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BLOCK STATUE

تماثيل الكتلة

Regine Schulz

Kuboid, Würfelhocker, Würfelstatue
Statue-cube, Statue-bloc

The block statue is a statue type characterized by the squatting posture of the person represented. It was invented in Egypt in the early 12th Dynasty and became from the New Kingdom to the Late Period the most common statue type for non-royal persons in Egyptian temples. Over time subtypes emerged presenting the squatting person with, for example, a stela, a naos, or a small statue in front of the legs.

تماثيل الكتلة هو تماثيل يمثل هيئة شخص جالس في وضع القرفصاء. و ظهر هذا التمثال لأول مرة في مصر القديمة مع بداية الأسرة الثانية عشرة، وأصبح أكثر أساليب النحت شيوعاً للأفراد في المعابد المصرية منذ عصر الدولة الحديثة وحتى العصر المتأخر، وبمرور الزمن، ظهرت العديد من الأنماط المختلفة لأشخاص في وضع القرفصاء حاملين على سبيل المثال لوحة أو ناووس، أو تماثلاً صغيراً أمام الساقين.



The term “block statue” is used in Egyptology to describe a statue type defined by its shape. It is characterized by the special squatting posture of the person represented, with the knees drawn up in front of the chest and the arms crossed above them. The body is often largely enveloped in a cloak, which intensifies the compact, cubical appearance of the statue.

The block statue was one of the most common types of private sculpture in ancient Egypt from the Middle Kingdom to the Late Period, and was probably invented in the early 12th Dynasty at Saqqara. Soon thereafter, block statues came to be used all over Egypt, including the provinces. However, most of these statues were excavated at Thebes. In the so-called Karnak *cachette* alone, the French archaeologist George Legrain discovered more than 350, which is more than one third of all the stone statues hidden in this ancient temple-cache (see Karnak *cachette*), aptly demonstrating the significance of the statue

type in ancient Egyptian temple sculpture.

Block statues generally represent specific private individuals who are male and adult (fig. 1), but never kings or deities. Very few examples depicting women appear in the Middle and New Kingdoms; rather, they are more commonly part of statue groups (Schulz 1992: 779 – 782) showing men and women together in the characteristic squatting posture (e.g., see Paris, *Louvre N 435*). Only two examples show a female, singly. One such statue may be a provincial experiment and depicts a woman with a Hathor wig (London, Petrie Museum UC 16570; Schulz 1992: 400 – 401, no. 234). The other statue is known only from a drawing made by Richard Pococke (1704 – 1765) during his travels to Egypt in 1737 and 1738. According to Pococke’s description, the statue represents Isis; a second, separate drawing features a block statue of a male, designated by Pococke as Osiris (Pococke 1743: 211 – 212, pls. LX – LXIII). The statues in these two illustrations



Figure 1. Statuette of Khaemwaset. Black serpentine, h. 86 mm.

are very similar and may have belonged to a Ramesside statue group of a man and a woman that has lost its shared base (Schulz 1992: 779 – 780).

A special type of block statue includes uninscribed squatting figurines that are completely enveloped (draped in a cloak) and placed in Middle Kingdom model boats, depicting the pilgrimage to Abydos as part of the funeral ritual. These figurines not only represent the deceased or his statue, but sometimes also other participants in the ritual (Schulz 1992: 755 – 759; e.g., see [Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 21.415](#)). Another special

type features small uninscribed cubic figures from the Meroitic Period that were excavated at the Amun Temple of Naga (Sudan). These were possibly used for ritual purposes (e.g., Khartoum, Sudan National Museum SNM 31332a – c; Wildung 2004: 182, no. 164), but it is unclear if they represent specific individuals or just unnamed intermediaries between worshippers and gods.

Three-dimensional representations of squatting people performing activities, such as the so-called servant figures, are to be distinguished from block statues. They usually do not represent specific individuals, and the gestures of their arms, their attributes, as well as their contexts clearly define the differences in their function and meaning.

Materials and Measurements

Block statues were sculpted in various hard and soft stones, and from the Late Period were occasionally carved in wood (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 91118; Emery 1967: pl. XXIV, 2; see also Schulz 1992: 553 – 555), or cast in bronze (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 818 and 189; Schulz 1992: 555). Interestingly, in several cases where one individual was represented by a pair of block statues, a dark stone was chosen for one representation in the pair, and a light stone was chosen for the other.

The size of the figure was mostly dependent on the social status of the represented person, and the functional context. The largest examples reach up to 1.5 m (Egyptian Museum CG 42137; Schulz 1992: 254, no. 139), but the average height ranges between 200 and 600 mm. Smaller examples were often integrated into larger structures, such as stelae or shrines (e.g., see London, [British Museum EA 569 and 570](#)), or offering platforms (e.g., see New York, [The Brooklyn Museum 57.140: alternate views](#)). Miniature examples, measuring between 2 and 6 cm, served as seals (e.g., Leiden, National Museum of Antiquities F 1955/2.21; Schulz 1992: 355, no. 203), and some had an amuletic function (Wiese 1997: 188 – 189, no. 121); it is also possible that they were intended as gifts for

family members or subordinates.

Statue Type and Development

Block statues occur from the early 12th Dynasty to the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. The basic shape (fig. 2) as well as possible additions (fig. 3) varied over time. Not all examples show the represented person squatting directly on the ground. Some squat on a low rectangular element (e.g., see London, [British Museum EA 888](#)), on a low cushion (e.g., see Boston, [Museum of Fine Arts 03.1891](#)), or on a low stool (e.g. Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 930; Schulz 1992: 220, no. 115), which was most popular in the Ramesside Period. A back slab or pillar was used in the Middle Kingdom and Thutmosid Period only occasionally, but from the Ramesside Period it became a standard element of most block statues (e.g., see Paris, [Louvre N 519: profile view](#)).

In the early 12th Dynasty the body forms were largely visible and the only clothing worn was a short kilt (e.g., Munich, State Museum of Egyptian Art AS 7148; Schulz 1992: 426 – 427, no. 252). At the same time a parallel type emerged representing the subject in a carrying chair (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 48858; Schulz 1992: 312 – 313, no. 174, and 747 – 754). The carrying chair was replaced in the mid-12th Dynasty by a cloak that enveloped the body, leaving only the head, hands, and usually feet uncovered. The hands of these statues are normally empty; in a few examples, the extended right hand holds a corner of the cloak (e.g., see New York, [The Brooklyn Museum 57.140 a, b](#)).

In the Thutmosid Period of the 18th Dynasty even the feet were enveloped (e.g., see London, [British Museum EA 48](#)) and attributes appear in the hands. Typical for this period was the lotus flower (e.g., see Paris, [Louvre E 12926: head view](#); Schulz 1992: 456 – 457, no. 272), although the folded linen cloth, as well as lettuce (a symbol of renewal and fertility), was also featured (Schulz 1992: 638 – 639). A special type of block statue was developed for the high official Senenmut who served under Queen Hatshepsut. This statue

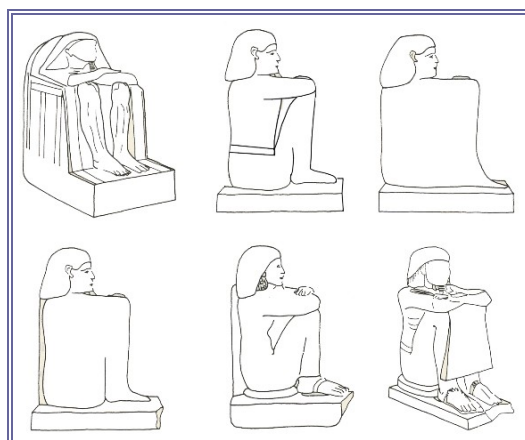


Figure 2. Basic shapes of block statue types.

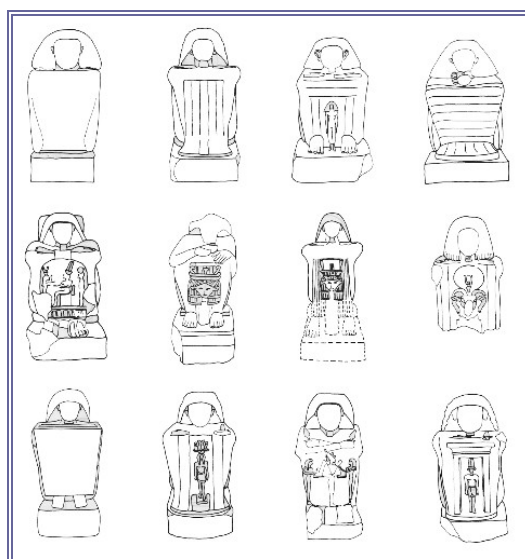


Figure 3. Varieties of block statue types.

type featured Senenmut and the young princess Neferura enveloped together in the same cloak (e.g., see Cairo, [Egyptian Museum JE 37438](#)). From the 18th-Dynasty reign of Amenhotep III to the 19th Dynasty, the statue type was modified and enriched by variations of costumes, wigs, and jewelry (e.g., Florence, Museo Archeologico 1790; Schulz 1992: 150 – 151, no. 69; and see Leiden, [Rijksmuseum van Oudheden AST 22](#); Schulz 1992: 350, no. 200). Additional elements became particularly common in the Ramesside Period, such as stelae (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 33263; Schulz 1992: 282, no. 155), divine figures (e.g., see Memphis, Art Museum of the

University of Memphis, [Institute of Art and Archaeology 1981.1.20: statue of Nedjem](#)), naoi (e.g., Paris, [Louvre A 110](#)), emblems (e.g. Paris, [Louvre E 17168](#)), incised ritual scenes (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 567; Schulz 1992: 176 – 177, no. 086), and a variety of hand-held attributes or symbols, such as the menat or sistrum (see Paris, [Louvre E 17168](#)), as well as *ankh* (*nh*), *maat* (*mꜣt*), *djed* (*dd*), and *tjt* (*tjt*) signs. However, lettuce, as a symbol of renewal and fertility, became the most important of these attributes.

In the Third Intermediate Period block statues of the simple, enveloped type with covered feet resurfaced in Upper Egypt (Brandl 2008: 108 – 209, 314 – 315). The plain areas at the front and sides were covered with texts and incised scenes, and in some cases a large *bꜣt*-symbol-shaped sistrum (ibid.: 315) appears on the front (e.g., see Cairo, [Egyptian Museum CG 42210](#)). For the first time a block statue appears with a cap instead of a wig (e.g., see Cairo, [Egyptian Museum CG 42230](#)). In Lower Egypt the body forms are more visible, and additions such as naoi are still common (Brandl 2008: 68 – 100, 314; e.g., see London, [British Museum EA 1007](#)). The scarab on top of the head seems to be a Lower Egyptian innovation (see London, [British Museum EA 1007: top view](#); Brandl 2008: 81 – 82, Dok. O-5.1.7, and 328 – 329). In the 25th Dynasty artists drew on all possible options, and closely enveloped forms appear beside forms displaying clearly distinguishable bodies with short kilts (Bothmer 1994; Josephson-El-Damaty 1999: 1 – 16). The surfaces of the bodies are less tightly decorated than in the earlier Third Intermediate Period, and the sides of the statues are often plain (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 48601 and 48602; Josephson-El-Damaty 1999: 1 – 4, pls. 1 – 2). In the Late Period this trend continues, but the diversity of forms further expands (e.g., see Cairo, [Egyptian Museum CG 48624](#); see New York, [Metropolitan Museum 1982.318](#); see Los Angeles, [Los Angeles County Museum of Art 48.24.8](#)). Graywacke became a very popular material, and the high polish of the surface, as well as the fine carving of the inscriptions, is

characteristic for this period.

In the course of the late 26th and 27th Dynasties block statues became less common but, particularly in Upper Egypt, were revived in the 30th Dynasty, extending into the early to mid-Ptolemaic Period (Bothmer 1960: 95; see also El-Sayed 1980: 233 – 248, and 1984: 127 – 153). During this time the enveloped subtypes became more common (e.g., see New York, [Brooklyn Museum 69.115.1](#)). A last innovation came with the introduction of magical texts covering the entire statue, including the head, and the occasional addition of Horus-stelae (e.g., see Cairo, [Egyptian Museum JE 46341](#)).

Block Statue Combinations

In addition to single examples, groups of two or more block statues exist (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 869; see Schulz 1992: 211, no. 106; and Saffron Walden, Saffron Walden Museum SESWM 18192.50; see Schulz 1992: 543, no. 336), which sometimes also combine block statues with other statue types (fig. 4). Furthermore, smaller representations of one or more family members sometimes appear in the front or on the sides of the squatting statue (e.g., see New York, [Brooklyn Museum 39.602](#); Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 46307; Schulz 1992: 302, no. 168; Bristol, City Museum H 395; Schulz 1992: 95 – 96, no. 029), as well as representations of deities and divine symbols (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 604; Schulz 1992: no. 093).

Several officials had more than one block statue, and pairs are common; such pairs occur in funerary contexts during the Middle Kingdom (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 47708 and 47709; Schulz 1992: 305 – 308, nos. 170 – 171), whereas from the New Kingdom to the Late Period they are limited to temples. A few celebrities even had multiple block statues. Ray, the High Priest of Amun under Ramesses II, had four block statues in Karnak—two in the temple of Amun and two in the temple of Mut (Schulz 1992: 573 – 574). The largest number, however, belonged to Senenmut, a high



Figure 4. Statue group of Ipy and his wife. Limestone, h. 14.7 cm.

official under Queen Hatshepsut, who had at least eight, six of which were placed in the temple of Amun at Karnak.

Inscriptions

Block statues are almost always inscribed, at the very least with the name of the owner. The inscribed text is usually incised on the body, the base, or the back pillar if one exists. Only very few are uninscribed; these examples are either unfinished or partly destroyed, or have become detached from an inscribed external base, stela, or shrine. The inscriptions are usually written in hieroglyphic script. Cryptographic writings occur in the New Kingdom (Schulz 1992: 651), but they became more common in the Late and Ptolemaic and Roman Periods in connection with magical texts (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 36984; Clarysse 1978: 239 – 240). Very few block statues have a non-Egyptian inscription. One such text is from the statue of the chief sculptor Nam from Serabit el-Khadim (Sinai), which was written in Proto-Sinaitic (Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 38268; Schulz 1992: 295

– 296, no. 163); another example is incised in Greek on the statue of Pedon, son of Amphinnes, from Priene (Asia Minor) (Ulf 1996: 100 – 102).

The social rank of persons possessing block statues, as reflected in their titles, changed over time. Most of the Middle Kingdom examples represent lower- and middle-ranking priests and officials. This changed in the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period, when more high-ranking officials embraced the type, including viziers and high priests (Schulz 1992: 648 – 664). For these individuals, representation, as a form of self-promotion, became increasingly important, and with it the desire to demonstrate their direct interaction with a deity or deified king, particularly in a temple context. In the 26th and 27th Dynasties the block statue became less popular with the elite, but it had a final revival in the 30th Dynasty and the early Ptolemaic Period, when it became again a favorite type, particularly for middle-ranking officials (Bothmer 1960: 95 – 96).

The inscriptions on Middle Kingdom block statues are limited to personal data, offering formulas, and offering appeals to visitors. Beginning in the New Kingdom, the range of inscribed texts grows more diverse, including appeals to the gods, longer biographies, donation inscriptions, and religious texts (for the Third Intermediate and Late Periods, see Jansen-Winkel 1985, 2001). Starting in the Thutmosid Period royal cartouches occur occasionally, particularly on the upper arms of block statues; they may serve as royal approval of the production and placement of the figure, and may ensure the protection of the statue and its ritual function. In the Third Intermediate Period these royal cartouches are occasionally associated with a “favor of the king” formula (Brandl 2008: 454). In the Late Period the *ntr-njwty* formula (“Saite formula”: see Jansen-Winkel 2000: 83 – 124) increasingly replaced the offering formula and, in addition, magical texts occur (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 46341; Jelínková-Reymond 1956).

Function and Meaning

Most block statues were positioned in ritual places, particularly the precincts and forecourts of temples. From the New Kingdom onward they occasionally functioned as doorkeepers (Clère 1968; 1995: 84) or as intermediaries between worshipers and deities (Schulz 1992: 706). Smaller examples were combined with other monuments, such as stelae (e.g., see London, [British Museum EA 569 and 570](#)), or mounted on pedestals (Rizzo 2004: 516 – 518; Schulz 2008: 216 – 222). Only very few examples of the Middle and New Kingdoms come from funerary contexts, where they were placed in niches or small, separate chambers in the front or outer parts of the tomb. These statues were not the focus of the ritual for the deceased tomb owner, but rather were associated with the rituals for deified kings (in the Middle Kingdom) or with deities particularly venerated in the cemetery (in the 18th Dynasty).

The meaning of the block statue type has been intensively discussed in Egyptology, and a wide variety of interpretations have been proposed (for an overview see El-Damaty 1990: 1 – 13; and Schulz: 1992: 690 – 742). The form of the statue has been variously interpreted as a posture of calmness, a typical “everyday life” depiction of an Oriental squatting posture, a manifestation of renewal and re-creation, as well as of protection, and as an abstract aesthetic concept. The creation of the block statue type in the early Middle Kingdom was indeed function- and meaning-related. The original meaning derives from two iconic elements: the special squatting

posture, and the crossed arms. In ancient Egypt, squatting was the conventional working or resting posture. However, in the statuary of private individuals it expressed the privilege of being part of the ritual community. Nonetheless, the squatting individual was neither the main focus of the ritual nor the active ritualist. He was entitled to be present for, and to participate in, the rituals for deities and deified kings in temples and along processional routes, including those in the cemetery. The crossed arms amplify this meaning and convey a respectful, yet passive, submissiveness toward a god, king, or superior. During the consolidation phase of the block statue type in the mid-12th Dynasty, an enveloping cloak that covered most of the body was added. Such cloaks were also used for other statue types and conveyed the higher rank of the represented official, as well as his right to participate in temple rituals and processions. The crossed arms and the enveloping aspect also signify an Osirian dimension and represent the desire for renewal. Another hint of the block statues’ meaning can be found in the term *ḥzyw*, “the praised and honored one,” which describes an individual of high ethical standards, excellent achievements, and piety. The *ḥzyw*-status implies not only recognition, but also participation in the rituals and partaking in the offerings, as well as a promise of renewal after death. From the 22nd Dynasty the term *ḥzyw* was occasionally written with a block statue as a determinative, and used to describe the honored person, as well as his statue. Some very rare depictions of block statues on stelae of the Ptolemaic Period may also refer to the *ḥzyw*-status (e.g., Cairo, Egyptian Museum CG 22054; Schulz 1992: 768 – 769).

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Figure 1. Statuette of Khaemwaset. Black serpentine, h. 86 mm. Walters Art Museum 22.68.

Figure 2. Basic shapes of block statue types. Drawings by Matthias Seidel and Regine Schulz.

Figure 3. Varieties of block statue types. Drawings by Matthias Seidel and Regine Schulz.

Figure 4. Statue group of Ipy and his wife. Limestone, h. 14.7 cm. Walters Art Museum 22.76.