CHAPTER 12

The Dawn of Osiris and the Dusk of the Sun-Temples: Religious History at the End of the Fifth Dynasty

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Abstract

In this paper, I wish to focus on the main religious developments that took place at the end of the Fifth Dynasty, when solar temples were no longer built, the religious center at Heliopolis made its hesitant first steps, and Pyramid Texts were inscribed on pyramid walls. I shall argue that all three phenomena were related. The rising cult of Osiris, and the identification of the dead king with him, brought an end to the construction of sun temples. Subsequently, the solar cult was established in Heliopolis and the Ennead was invented as a means to accommodate the newly introduced Osiris. The first part of my paper discusses sun-temples, the reason for their construction and, especially, the religious difference between the sun-temples and the pyramids. The second part is dedicated to Osiris and his role in the religious history of the time.

Part One: Sun-Temples and Pyramids

The story of the Fifth Dynasty begins with Queen Ḫnt-kꜢw.s I, who was probably a descendant of the Fourth Dynasty and gave birth to the first king or kings of the Fifth Dynasty. One of the phenomena most associated with the rise of the Fifth Dynasty is the construction of sun-temples, in addition to pyramids, by its first six monarchs. Thus far, only two of the six known sun-temples

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* This paper is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend Dr. Terence DuQuesne, who kindly read an earlier version of this paper, and made numerous comments. May he travel well on the beautiful roads of the West. Needless to say, I alone am responsible for this paper’s shortcomings and for the views expressed in it.

have been located and excavated, namely, Userkaf’s sun-temple in Abusir and the better preserved Nyuserre’s sun-temple in Abu-Gurab, north of Abusir. The excavations revealed a general plan very similar to that of the pyramids, and both the archaeological and textual evidence indicate close administrative and religious contacts between the two institutions. An important source of information concerning the meaning and use of the sun-temples is their decorative plan. Two themes were used in the decoration of the temple at Abu-Gurab: natural scenes depicting the seasons of the Egyptian year, decorating the “Room of Seasons,” and a series of reliefs depicting the king in his Sed-Festival. Unfortunately, the decorations in Userkaf’s sun-temple are very fragmentary.

An intriguing issue in the study of sun-temples is their sudden appearance at the beginning of the Fifth Dynasty, and their surprising disappearance less than one hundred years later. Why were they built and what was the reason behind their decline? Many scholars have dealt with these questions and offered various interpretations. With reference to the Sed-Festival scenes, Werner Kaiser pointed out that the sun-temples were built in the early years of their builders’ reigns. Hence, according to Kaiser, it is unlikely that the temples were built for the actual earthly celebration of the Sed-Festival. Taking into account the location of the sun-temples near the pyramids, as well as their close economic relations with the pyramids, he concluded that the temples were built for the celebration of Sed-Festivals of the dead king. Erich Winter, following Kaiser, argued that the sun-temples played an important role in the worship of the dead king as the father of the living king.

However, in the last few years several scholars have questioned the identification of sun-temples as funerary monuments. On the basis of the decoration and the architecture of Nyuserre’s sun-temple, Andrzej Ćwiek argued that the Sed-Festival and the Room of Seasons reflect two different concepts: the transformation and renewal of the royal power on the one hand, and nourishment and supply, on the other. He adds that the sun-temple functioned as a medium for the king to communicate with the sun god, during the king’s life and after

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2 On this topic, see most recently Vymazalová, “The economic connection.” On the transport of offerings from the sun-temple of Neferirkare to his pyramid by boat twice a day, see Posener-Kriéger, Les archives du temple funéraire de Néferirkarê-Kakaï 11, 519–20. For the archive see Posener-Kriéger and Cenival, The Abusir Papyri. On the prosopography of the priests in the sun-temples, see Nuzzolo, “The Vth Dynasty Sun Temples Personnel.”
