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## SEVERAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING THE OLD KINGDOM ROYAL PALACE (ꜥḥ)

*ABSTRACT:* Although written evidence of the royal palace ꜥḥ, and even the names and owners of this palace are available in the Old Kingdom documents, no such palace has yet been archaeologically identified. Some recently discovered inscriptions from Abusir – from the causeway of Sahure's pyramid complex and from the jar docket revealed in Raneferef's pyramid complex – refer to a hitherto unknown palace of Sahure's called "Extolled is Sahure's Beauty". The wider context of these inscriptions permits the assumption that this palace might have lain in the vicinity of Sahure's valley temple and the Lake of Abusir which at that time extended between Abusir, North Saqqara and Memphis.

*KEY WORDS:* Royal palace – Sahure – Abusir

The royal palace was one of the most important state buildings in ancient Egypt since it was not only the seat of a king, but also one of the most important administrative centers of the country. Rather frustratingly, from early times, several terms for the "royal palace" are attested in the Egyptian written documents and it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish the precise meaning of one term from each other. We owe especially O. Goelet for his erudite examination of the problem in the Old Kingdom texts (Goelet 1982, 1986: 85–98). In this brief paper attention will be focused upon the Old Kingdom royal palace using the term ꜥḥ.

There is no need to emphasize how important for our better understanding of the ancient Egyptian royal palace, its shape and meaning, archaeological evidence would be. Up until now, unfortunately, although the written evidence for royal palaces dates from as early as the First Dynasty, contemporaneous archaeological evidence until Middle Kingdom is very scarce (Adams 1995: 65). For instance, inscriptions on two stone vessels mention Andjib's palace S3-ḥ3-Ḥr "Protection around Andjib" (Kaplony 1963: 817–810). It especially concerns the Old Kingdom royal palaces (Arnold 1982: 646), even though their existence is known from contemporaneous written sources, not least of

which is found in the titles of officials such as ḥrp ꜥḥ, šḥd ꜥḥ, imy-r3 ꜥḥ, etc (Jones 2000: s.v. ꜥḥ).

Despite such a disappointing legacy, some features in the contemporaneous pyramid complexes give us at least a partial idea about the architecture of the Old Kingdom royal palaces. For instance, the columned hall in Raneferef's pyramid temple in Abusir, a very unusual feature in the plan of a pyramid complex, was very probably inspired by contemporaneous royal palaces (Verner *et al.* 2006: 146–152). In this respect, we can find some inspiration from our knowledge about private residences, too. A rare example of such architecture can be seen in the palace of governors of the Western Desert oases in Ain Aseel in Dakhla (Vallogia 2004: 80–86). Be that as it may, the little information we can gather about the ꜥḥ royal palace seems to indicate that it was not a building of one standard plan but that different types of structures might have been called ꜥḥ or, at least, determined with the sign ꜥḥ.

An important Old Kingdom document referring to the royal palace is present in a cone-shaped object (*Figure 1*) of red granite nearly one and half meters tall, which was found by Henri Gauthier in Elephantine in 1909 and is now deposited in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (JE 41556). The cone, dating from the time of the last king of the

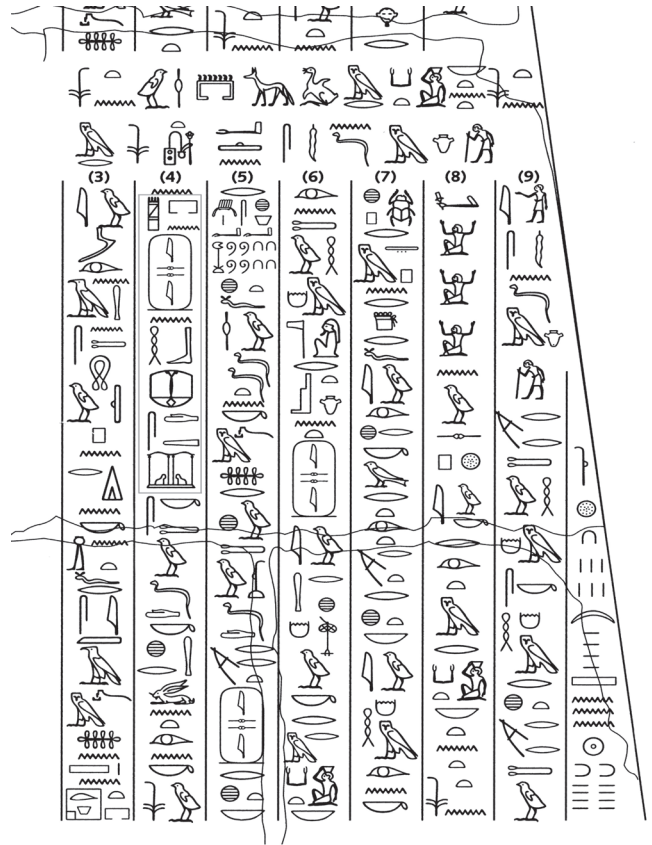


FIGURE 1. Cone-shaped object found in Elephantine and bearing the name of Huni's palace.

Third Dynasty, Huni, was published by Hans Goedicke (Goedicke 1956: 18–24). The base of the cone bears an inscription in sunk relief which, according to Goedicke, reads *Šsd-Ny-Swth* "Nisutekh's (Huni's) diadem". As the determinative indicates, it was the name of a palace (rather than a fortress as some authors assume), and it was built by the King on the southern border of Egypt. The find offers indirect evidence of palaces which Egyptian kings had, not only in the capital, but also in other important places of the country. As a matter of fact, there is a theory that small step pyramids, dating from the turn of the Third and Fourth Dynasties and scattered over Egypt from Athribis as far as Asuan, might have marked royal temporary seats (Dreyer, Kaiser 1980). Moreover, both in and near the capital, there might have been more than one royal palace. For instance, the title *imy-r3 ḥ (n) Wr-Ḥḥ.f-Rḥ* "overseer of the palace (of the pyramid complex) 'Great-is-Khafre'" (Junker 1938: 175) suggests that a royal palace might have been part of some Old Kingdom pyramid complexes or, more precisely, their pyramid towns.

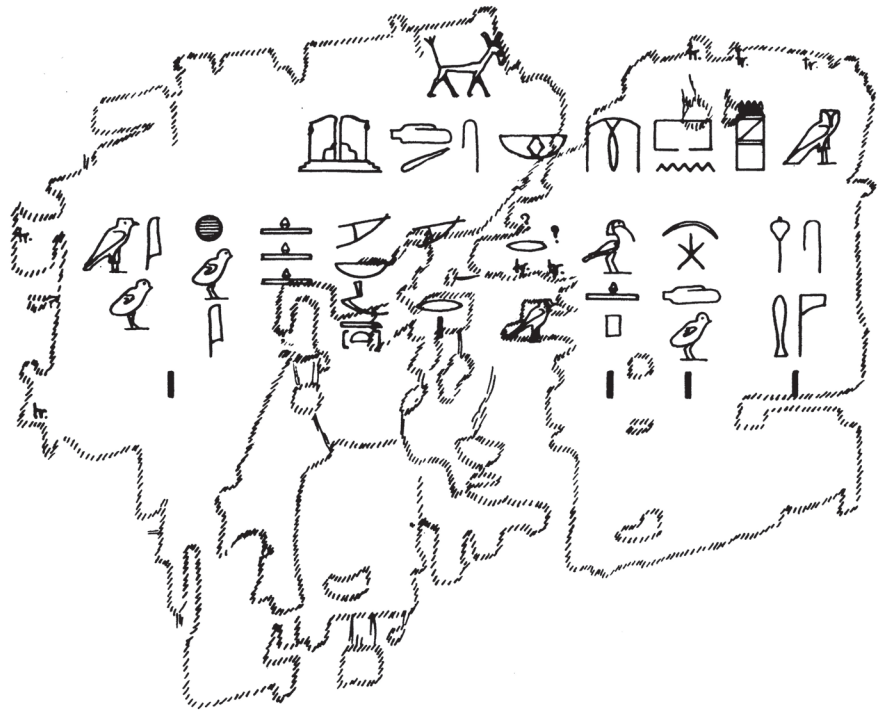
Probably, the most often cited written document pertaining to an Old Kingdom royal palace is a letter sent by King Djedkare to the Vizier Senedjemib Inti. The letter is recorded in the official's tomb (Figure 2). A not quite



FIGURE 2. Inscription from the tomb of Senedjemib Inti referring to the palace of Djedkare's jubilee festival.



FIGURE 3. Fragment from the papyrus archive of Neferirkare mentioning *sed* festival palace.



accurate copy of the inscription by Kurt Sethe led to a misunderstanding, according to which the palace, with whose construction Senedjemib Inti was entrusted, was called "Djedkare's Lotus Flower" and its dimensions were interpreted to have been 1220×220 cubits (Stadelmann 1981: 158). The inaccurate data based on Sethe's copy of the inscription were corrected by Edward Brovarski in his recent edition of the tomb of Senedjemib Inti (Brovarski 2001: 97) succeeded in reconstructing the damaged signs in the relevant part of the inscription which he then reads as:

"..... My Majesty has seen this ground plan {which you sent} to be considered in the court council for the precinct of the broad court of the keep of Izezi of the jubilee festival. Moreover, {you} say to My Majesty that you have made {i} t {to} a length of 1,000 cubits and {to} [a width] of 440 cubits, in accordance with what was commanded to you in the court council. ...."

The palace, constructed on the occasion of Djedkare's *sed* festival, attested also in other written documents (Ziegler 1997, 464), must have been a large building, since it (its broad court, i. e. the enclosure within which stood the palace) covered the area of about 525×231 meters, nearly the same as Djoser's pyramid complex (544×277 m). As a palace built to host Djedkare's jubilee festival, the palace may have been a temporary construction built of light materials such as mudbrick, wood and reeds. We can only surmise that it was erected in the vicinity of the king's pyramid, rather than directly in the capital, possibly at the edge of the desert near the building site of Djedkare's pyramid complex. To this *hebsed*-palace may pertain a reference on a fragment (Figure 3) from the papyrus archive of Neferirkare for which Paule Posener-Kriéger had no satisfactory explanation (Posener-Kriéger, de Cenival 1968: pl. 88B, Posener-Kriéger 1976: 561). The text on the fragment reads: "..... [Horus and] Sutekh, ..... in the palace of the festival *sed* ....." The text is

FIGURE 4. Jar docket from Raneferef's pyramid complex mentioning Sahure's palace "Extolled-is-Sahure's-beauty".



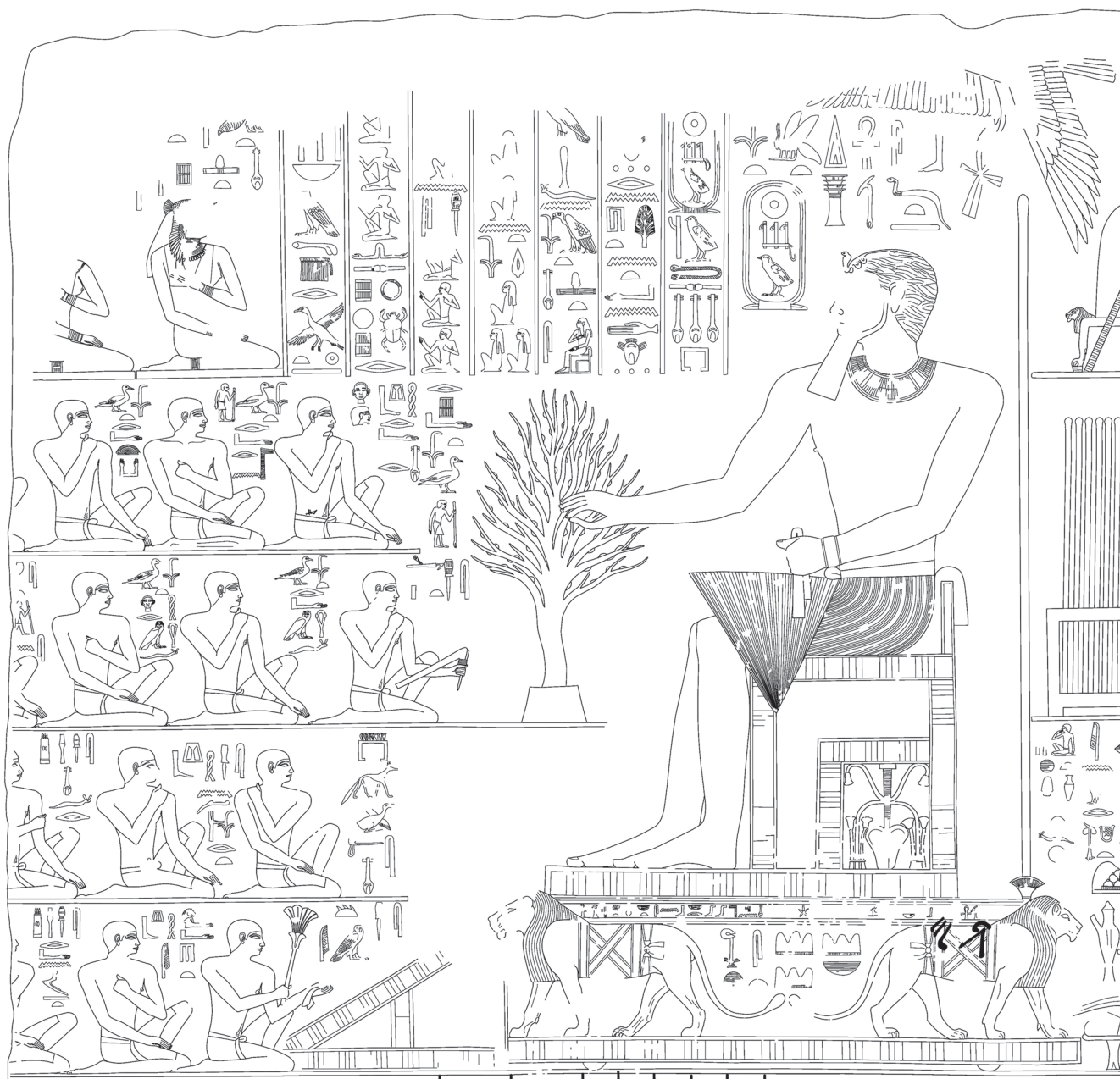


FIGURE 5. Sahure and his family admiring a frankincense tree from Punt in the garden of the palace "Extolled-is-Sahure's-beauty". Causeway of Sahure's pyramid complex. Drawing El Avady.

concluded with the list of officials (one *hem-netjer*-priest and seven personal names) who must have been somehow connected with the festival.

Another Old Kingdom royal palace is mentioned on the false-door of the physician Niankhsakhmet (Sethe 1933: 38) namely, Sahure's palace  $\text{H}^{\text{c}}\text{-Wrrt-}\mathring{\text{S}}\text{h}^{\text{w}}\text{-r}^{\text{c}}$  "Sahure's-crown-shines". The inscription describes how Sahure complied with Niankhsakhmet's wish and ordered that a double false door be brought from the quarry in Tura and laid "in the audience hall of the house (called) "Sahure-Shines-with-Crowns" (as translated by James H. Breasted) (Breasted 1906: 109–239). Obviously, "Sahure's-crown-shines" was a type of palace different from that in which

Djedkare's jubilee festival was celebrated. The mention of the Upper Egyptian crown (Seeber 1980: 812) in the name of the palace might suggest that this building stood somewhere in Upper Egypt. However, the reference to Tura and the fact, that Niankhsakhmet was buried in Saqqara, indicate that the palace "Sahure's-crown-shines" is – or was – to be found near or within the capital.

In the mid 1980s, during the excavation of Raneferef's pyramid complex in Abusir, jar docket (Figure 4) were revealed with a reference to the slaughterhouses of Sahure's palace  $\text{W}\mathring{\text{t}}\text{-nfrw-}\mathring{\text{S}}\text{h}^{\text{w}}\text{-r}^{\text{c}}$  "Extolled-is-Sahure's-Beauty" (Verner *et al.* 2006: 272–283). The docket, coming mostly from the time of Niuserre, are formal dispatch

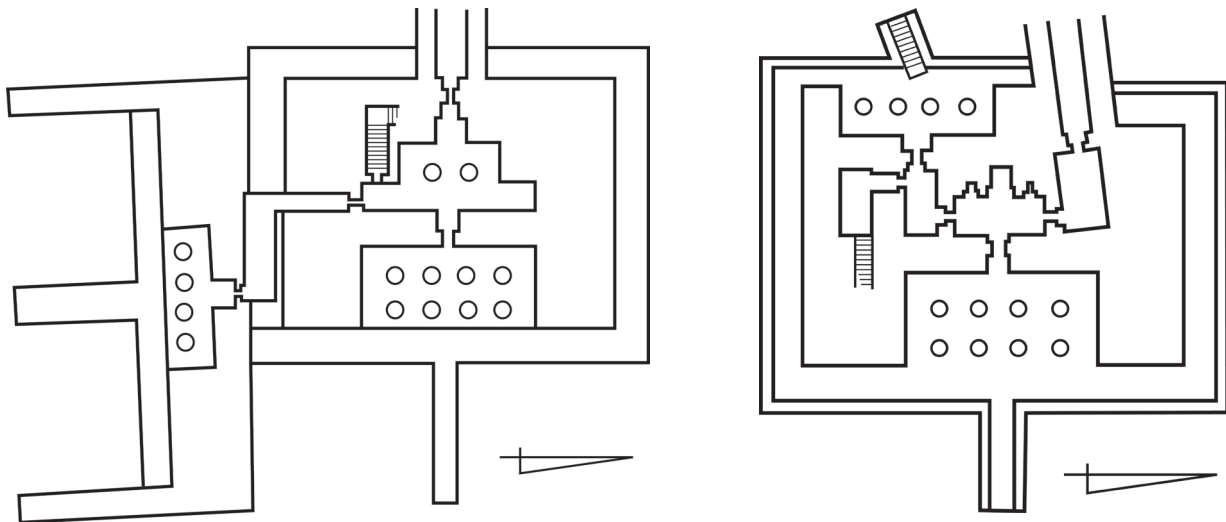


FIGURE 6. Plan of Sahure's (left) and Niuserre's (right) valley temple.

notes referring to the sender of meat products to the phyles of Raneferef's mortuary temple. It is rather surprising information that the slaughterhouses of Sahure's palace were the exclusive suppliers of meat for Raneferef's temple personnel, particularly if we take into account the existence of a large slaughterhouse adjacent to Raneferef's mortuary temple built originally to cover the needs of that king's mortuary cult. However, we need to remember that this slaughterhouse of Raneferef's pyramid complex did not function for very long (Verner 1987: 181–189). After the expansion of the early stage of Raneferef's mortuary temple in the early reign of Niuserre, the House of the Knife was converted into a magazine. Apparently, from this time onwards, Raneferef's mortuary cult was dependent on supplies of meat products from the slaughterhouses of Sahure's palace. The plural *ḥwwt-nmt* indicates that the slaughterhouses of Sahure's palace must have been a large and economically important institution.

Originally, the slaughterhouse was established to supply with meat and meat products – and perhaps only for – Sahure's palace and the royal court. Later, it apparently began to play an important role in the mortuary cult of the king and, in the course of time, some other royal mortuary cults of the kings buried in Abusir, too. Surprisingly, no jar docket pertaining to this slaughterhouse were revealed during L. Borchardt's excavation of Sahure's mortuary temple (Borchardt 1910–1913).

The palace called "Extolled-is-Sahure's-beauty" took a somewhat more concrete shape in the late 1990s when new blocks from the causeway of Sahure's pyramid complex in Abusir were found. In the relief decoration on some of these blocks there is a sequence of scenes which took place precisely within this palace (El Awady 2010: 160–184). The scenes depict the return of the Egyptian expedition from Punt, the planting of a rare frankincense tree brought from Punt in the garden of the royal palace, the royal family

FIGURE 7. View of the place where as late as the 19th century the Lake of Abusir extended.





admiring the tree and a subsequent banquet in the palace, during which distinguished officials were rewarded (*Figure 5*). The context of these scenes seems to indicate that just this palace must have been a favourite residence of Sahure's. Judging by the ships returning from Punt, and apparently anchored not far from the palace, the latter must have been lying near the capital and close to the Nile, probably at the channel linking it with the Nile, either directly or via the Lake of Abusir. Regular supplies of meat products from the slaughterhouses of this palace for the royal mortuary cults in the Abusir pyramid complexes seem to suggest that the palace also lay not far from these monuments.

Again, we can only surmise that the palace "Extolled-is-Sahure's-Beauty" might have stood near Abusir, possibly at the Lake of Abusir (Ray 1976: 150, Gaballa, Kitchen 1969: 5–6), a natural depression filled annually with the water of the Nile flood, whose remains survived until the 19th century. The lake lay between the then ancient Egyptian capital "White Wall" and its necropolis. The assumption that this royal palace may have lain near the lake is indirectly supported by the occurrence of auxiliary ramps which exist in both the valley temple of Sahure and the valley temple of Niuserre in addition to the main landing ramp on the eastern side of each of the two temples. The auxiliary ramp lies in the valley temple of Sahure on its southern side and in the valley temple of Niuserre on its western side (Borchardt 1907: 1910–1913) (*Figure 6*). It can logically be presumed that at each of these auxiliary ramps an artificial channel ended, which linked the valley temples with the lake, lying south-east of the temples, and via the lake with Memphis. The main landing ramps of the two temples very probably ran eastwards and were directly linked with the Bahr el-Libeini (the so-called Great Channel of Memphis) used by the pyramid builders (Goyon 1977: 131–137). The area delimited by the aforesaid channels and the Lake of Abusir (*Figure 7*) therefore seems to be a very tempting hypothetical location for the palace "Extolled-is-Sahure's-Beauty".

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