

## A Different Perspective of the Reserve Heads in Ancient Egypt Hebatallah Sobhy Ibrahim Abdou

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### Abstract

Reserve head is a depiction of an anonymous person's head, showing extremely high details of the facial features and sometimes the hair line. They were usually made out of limestone and started to appear from the end of the Old Kingdom. They were usually found partially damaged, especially the ears, or the neck. Many scholars generally discussed the usage of the reserve heads, however this research is focused on the signs of damage; use it as an evidence to confirm the perception that the reserve heads were used as a way of cursing of the deceased. This perspective was not discussed in details before by scholars dealing with the reserve heads. The research started with a detailed description of the reserve heads, through the collections found. It also discussed most of the researches and arguments which dealt with their use, explaining the appearance of attacks and signs of violence on most of the reserve heads in specific parts. Then the research proved that the purpose of these heads was not as reserve head but to be used as a substitute head for the purpose of performing execration rituals on the deceased and harm him in his afterlife.

**Keywords:** Reserve Heads, Ancient Egypt, Old Kingdom, Afterlife.

### Introduction

Reserve heads were usually found inside the tomb shaft which is usually located at the entrance leading to the burial chamber. Few number were discovered, as these reserve heads were not common to use or a popular item. They were not considered important to the owner of the tomb.<sup>1</sup> Tefnin discussed a collection of thirty-eight heads.<sup>2</sup> Most of them were represented with detailed facial features, detailed representations of eye lines, mouth, nose, and some were represented with hair. But most representations show the hair of the person shaved. The nose is often engraved in details with its nostrils, this seems to be made to let the head breathe. Most of them had their ears damaged, although they were originally existing (see fig. 1, 5). Two heads still have their ears intact (see fig. 2, 4). Broken ears might be destroyed, as most of them have rough edges. There are also some heads shown with spare ears,<sup>3</sup> which were made unconnectedly and then attached to the head.<sup>4</sup> Other heads shows only a hole on either side of the head as an indication of the place of the ear (see fig. 5).<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the fact that all the representations of reserve heads show the same overall features, but not all of them are similar. There are some distinguishing differences in each head relating to the features and the shape of the face, this comes out with a distinctive identification. Most of the reserve heads were made out of stone, this might indicate that it was supposed to last forever.<sup>6</sup>

Reisner in his excavations at Giza plateau found some reserve heads in some tombs. He called them "Extra Heads". His suggestion was the use of these heads if the head of the mummy was

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<sup>1</sup> Mendoza, "Reserve Head", *Encyclopaedia of Egyptology* 2017, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Tefnin, *Art et Magie au temps des Pyramides. L'énigme des têtes dites "de remplacement"*, pl. 8, pl. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Boston 21.329, Cairo JE 44975.

<sup>4</sup> Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, p. 35-36, pl.14.

<sup>5</sup> See Berlin 16455& Cairo CG 519& Boston 36-12-6 see Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, pl.13.

<sup>6</sup> Louise, *The Process of Cursing in Ancient Egypt*, p. 172.

damaged or lost.<sup>7</sup> He also discussed the family match of the heads, and declared that they were related to the royal family.<sup>8</sup> Reisner supposed that various races can be recognized through the facial features, as he recognized Nubians, Egyptians, and Asiatic people.<sup>9</sup>

Junker in his study of the reserve heads, related them to the burial chamber of the tomb. However there is no evidence for his suggestion, as they were not usually found in the burial chambers.<sup>10</sup> He suggested several uses for the reserve heads in this work, as he proposed that they are a replacement heads to be used if the head of the mummy was decayed, to permit the owner to use his senses of seeing, hearing, tasting and smelling. It also helps the *ba* (soul) to identify the body of the deceased.<sup>11</sup> He also related their use to the statues inside the serdab,<sup>12</sup> watching the outside ceremonies. Reserve heads were also identified with the statues found in the tomb.<sup>13</sup>

Millet discussed reserve heads, and their strange characteristics. He suggested that it was used as a model to make the funerary mask.<sup>14</sup>

Tefnin published a comprehensive catalogue of reserve heads, and discussed characteristics forgotten by other scholars, like the damage of the ears and the traces of colour found on few examples.<sup>15</sup> Tefnin also recommended the idea that these heads were used as spare heads, for the *ba* of the deceased, in case the head of the deceased had any sort of damage or decay.<sup>16</sup>

Tefnin also discussed the existence of a horizontal contour around the neck, which was ignored by other scholars, and he explained its existence (see fig. 1). As he related this line to beheading, and he also explained the existing of a vertical contour, which he related to an attempt of depicting blood (see fig. 2),<sup>17</sup> similar to Gardiner's hieroglyph sign (A14) which shows a representation of a man with blood overflowing out of his head is similar to this representation.<sup>18</sup>

Roehrig argued that resemblances shown between reserve heads are related to family closeness, or as a reason of being made by the same sculptor, or in the same workshop,<sup>19</sup> (see figs. 3, 4, and 5). Roehrig also noted that the majority of the heads were found in shafts inside tombs especially inside burial chambers.<sup>20</sup> Roehrig was the first to discuss the relation between the reserve heads and the cult of offering, as she confirms that it was not a part of it, as these heads were found buried.<sup>21</sup> Roehrig proposes that these reserve heads might depicts the sun god Atum, and

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<sup>7</sup> Reisner, *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* XIII (76), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Reisner, *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* XIII (76), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Reisner, *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* XIII (76), p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Junker, *Giza I.* p.57.

<sup>11</sup> Junker, *Giza I.* p.58.

<sup>12</sup> A closed room with no doors or windows, just two slots in front of the statue.

<sup>13</sup> Junker, *Giza I.* p.59.

<sup>14</sup> Millet, "The Reserve Heads of the Old Kingdom", in *Studies in Ancient Egypt, the Aegean and the Sudan*, p.130-131.

<sup>15</sup> Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, p. 12, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, p. 78-80, p. 83-84.

<sup>18</sup> Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 443.

<sup>19</sup> Roehrig "Reserve Heads: an Enigma of Old Kingdom Sculpture", in *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*, p. 74.

<sup>20</sup> Roehrig, *Egyptian Art*, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> Roehrig, *Egyptian Art*, p. 77, 78.

suggested that they were originally located in the burial chamber above a hill of sand, depicting the concept of creation from a primeval hill, but there is no evidence of these suggestions.<sup>22</sup>

Nuzzolo also dealt with the reserve head, as he summarized others researches, then worked on the suggestions of Tefnin, explaining that the reserve head in case of decapitation or beheading can cause a prevention of resurrection,<sup>23</sup> and that beheading means losing most of the essential organs for the resurrection of the deceased.<sup>24</sup> He added that majority of the heads were placed in the east part of the tomb, relating it to a Westcar papyrus text that depicts the beheading of a goose, placing its head in the east side and the body in the west side.<sup>25</sup> He also suggested that he reserve heads are placed to face the pyramid of Khufu, as the sun god in his journey in the sky will lighten the tombs, which in turn leads to the resurrection of these heads. However all these suggestions have no solid basis, and are all based on imagination and suggestions of the role of the reserve heads. Other scholars dealt with the reserve heads, however they did not add a lot to the discussed researches.<sup>26</sup>

### Discussion

The two main points of discussion when dealing with the reserve head are the damages of the ears, and damage of the back line seen on most of the heads. The elimination of the ears may prevent the person from listening to the prayers of his beloved ones offered to him in his tomb. The damage might have been done by a skillful sculptor; as part of the technique of shaping the head.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the back contour carved on some reserve heads down to the neck (see fig. 2), this line is usually straight, but in some heads it is curved and rough.<sup>28</sup> Generally, the back line is shown in a deeper relief than the lines of the facial features. The back contour is usually carved rougher than those of the facial features, with some irregular parts of the stone missing in the edges (see fig. 2). This might indicates that it was not made by the same artist or sculptor, but by someone related to the owner of the head.<sup>29</sup>

This back contour cannot be seen from the front, as it is only visible when you face the head, not to appear, or to lessen the beauty of the head. It also shows that it was not intended to split the head totally or to destroy it. But still no clear evidence of the purpose of this back line.

These two features are considered an attempt of attacking the reserve heads. This attack might indicate the intention of controlling the owner of the head, as he was considered as a foe. This kind of violence toward the head might result in a damage to the brain, which is a more advanced technique of punishing the deceased.

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<sup>22</sup> Louise, *The Process of Cursing in Ancient Egypt*, p. 174.

<sup>23</sup> Nuzzolo, "The Reserve Heads": some Remarks on their Function and Meaning" in *Old Kingdom: New Perspectives. Egyptian Art and Archaeology 2750-2150 BC*, p. 212.

<sup>24</sup> Nuzzolo, *Old Kingdom*, p. 214.

<sup>25</sup> Nuzzolo, *Old Kingdom*, p. 215.

<sup>26</sup> Other researches are: Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, p. 23-30; Hawass, "A Group of Unique Statues Discovered at Giza II. An Unfinished Reserve Head and a Statuette of an Overseer", in *Kunst des Alten Reiches*, p. 97-101; Picardo, "Semantic Homicide" and the So-Called Reserve Heads: the Theme of Decapitation in Egyptian Funerary Religion and some Implications for the Old Kingdom", *JARCE* 43, pp. 221-252.

<sup>27</sup> Millet, *The Reserve Heads of the Old Kingdom*, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> Cairo JdE 46217, see Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, pl. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Louise, *The Process of Cursing in Ancient Egypt*, p. 176.

Book of the Dead spell 154, represented the importance of these organs and their effect on the resurrection of the deceased in his afterlife, as it contains wishes of the deceased that his corpse would be kept safe, it states:

“My skull is not crushed, my ears are not deaf, and my head (itself) is not removed from my neck”.<sup>30</sup>

The spell depicts exactly the execration shown on the head as the splitting of the back part, the damage of the ears and the contour round the neck. These were done on a bust head to harm the deceased, in other words, to stop him from having an afterlife. To sum up, these are signs that the reserve head was used to harm the owner of the head. This is considered a way of cursing the deceased.

So reserve heads are not made to honor the deceased, and they are not related to the cult of offerings, but they act as an object to be attacked, which is more related to execration rituals. They fit perfectly with the execration figures, which was created in detailed facial feature to identify the person wanted to be harmed.

Some execration figures have no inscriptions, but they represent the enemy who was supposed to be attacked in a detailed representation, in order to attack the right person. Any damage of the facial features could affect the identification of the person intended, so the attack was focused somewhere else, in a place not related to the face, as explained above.<sup>31</sup>

The purpose of these execration figures was to curse foes or the dead people, in case it is impossible or not preferred to deal physically with them. Dealing with reserve heads, which were found in the tombs, is showing that the target is a deceased person. It is hard to enter the tomb and destroy the corpse of the deceased, as it is difficult to break into the tomb, but the reserve head is easier and work as an intermediate link with the desired person.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the damage of the reserve head has its consequences on the dead person, which it represents. The main aim of these execration process is to control the deceased, through the curse of the head.

All types of curses are influenced by magical power. The process of cursing includes a physical action of harming the reserve head and could be followed by an articulation of a spell or a prayer, to ensure that the curse work properly.<sup>32</sup>

Reserve heads represents a focused attack, which is attacking a figure of the vulnerable person, in a special parts of his body.<sup>33</sup> The damage of the reserve head was not a haphazard violence, but it is focused on some intended areas of the head. The damage was done for an exact determination; not just to injure the target, but to have a specific consequence.

Letters to the dead<sup>34</sup> represents how the dead could affect the living people, help them, and sometimes they could affect the decisions of the deities.<sup>35</sup> An Example of these letters is one written on part of what is called the “Kaw Bowl”. The writer is addressing his dead mother,

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<sup>30</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, spell 154.

<sup>31</sup> Louise, *The Process of Cursing in Ancient Egypt*, p. 176.

<sup>32</sup> Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, p. 180.

<sup>33</sup> Similar to the attack of the figure of the deceased on the depictions inside his tomb, for more details see the tomb of Senenmut at Deir el Bahary, where there is an intentional damage, see Dorman, *The Tombs of Senenmut: the Architecture and Decoration of Tombs 71 and 353*, p. 60,61,71, 81

<sup>34</sup> Gardiner& Sethe, *Egyptian Letters to the Dead*; Wentz, *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, p. 210-219; Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, pp. 180-183; and Strudwick, *Texts from the Pyramid Age*, pp. 182-184

<sup>35</sup> Grapow, “Bedrohungen der Götter durch Verstorbenen”, *ZÄS* 49, pp.48-54.

wants her to help with another dead person called Sobekhotep, he wants her to help her son by stopping Sobekhotep from making him ill.<sup>36</sup> This shows that the dead can cause harm to the living, but also living person ask for help from their dead relatives.

Other examples of the letters to the dead seeks help against living people. This is well represented on a Linen<sup>37</sup>, it related the story of a lady who wanted the late husband to help her against some people who renowned their house, she wants him to take revenge of the living people, as she thought that her dead husband had a supreme power in the burial place.<sup>38</sup>

Splitting the back part of the reserve head, or the beheading have indications that it was a trial of harming a vulnerable dead. Recitation of spells were essential to the deceased as well, this is well shown in a letter to the dead from the First Intermediate Period, it is inscribed on a stela written by a husband addressing his dead wife, it states:

“I did not say [a spell] in the attendance, of you as I spread your name on earth”.<sup>39</sup> Therefore the damage of the ears of the reserve head would affect that the deceased become deaf, so he was unable to receive prayers. This is because the recited prayers are not heard, affecting him having a good netherworld.

The dead could also harm the living people. They might do because of their desire, or by a request from a living person. Reserve heads might have been used as a mean of harm of the dead, to stop them from harming the living.

Studying of the letters to the dead clarifies the different grades of harm caused by cursing. In some types of cursing, the vulnerable person is humiliated in some way before the curse. This can be done by calling his name, and representing his bad behaviors. But when dealing with execration, the vulnerable person is already humiliated, then attacked by articulation of his name and attacking of his image.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, they used to humiliate the vulnerable person first before cursing him. In the letters to the dead, cursing is not shown, as living people interacts through their bodies or *akh*, which give them more power.<sup>41</sup>

The question is how the dead get affected by the curses made on a reserve head. As its consequences that the body become deafened, is not to hear the prayers of the visitors; which leads them to not having a complete *akh*. It is possible to suggest that this deceased is an evil person, called the *mwt* dead. A living person wanted to stop his evil, this is well represented in Papyrus Deir el-Medina 36, which clarifies how the dead (*mwt*) become vulnerable to any sort of curse.<sup>42</sup>

It is the damage of the ears, which is a popular feature of the reserve head, making the head a form of cursing. This feature is the needed degradation of the deceased by removing his power. This makes the deceased vulnerable to be cursed by any mean, like beheading or even cursing spells.

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<sup>36</sup> Gardiner & Sethe, *Egyptian Letters to the Dead*, p. 4, pl. 3-3a, Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, p. 212 and Strudwick, *Texts from the Pyramid Age*, p. 183; Wb II, 95.3.

<sup>37</sup> Cairo CG 25975.

<sup>38</sup> Gardiner & Sethe, *Egyptian Letters to the Dead*, p. 5-7, pl. 5-5a; Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, p. 214. Wb I 161.3.

<sup>39</sup> Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, p. 215.

<sup>40</sup> For detailed explanation of the execration, see: Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, p. 34-56.

<sup>41</sup> Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, p. 133-160.

<sup>42</sup> See Sauneron, S., “*Kêmi: revue de philology et d’archéologie égyptiennes et coptes* 20, pp. 7-18, fig.2.

The damage of the corps of the deceased is similar to the cursing of the reserve heads in many aspects. The horizontal contour or cut around the lower part of the reserve head reflects the damage of the backbones, which appears in the tombs of Hierakonpolis; these represent beheading, or the inability to move because of the breakage of the vertebrae. This is obvious to affect the movement of the deceased as a kind of harm in the netherworld.<sup>43</sup>

Actually, the parietal lobe is an important part of the brain, which is located at the upper back part of the neck, and any damage to this part would affect the movement severely, causing a complete disability. This damage of the parietal lobe would have more complicated effects on the body as it lead to problems with the operation of the body.<sup>44</sup> There is a probability that the attack of the back part of the reserve head was intended to damage the parietal lobe, which prevent the person from moving or functioning with his new surroundings in the afterlife.

The curse could harm a part of the body, preventing it from functioning, but the reserve head curse is subjected to the brain, to cause the stop of functioning of many vital parts of the body.<sup>45</sup>

Under the parietal lobe in the anatomy of the brain, the occipital lobe is responsible of the vision, and the receiving of visual data.<sup>46</sup> This lobe exists at the back contour existing in some reserve heads. So the damage caused of this occipital lobe causes blindness.<sup>47</sup>

The facial features were very important in the reserve head, not to address a different person, so it was showing the details of the facial features. In this case, any attack of the eyes would lead to a problem with the identification of the person, so the damage of the occipital lobe can do the job by harming the vision completely without the damage of the eyes.

This practice could be considered as a substitute of the original way of execration, which is through the damaging of the eyes of the corpse directly, this was usually done by attacking the eyes.

To conclude, both the occipital lobe and parietal lobe were attacked through the excretion head as a substitute of other methods of attacking the body organs and to keep the facial features of the head unharmed. And to keep the portrait elements clear while harming the deceased.

It is hard to ascertain whether the ancient Egyptians knew the association between the brain and the ability of the body to function, or they only saw how the injury of the back of the head affected the body, without knowing the cause behind it. Therefore, reserve heads are considered an evidence that the ancient Egyptians knew the consequences of the damage of the back of the head.

Removing of the ears of a reserve head means the detaching of a part of the body, it is still in the deceased possession, and may be usable in the netherworld. The process of separating an organ might mean that they would not function for the body, as he cannot use them during his life or in his afterlife. On the other hand, the damage of the corpse is focused on the physical body and not the identity or the *akh*.

In some cemeteries, the bodies were easy to be accessed, as they were placed in pits. But high rank people were buried in tombs with seals, which is harder to access, But the majority of reserve heads were found inside shafts, supposed to be deposited after the closing of the tomb.

This idea shows the preference of the use of execration object to curse someone when the physical damage to the corpse is hard or unwanted. Also the head is considered a distinct part of

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<sup>43</sup> Nolte, *The Human Brain*: p. 60-61.

<sup>44</sup> Nolte, *The Human Brain*, p. 548.

<sup>45</sup> Nolte, *The Human Brain*, p. 547.

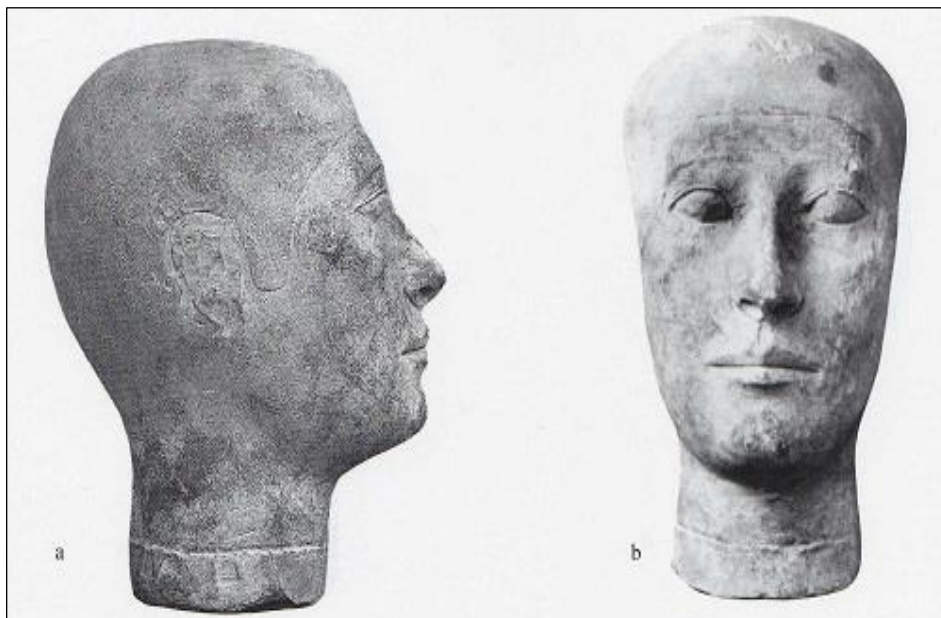
<sup>46</sup> Nolte, *The Human Brain*, p.61.

<sup>47</sup> Nolte, *The Human Brain*, p. 444.

the body. Controlling of the dead using the reserve head without the use of spells spread after the change in the methods of burial, and making the physical contact with the corpse difficult.

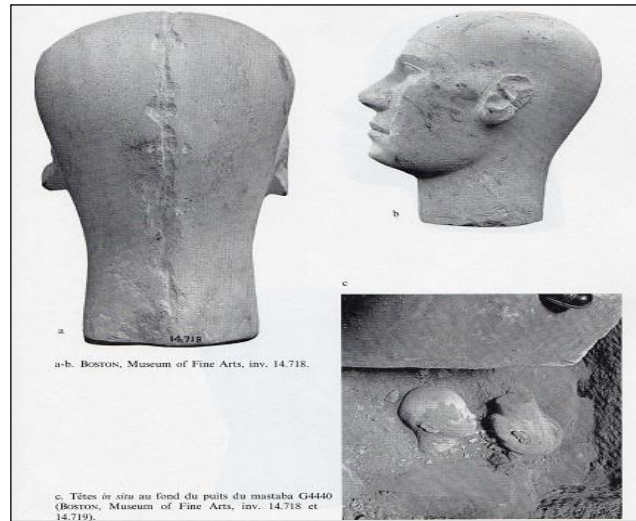
To sum up, the number of reserve heads found is very limited, which indicates that its function is not related to the tomb, and it is not a vital object in the afterlife. These heads were used in special occasions, and as proposed above, it may be used for cursing a dead person. It is also noticeable that these heads were not representing ladies as all the collections found represents male figures. This may confirm the idea that it was not a reserve head to the head of the mummy, but used to curse some individuals, and they were mostly males. So the name “reserve heads” is not indicating the proper use. As these heads were not a substitute of the mummy head, or can be used in case the head of the deceased was damaged or decayed. It is a substitute of the corpse head as a method of execration.

Fig. 1: Reserve head, Cairo JdE 44974



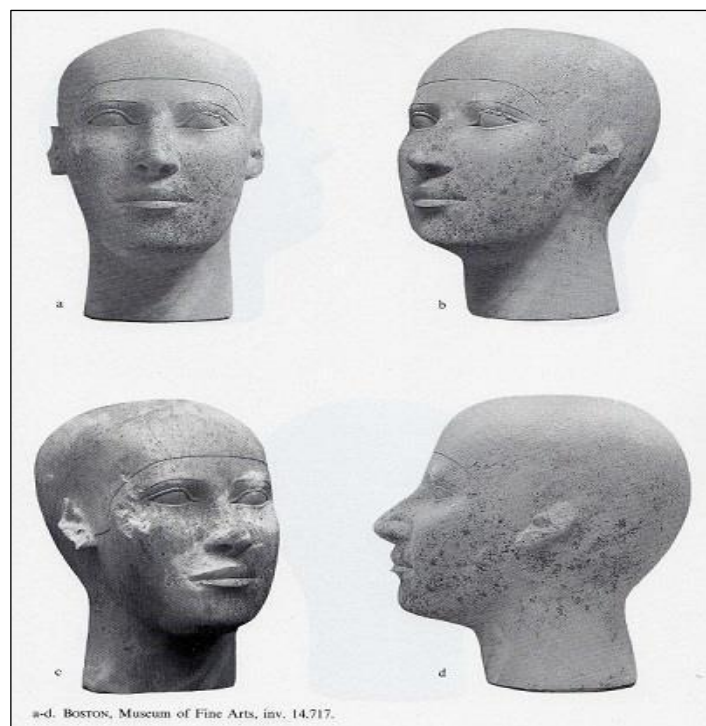
After: Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, pl. 14.

Fig. 2: Reserve head, Boston 14.718



After: Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, pl. 7.

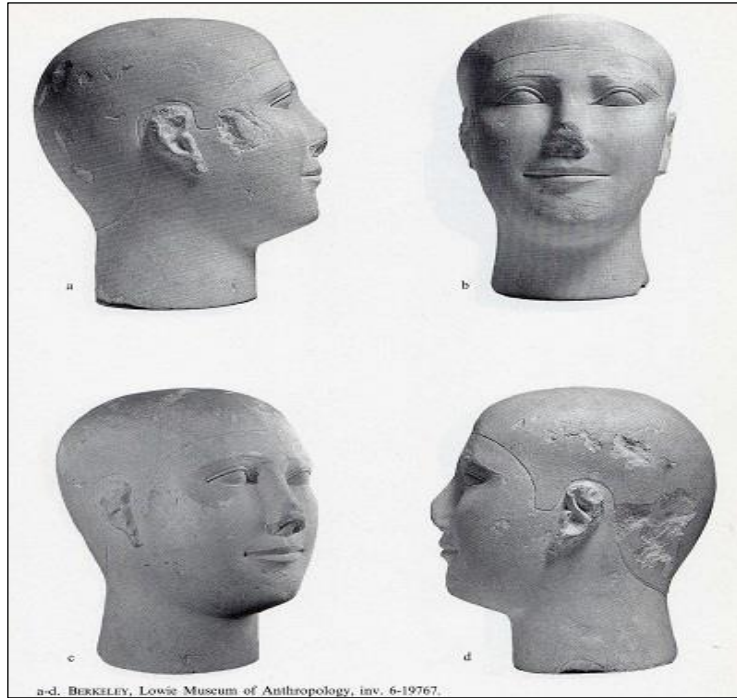
Fig. 3: Reserve head, Boston 14.717



After: Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, pl. 5.

Fig.4: Reserve head, Berkeley 6-19767





After: Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, pl. 1.

Fig. 5: Reserve head, Berlin 16455



After: Tefnin, *Art et Magie*, pl. 2.

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