

Sun Temples and Kingship in the Ancient Egyptian Kingdom¹.

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Sun temples represent a very anomalous element in the artistic and ideological development of the Ancient Egyptian Kingdom. The various analyses conducted in the first fifty years of the last century by Borchardt², Bissing³, Ricke⁴, Kaiser⁵, Winter⁶ have defined the key-points of this problem:

- the funerary nature of these structures, situated on Nile's west bank;
- their peculiar architecture;
- their complementary nature to the contemporary pyramid complexes.

The discovery and subsequent publication of the Abusir papyri⁷ in the seventies have further confirmed the central role that these buildings played in the celebration of the divine prerogatives of the monarch, in connection with the most important places of the royal funerary cult, that's so the pyramids. For these reasons the disappearance of the temples in a period of only sixty years is even more surprising.

But we can understand the reasons of such a fast rise and fall analysing them as part of a more general defining process of the royal ideology, as it was going to outline during the IV, V and VI dynasties. Therefore we'll deal with a close examination of the peculiarities of the temples, side by side with the analysis of the most important features of the pyramids, revealing how both contribute to the celebration of the king in all his different divine "natures".

¹ This paper is an abstract developed from my graduation thesis (Nuzzolo M., "I templi solari: tra culto solare e testi delle piramidi", Napoli forthcoming) and it's to be considered as a work-in-progress of a more complete and detailed publication.

² Bissing F.W. von (eds.), *Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne-user-Re*, I. Der Bau, Berlin 1905.

³ Ibid. II. Die kleine Festdarstellung, Leipzig 1923; III. Die grosse Festdarstellung, Leipzig 1928; ibid., "La chambre des trois saisons du sanctuaire solaire du roi Rathures à Abousir", *ASAE* 53 (1956), pp. 319-38; ibid., Kees H., *Untersuchungen zu den Reliefs aus dem Re-Heiligtum des Rathures*, München 1922. See also Edel E., "Zu den Inschriften auf den Jahreszeitenreliefs der Weltkammer aus dem Sonnenheiligtum des Neuserre", *NAWG* 8 (1961), pp. 209-48; ibid., Wenig St., *Die Jahreszeitenreliefs aus dem Sonnenheiligtum des Königs Neuserre*. Mitteilungen Ägyptischen Sammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 7, Berlin 1974.

⁴ Ricke H., *Das Sonnenheiligtum des Königs Userkaf* I. Der Bau, *BÄBA* 7, Kairo 1965; II. Die Funde, *BÄBA* 8, Wiesbaden 1969.

⁵ Kaiser W., "Zu den Sonnenheiligtümern der 5. Dynastie", *MDAIK* 14 (1956), pp. 104-116; ibid., "Die kleine Hebseddarstellung im Sonnenheiligtum des Neuserre", *BÄBA* 12, Wiesbaden 1971, pp. 87-105, falttafel 4-5.

⁶ Winter E., "Zur Deutung der Sonnenheiligtümer der 5. Dynastie", *WZKM* 54 (1957), pp. 222-233.

⁷ Posener-Krieger P., *Les archives du temple funéraire de Néferirkarê-Kakäi*, (*Les Papyrus d'Abousir*): traduction et commentaire, BdE 65, Le Caire 1976.

In this way it will be clear how the cult message embodied by the sun temples did not vanish with their disappearance, but it was reformulated on new longer foundations and granted to a different “viaticum” that could guarantee the ruler eternal life.

Let’s begin by analysing Userkaf’s sun temple, the *Nxn-Ra*. It consisted of the three basic elements of a funerary complex: the upper temple, the causeway and the lower temple (fig. 1).

The archaeologists could establish the upper temple had undergone four major transformations which were characterized by a similar plan and by the same conceptual statement even if they show some specific differences in their architectural elements. We can find a large enclosure, at the beginning square-shaped with round corners, that holds a wide open court with a central mound in shape of a mastaba. A mudbrick altar, surrounded by low thin walls, and two statue shrines on either side of it, were situated on the east side of this pedestal building.

On the top of this lower level was placed the cult symbol whose shape has not yet been defined. Only in phase 2 we can find a granite obelisk that will become the main badge of the sun religion from now on. In phase 1 however we could have found a pole made of perishable material, maybe wood. This shape is supposed on the basis of a limestone slab that shows sun temple’s hieroglyphic name determined by a mast projecting from a mound⁸ (fig. 1), perhaps a symbolic perch for the sun god in his falcon form.

Palermo Stone’s mention of two oxen and two geese⁹ daily sacrificed in this temple make us assume the presence of magazines and slaughterhouse, but we have no evidence in this way.

The most interesting part of the complex is represented, in my opinion, by the lower temple, a great rectangular building, not oriented to the cardinal points but shifted towards north-west (fig. 1). The temple was divided into three sections: an open court in the centre with a colonnade of 16 rectangular granite pillars; 5 or 7 niches behind the court in the west; an entrance hall in the east which is too damaged to enable us to reconstruct its layout. Maybe there were magazines by the sides of the entrance hall.

This temple was considerably more than the glorified gateway represented by contemporary pyramid valley temples, or by the valley temple of Niuserra’s sun temple. In my opinion we’re dealing with a pure place of worship, a real “funerary” temple¹⁰.

The other known sun temple, the *^sp-ib-Ra* of Niuserra, was characterized by the same elements as the previous one but it was marked by greater magnificence and monumentality (fig. 2). We can find a big pedestal building dominated by a massive

⁸ Ricke H., *ibid.* I, pp. 4-5. A lot of limestone slabs were found amid the debris of Userkaf’s sun temple. For further information see Edel E., “Die Kalksteintafelchen“, in: Ricke H., *ibid.* II, pp. 1-34.

⁹ Sethe K., *Urkunden des Alten Reichs*, I, Leipzig 1933, p. 241; Wilkinson T.A.H., *Royal Annals of Ancient Egypt*, London-New York 2000, pp. 152-59, 259.

¹⁰ According to Ricke and Scott it was the temple of Neith “north of the walls“ often mentioned in the titles of the priestess of the goddess during the Old Kingdom, but this theory is not supported by any archaeological evidence. Quite recently Ronal Wells has suggested that the valley temple was oriented to some specific stars that would have ascended in the sky just before sunrise in that period, so that the temple could be seen as a kind of astronomical clock for sacrifices, but this theory is not convincing. For further information see Wells R., “The 5th Dynasty Sun Temples at Abu Ghurab as Old Kingdom star clocks: examples of applied ancient egyptian astronomy”, *SÄK, Beihefte 4*, 1990, pp. 95-104.

obelisk built of limestone blocks, a wide open court with a monumental alabaster altar in the centre, a large slaughtering area, a long set of magazines.

The temple was furthermore enriched by two new elements: a wide figurative program, unfolded along the whole south side, and a huge mudbrick model of a boat, just outside the enclosure of the temple on the south-east corner.

The figurative program was directed to the celebration of the main rituals of king's power renewal (*Sed* festival) or, as generally accepted, to the worship of the sun god (or of the king as the god Ra) as the source of every kind of life in the earth (room of the seasons).

The sun boat was instead an element of fundamental importance for the afterworld destination of the king, and in fact we find it in many previous pyramid complexes. The pharaoh shares the mythical journey of death and rebirth of the sun god across the ocean of the sky; he identifies himself with Ra and so he can enjoy the timeless world of the gods.

Nevertheless all these elements of the sun temples must be viewed within the context of the general defining of the patterns that involves the pyramid complexes too. Beginning from the reign of Snefru the pyramid was becoming the place of the celebration of a kingship more and more directed towards the sun god¹¹.

The establishment of the pyramid complex made up of three basic elements (upper temple, causeway, lower temple) oriented to the east-west axis; the decorative program of the whole complex; the pyramid shape of the royal tomb unlike the old step-shape; the position of the burial chamber within and not under the pyramid (only in the pyramids of Snefru and Khufu); everything makes us understand that the king claimed for himself the absolute power of the god, because he came from the god, he was the earthly embodiment of the god himself.

We reach the climax of this trend in the period of Khufu: the king tries to achieve the merging with the god which leads to solar apotheosis in his horizon, maybe even before his death¹². The pharaoh is the living god, his "epiphany", and so his tomb must mirror the infinity of the sky he wants to come back to.

The successor of Khufu, Djedefra, continues this trend probably building the Sphinx temple, where he celebrates the deified father Khufu who arises from his horizon (*Axt-#wfw*) as *Ra-@r-Axt*¹³. But the son of the god can't share the same solar

¹¹ Stadelmann R., "Snofru und die Pyramiden von Meidum und Dahschur", *MDAIK* 36 (1980), pp. 437-49; *ibid.*, "Pyramiden und Nekropole des Snofru in Dahschur", *MDAIK* 49 (1993), pp. 259-94.

¹² Stadelmann R., *Die ägyptischen Pyramiden. Von Ziegelbau zum Weltwunder*, Mainz 1985, pp. 110-123; Hawass Z., *Secrets from the sands*, New York 2003, p. 50 (pp. 52-62).

¹³ This hypothesis was strongly supported by the German scholar Dietrich Wildung (*ibid.*, *Ni-user-re Sonnenkonig- Sonnengott*, München 1984, pp. 18-20) and it has been recently reposed by Vassil Dobrev (*ibid.*, "La IV dynastie: un nouveau regard", *Egypte, Afrique et Orient* 15, 1999, pp. 3-28), but most egyptologists do not agree, maintaining (stating) the Sphinx and his temple were both built in the reign of Khafra. See Hawass Z., "The program of the royal funerary complexes", in: O'Connor D., Silverman D.P. (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, Leiden - New York - Köln 1995, pp. 227-8, 249-53; *ibid.*, "The Great Sphinx at Giza: date and function", in: *Atti del VI convegno internazionale di Egittologia vol. II*, Torino 1993, pp. 177-95; Ricke H., "Der Harmachistempel des Chefren in Giseh", *BÄBA* 10, Wiesbaden 1970, pp. 1-43; Schott S., "Ägyptische Quellen zum Plan des Sphinxtempels", *BÄBA* 10, Wiesbaden 1970, pp. 49-79; Anthes R., "Was veranlasste Chefren zum bau des Tempels vor der Sphinx?", *BÄBA* 12, Wiesbaden 1971, pp. 47-58. Last but not least we must consider Rainer Stadelmann who firmly believes that the Sphinx (and maybe also his temple) was built by Khufu. See *ibid.* 1985, pp. 124-26; *ibid.*, "The Great Sphinx of Giza", in: Hawass Z. (eds.), *Egyptology at the dawn of*

destiny in a place consecrated by his father. So he leaves the pyramid field of Giza to prepare his own horizon of resurrection elsewhere.

This extemporary deifying attempt vanished just after the death of Djedefra, or rather was put back on the right track. And it was Khafra who re-established the idea of a kingship of divine origin suitable for the king as such and not only for a particular ruler. His pyramid complex shows the main elements of the new sun religion of Heliopolis: the king is the living Horus who rules over Egypt guaranteeing the prosperity of the country; he performs his duties and then he can be received by the assembly of the gods as one of their members, joining Ra again only after his death.

The pyramid becomes the place where the main natures of the king merge, the solar one and that one connected with the falcon of Hierakompolis.

The decorative program of his pyramid complex really seals in the stone these ideas: the king is represented as the living Horus in the whole valley temple and for the most part of the upper temple (statues of Khafra with the falcon god on his shoulders; scenes of the king who strikes the enemies assuring order and the *MAat* on earth; scenes of the *Sed* festival).

After fulfilling his duties he's worthy to gain access to Ra, being united with him only in the innermost room of his mortuary temple, the five shrines at the west end, at the feet of the pyramid itself (fig. 3). Outside the temple five boat-pits make the king able to take part in the sailing across the sky to join the gods again.

This separation of king's different divine natures is even more stressed in Menkaura's pyramid complex: as in Khafra's pyramid, in the valley temple the king is celebrated as Horus, in association with the goddess Hathor who receives here an increasingly growing cult (triads of Menkaura with Hathor and a deity representing some of the Egyptian *nomes*). But in the innermost room of his upper temple we can now see only one statue or cult object of Ra (fig. 3)¹⁴. So the king is no more identified with Ra in the completeness of his names, but he pays tribute to him as a respectful son. In this way the king places himself a step down from god.

The new sun religion of Heliopolis (and its clergy) had clearly reached such power to be able to leave its mark on the idea of kingship. However this new religious planning did not mean the king will have to give up mythical-theological prerogatives of the kingship, but only to reconcile them with the new eschatological message of the sun religion, creating a new concept of kingship.

I consider the reigns of Shepseskaf and Userkaf of great importance in this process. Influenced by Heliopolitan clergy and not against it, Shepseskaf wanted to reaffirm the cultural position of the king as Horus emphasizing the architectural-decorative features that symbolized this ideology from bng time: the mastaba-shape with "palace-façade" niches and panelling (a kind of decoration used also in completing the inner rooms and the sarcophagus of Menkaura's pyramid complex).

But the new royal ideology also needed a set for the worship of the king as Ra. The pharaoh can't give up his identification with the sun god, but he can't realize it within his funerary complex before dying.

the twenty-first century: proceedings of the eighth international congress of Egyptologists, Cairo 2000, vol. I: Archaeology, Cairo 2003, pp. 464-9.

¹⁴ Hawass Z., *ibid.*, in: O'Connor D., Silverman D.P. (eds.), pp. 223, 232-37, 249-53.

And it was Userkaf who created this new stage, that's so the sun temple, adopting the same architectural tripartite structure as the pyramids but with two important differences at least:

- the worship that took place inside the temple;
- the shape of the cult symbol.

As far as the first element is concerned (different from all the other sun temples) the layout of the lower temple (fig. 1) leads me to think that here the king as Horus was worshipped, in accordance with the same rituals as the pyramid's upper temple (howelse could we explain the 5 or 7 shrines?). King-Horus, then, went up the causeway to be glorified in his union with Ra at the top of the pedestal building where there was the "obelisk", the new shining symbol of the sun religion (that in the first stage was constituted only by a pole or perch as previously mentioned).

In this way Heliopolitan theology had tried to reconcile the different features of king's divine nature, ensuring perfect syncretism among the several ideas of the kingship developed by that time.

This is a real turning point in the religion and architecture of the Old Kingdom: from now on the pyramids complex would have celebrated the "earthly" kingship of the ruler, the image of the king as Horus, making it eternal with its fine relief carvings and painting (fig. 4).

The sun temple would have instead kept for ever the image of the king as the primeval god Ra, or rather as the parting, the phenomenal shape and expression of the god Ra on Earth (fig. 4).

This cult-religious dualism was of primary importance for the new pattern of the kingship: for example almost all the priests and attendants in the sun temples held an office in at least one funerary complex, usually, but not only, the pyramid of the same king¹⁵.

The equipment of the two complexes was complementary too: for example the sun boats. There were no boats near the pyramids of the six kings who also built sun temples¹⁶. On the contrary we can find a boat in at least two of the sun temples¹⁷, and it can't be a sheer chance.

Throughout this long period of time, very little importance seems to be given to the cult of the god Osiris. This is even more surprising if we consider that, till the III

¹⁵ Kaiser W., *MDAIK* 14 (1956), pp. 113-14, and Abb. 1; Baer K., *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom. The Structure of the Egyptian Administration in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties*, Chicago 1960.

¹⁶ In the seventies the Czech archaeological team, led by Professor Miroslav Verner, re-excavated many pyramid complexes of the fifth dynasty in Abusir finding two small boat pits near the pyramid of Neferirkara, on the northern and southern side, and five even smaller boat pits inside the funerary temple of Neferefra (Verner M., *Il mistero delle piramidi*, Roma 2002, tr. from english of: *The pyramids*, New York 2001, pp. 262, 270). However no boat was found intact and so we can't understand the exact meaning and function of these "furnishings". According to me, it's possible that they were not linked to the sun god Ra, as the boats found outside the pyramid complexes of Khufu and Khafra were in the IV dynasty, but rather to the mythical pilgrimage to Abydos that the king had to accomplish as a tribute to the god Osiris. I'll certainly give more attention to this problem in my next researches.

¹⁷ Besides mudbrick sun boat found outside Niuserra's sun temple, Palermo Stone states Neferirkara's sun temple held at least three sun boats. See Sethe K., *ibid.*, p. 249; Wilkinson T.A.H., *ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

dynasty, he had always had a central position in every kind of funerary cult¹⁸, and that his image had been closely linked to the pharaoh, as shown by the tombs of the first two dynasties and by Zoser's pyramid complex.

Suddenly by all appearances he will resume being of great importance for the idea of kingship in the pyramid texts. Maybe his absence was due to our knowledge full of gaps. From Abusir papyri we know, for example, that a statue of Neferirkara as Osiris was placed in the central niche of the five cult shrines of his pyramid's upper temple.

Moreover the priests who attended to the worship of the king were many times the same who attended to the funerary rituals connected to Anubis and Osiris¹⁹.

This concentration of cultual "offices" became very frequent as from the period between the reigns of Neferirkara and Nüserra, when we can find an increasingly growing cult of Osiris also in private mastabas.

I can't give here a lot of space to the funerary problems of the Old Kingdom nor to the pyramid texts because they would need a separate treatment. Nevertheless it's clear that a deep religious transformation was carrying out, and the attention was more and more centred on the funerary features of the rituals of king's resurrection (and on the god Osiris connected with them). These features were in fact the weak point of the monumental structure of all previous royal funerary complexes.

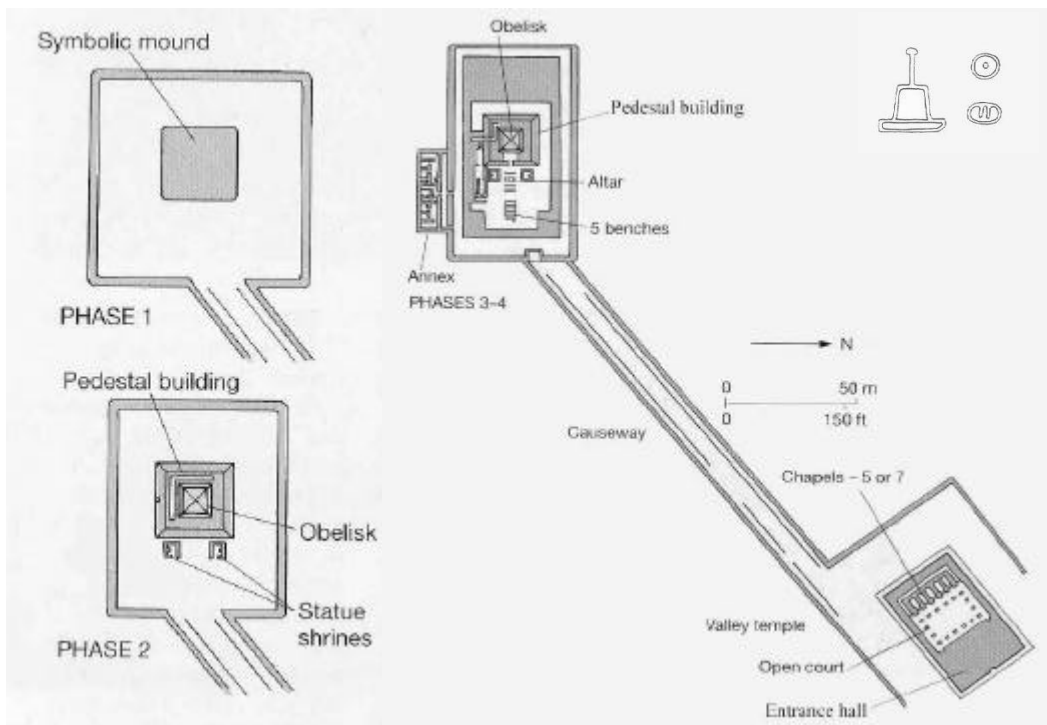
The long process of defining the theoretical bases of the "Pharaonic State" didn't come to the end with the appearance of the sun temples; on the contrary these ones were no longer sufficient to perform all the new complex implications linked to the pharaoh's image. So we have the pyramid texts which fully express the new cultual-religious needs²⁰. But sun religion features were not lost though with the disappearance of the sun temples.

Beginning from the reign of Unis, in fact, we can find again in every pyramid complex all those elements that have characterized the idea of kingship during the Old Kingdom. By the time of Snefru and Khufu they are now placed again in a sole monumental complex, that's so the pyramid: we have the sun boats, a decorative program which shows the king in all his divine natures and, in particular, the pyramid texts. These are the real "pass", the real viaticum for eternity, the essential element in the monumental "panoply" of sixth dynasty's pyramids, the only part able to resist the complete degradation of the outside structure of the tomb, by now built in a less careful way. It's now in these texts that the real "essence" of divine kingship is concentrated. Their magic utterances will make the king able to rise like his father the gods for performing his destiny and for shining, in the whole of his natures, "in the sky of the everlasting North Stars, for ever".

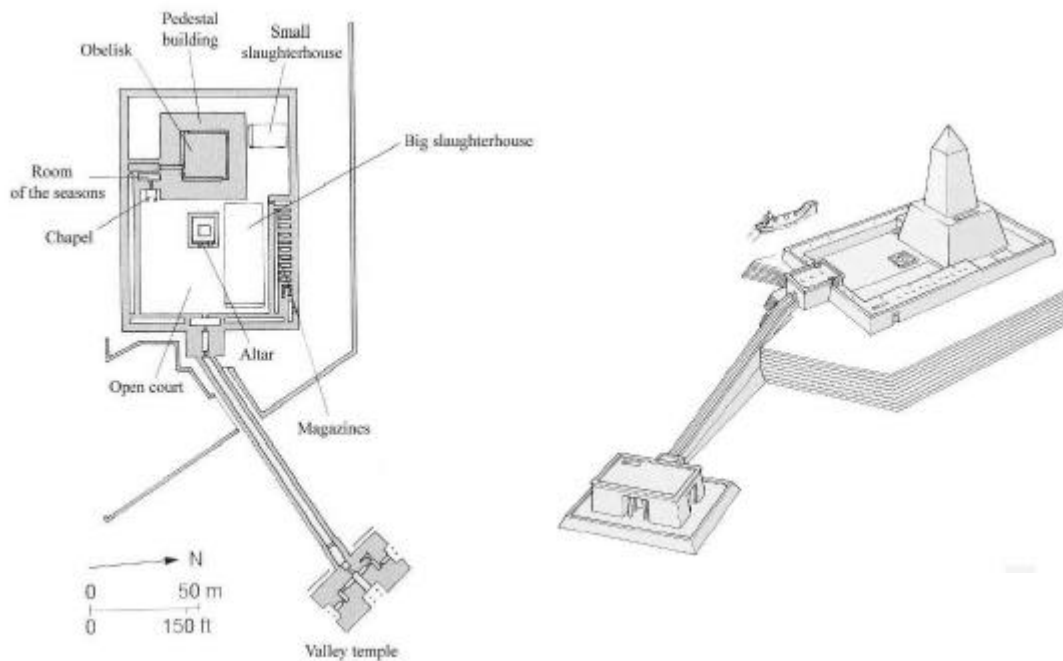
¹⁸ Cervello Autuori J., "Back to the Mastaba Tombs of the First Dynasty at Saqqara. Officials or Kings?", in Pirelli R. (eds.), *Egyptological Essays on State and Society*, Serie Egittologica 2, Napoli 2002, pp. 27-61

¹⁹ Kaiser W., *MDAIK* 14 (1956), p. 115, note 1, and Abb. 1.

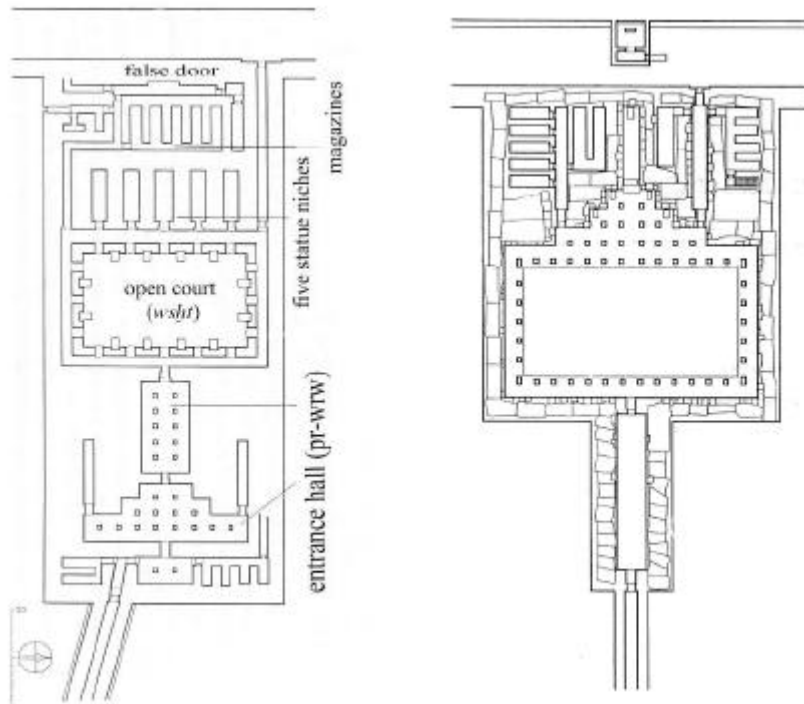
²⁰ Barta W., *Die Bedeutung der Pyramidentexte für den verstorbenen König*, MÄS 39, München-Berlin 1981



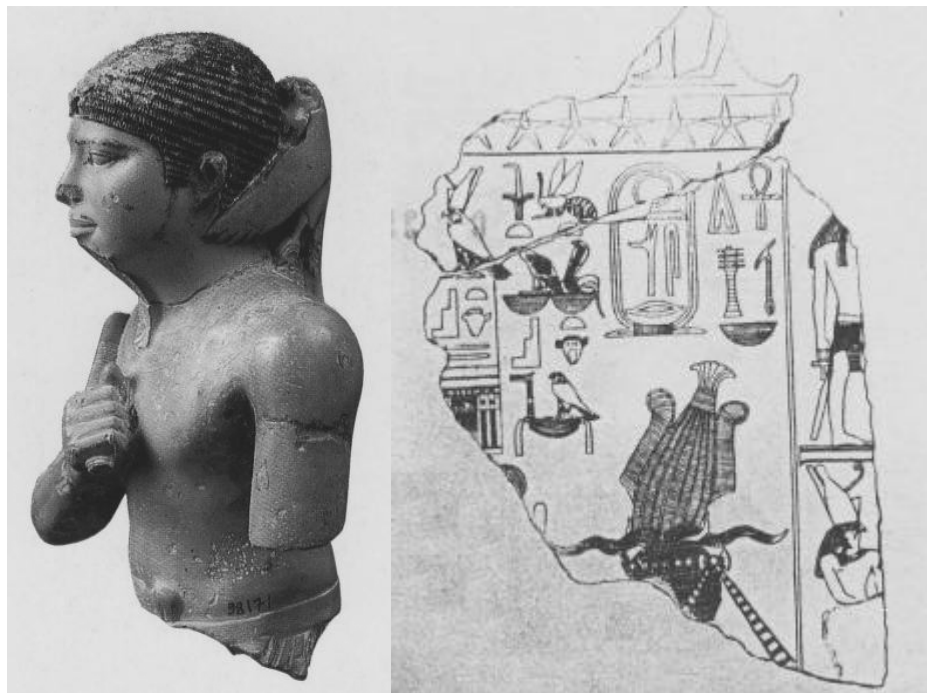
1. Four phases of Userkaf's sun temple. Plan drawn by Mark Lehner from the original by Ricke. (Right on the top) The early form of the hieroglyphic name of the temple including a mound surmounted by a perch.



2. Plan of Niuserra's sun temple (left) and his reconstruction (right). Plan drawn by Mark Lehner from the original by Borchartd.



3. Plan of the Upper temples of Khafra (left) and Menkaura (right). Drawing by Stadelmann from the original by Ricke.



4. Statue of Neferefra as Horus from his Upper temple (left). Niuserra represented as Ra on a fragment of the *sed* festival scenes from his sun temple (right).