

Sahure – Death and Life of a great Pharaoh

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Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung

Walltexts

The Royal Portrait in the Old Kingdom

Over the past decades, our knowledge of the royal portrait in the Old Kingdom has increased substantially due to spectacular finds and new interpretations. It was only recently proposed that the Great Sphinx of Giza represents the pharaoh Cheops. Scholars also proved that a small head in Munich actually portrays the same ruler – and thus the builder of the largest pyramids in Egypt.

The reliefs depict the pharaoh in idealized fashion. He can be recognized as a king by such features as his height, his powerful tread and his throne, and attributes such as the nemes headdress, crown, loincloth and flail. The art of the Old Kingdom makes consistent use of stringently formalized elements. A certain specific inscription is always employed to identify the same person or action. Threedimensional statues of the sovereign, however, represent a striking exception to this rule: here the pharaoh's faces are carefully worked and possess numerous individual traits.

Statues depicting a kneeling pharaoh show him making a sacrifice to the gods. When he sits on his throne, he is in the act of receiving offerings himself. The depiction of a standing pharaoh is a direct reference to his supremacy.

The Splendid Pyramid Complex of Pharaoh Sahure

The funerary complex of a pharaoh consists of four elements and can extend in length to as much as one kilometre. The pyramid itself – a structure of extraordinary geometrical purity and massive dimensions – is the pharaoh's actual burial place.

Yet it is only the last in a succession of magnificent edifices. The survivors experienced the spacious, palatial settings of the valley temple, causeway, mortuary temple and sanctuary during the burial rites. The funeral procession travelled to the complex in ceremonial boats by way of Nile canals and landed at the splendid valley temple, then proceeded along the extremely elongated causeway to the solemn atmosphere of the mortuary temple. The path ended at – and culminated in – the false door facing the pyramid.

The most beautiful and luxuriant pyramid complex is that of Sahure, second pharaoh of the Fifth Dynasty. Built in around 2500 BC, the mighty ensemble was excavated in 1907 by Ludwig Borchardt, discoverer of the Nefertiti. In keeping with the law, the unexpectedly abundant finds were divided between Egypt and Germany. Many of the stone plates of the relief decoration originally covering ten thousand square metres – one of the largest stone picture books known to man – entered the collections of Berlin, Frankfurt and other German cities.

The Westcar Papyrus Sahure and Khufus

Hundreds of pharaohs ruled the land on the Nile over the course of three millennia. Many of them have sunk into oblivion, but not Sahure. His mortuary temple remained in use for two thousand years. The elegant and inventive imagery of the reliefs throughout the pyramid complex was meticulously copied. Even today, remnants of horizontal and vertical black lines testify to this circumstance: they were applied to the reliefs by the copyists to aid them in their work.

Sahure's impact is also reflected in Egyptian tales of marvels performed by priests and magicians. A famous papyrus of the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1600 BC), named after its discoverer Westcar, tells of a prophecy revealed to Pharaoh Cheops. The seer Dedi foretells that an immortal woman bearing the name Rudeddet will be received by the sun god Re. Rudeddet and Re will bring forth triplets: three sons of the sun, who will succeed Cheops as king. They are Userkaf, Sahure and Neferirkare.

The Sun Temple of Niuserre

On the desert's periphery – in the immediate vicinity of the pharaonic graves – huge temples were erected in the Fifth Dynasty in honour of the sun god. From written sources we learn that Sahure likewise had a sun temple built. To this day, the complex has not been found.

In 1898-1901, Ludwig Borchardt and Heinrich Schäfer researched the sun temple of Sahure's successor Niuserre. Its striking architectural forms resemble the pyramid complex concept. An open causeway led to a large courtyard which was dominated by a mighty alabaster altar, and above all by a heavy obelisk placed on a frustum. Here again, the interiors of the corridors and chapels are decorated with pictures in stone. The themes addressed by this sophisticated pictorial language, however, are new. On the one hand, the sed festival – celebrated in confirmation of the king's power – is described in great detail. On the other hand, the Egyptian seasons are represented in lively images of nature.

Mimi and Ludwig Borchardt

Two people with a very close personal relationship to one another advanced research on ancient Egypt to an exceptional degree. Ludwig Borchardt of Berlin (1863 – 1939) had been commissioned by the emperor to vitalize German Egyptology. England and France had already been successful in this field, and the German empire wanted to enter the competition.

Emilie Cohen (1877 – 1948) of Frankfurt met Ludwig Borchardt in the land of the Pharaohs. The couple married in Frankfurt, but lived in Cairo and at the excavation camps. Numerous journeys brought them back to Germany. Ludwig was also a frequent visitor to Frankfurt, where he informed the town society of the latest results of Egyptological research. Mimi's mother Ida Cohen, née Kuhn, came from a wealthy American family of bankers. When the first building of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut was purchased, the Cohen family supported the undertaking financially.

Ludwig's merits in the field of scholarship are unusually numerous. He carried out his first excavations in Abusir; from 1912 onward he would work in Tel el-Amarna. His most wellknown find is the polychrome bust of Nefertiti. The pyramid complex of Sahure, however, represents the most prominent structural ensemble to have been excavated by Borchardt in the course of his career.