

A New Angle on Sneferu's Pyramids

By David A. Cintron

The most prolific pyramid builder in Egyptian history was King Sneferu, the first king of the fourth dynasty and only the second king known to have built a pyramid that still stands today. Even more, at 3.8 million cubic meters the volume of his monuments exceeds that of his son and builder of the Great Pyramid, Khufu, by 42%. And in fact we are not certain that we have counted all of the pyramids that Sneferu built. Currently attributed to Sneferu are the step pyramid at Meidum, the Red Pyramid at Dahshur, the Bent pyramid with its small ka-pyramid at Dahshur, and at least one of the many provincial pyramid monuments found along the length of the Nile.

In spite of all of Sneferu's pyramid building, he could still only be buried in one of them. It appears that Sneferu's final resting place was the Red Pyramid of the Dahshur complex. But if this is so, why did he build so many?

Ahmed Fakhry, the first to conduct an investigation of the Dahshur complex using modern methodology in the early 1950's, proposed this story. Because the pyramid architects had only built step pyramids up until that time, the southern pyramid was begun at too steep of an angle to support its own weight. After the pyramid was begun it was found that the sharp angle was unsafe and causing cracks within the structure, so the angle was reduced and the pyramid completed. But it was too late, the damage was done, and so the southern pyramid was left behind and the northern pyramid was designed with a shallower angle and was completed to satisfaction.¹

Unfortunately we have no narrative history for this period. No records have survived from the fourth dynasty stating what the original intention was for what we now call the Bent pyramid, and I am sure Fakhry did not intend for his story to be repeated in popular literature without reference to its source as the invention of a modern archaeologist. It is just as plausible that the pyramid complex of Dahshur was designed as a unified whole from the beginning as a dual pyramid necropolis and that this design was carried out exactly as intended to Sneferu's satisfaction.

This is not a new idea. The best evidence that we have for this is that the pyramids both stand complete today. If the Bent pyramid turned out to be an unsatisfactory monument, why was it finished complete with casing stones, enclosure wall, ka-pyramid, valley temple and pyramid temples for itself and its ka-pyramid? It has been suggested that the reason this would have been done is that a king could not leave such a monument incomplete.² Even though the Red Pyramid is considered the burial place of Sneferu, no valley temple has yet been found for it, yet the Step pyramid has one. Clearly there is more to this story.

The only written records we have for this time period even approaching the narrative come in the form of the Palermo Stone. Actually seven fragments of what may have once been a single monument, the Palermo Stone contains year-by-year records of every king beginning with a list of predynastic rulers and ending with the Neferirkara of the fifth Dynasty. The records kept

are not the newsworthy history we are used to reading, but records of accomplishments meaningful only to the royal autobiography.

The Palermo Stone contains three fragments that contain references to the reign of Sneferu. These include one section on the main fragment that has three-year compartments in a row (PS register VI compartments 2, 3, and 4) that are all very legible. Compartments 1 and 5 show only small fragments. Compartment 2 comes from the year before the 7th occasion of the census, which occurs in compartment 3, and compartment 4 is marked as the year of the 8th occasion of the census.

In “Royal Annals of Ancient Egypt” Dr. Wilkinson translates compartment 2 as containing this passage ³:

qd inb rsi t3-mhw hwwt-Snfrw
Sneferu (his thirteenth year?) ...
building the wall of the south and north-land (called) ‘the Mansions of Sneferu’

Wilkinson states that the buildings referred to in this passage are not known. Could they be associated with his pyramids? Wilkinson translates PS rVI.4 with this passage:

s’h’ q(3i)-hdt Snfrw tp(i)-r sbht rsi (q3i)-dsrt Snfru tp(i)-r sbht mhtt
Sneferu (his fifteenth year?) ...
erecting (the building) ‘Sneferu high of the white crown’
(at) the base? of the southern gateway, (and the building)
‘Sneferu (high of) the red crown’ (at) the base? of the northern gateway

Wilkinson also states (p. 144) that “the expression *tp-r(3)* can be used to denote the base of a triangle or the radius of a circle”, citing Erman and Grapow (eds) 1931:27. This would alter the translation to:

erecting (the building) ‘Sneferu high of the white crown’
(at) the base? of the southern triangle, (and the building)
‘Sneferu (high of) the red crown’ (at) the base? of the northern triangle

It is possible that these two annals refer first to the initial construction of the enclosure walls of his pyramid city, and then to the beginning of construction of the actual pyramids?

Going back to the census records we find that according to the records we have every king before Sneferu held the census only every other year. The 8th occasion of the census was the first time this had been done two years in a row.

Stadelmann proposes that the reason for holding the census in two consecutive years is obvious. That Sneferu was raising money to pay for the commencement of construction on a new pyramid.⁴

The only reference we have to the Dahshur complex from ancient times is a tax decree of Pepi I from the 6th dynasty. This refers to Sneferu’s pyramid town as a dual pyramid town:

Sneferu's son and grandson and builders of the two largest pyramids ever, these two respectively cranked out an approximate 112,600 m³ and 84,000 m³ annually. Stadelmann computes that at 80,000 m³ per year the construction of the base of the Bent Pyramid would have taken 11 years beginning with the 8th occasion of the census in Sneferu's 15th year and ending with the beginning of construction of the Red Pyramid on the 15th occasion of the census in Sneferu's 24th year. He then computes that at 100,000 m³ per year Sneferu could have completed the upper portion of the Bent Pyramid, built the Red Pyramid and changed the pyramid at Meidum from a step pyramid to a true pyramid in approximately 22 to 24 years beginning with the 15th occasion of the census in his 24th year and ending with the 24th occasion of the census in his 48th year. Contrarily, if Sneferu had reigned for only 24 years, he would have had to stack over 150,000 m³ of limestone every year to complete all of his pyramids.⁹

Regnal Year?	Occasion of the census	Source of the date
4 th year (2x2)	2 nd occasion	CF4 r.U.1
	census free year	CF4 r.U.2
	unknown – fragment	PS r.VI.1
	census free year	PS r.VI.2
14 th year (7x2)	7 th occasion	PS r.VI.3
15 th year 18 th year (per WS Smith)	8 th occasion	PS r.VI.4
	unknown – fragment	PS r.VI.5
28 th year (per Stadelmann)	15 th occasion	Red Pyramid, SW cornerstone
28 th year (per Stadelmann)	15 th occasion (II shemu 14)	Red Pyramid, 12 th course (9m)
30 th year (per Stadelmann)	16 th occasion	Red Pyramid (III akhet 30) 16-17 th course (12m)
	16 th occasion	Maidum
23 rd year (per WS Smith)	17 th occasion	Maidum
	18 th occasion	Maidum
	census free year	Maidum
	23 rd occasion	Maidum
42 nd year (per Stadelmann)	24 th occasion (peret)	Red Pyramid
42 nd year (per Stadelmann)	24 th occasion (1 akhet)	Red Pyramid
unknown	unknown – fragment	LF r.L.1
unknown	4 th running of the Apis	CF r.M.1

Table 1. Date records from Sneferu's reign

One thing is certain, and that is that Sneferu was the most prolific pyramid builder in history, and one way or another he was able to accomplish what he set out to do. One question remains, and that is, if Sneferu did build a dual pyramid complex, then why?

It has been long known that the philosophy of Egypt leaned heavily on their concept of the dual nature of the world. This is nowhere more evident as in the common phrase, “as above,

so below”. Egypt was a dual kingdom, with Lower Egypt in the North and Upper Egypt in the South. The king was the dual king, the *nsw-bty*, and the *edo-wdjt* god-king of the people. All of the rulers of the first dynasty had dual monuments at Abydos, with an underground mound-burial towards the west and a temple enclosure in the east, and possibly a mastaba at Saqqara (it is unknown whether these first dynasty mastabas belonged to kings or to other royalty). Very few second and third dynasty burial monuments have survived so the time track of their development is not clear. Sneferu being the first king of the fourth dynasty immediately follows the last king of the third dynasty, his father Huni.

This brings up another question in regard to the break in dynastic count. It is thought that Manetho changed dynasties just as often for a break in religious practice as in familial continuity. Sneferu certainly did begin an unprecedented tradition of monumental construction. Could it be that this tremendous increase in materialism in funerary monument construction marked a drastic change in beliefs? Evidence for this is indicated by what seems to be a healthy dose of Egyptian symbolism built into the Dahshur complex.

Sneferu’s northern pyramid was built only 500 meters east of a deposit of red limestone that was used to build the core of the “Red” pyramid. It would seem that the selection of the Dahshur location might have been based solely on access to this deposit so Sneferu could build a red pyramid on the north end of his complex to symbolize his status as wearer of the Red Crown of Lower Egypt. The “Bent” pyramid, built of common white limestone, had a white core and was built on the south end of the complex symbolizing Sneferu’s status as wearer of the White Crown of Upper Egypt. The two pyramids seem to have been built with common design features as well. The slope of the upper section of the Bent pyramid is virtually equal to the slope of the Red pyramid, differing by less than one degree. Both pyramids are also aligned, with the southern pyramid’s east wall and the northern pyramid’s west wall along a common axis.

Another feature that may have significance that cannot now be proven is the Bent pyramid with its extra sides. It has been suggested that the nine faces of this pyramid, including the bottom face, were meant to represent the nine gods of the Heliopolitan Ennead. However in light of the likely symbolism of this pyramid as a monument of Upper Egypt, it is more probable that the eight exposed faces represent the eight gods of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad. Unfortunately there is not yet any clear attestation of this entity in the Old Kingdom. On the other hand there is circumstantial evidence that an Old Kingdom version of the Ogdoad did exist. It is known that Hermopolis was founded at some time during the Old Kingdom and its Egyptian name, *hnmw*, means city of the Eight. Further, there is a reference to four of the same gods as appear in the Middle Kingdom Ogdoad, and four other gods in the same Utterance in Pyramid Text 301.

*“You have your offering-bread, O Niu and Nenet ...
You have your offering-bread, O Amun and Amaunet ...
You have your offering-bread, O Atum and Ruti ...
O Shu and Tefenet who made the gods ...”*¹⁰

The symbolism behind the presence of three chambers in each pyramid, a northern entrance to each and an extra entrance to the west in the southern pyramid may never be known. It is certainly a mystery as to why the trouble would be taken to build chambers in a cenotaph the

size of the southern pyramid. The quantity of funerary monuments for early dynastic rulers would indicate that the presence of the king's physical body in the tomb was not a prerequisite for the construction of living space and that it was far more important that the purpose of the monument be to facilitate the activity of the spirit of the king after death.

In Sneferu's case, the presence of the western entrance in the older pyramid indicates homage to a fading belief in resurrection by travel to the west, and its absence from the northern pyramid implies a change towards belief in resurrection solely through travel to the dark place in the zenith of the night sky where the gods live. Perhaps Sneferu wished to rise to a truly dual kingship in the afterlife, leaving his northern pyramid to meet the rising sun, and returning to his southern pyramid from the western horizon at night.

Footnotes

1. Fakhry, Ahmed. The Southern Pyramid of Sneferu, ASAE 51 (1951).
2. Stadelmann, Rainer. Snofru und die Pyramiden von Meidum und Dahschur, MDAIK 36 (1980).
3. Wilkinson, Toby. Royal Annals of Ancient Egypt. London (2000)
4. Stadelmann. Snofru und die Pyramiden.
5. Sethe, Kurt. Urkunden des Alten Reichs I, pp.210-212, Leipzig (1903)
6. Gardiner, Alan H. The Royal Canon of Turin. Oxford (1959)
7. Faulkner, R.O. A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian. Oxford (1962)
8. Krauss, Rolf. The Length of Sneferu's Reign and How Long It Took to Build The Red Pyramid, JEA 82 (1996)
9. Stadelmann, Rainer. Beitrage zur Geschichte des Alten Reiches, MDAIK 43 (1987)
10. Faulkner, R.O. The Pyramid Texts, Vol 1, Oxford (1969)