

## **THE ROYAL MOTHER IN THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN KINGDOM: ROLE, REPRESENTATION AND CULT.**

MASSIMILIANO NUZZOLO  
*Università La Sapienza, Roma*

Pharaoh's human mother seems to have played a focal role in defining the royal ideology of the Old Kingdom. As vehicle of the incarnation of the living king and point of linking and guarantee of the dynastic legitimacy, the queen mother assumes a position that often allows her to enjoy a privileged status, documented both in iconography and texts.

Although the various studies of the last years, among which I can recall those by Lana Troy in 1986 and Silke Roth in 2001, have produced significant results, facing the matter in a comprehensive perspective, some aspects of the issue still require investigation: particularly the religious and ideological implications connected with the idea of kingship and the exact definition of the historical events of some of these personalities.

Through a careful analysis both of the most important epigraphic and architectural-figurative sources related to the queen mothers I will thus try to demonstrate the fundamental contribution of the highest «expression» of the female power in the Old Kingdom to the civil and religious life of the country.

First of all, I would point out that, in studying this documentation, the term «queen», as used in the modern sense, could be misleading for it involves connotations that do not mirror the entire spectrum of family roles<sup>1</sup>. The royal mother, instead, represents the feminine aspect of the kingship as such, playing a key-role as mother and wife as well as daughter and sister of the king<sup>2</sup>. Her patterns seems to be adapted to those of the king; it is he who represents the earthly manifestation of the power of the creator, whose androgynous identity is a composite of female and male elements, as is clearly shown in the myths of creation, renewal and resurrection<sup>3</sup>. The interaction of female and male elements which, in their union, give rise to the dynamics of creation and power, is also reiterated in the most important symbols of the kingship. This is seen, for example, in the Two Ladies as well as the two Crowns, whose imageries, well integrated into the iconography of kingship, are developed as complementary to and symmetrical with the female and male elements<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See also TROY, 1986: 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> BRUNNER, 1964: 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> TROY, 1986: 7. Further references can be found in the bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> TROY, 1986: 115-116; BARTA, 1975: 156-157. For a more general view of the problem concerning interaction between myths and reality and the dynamics and symbol of royal power see also ELIADE, 1959: 3ff. and FRANKFORT, 1948: 9ff.

It is, thus, the kingship that provides the basic frame of reference with his mythological patterns and concepts. In this “symbolic tale” the royal mother, and in a more general sense the royal women, through participation in the cult and rituals dedicated to the ruler, has a major function operating on different levels:

1. as a manifestation of feminine prototypes, in relationship to Hathoric imagery;
2. as a source of sacral power in the performance of cults and rituals;
3. as an element of renewal both of earthly and divine rights of the king to wield power, what Gundlach and Roth call «*juristische Legitimation durch Erbe*»<sup>5</sup>.

The position of the royal mother comes into focus as she is given a specific iconography and titulary to align her role to the mythological paradigms of kingship.

The most important titles are *mwt nswt*, or more commonly *mwt nswt bity*<sup>6</sup>, and *s3t ntr*. Despite a long debate among scholars and many different hypotheses, especially about the *s3t ntr*, the fact that these titles could be documented for most of the royal mothers from IV to VI dynasty (fig. 1)<sup>7</sup>, should lead us to conclude that they represented a basic part of the titles of a queen mother during the Old Kingdom<sup>8</sup> rather than indicated impediments blocking the normal progression of patri-linear succession<sup>9</sup>. Not only would this hypothesis implicate almost continual political disruption in that period, but it could not be applied to some royal mothers holding *s3t ntr* title either, whose sons certainly succeeded their own fathers to the throne. The lack of ancient available sources could be the reason of the missing *s3t ntr* title in at least two cases, namely *Mr.s-ꜥnh* I and *Nfr-ḥtp.s*<sup>10</sup> (fig. 1). As far as *ꜥnh.s-n-Mry-Rꜥ* I and *Nt* are concerned, their sons might have become kings only after their «royal» mothers had died. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the mention of the sole status of «royal wife» in the extensive epigraphic-archaeological documentation. The reference to their status of *mwt nswt*, instead, comes from later records of uncertain dating:

1. *ꜥnh.s-n-Mry-Rꜥ* I: fragment of false door coming from the tomb of her brother *Dꜥw*<sup>11</sup>.
2. *Nt*: «Royal Decree» of Pepi II from Saqqara; the queen only shows *mwt nswt* title following her name<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> GUNDLACH, 1998: 17-19; GUNDLACH, 1999: 7-8; ROTH, 1999: 120-121.

<sup>6</sup> The reason for a different use of both titles in the Egyptian sources is well explained by Baud who supports a distinction between two types of official royal records called «d'identité» and «de cursus». See BAUD, 1996: 51-71. For a different position see CALLENDER, 1991: 103-105.

<sup>7</sup> Only titles directly linked to the king (*mwt / ḥmt / s3t nswt* and *s3t ntr*) have been considered in fig. 1. For a complete picture of the titles of a queen mother see ROTH, 2001: 365; BAUD, 1999: 340.

<sup>8</sup> See also SABBAHY, 1998: 307 and BAUD, 1999: 141-148, and table 9.

<sup>9</sup> As stated by CALLENDER, 1991: 89-109.

<sup>10</sup> In my opinion this royal woman, buried near Userkaf's pyramid and supposed to be Sahura's mother (see below), can not be identified with *Nfr-ḥtp.s*, daughter of Djedefra, and *s3t nswt*, because of the great chronological distance (for a different position see TROY, 1986: 153). For this reason, I will consider only her *mwt nswt* title (see also LABROUSSE, 1996: 264-265; BAUD, 1999: 491-495, nr. 121, 123 and note 16 in this paper).

<sup>11</sup> Porter, MOSS, 1937: 95; BORCHARDT, 1937: 111-112 (CG 1431); ROTH, 2001: 558.

Taking into account these elements we can suggest that *s3t ntr* title could be in opposition to *s3t nswt* title. Although the former was sometimes written in the unusual form *s3t ntr n ht.f*<sup>13</sup>, certainly patterned after the princess's title<sup>14</sup>, this would not imply that both of them refer to the main nature of the king, as a living ruler (*s3t nswt*) as well as a deceased one become god (*s3t ntr*)<sup>15</sup>.

The title *s3t nswt* does not seem to have a honorific value but it rather stresses a real genealogical link with the living king whose daughter could eventually become a *mwt nswt* and *s3t ntr*<sup>16</sup>, as it was the case for *H<sup>c</sup>-mrr-Nbty I*<sup>17</sup>, and almost certainly *Ipwt I*<sup>18</sup> (fig. 1).

On the contrary, the royal mother was given the *s3t ntr* title only after her son had become king<sup>19</sup>, apart from any genealogical or blood relationship with the previous deceased pharaoh<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, as a *post-eventum* epithet, the title *s3t ntr* simply underlines the divine birth-rights, and therefore legitimacy, of the living king whose mother represents the actual, direct link with the gods rather than the previous deified ruler. It must be borne in mind that, although one might assume that a son would aspire to the official succession of his father, the principle of legitimation by «real» inheritance was by no means essential inasmuch as the living king naturally considered himself the son of his predecessor<sup>21</sup>. Thus there was a line of dynastic continuity between sovereigns exclusively through their «office» and not through direct kinship<sup>22</sup>.

This seems the key to the references to the royal mother in the Annals of the Old Kingdom: the ruler proclaims his identity as the son of the living mother, both in reality and ideally, and declares himself the successor of his immediate predecessor, thereby presenting himself as the legitimate heir to the royal office.

In this context we must note that none of the royal mothers known from the Annals of the Old Kingdom<sup>23</sup> has actually been shown to be the consort of a dead king,

<sup>12</sup> PORTER; MOSS, 1974: 43; GOEDICKE, 1967: 158-162, fig. 15 (JE 56370). In this Royal Decree a royal mother named *ḥnḥ.s-n-Mry-R<sup>c</sup>* is also mentioned. Unfortunately the fragmentary nature of the text do not allow us to establish her identity as either *ḥnḥ.s-n-Mry-R<sup>c</sup>* I or II (in this regard see also note 40 in this paper).

<sup>13</sup> For the epigraphic evidences of the title see JONES, 2000: 823, with further bibliography.

<sup>14</sup> SCHMITZ, 1976: 135-137.

<sup>15</sup> As stated by Sabbahy, 1998: 306 and GOEDICKE, 1988: 113, following an old hypothesis by REISNER, 1931: 239-240.

<sup>16</sup> As a matter of fact a *s3t nswt* was almost always a priestess of Hathor (*hmt-ntr Hwt-Hr*) but she did not hold the title of either *mwt nswt* or *s3t ntr*. For the cult-religious link between the priesthood of Hathor and *s3t nswt* title see also FEDERN, 1945: 165-192 and PIRELLI, 2003: 58-59

<sup>17</sup> TROY, 1986: 154, nr. 4.15; BAUD, 1999: 532-533, nr. 171.

<sup>18</sup> TROY, 1986: 155, nr. 6.2; BAUD, 1999: 144, 410-411, nr. 17.

<sup>19</sup> See the abovementioned cases of *ḥnḥ.s-n-Mry-R<sup>c</sup>* I and *Nt* who were not given the *s3t ntr* title.

<sup>20</sup> See also BARTA, 1975: 21; BRUNNER, 1964: 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> GUNDLACH, 1998: 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> See also ROTH, 1999: 121.

<sup>23</sup> From the Palermo Stone two royal mothers are documented: Henithapi for Djer (WILKINSON, 2000: 187) and Meretneith for Den (SCHÄFER, 1902: 18; WILKINSON, 2000: 104-105; SEIPEL, 1980: 26, 43-45). A third mention of a royal mother, namely Meresankh for Snefru, seems to be documented on the *recto* of Palermo Stone (Cairo Fragment 1, line 6) but this part of the Annals it is too badly preserved to be accepted beyond doubt (see WILKINSON, 2000: 214-215 and fig. 4; VON BECKERATH, 1997: 13-19; SEIPEL, 1980: 86).

but only the mother of the ruling sovereign through the title *mwt nswt* or more often *mwt nswt bity*.

As to the iconography, the royal mother appears to have a specific set feature: she is almost always depicted wearing the vulture headdress, sometimes also associated with the ureus, particularly in the VI dynasty (see below), and holding the sceptre in papyrus shape on one hand and the *ꜥnh* sign on the other (fig. 2). This iconography is documented all over the Old Kingdom, from the relief fragments referring to *Hꜥ-mrr-Nbty* I<sup>24</sup>, mother of Menkaura, to the statue of *ꜥnh-n.s-Mry-Rꜥ* II<sup>25</sup>, mother of Pepi II.

Particularly in the case of the most common vulture headdress we can speak of an authentic «official attribute» of the royal mother<sup>26</sup>. This is taken over from the divine prototype in which the royal mother identifies herself as representative of the female aspects of kingship, expressed by the goddess Nechbet and the title *Nbty* (with related forms *sm3wt mry Nbty* and *wrt hts Nbty*), and vehicle for the rebirth of the pharaoh in the afterlife<sup>27</sup> (see also representations of the pharaoh being suckled by the goddess Hathor in many pyramid valley temples).

Otherwise it is only the ruler who presents himself, like the royal mother, with specific attributes taken over from the divine world implying an intrinsic affinity, or rather identification, between the earthly possessor and the divine counterpart.

Turning to the ureus, the matter is much more complicated: before the VI dynasty this specific attribute of kingship is only attested in two cases, *Hꜥ-mrr-Nbty* I<sup>28</sup> in the IV dynasty and *Hnt-k3w.s* II<sup>29</sup> in the V (fig. 2).

In the first case the iconography gives rise, in my opinion, to many doubts since it is attested only by a fragment of a small ritual wand which is badly damaged and fairly illegible.

In the second case, on the other hand, the clearly anomalous position of *Hnt-k3w.s* II may have played a decisive role in the contemporary political scenario, possibly indeed as regent. In this respect it must be borne in mind that a similar royal attribute does not seem to be attested even for *Hnt-k3w.s* I<sup>30</sup> who nonetheless had had, like her homonym, a position of undoubted privilege associated with the enigmatic title of *mwt nswt bity nswt bity* (on the so-called «Khentkaus Problem» see below).

The ureus seems to have become a prerogative of the royal mothers, or rather royal women, only from the VI dynasty onwards, when we know of at least four queens, *Ipwt* I, *ꜥnh.s-n-Mry-Rꜥ* I, *ꜥnh.s-n-Mry-Rꜥ* II and *Ipwt* II, the last-named being attested only with the title of king's wife (*hmt nswt*) and never with that of king's mother (*mwt*

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<sup>24</sup> A fragment of lintel coming from the mortuary temple of her daughter *Hꜥ-mrr-Nbty* II at Giza (see PORTER; MOSS, 1974: 273-274 with further bibliography; CALLENDER; JANOSI, 1997: 16, fig. 8) and a fragment of a «ritual» wand coming from the pyramid temple of Menkaura (see REISNER, 1931: tab. 19a; PORTER; MOSS, 1974: 33 with further bibliography).

<sup>25</sup> JAMES, 1974: 28, pl. 25.

<sup>26</sup> See also ROTH, 2001: 279-283.

<sup>27</sup> TROY, 1986: 115-116.

<sup>28</sup> See note 24.

<sup>29</sup> VERNER, 1995: 56, note 4, 80, pl. 11.

<sup>30</sup> On a relief coming from her funerary complex, the queen mother holds a short ritual beard and what is likely to be a vulture diadem (although both emblems seem to be a later addition to the carving) but no evidence of the ureus can be seen (see VERNER, 1995: pl. 32, fig. 85a, 174-175, fig. 85b).

*nswt*)<sup>31</sup>. Among these four figures, moreover, only in the case of *ḥnh.s-n-Mry-R<sup>c</sup>* II can we consider a true regency, with the queen standing in for the very young Pepi II, a hypothesis which seems to be borne out both by the inscription found in the Wadi Maghara<sup>32</sup>, Sinai, and perhaps by the famous alabaster statue of the queen holding the young Pepi II in her lap<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore, contrary to Roth's assertion<sup>34</sup>, it seems very difficult to see the ureus as a meaningful, essential symbol of the basic iconography of a royal mother, at least before the VI dynasty. Where this is not documented, above all in the IV and V dynasty, this can not simply be the result of inadequate documentation. Only from the VI dynasty onward, we can see, apart from the obvious association of the royal mother with the goddess Wadjet (further documented by the occurrence of the *w3d* sceptre in papyrus shape), a direct link with the ureus of the king. In this way the royal mother presents herself as a member of pharaoh's family and participates in his «nature» as mother-vulture as well as wife-cobra of the king<sup>35</sup>.

The prominent position of the royal mother can be also seen in the cults established for her that did not exist for a queen who was only king's wife<sup>36</sup>. Besides the *ḥmw-k3* (documented for almost all the royal mothers), who also attended to the cults performed in a private funerary context, the funerary cult for Khentkaus I and II, and for each royal mother of the VI dynasty, was also provided by the *ḥmw-ntj*<sup>37</sup> (fig. 3). This kind of priesthood was usually considered a sole prerogative of the funerary cult for the king as earthly embodiment of the god. The establishment of such a cult for the royal mother, documented also for important provincial temples like Abydos<sup>38</sup>, and its consequent supplying provided by numerous royal decrees (Coptus A<sup>39</sup>; royal decree for the queen mothers *ḥnh-n.s-mry-R<sup>c</sup>* and *Nt*<sup>40</sup>), seems to clearly testify that her privileged and «divine» status was intended to last forever<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> ROTH, 2001: 283-284, 394, 400-402, 409-414, 419-420 with bibliographical references.

<sup>32</sup> PORTER; MOSS, 1951: 342; GARDINER; PEET, 1952-1955: 64 and tab. 9.

<sup>33</sup> For the bibliography, see note 25. In spite of the usual iconography of the queen mother with vulture headdress, the hole visible on the upper part may not refer to a bird of prey but rather to the ureus. This iconography is documented, albeit referring to a divinity, in a relief from the funerary temple of Niuserra (see BORCHARDT, 1907, blatt 16). The presence of the ureus would further confirm the royal prerogatives displayed by the queen mother in other circumstances.

<sup>34</sup> ROTH, 1999: 116-117; id., 2001: 283-287.

<sup>35</sup> On this dialectic relationship between mother/vulture and daughter/cobra during the whole Old Kingdom see also TROY, 1986: 116-123. The scholar describes this relationship as a «pictorial paraphrase» of the mythical role of the royal mother in the paradigm of kingship (*Idem*, 131).

<sup>36</sup> The only documented exception is that of *Wdbtn*, wife of Pepi II but not a royal mother. We are, then, at the end of the VI dynasty, in a period in which other «anomalous» cases are attested of royal wives with the titles or iconography of a royal mother (see the above-mentioned case of the ureus for *Ipwt* II).

<sup>37</sup> ROTH, 1999: 119. As to Khentkaus I and II see also VERNER, 1995: 171-172.

<sup>38</sup> Royal Decree of Pepi II for *ḥnh-n.s-mry-R<sup>c</sup>* I and II. See GOEDICKE, 1967: 81-86 with further bibliography.

<sup>39</sup> Royal Decree of Pepi I for king's mother *Ipwt* I (JE 41890). See GOEDICKE, 1967: 41-54, with further bibliography.

<sup>40</sup> GOEDICKE, 1967: 158-162, with further bibliography. Taking into account that this decree was enacted by a successor of Pepi II, it reasonable to think, contrary to Goedicke's assertion, that it should be linked to *ḥnh-n.s-mry-R<sup>c</sup>* II, mother of Pepi II, rather than the older sister of king's mother, namely *ḥnh-n.s-mry-R<sup>c</sup>* I.

<sup>41</sup> See also BAUD, 1996: 64-66.

The size and location of her resting-place finally confirm this key-role in the Egyptian religion and society, with the most important pyramid complexes of the royal mothers situated very close to those ones of their husbands. In the case of Khentkaus I and II, these complexes actually seem to take on a full architectural and cult autonomy<sup>42</sup> with respect to the contemporary structures of the respective ruler-husbands, whose identity, at least in the first case, is still to be established.

It is precisely these two queen mothers whom I wish to end by considering, since the historical events surrounding them are still a bone of contention among scholars. The core of the issue is the interpretation of the distinctive and anomalous title *mwt nswt bity nswt bity*<sup>43</sup> which has split scholars into two groups concerning its meaning: one favours the reading «King of Upper and Lower Egypt and Mother of King of Upper and Lower Egypt»<sup>44</sup>; the other favours, with different hypotheses, the reading «Mother of Two Kings of Upper and Lower Egypt»<sup>45</sup>. In the light of our present knowledge, the latter reading seems the most convincing, not least because there is no proof of a regency or a real kingship of the two queens, whose names are never written into cartouche or in any King-list<sup>46</sup>.

In the case of Khentkaus I, she may have ensured the continuation of a dynastic line, began with her first son, which otherwise risked forfeiting the royal power, legitimising the unexpected, indirect ascent to the throne of her second son. In fact, the changes in the queen's iconography (with the addition of the title in question) as well as in the tomb's architecture, must surely date from a later building stage which means, according to the scholars, from a later king's reign<sup>47</sup>. Moreover, the placement of her mortuary complex in the pyramid field of Giza seems to testify the wish of her first/second son to be associated, via his mother, with the legitimate predecessors of the IV dynasty, bypassing in this way the brief reign of Shepseskaf, and the even more ephemeral and obscure reign of Thamphthis. Taking into account these elements, it has been recently suggested that the two sons in question could be Userkaf and

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<sup>42</sup> The pyramid complex of Khentkaus II, as well as a specific funerary temple, also possessed a satellite pyramid of its own (VERNER, 1995: 160-161), which is unique for a queen in the Old Kingdom (whether mother or wife of the king) prior to the wives of Pepi I and Pepi II.

<sup>43</sup> For the complete titulary of the two queen mothers see BAUD, 1999: 546-554, nr. 186-187; ROTH, 2001: 398, 400-403.

<sup>44</sup> JUNKER, 1932: 131-142; HASSAN, 1940: 1-102.

<sup>45</sup> ALTENMÜLLER, 1970: 223-235; Seipel, 1980: 185-195; CALLENDER, 1992: vol. I, 240-272; VERNER, 1995: 173-178; ROTH, 2001: 90-99.

<sup>46</sup> CALLENDER, 1992: vol. I, 240-252; VERNER, 1995: 173, 177. This conclusion is strongly influenced by the supposition that the account of the Westcar papyrus can be considered, albeit with all due caution, as reflecting quite accurately the historical and political contemporary situation. In my opinion, however, that is highly problematic, since it means losing sight of the general tone and specific political and propagandistic aims of the account, which must be viewed exclusively in the climate of the period when the text was compiled, and not in an unmotivated desire to effect a historical reconstruction of the past in a work which, furthermore, has all the hallmarks of a novel or fable. See also GOEDICKE, 1993: 23-36.

<sup>47</sup> VERNER, 1995: 175; ROTH, 2001: 93-96.

Neferirkara<sup>48</sup>, also because the connection of Sahura with Neferhetepes, wife of Userkaf, seems to be demonstrated beyond doubt<sup>49</sup>.

Apart from these considerations of a historical and chronological nature, other cult reasons could lead us to identify Neferirkara as the second king-son of Khentkaus I. During his reign the cult of the royal mother as mythical and symbolic counterpart of the ruling king seems to reach its climax: on the one hand, she is given, for the first time, a specific «divine» cult, provided by the abovementioned *ḥmw-ntr*; on the other hand, the cult of Hathor assumes a position of primary importance in the most important cult place for the living king, the sun temple. In fact, of the six sun temples known, only the one of Neferirkara appears to have housed a proven cult of the goddess of Dendera, with no less than 21 priests serving it among *ḥm-ntr*, *imy-ḥt ḥm-ntr*, *imy-ḥt w<sup>c</sup>b* and *ḥry-sšḥ*<sup>50</sup>. In the private context too, during the reign of Neferirkara, the cult of Hathor (and the relative number of priestesses) seems to have undergone a substantial increase, surely further confirmation of the wish to emphasise the complementary role of the queen mother vis à vis the king, in her chief nature as mother and wife of the ruler, with the figure of Hathor as mythical and symbolic counterpart.

Also in the case of Khentkaus II the historical situation requires some clarification: according to the archaeological evidence the two king-sons of the queen mother, to whom the frequently cited title *mwt nswt bity nswt bity* refers, ought to be Neferefra e Niuserra<sup>51</sup>. Nevertheless I find it strange that a ruler who succeeded his predecessor and brother directly, with no interruption by others, should have felt it necessary to insist on a title that clearly implied, as in the case of Khentkaus I, a break in the normal line of dynastic continuity. This is all the more salient when you consider that we know of other cases of queen mothers who, while having two or three sons who succeeded one another on the throne, did not make use of this title<sup>52</sup>.

Unless one believes that the chronological and possibly also genealogical proximity (together with the homonymy) of the two royal mothers had a paradigmatic function, leading to the attribution of a title to the second one without any real basis in fact, the attribution of this epithet to Khentkaus II by Niuserra seems to suggest that

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<sup>48</sup> See also ROTH, 2001: 90-99, 361.

<sup>49</sup> The name of Sahura does, in fact, appear to be closely linked to the restoration work, or indeed to the completion, of the pyramid complex of Neferhetepes, which would seem to confirm, together with other elements, his descent from this queen. The proximity of Userkaf's pyramid to that of the queen, in turn, seems better suited to a wife-husband rather than mother-child relationship, as others have maintained. See also LABROUSSE, 1996: 265-266; BAUD, 1999: 493-494, nr. 123; ROTH, 2001: 99-102, 361.

<sup>50</sup> See also Nuzzolo, M.: I templi solari della V dinastia: significato e pratiche cultuali, *Aegyptus* 1-2/2006: 86-88 and pl. 1, in print. The type of offices attested in the sun temple is the same as those documented inside the pyramid complex of the queen, with a particular numerical predominance of *ḥm-ntr* and *ḥry-sšḥ* (see also VERNER, 1995: 132), just as occurs, in the same period, also for the pharaonic cult inside his pyramid and solar complex. This analogy, or in some cases genuine cult identity, between sun temple and pyramid is the subject of the PhD thesis I am currently working on, the first results of which were recently described at the XI Congresso Nazionale di Egittologia e Papirologia held in Chianciano Terme from 11 to 13 January 2007 and in press.

<sup>51</sup> VERNER, 1995: 171, 177; ROTH, 2001: 102-112, 400-402.

<sup>52</sup> It is the case, for example, of queen *Nfrw* I, mother of Intef I and Intef II, or of XIII dynasty queen Kemi, mother of three kings. For a genealogical picture of the XI and XIII dynasty see CALLENDER, 1992: vol. I, 265, vol. III, 161; ROTH, 2001: 179-185, 363. For a different position see TROY, 1985: 156, nr. 11.1, 160, nr. 13.7.

there was a short dynastic interruption following Neferefra's brief reign, when the obscure king Shepseskara probably acceded to the throne<sup>53</sup>.

After his reign, clearly, the queen mother's role in defending and legitimising Niuserra's claims to the throne must have been decisive, enabling her to use the otherwise anomalous title of «Mother of Two Kings of Upper and Lower Egypt» and possibly to adorn herself with the ureus (see above). This hypothesis could also be borne out by the placement of Niuserra's pyramid complex up against that of Neferirkara, in a zone which was most inconvenient from a topographical point of view, probably on account of the lack of available space in the Abusir necropolis (fig. 4)<sup>54</sup>.

Although the historical-political scenario we have just outlined does have a coherence and plausibility, several elements make our approach to the «Khentkaus Problem» highly partial. Until I have the opportunity to dedicate more space to the question, I shall merely set out a few of these elements here.

First of all, many archaeological elements, above all the architectural size and cult complexity of the pyramids of the queens in question<sup>55</sup>, give the sense of the power they exercised and the prestige they enjoyed, prompting us to attribute fully royal dignity to them. This dignity may have been wielded not in a simple regency in the name of an heir to the throne who was still a minor, as in the case of *ḥnḥ.s-n-Mry-R* II for Pepi II, but with plenipotentiary functions following the sudden and perhaps unexpected death of the ruling king-son, when there can have been as yet no legitimate pretenders to the throne<sup>56</sup>. At this point the title of *mwt nswt bity nswt bity* could be read as «King of Upper and Lower Egypt and Mother of King of Upper and Lower Egypt», and this would explain why *ḥnḥ.s-n-Mry-R* II did not bear it.

In the second place, there is a chronological problem concerning the relationship between Khentkaus I and II in the genealogical sequence of the IV and V dynasty. On the basis of several archaeological and philological elements, as well as the interpretation of the title in question as «Mother of the Two Sovereigns of Upper and Lower Egypt», most scholars have considered Khentkaus II to be the daughter of the homonymous queen mother, and thus sister of Userkaf and Neferirkara<sup>57</sup>. However, we know that at his death the latter king must have had two young children: Neferefra, his probable successor, aged about 20, and the even younger Niuserra<sup>58</sup>. Considering that

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<sup>53</sup> See also VERNER, 2000: 594-597.

<sup>54</sup> If we consider that the unfinished construction half-way between Sahura's pyramid and Userkaf's sun temple could be Shepseskara's pyramid, we have to certify that there would have been no other available space in the Abusir necropolis for building a pyramid but the narrow area between Sahura's and Neferirkara's pyramids, where Niuserra's pyramid complex stood. See also LEHNER, 1997: 142, 148-149.

<sup>55</sup> See also VERNER, 1995: 168-173 and note 42 in this paper.

<sup>56</sup> In this respect, for example, it is possible that the obscure king known as Thamphthis, collocated at the end of the IV dynasty by Manetho, could in reality be identified with Khentkaus I, whose exceptional political prestige, further borne out by her burial complex, may have deceived the Egyptian historian, leading him to collocate in that period a sovereign who was in fact completely missing from the annalistic sources and, in deed, in all the king-lists known to us. I am currently preparing a more detailed study of this matter.

<sup>57</sup> VERNER, 1995: 170-173; ROTH, 2001: 102-112, 361.

<sup>58</sup> VERNER, 1995: 177; *idem*, 2000: 589, 595-597 with further bibliography

Neferirkara reigned for at least 10 years<sup>59</sup> and probably came to the throne fairly advanced in years, following the approximately 20 years in which Userkaf and Sahura reigned<sup>60</sup>, it seems unlikely that he can have had from his sister Khentkaus II, also obviously quite elderly woman, a son as young as Niuserra. This would lead us to believe that Neferirkara and Khentkaus II were not brother and sister, and that, therefore, one of the two was not the child of Khentkaus I.

Leaving aside the abovementioned historical-archaeological elements, however, what is undoubtedly very interesting in this case (and in the Old Kingdom as a whole) is the lack of any reference to the pharaoh and father of the ruling king. If on one hand this complicates our identification of the family and genealogical ties within the dynasties, on the other it gives more credibility to our analysis underlying the central position of the royal mother in «building» and «confirming» the dynastic legitimacy of the pharaoh.

Thus, by taking on a specific iconographic and epigraphic identity, she enters into the prototype of mother and tutelary divinity of the king receiving, as *s3t ntr*, a privileged status, comparable only to that of the king. We can see evidence for this status in both the burial of the royal mothers in tombs of a «regal» shape, and the description of her funerary temple as *hwt-ntr*, supported by the *hmw-ntr*. The subsequent confirmation of this status through foundations providing offerings and supply for their funerary cult and their favouring by official decrees completes the picture and serves also, ultimately, to legitimise the living king, fulfilling one of his main dynastic duties, that of honouring the memory of his deified dead mother.

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<sup>59</sup> VON BECKERATH, 1997: 153-155, gives Neferirkara twenty years of reign.

<sup>60</sup> SCHÄFER, 1902: 34, 38; WILKINSON, 2000: 158-159, 169-173; VON BECKERATH, 1997: 155.

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<i>Name</i>	<i>mwt nswt</i>	<i>mwt nswt bity</i>	<i>hmt nswt</i>	<i>s3t nswt</i>	<i>s3t nṯr</i>	<i>King-son</i>
<i>Mr.s-ḥnh I</i>	(X)	(X)				<i>Snefru</i>
<i>Htp-ḥr.s</i>	X	X	(X)		X	<i>Khufu</i>
<i>Hḥ-mrr-Nbtj I</i>	X	X	X	X	X	<i>Menkaura</i>
<i>Hnt-k3w.s I</i>	X	X			X	<i>Userkaf and Neferikara?</i>
<i>Nfr-ḥtp.s</i>	X					<i>Sahura</i>
<i>Hnt-k3w.s II</i>	X	X	X		X	<i>Neferefra and Niuserra</i>
<i>Sšsšt</i>	X	X			(X)	<i>Teti</i>
<i>Ipwt I</i>	X	X	X	X	(X)	<i>Pepi I</i>
<i>ḥnh-n.s-Mry-Rḥ I</i>	X	X	X			<i>Merenra I</i>
<i>ḥnh-n.s-Mry-Rḥ II</i>	X	X	X		X	<i>Pepi II</i>
<i>Nt</i>		X	X	X		<i>Merenra II?</i>
<i>ḥnh-n.s-Ppy III</i>	X	X	X		X	<i>Neferkara II</i>

Fig. 1. Titles and king-sons of the royal mothers from IV to VI dynasty.

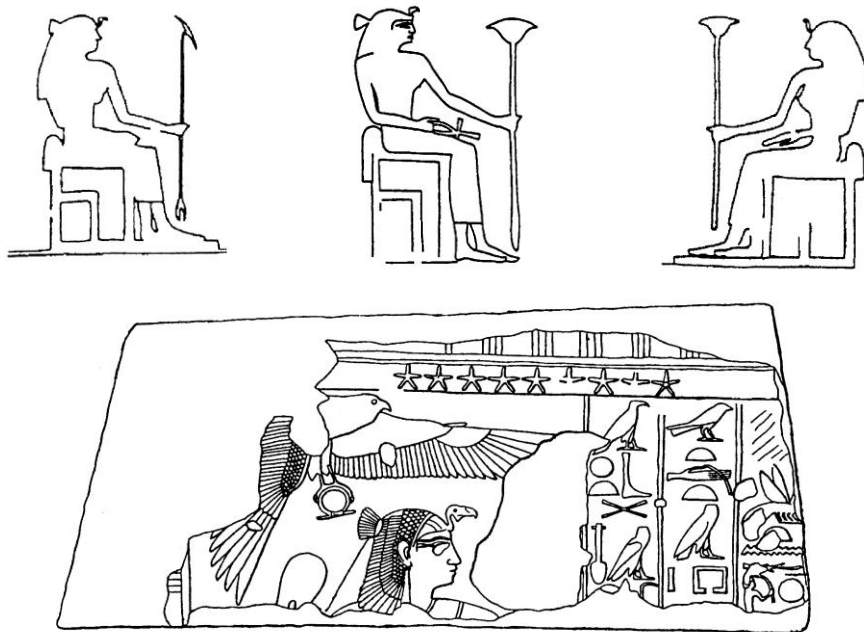


Fig. 2. The iconography of the royal mothers: on the top, three images of Khentkaus II coming from her mortuary complex in Abusir (from Verner, 1995: 80); below, relief fragment of Iput I coming from her pyramid temple in Saqqara (from Roth, 2001: 555).

Name	<i>ḥwt-k3</i>	<i>ḥm-k3</i>	<i>ḥwt-ntr</i>	<i>ḥm-ntr</i>	<i>w<sup>c</sup>b</i>	<i>ḥnty-š</i>	<i>ḥry-ḥb</i>
<i>Mr.s-ḥnḥ I</i>							
<i>Ḥtp-ḥr.s</i>		X					
<i>Ḥ<sup>c</sup>-mrr-Nbtj I</i>		X					
<i>Ḥnt-k3w.s I</i>		X	X	X			
<i>Nfr-ḥtp.s</i>							
<i>Ḥnt-k3w.s II</i>		X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Sšsšt</i>							
<i>Ipwt I</i>	X	(X)	X	X			X
<i>ḥnḥ-n.s-Mry-R<sup>c</sup> I</i>	(X)	X	X	X	X		
<i>ḥnḥ-n.s-Mry-R<sup>c</sup> II</i>	(X)	X		X	X		
<i>Nt</i>		X	X	X	X		
<i>ḥnḥ-n.s-Ppy III</i>							

Fig. 3. The cult of the royal mothers from IV to VI dynasty: priest offices and cult places.

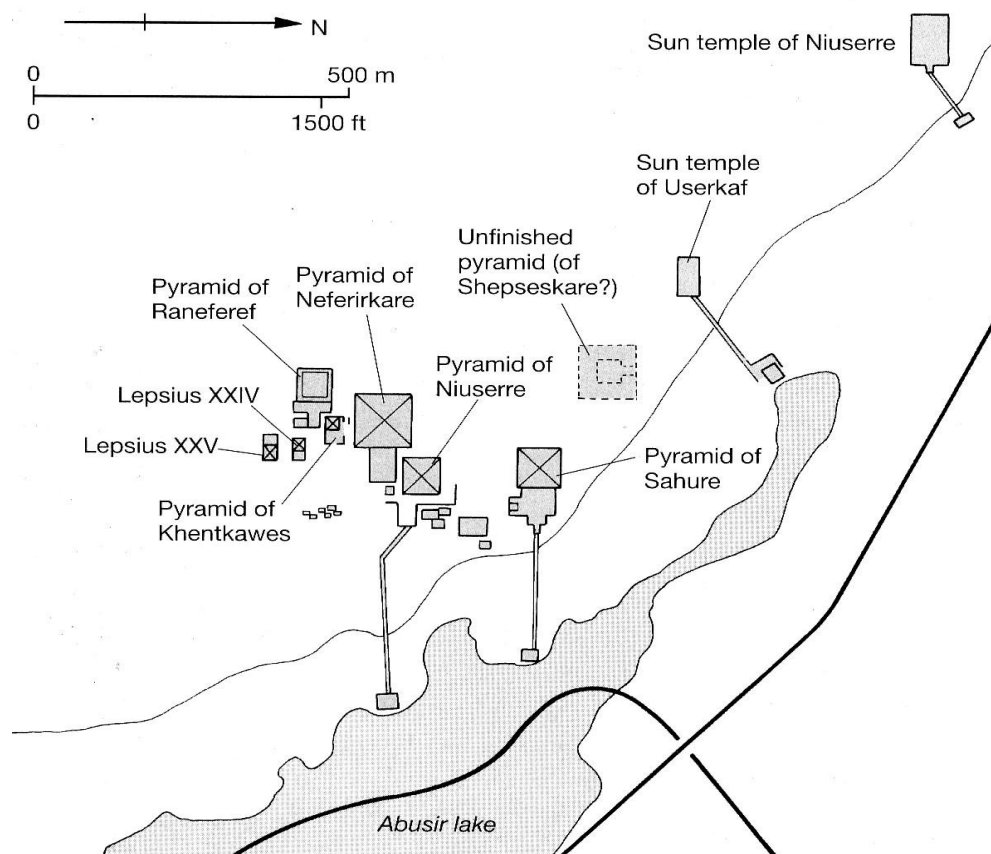


Fig. 4. The 5th-dynasty pyramid field at Abusir (from Lehner, 1997: 142).