Khufu’s expeditions and their implications for kingship and society

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Apart from the Great Pyramid Complex in Saqqara few buildings and artefacts relate directly to Khufu’s reign. Later descriptions and stories like the Westcar Papyrus (probably Middle Kingdom) and the writings of Herodotus (5th century BC) and Manetho (3rd century BC) were written many centuries after Khufu’s death and developed over time into distorted descriptions of a cruel and godless pharaoh. Since there are no contemporary sources, few details of his life are actually known.

One puzzle piece in Khufu’s life, however, is the recently discovered inscriptions of expeditions and mining activities of Khufu. These signs, sometimes not more than a cartouche or a simple text, can nonetheless give us important information about Khufu’s ambitions and ideas concerning his role as pharaoh, his relationship with the ‘enemies of Egypt’, the outside, and even social changes within Egypt.

Since the country had been united, there has been a steady increase not only in luxury objects, but also in building material. Especially latter was of pressing importance during the 4th dynasty because of an increased interest in monumental constructions. King Snofru, Khufu’s father built at least four pyramids (two in Dahshur, and one each in Meidum and Seila), for several other minor step pyramids there is no decisive attribution to Snofru although they might well fall into the reign of Snofru. Snofru therefore ventured into foreign countries to obtain building material, exotic goods, but also cattle and slaves. The Palermo Stone lists several of these events. Many of the routes to the necessary raw material were therefore already established during the reign of Snofru.

While Snofru sang his own praises with counts of ‘subdued’ and ‘smitten’ barbarian tribes of the desert or having accessed – or in other words stolen- their cattle, the texts of Khufu’s expeditions were much subtler. His relations with the dessert tribes, but also to neighbouring populations on the

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1 Herodotus, Histories 2,124 ff, http://textual.net/access.gutenberg/1/Herodotus.
Arabian Peninsula were not based on military campaigns to take by force what he desired, but were much more based on trade and exchange. While Snofru was a warrior, Khufu was a diplomat.

But let us first have a look at the textual and archaeological evidence from Khufu’s expeditions:

1. Maghára, Sinai

Maghára was a turquoise mining site about 10 km south of Serâbît el-Châdim. It was already exploited from the 3rd Dynasty onwards. King Sekhemhet is shown wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt and clubbing a nomad. King Snofru is depicted with the feather crown of Horus, ‘subduing the foreign lands’. Khufu, too, is depicted clubbing a nomad (iwn-wt) but, and this is an extraordinary exception, this happens in the presence of the god Thoth. Since the Semitic moon god Sin was equated with Thoth he can be considered as the local god. The pharaoh represented in front of Thoth and acting in accordance with the locally worshipped god conveys a completely different impression. Here the pharaoh is acting in accordance with the Sinai’s god and thus within the laws of the local residents.

2. Hatnub

Hatnub was the calcite alabaster (‘Egyptian’ alabaster) quarry of Khufu, located just one kilometre south-east of Tell el-Armana. His presence is known from an inscription in quarry zone P and constitutes the oldest inscription in Hatnub. At least the Old Kingdom settlement pattern with an obvious lack of any protective measures suggests a low level of concern regarding attacks from the desert.

3. Gebel el-Asr

Gebel el-Asr was a diorite gabbro and anorthosite gneiss quarry and is situated 65 km north-west of Abu Simbel, near Tushka. At the east end of the quarry two stelae of Khufu have

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been found\(^7\). The material was used for funerary vessels and statues during the Predynastic and Old Kingdom.

4. Gold from the Eastern Desert

Only few gold mining sites to the east of Qena, Quft, and Edfu are known from the Old Kingdom\(^8\). According to expedition reports from the Old kingdom gold was imported from Nubia. The first known military campaign only happened during the reign of Senwosret I at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. Klemm et al. even argue that, based on the analyses of mining tools, the workforce consisted of local ethnic groups\(^9\) rather than Egyptians. This suggests that the Egyptians were rather involved in trade than mining itself.

5. Dakhla Oasis

Dakhla was of special importance since it was a vivid trading centre where Libyans and Nubian herder nomads frequented. It was also a stop-over for expeditions to the Gilf Kebir, Kufra, and Nubia, as mentioned e. g. in the tomb inscription of Herchuf from the 6th Dynasty, as well as the Chad region and Northern Sudan.

a) There had been several expeditions to the Dakhla area in the Eastern Sahara during the reign of King Khufu. In the 24th year of his reign (year 12 of the cattle count) an expedition under the command of Bbj went to the Dakhla oasis to recruit men and obtain \(mf3t\) powder\(^10\). We do not know exactly what \(mf3t\) powder was, but in a later inscription (see 5.b) it is elaborated that it was transported in bags (\(mjnw\)) and that it was used for \(zh3\), i.e. writing and painting. Since Dakhla Oasis is known for its rich iron oxides, manganese veins, and its varied shales, it is assumed that \(mf3t\) consisted of one of these earth pigments.

b) In year 13 of the royal cattle count (presumably year 25 or 26 of Khufu’s reign, Jji-mrjj and Bbj went again to obtain \(mf3t\) from the Dakhla Oasis. The rock inscriptions are of

special importance, since Khufu’s cartouche is depicted together with the god of the oases, Igai\textsuperscript{11}. Again we have the unusual combination of Khufu and a local god.

6. Khufu 01/1, Abu Ballas Trail

The site Khufu 01/1 has been excavated by Kuper\textsuperscript{12} since 2002. On two locations the Horus name, as well as the birth name of Khufu were engraved onto the rock alongside a later inscription of his son Djedefre (the so-called ‘water mountain’ cartouche). Several other inscriptions of this time period belong to masons (\textit{hrtj-ntr}), translators (\textit{\textbf{3}}\textit{w}), scouts of Upper and Lower Egypt as well as the further south (\textit{nw.w}), watchmen (\textit{z3wtj}), and the overseer of stone cutters (\textit{hrtjw}) Nfr. The presence of translators points to a close interaction with local inhabitants. That this probably happened peacefully is indicated by the company of only a couple of watchmen but without any military involved.

7. Gebel el-Silsilla

These sandstone quarries were at a relative distant and remote area, yet they had significant cult installations similar to Hatnub. The different shrines, stone alignments, and cairns reflect primarily cults of local association and reflect an ethnically and racially mixed group of workers\textsuperscript{13}.

8. Widan el-Faras, Fayum area

Although we don’t have any inscriptions of Khufu’s presence in Widan el-Faras, we can deduce that Khufu used the basalt quarry in Widan el-Faras from archaeological evidence. Basalt has for example been used as flooring of Khufu’s upper temple, the causeway, and the valley temple. It is estimated that Khufu needed ca. 1000 m\textsuperscript{3} of basalt\textsuperscript{14}. Since the nearest

source of basalt in Abu Roash, north of Giza, has not been worked until modern times, the closest source to obtain basalt would have been the Fayum\textsuperscript{15}.

Already under King Djoser extensive transformations in the social structure of Egypt took place like the arrangement of productive units into nomes\textsuperscript{16}.

How important expeditions and trading connections were in the Old Kingdom can be seen from the fact that the title \textit{wr m33.w} (prospector for quarries) soon became the title of the high priest of Iunu (Heliopolis)\textsuperscript{17}. Iunu, being the starting point for expeditions into the Sinai Peninsula where copper and turquoise were acquired, gained immensely on influence. The change of the pyramid location to the opposite side of Iunu, fully visible from the sun temple, might very well have been connected to the growing influence of Iunu and its crucial position in the trading network. To secure the sovereignty over these important junctions and to not be overridden on decisive power, Khufu put family members in higher positions. Thus his son Rahotep became high priest of Re in Iunu; Kanefer, Khufu’s half-brother, was already second vizier under Snofru and continued his position under Khufu. Khufu’s nephew Hemiunu he held the title of ‘greatest of the five of the House of Thoth’, and Minchaef, another son of Khufu, was Vizier and Chief Justice. Thus Khufu claimed the absolute power; he became the embodiment of the god himself\textsuperscript{18}; he became Re and his sons became the sons of Re.

As we have seen, Khufu not only continued the social and religious changes initiated by his father, but moreover followed a completely different approach. This is seen in much more diplomatic relationships with the local population, but also in a religious shift towards the cultic centre of Heliopolis and a veneration of Re/pharaoh. Archaeological and textual evidence of expeditions and quarry activities can add immensely to studying the social history and dynamics of the early 4\textsuperscript{th} Dynasty. This is especially helpful since little contemporary information on King Khufu exists.

\textsuperscript{17} Helck, W. 1975. \textit{Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Alten Ägypten im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend vor Chr.}, Leiden/Köln, 127.