnold 42). Also during this phase the forecourt was completed with all of the walls outlines the perimeter of the bay at Deir el-Bahri. Other attributes to this phase include the planting of the garden and finishing of the causeway.

Reliefs of The Complex

As with the architecture of Mentuhotep's complex, a report of the remaining reliefs also must be recorded. However, it should be noted that as the reliefs have come down, many of them have lost their color and have been largely worn away. There is no complete reconstruction of all the reliefs as only fragments have been found.

The temple was decorated completely with painted relief scenes on the limestone walls (Navelle, II, 13). All three exterior walls and four interior walls were carved with high relief and were divided into two registers (Peck 132). The front portion of the ambulatory presents mostly scenes of daily life and some of offering. The back part of the temple was decorated with scenes of the king being embraced by deities (Robins 92).

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The depictions on the south side of the wall of the ambulatory are quite varied. One depicts the *sed*-festival ceremonies. It shows the king, as Osiris, receiving respect from his vizier. The king is also depicted here setting up the temple in a relief where he is shown measuring the area with an oar and mason's square. Other depictions on this wall show "processions of priests, magnates, and warriors: female slaves bearing 'the god's offerings' from the farms attached to the temple; foreigners and court dignitaries bringing gifts to the king seated on his throne or standing with the gods behind him" (Navelle, I, 40). Also in this front part of the temple there are scenes depicting animal slayings as offering to the *ka*. These reliefs are accompanied by swamp scenes depicting plants and birds.

Upon the back walls of the lower colonnade there are reliefs of the king's war against the *Aamu* and scenes of boating. Specific depictions of weaponry are noticeable including those of an oxhide shield and a copper axe head (Navelle, I, 40).

Reliefs also belong to the shrines and coffins of the wives. These pieces represent the character of these women. The depictions include clothing and jewelry worn as well as related symbols such as Hathor cows. These are considered to be the earliest reliefs in the temple because the coffins use an early name of the king before it was changed (Freed 150). This is also supported by the phases under which Arnold places the construction of the sanctuaries (*see pp. 6*). These reliefs are perhaps the most distinctive of the complex. As an example, the reliefs from Kemsit's chapel are carved very high and are rounded in nature (Freed 150).

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Architectural Inspiration and Innovation

As described above, the temple of Mentuhotep at Deir el-Barhi is a vast complex that includes an amalgam of architectural styles. The innovation of the site is made possible through the utilization of both archaizing elements of the Old Kingdom and also local Theban trends of the First intermediate Period. This hybridization in style bridges a gap in provincial styles and sets forth to create a new unified style to mimic a new unified Egypt formed by Nebhepetre Mentuhotep at the onset of the Middle Kingdom.

In many ways this temple relates closely to those monuments of the previous rulers of the 11th dynasty in Upper Egypt, particularly the Intef's. Intef I, II, and III all built their tombs on the west bank of Thebes at el-Tarif (Lehner 165). The tombs of these rulers are classified as *saff*-tombs. Approaching from the east, they have a very large forecourt that is situated in the side of the sloping desert cliffs. As the forecourt is cut into the rock, when sufficient height has been made, a colonnade proceeds further west into the cliff. This columned portico extends to the sides and into some of the court creating a three-sided colonnade. Beyond this colonnade there are chambers associated with the burial. However, there is no single plan that each of these rulers followed.

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This architectural style produced by the Theban predecessors of Mentuhotep has a distinct impact on how he constructs his tomb. In a similar fashion, Mentuhotep's tomb is situated on the west bank of Thebes. He also, like the Intef's, includes a very large forecourt, which dwarfs the actual footprint of the temple itself. And, just like the colonnade of the Intef tombs, Mentuhotep's lower colonnade similarly mimics this style. It is interesting to note that Mentuhotep's tomb used square columns on the outer colonnades both on the upper and lower levels while all interior columns are octagonal. This most likely relates back to the square columns at el-Tarif that were formed from creating a rock cut tomb (Winlock 19). The fact that Mentuhotep's columns are not rock cut, but rather carved from sandstone, seems to emphasize this intentionality to draw influence from these predecessors (Navelle, II, 13).

However, there are some differences between these structures. The extension out of the cliff face is something that makes Mentuhotep's temple very distinct from its Theban predecessors. The temple is neither a 'stand alone' building nor completely rock-cut and therefore creates an interesting duality of the two styles. It is pushed back and recessed into the side of the cliff at Deir el-Bahri. Because of this, there are both rock cut chambers and tombs in the western end and upon moving east out of the temple, built portions become an extension of the cliff. The niche of the cliff in which the temple is situated could mimic the three-sided

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nature of the portico in the previous *saff*-tombs and once again could show an evolution in style.

While the number of Theban architectural details and styles in the temple are striking, many Old Kingdom ideals were employed in its construction as well. Probably the most overt reference to an Old Kingdom ideal is the axial and symmetrical nature of the complex. This axis is emphasized in Mentuhotep's complex by the causeway running from the valley, the ramp that rises to the ambulatory, and even the sanctuary and shrine at the western end of the temple, all of which are in perfect alignment (Neville, I, 35). When looking at the multiple building phases of the complex, it is obvious that the axis of construction was always important to the site. The original fieldstone wall emphasizes the creation of then temple on an axis even at an earlier phase, which is still in alignment with the final sanctuary in the western focus of the temple (Arnold 9)

Similar axial alignment is seen specifically in the Old Kingdom royal tombs that were often aligned from east to west. One example that acts as a great parallel and presents the characteristic qualities of Old Kingdom tombs is that of Unas. Unas' tomb had a long causeway, similar to Mentuhotep's, running from east to west that led to the entrance of a large temple. The temple door was constructed of granite, also like Mentuhotep's (Neville, II, 13). The plan of Unas' temple, which mimics the previous Djedkare-Isesi's, consists of an entrance hall, an open colonnaded court, a transverse corridor to separate the front from the inner temple,

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5 statue niches, and a sanctuary abutting the pyramid (Lehner 155). Similar elements exist in the layout of Mentuhotep's temple. The temple also has an open colonnaded court and a distinct shift from the front temple, which is not cut into the cliff, to the inner temple, which was cut into the cliff. Niches, or in this case sanctuaries, also exist in the Nebheptra's temple, but are for the worship of his queens and not for statues. Finally, at the very end of the western axis there is also a sanctuary, as a cella, in a similar fashion to Unas'.

Upon building the complex, the king must have decided explicitly to not include some Old Kingdom conventions. One such example is that the royal tomb is accessed from the east, just as the rest of the temple and not from the north. This had been convention in the Old Kingdom beginning with Djoser who made the descent to his burial chamber on the north end of his pyramid (Lehner 92). Continuing throughout the Old Kingdom the descent into the burial chamber was accessed from the north end of the pyramid rather than the eastern face of the mortuary temple. In this sense, it seems that Mentuhotep orientation of the royal tomb entrance relates more to the *saff*-tombs than tombs of the Old Kingdom.

Also, quite possibly the most obvious difference between Mentuhotep's temple and the mortuary complexes of the Old Kingdom is the lack of a pyramid. As discussed above there was an enigmatic structure that was placed in the center of the ambulatory, but the case for it being a pyramid has been disproven (Arnold 34). However, its presence nonetheless is indicative of its importance to the complex. As

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Lehner suggests, the pyramidal forms takes its roots in the mythology of Atum, the creator (Lehner 34). The pyramid is believed to have been a symbol of the primeval mound produced by the creator and in turn acts as a place for creation and rebirth. Although no pyramid existed at the site, the reconstructions of both Stadelmann and Arnold support this claim. This inclusion of the primeval mound shows both a reverence to the religious tradition and asserts a new form on the landscape. There is also a valid argument that the peak of the cliff at Deir el-Bahri, el-qurn, could have been seen as a natural pyramid (Lehner 167). This is supported by the fact that the royal chamber runs directly underneath the cliff in the same manner that a royal tomb runs beneath a pyramid. Finally, the inherent nature of the complex is expressed through verticality. Just as Djoser's pyramid was a step pyramid, this complex too takes on a similar guise (Lehner 167). The terraced levels, also supported with the rectangular addition of Arnold's structure, mimics the form of Djoser's step pyramid. Alternatively, Smith suggests that this terraced nature may have also been derived from house forms seen in soul houses (Smith, Art, 85).

Another parallel to Djoser's step pyramid at Saqarra is noticeable in the burial chambers of both tombs. Djoser's burial chamber was dressed with 4 courses of granite blocks (Lehner 87). Similarly, Mentuhotep's inclusion of a vault not only adheres to Old Kingdom ideals, as such vaults did not exist in First Intermediate Period necropolises, but also was also dressed with multiple layers of stone. Naville mentions in his report of the tomb that "the chamber was faced with great granite

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blocks like those of a tomb-chamber of a pyramid” (Neville, I, 35). However, the chamber was not only dressed in granite but also contained slabs of diorite and an alabaster sanctuary.

Another innovative feature of this temple was the inclusion of a garden of about 50 square meters in the forecourt, an element that the Intef predecessors did not add to their courts. Wilkinson suggests that the significance of the garden be found in its meaning and symbolism in the process of rebirth (Wilkinson 3). The Sycamore-fig tree was the home of the sky goddess and also functioned as nourisher of the deceased. Such prerogatives are often seen in reliefs where the sky goddess appears from the sycamore at the edge of a pool, holding out bread and fruit while pouring water. This theme of rebirth is again repeated in the *Book of the Dead* in the line, ‘I know those two trees of turquoise between which Re goes forth,’ referring to these two trees (Faulkner 113).

While no similar gardens just like this existed beforehand, there is evidence of single palm trees and flowerbeds planted around private tombs in Memphis (Wilkinson 3). Other precursors to such a garden type include menageries that were included in gardens (Wilkinson 5). The animals reared in these menageries were either sacred to the temple or used as offerings. An Old Kingdom example is at the sun temple of Niuserre where birds were reared.

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Inspiration and Innovation in Relief Decoration

The reliefs in Mentuhotep's temple vary greatly in artistic quality, some of them being very crude while others are quite fine. This variety in relief shows an artistic relationship to both the quality and forms of the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period, while also introducing new elements.

The craftsmanship of relief in the First Intermediate Period is often identified by its "decline" in quality and craftsmanship from the Old Kingdom (Robins 82). While this is certainly true, new styles of their own merit arose in the provinces and had a definite impact on the art in Mentuhotep's temple. One example of such a provincial style is in the tomb of Ankhtifi of Moalla. The reliefs in this tomb have an irregular placing and most strikingly have a garish color palette. While not continued into the Middle Kingdom, it is thought that much of this provincial variety fostered a more diverse Middle Kingdom style (Smith, Art, 82).

Such a distinct quality in relief can be seen in the earliest reliefs from Mentuhotep's temple in the wives sanctuary. When first examining these reliefs the difference in figural proportions from Old Kingdom paradigms is noticeable. The waist and buttocks are high on the body, the legs are long, and the head is disproportionately short with varying shoulder lengths (Freed 150). Similar proportions can be seen in the First Intermediate Period relief of a female offering bearer from the tomb of a high official Tjetji (Robins 85). Besides the similar proportions, both examples have incised jewelry and also elongated fingers. The

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sarcophagus of Kawit (Cairo, JE 47397), a wife of Mentuhotep, found in his mortuary temple not only mimics this style but also adds new elements, such as a square backed shawl. Smith notes on these wives reliefs that the “spirit of the preceding period in Upper Egypt” is present in many of these details (Smith, Art, 87). Additionally, the reliefs on the retaining wall of the Western Court also show an awkwardness with lanky proportions (pl. XIII a,c, Naville I).

Two stelae can also be examined to assess the style of the time period and in relation to the reliefs of Metuhotep’s temple. First, the stela of Intef, born of the lady Tjeft, an administrative official under Mentuhotep, shows a similar Memphite influence seen in the royal complex. The stela, in normal convention, depicts the deceased and his wife at an offering table, on which there are loaves of bread (Fischer 240). The rest of the stela includes other food and equipment offerings that act as provisions for rebirth. A popular Old Kingdom motif carried into this stela is the inclusion of a dog sitting beneath the chair (Fischer 247). The stela also includes an emaciated figure, an uncommon motif in Thebes for the time period. This instead references similar figures from the Old Kingdom. The style is found first in the 5th Dynasty on a relief of the causeway of Unas and is also repeated in late Old Kingdom false doors and Memphite tombs (Fischer 151).

The second stela, a First Intermediate Period stela of the official Maaty, can act as an immediate precursor to Intef’s. This stela presents a characteristic pre-unification Theban style (Robins 84). This style is marked by deeply cut reliefs, a

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lack of musculature and similar irregular proportions, as seen in the reliefs of Mentuhotep's wives. While distinctly of the First Intermediate Period, this stela too has some Old Kingdom elements such as the outwardly facing bread loaves from the 6th dynasty.

These stelae are integral in understanding the development of relief to the form presented in Mentuhotep's temple. When examining the earlier reliefs of Mentuhotep's wives it is obvious that they expand on the pre-unification Theban style, with even more rounded forms and elongated fingers. These stela also act as a reminder though that even in the First Intermediate Period, art was drawing influence from Old Kingdom ideals, and while the level of craftsmanship is debatably lower, the access to previous artistic styles at Thebes is undeniable.

However, while these stelae are able to form stylistic links, much of the relief work in the complex of Mentuhotep is of such a fine quality that it sets a distinctively new precedent for the Middle Kingdom. This increase in quality is so fine that it is reminiscent of the best work of the Old Kingdom (Navelle 41). As the layout of the pyramid complex in the late Old Kingdom became standardized so too did the types of relief scenes. As an archaizing element in Mentuhotep's temple he utilizes many of these same scenes.

Each Old Kingdom complex included a variety of scenes that centered on the king establishing of order, legitimizing and renewing kingship, oftentimes through the interaction with deities, and making provisions for the afterlife (Robins 60).

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Establishing order was expressed in a variety of ways. Often scenes would show the king triumphing over enemies, sometimes smiting them, trampling them, or detaining them as captives. To present the king as quelling chaos and nature, Old Kingdom reliefs would utilize fishing and hunting scenes. Scenes of legitimizing kingship were also varied. The depiction of the king with other deities could indicate support as king. By the 6th dynasty, the suckling of the king by a deity had become a common occurrence in tomb reliefs to display such support (Egyptian Art 352). Other depictions also include the *sema tawy* motif and *sed*-festival symbolism. Finally, as a way to provision for the deceased king, the reliefs often portrayed offering processions, offering lists, and other activities related to the giving and procuring of offerings (Robins 62).

The relief scenes in the temple of Mentuhotep assert these royal prerogatives in a similar fashion. As a testament of his ability to contain chaos, Mentuhotep filled his tomb with hunting scenes (pl. XVI, Naville, I). These scenes are quite possibly the most similar to Old Kingdom portrayals in theme and style (Smith, Sculpture, 235). An Old Kingdom comparative is the limestone reliefs of Reaemkay in the 5th Dynasty (Hayes 172). Both scenes show in raised relief the capturing of game, including antelope that look indistinguishable from each other despite the dynastic gap. Another common depiction shared by both reliefs is the netting of waterfowl. Niuserre's pyramid complex at Abusir also contains similar hunting scenes (Naville, I, 39).

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Mentuhotep's temple also includes war scenes (pls. XIV, XV, Naville, I). These scenes are peculiar not in their style, for they also utilize the fine archaizing craftsmanship, but rather in what they represent. Reliefs of war are unprecedented in the Old Kingdom (Smith, Sculpture 235). This however does not mean that warfare did not exist in the Old Kingdom. Rather, these scenes, acting as an innovation of King Mentuhotep, not only serve to describe his unification of Egypt through battle, but also legitimize his right to be king by conquering the chaos that threatened Egypt.

In conclusion, the figures in the reliefs from Mentuhotep's temple, which were formed in low relief differentiated from Old Kingdom relief primarily in their simplicity. Smith characterizes them as having "wide sweeping lines [that] indicated that the forms were produced in masterly fashion without recourse to minor detailed digressions" (Smith, Sculpture, 235). And, as such, the reliefs of the temple represent the progression of a less exaggerated figure (as seen in the First Intermediate Period) with the inclusion of Old Kingdom quality and motifs. Thus, as an amalgam of these two styles, the King creates a new innovative form that becomes characteristic of the Middle Kingdom.

Conclusion

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The mortuary complex of Nebhepetra Mentuhotep at Deir el-Bahri acts as an exemplary model for examining the dawn of the Middle Kingdom. Both the architecture and reliefs of the complex show a development through phases, progressing from more regional to one of national importance that reintroduces the prevalent styles of the Old Kingdom. A study of these elements has revealed the following things. The mortuary complex at Deir el-Bahri began under the primary influence of Theban style. After the reunification of Egypt, the king chose to reintroduce archaizing elements. Through this development and amalgam of styles, Mentuhotep uses innovation to both set himself apart as a new ruler yet relate back to his ancestors of the First Intermediate Period and Old Kingdom. Thus, through these efforts, Nebhepetra Mentuhotep legitimizes his right to kingship at Thebes under a newly unified Kingdom of Egypt and sets the precedent for rulers to follow.

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