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FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE KHENTKAUS PROBLEM

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In a recent edition of *Discussions in Egyptology* 36 (1996), pp.123 - 128, Dr Jaromír Málek most generously took the time to review my recent publication, *ABUSIR III. The Pyramid Complex of Khentkaus, Praha 1995*. It is indeed a privilege to have had this book reviewed by such a distinguished scholar, whose work on *The Topographical Bibliography*, and whose knowledge of Old Kingdom history in particular is literally encyclopaedic. Jaromír Málek's review was characteristically stimulating and thought-provoking, especially in the suggestions he made in the second half of the review, so I am tempted to take up discussion once more about this intriguing and enigmatic subject matter, for it would appear that there are some areas where the material has been imperfectly understood.

In his review of the chapter entitled *Conclusions*, Jaromír Málek has made an apt observation about my final remark on the Khentkaus material - a suggestion only, as it was expressed in the book. Regarding this, I said that the interpretation of the queen's title, *mwt nswt bity nswt bity*, might well have been an intentional ambiguity, suggesting that she indeed held the powers of a king while yet being the mother of two kings. If, as some of us suspect, Khentkaus I had in fact gained her prestige during a regency for Thamphthis, this ambiguous title might have received its ultimate expression during the reign of her second son (possibly King Neferirkare, for it seems that it might have been in his time that the final form of her mortuary monument was given shape) ¹.

For Dr Málek to refer to my suggestion as having been made in "Solomon-like fashion" is very complimentary, but it is also emphatically correct, for the answer to the Khentkaus Problem has occupied the minds of many of us for decades, and only the wisdom of Solomon might divine, under the available evidence, the answer to that problem of whether or not she had been a ruler. The second Khentkaus presents a similar dilemma because she appears to carry similar titles. The evidence has produced a multitude of problems concerned with the queens, in particular, the incomplete and contradictory nature of the evidence concerning their titles.

The Khentkaus Problem is like a chessboard on which various games have been played. Like all games, the results have depended on the specific field of interests of the players, and no lesser lights than, for example, Altenmüller, Borchardt, Grdseloff, Hassan and Junker have all exercised their powers on this perplexing material where the evidence can be interpreted in more than one way. Then, too, the permutations of the games have been complex and varied. It was precisely for this reason that the decision was made to permit Dr Peter Jánosi's individual conclusion regarding the architectural evidence to stand, even though the author sees exactly the same material in a slightly different way, and it may be appropriate here to clarify a point made by Dr Málek in regard to this.

Járomír Málek has noticed a very subtle but not unimportant discrepancy between my dating (*Khentkaus*, p. 38) of the earliest phase of the temple of Khentkaus II and that of Peter Jánosi (*Khentkaus*, p. 150). The subtlety of the problem lies in the origin of the foundation platform, which consists of fragments of stone in a bed of sand. The temple built on this platform dates for certain to the time of Niuserre, but the question remains:

was the platform for this temple built in the time of Neferirkare or of Niuserre? There is no direct evidence as to the date of this platform within the platform itself. However, judging from the neighbouring pyramid complexes of Raneferef and Neferirkare, the temple's foundation platform was not built simultaneously with the foundation of the pyramid, but was added later (after the king's death and during the construction of his mortuary temple). I am inclined to believe that in the case of Khentkaus II as well, the temple foundation platform was added later, under Niuserre. Irrespective of the date of this platform, the limestone temple itself (LST I and LST II) was constructed under Niuserre, and in that important conclusion Jánosi and I are in complete agreement (see *Khentkaus*, p.151).

A change made in the pyramid owner's title from *hmt n'swt* to *mwt n'swt* (Graffito No. 13, *Khentkaus*, p.47) clearly indicates that - at some time, probably just after the accession of Niuserre - the queen's son² had taken over the construction of the still uncased pyramid core of his mother. The eastern face of the pyramid shows that its casing must have been built together with the temple. This categorically demonstrates that the first stage of the limestone construction of the temple (LST I) could not have belonged to the time of Neferirkare.

With regard to Jaromír Málek's summary (*DE* 36, 125) of my final chapter, some of the observations present an inaccurate view of my opinions. I did not state that Khentkaus I was the mother of Thamphthis, but that she might have held a regency on his behalf (*Khentkaus*, p.177). (There is no evidence indicating that she might have been his mother.) Likewise, I did not say that Khentkaus II acted as a regent for Raneferef in his infancy:

I said instead that the "situation is also nebulous" (*loc. cit.*), and that "We suspect from his statuary that the ephemeral Raneferef was still a youth", after which the question is asked, "Did he have a regent? Nothing in the evidence suggests this..." My opinion (as expressed in that book) could be briefly summarised as follows:

Judging by the archaeological evidence, including the horizontal stratigraphy of the site, Raneferef succeeded Neferirkare immediately. The indicative archaeological evidence suggests that the owners of the pyramids who built along the principal axis (the line intersecting the northwest corners of the pyramids of Sahure, Neferirkare and Raneferef) of the Abusir pyramid field, in all probability, followed each other without any major interruption. After Raneferef's death, things altered. It is also evident that the king must have died relatively still young. There is nothing in the so-far available evidence - including the as-yet unpublished material from the king's own tomb, and the neighbouring small pyramid, Lepsius no. XXIV - to show that he reigned more than three years, and this appears to be in agreement with the state in which he left his funerary monument, with only the lowest step of the core finished. (At this stage no more can be said because the excavation of the substructure of the pyramid has not yet been completed.) Judging from the known portraits of Raneferef, the king died in his early twenties at the most. The improvisations and changes made in his funerary complex by the following rulers - as seen from the archaeological viewpoint - came later.

Jaromír Málek's own suggestions about the state of affairs existing in regard to both queens really represents yet two more games played out upon the Khentkaus chessboard, and his projected genealogy (*DE 36, p. 127*) of the queens' families is a part of

that reconstruction. His suggestions mark another contribution to the debate on the Khentkaus Problem. There is much to discuss at this point, but this is not the appropriate place to do it. However, just a few points might be made.

I must first point out, in regard to this genealogy that there is no secure support for his claim that Khentkaus I was the wife of Menkaure: indeed, the evidence suggests otherwise. In the small cult area behind the valley temple of Menkaure (Hassan called it Khentkaus' "valley temple"), an offering tablet ³ was found with faint traces of inscription still discernible. (It would indeed be to our great advantage if infra-red or ultra-violet analysis could be made of this tablet at some future date.) Those signs visible to the naked eye permit us to read: "... *it.ś* ... *s3[t?] nswt* ... /// ...*kau*... together with the figure of a queen wearing a vulture cap. ⁴ This is a queen mother who must date to the mid-4th Dynasty or later. ⁵ Indeed, the figure drawn is similar to that on the door posts of Khentkaus I's complex not far from where this tablet was found, and it is clear from the archaeological context that this cult area was in some way connected with that queen. Only two queens with "kau" are known to us for the entire pharaonic record, Khentkaus I and Khentkaus II. Thus, there is every possibility that the woman represented on the offering tablet is Khentkaus I, for there is no evidence of Khentkaus II beyond the sphere of Abusir.

There was a direct access from this cult place into the intimate rooms of Menkaure's temple, and in Hassan's opinion ⁶, this doorway linked the cults of Menkaure and the owner of the cult rooms behind the valley temple. It seems that this was done to link the two cults - perhaps a daughter honouring her father in a most personal way. Should this be so, Khentkaus I is unlikely to be both daughter of Menkaure and also his wife.

For Dr Málek to suggest, however, that a satellite pyramid built for Khentkaus I in the pyramid cemetery of Menkaure should be abandoned in favour of commencing a new (and equally large and complex) tomb, LG 100, seems to beg the question: *Why go to that extra trouble, when finishing the alleged pyramid would be cheaper and simpler?* ⁷ Intriguing as it is, the Khentkaus Problem cannot be so simply resolved.

Thirdly, Jaromír Málek gives a genealogy in which Sahure and Neferirkare are sons of Khentkaus I, yet there is more likelihood that Sahure was the son of Userkaf and his purported queen, Neferheteps. ⁸ Furthermore, whilst as many as four sons of Sahure are known - including his eldest son, Netjerirenre - none of those sons has a name in any way similar to Shepseskare, making it rather difficult to place Shepseskare as a son of Sahure. (His name, indeed, has more affinity with that of either Shepseskaf or Userkaf.) I myself was tempted to ascribe the barely started pyramid, positioned between the pyramid of Sahure and the sun-sanctuary of Userkaf, to Shepseskare. ⁹ Shepseskare might well have been the son of Sahure, as Málek says, or he might have been the son of Shepseskaf, or of Userkaf or even Neferirkare - the possibilities are numerous, but all are speculative. We have no knowledge at present of his antecedents, and only the clarification of his chronological position might be able to help us here. Dr Málek has therefore kindly suggested that an article should be prepared by the Czech Institute of Egyptology on the interesting topic of Shepseskare's position in the Fifth Dynasty in regard to the archaeological finds at Abusir, and this will be done as soon as practical.

It is, however, rather strange to read Dr Málek's statement that "The main piece missing in the jigsaw puzzle is the relationship between Raneferef and Niuserre." (p.127). This

piece, or rather, these pieces - for such they are - have been found: the first is the Ghazouli Block ¹⁰ showing Khentkaus II as the mother of the eldest son, Prince Ranefer ¹¹ and wife of King Neferirkare. The second piece is a block ¹² featuring the head and titles of the queen as king's mother next to the name of King Niuserre. Both pieces were discussed in *Khentkaus*, p.170f. Since both kings Ranefer and Niuserre are acknowledged sons of Khentkaus II, they must have been siblings. Whilst (theoretically) there could be the faint possibility that Niuserre might have been the child of King Shepseskare, this does not seem at all likely, for one would then like to know why he finished off his alleged half-brother's tomb ¹³, when his purported father's tomb appears never to have been given substantial form. Such a scenario is inexplicable. Be that as it may, Niuserre could never have been the son of his brother, as Jaromír Málek has proposed on p.127 of his review article.

Khentkaus II has indeed been entitled as *mwt nswt bity nswt bity* (contra Málek's indecision about this - p.127 ult.). As the broken block already cited (200/A/78) clearly shows, the queen's incomplete title rests next to the incomplete serekh and cartouche of her son; the rest of her title can be seen on 314/A/78, although, as Jaromír Málek says elsewhere, this is one piece which theoretically might apply to either queen - if the first Khentkaus had been honoured at Abusir, a fact we cannot at present ascertain.

These, then, are the few amendments that I would like to append to Dr Jaromír Málek's review of my book. It only remains for me to reiterate that the review was both thoughtful and considerate, and raises no objections on my part. Rather, I merely felt that it would be both necessary and appropriate to

restate my opinions in regard to one or two sections, and to thank Dr Málek for not only taking the time to review my work, but for offering his own original contribution to what now should be called *the Problem of the Khentkaus Queens*.

NOTES

- 1 P.Jánosi, *Die Pyramidenanlagen der Königinnen (DÖAW XII, Wien 1996)*, 30 dates the 1st building phase of the tomb of Khentkaus I to either the late reign of Mycerinus or to the reign of the Queen s first born son (Userkaf - according to P.J.). The 2nd building stage is to be dated to the time of the Queen s second son (Neferirkare - according to P.J.).
- 2 Theoretically, some building activities in the pyramid complex of Khentkaus II cannot be excluded also during the short reign of Raneferef. However, there is no archaeological evidence for such an assumption.
- 3 S. Hassan, *Giza IV, Cairo 1939*, pl. XXVII C. In a recently published reexamination of the materials pertaining to Khentkaus I, including the tablet in question, M.Baud came to a conclusion that the Queen was not a King's wife (see *BIFAO* 96, 1996, 70).
- 4 It cannot be excluded that also Menkaure might be the person referred to by the ...k3w inscription.
- 5 V. Callender, *The Wives of the Egyptian Kings. Dyn. I-XVIII* (PhD Dissertation, Macquarie University, Sydney 1992). III, 87-99
- 6 V.Maragioglio, C.Rinaldi, *Architettura delle piramidi memfite VI - Text, Rapallo 1976*, 124 refused S. Hassan s hypothesis

that the ante-temple to the valley temple of Mycerinus was the valley temple of Khentkaus I. Be it as it may, the plan and orientation of the so-called funerary city of Khentkaus I seems to indicate the intention to bring the building as close as possible to the valley temple of Mycerinus.

- 7 P.Jánosi, *o.c.*, 21-30 and 128-135 gives details on the stratigraphy and chronology of those pyramids.
- 8 B.Grdseloff, in: *ASAE* 42, 1942, 69f.; V.Callender, *o.c.* III, 100-104
- 9 *ZÄS* 109, 1982, 75f.
- 10 P.Posener-Kriéger, *Les archives du temple funéraire de Neferirkare-Kakai* (*BdE* 65, Le Caire 1976), II, 531 fig. 34
- 11 For the variations in the name of the prince and the king, see M. Verner, in: *BIFAO* 85, 1985, 281-4.
- 12 *ZÄS* 107, 1980, 161 fig. 5
- 13 See M.Verner, *Forgotten Pharaohs, Lost Pyramids*. Praha 1994, 141-153.