Missing Royal Boat Graves at Abusir?
Burials of boats in the Old Kingdom pyramid complexes rank among a number of questions which have been debated for a long time but, so far, have not as yet had any satisfactory answers.¹ For example, it remains to be explained why such fundamental questions as the meaning of these boats (which might have changed in the course of time), the fluctuating number of boats buried in one pyramid complex, the absence of boat graves in some pyramid complexes, etc., have not been answered. This brief article does not strive to tackle all these complex problems. Rather, it seeks to deal with only one archaeological aspect of the boat graves concerning the royal cemetery at Abusir. Not surprisingly, an impetus for this reflection was provided by the Abusir papyri.

Among the papyri coming from Neferirkare’s mortuary temple archive there are two fragments (one of them, 31 A, is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo whereas the second one, 31 B, is in the British Museum in London) the texts of which directly refer to the funerary boats which had originally been part of Neferirkare’s pyramid complex.² The text on fragment B specifies that the boats were two and were called the South Boat and the North Boat. Moreover, the text also mentions the extent of damage revealed during the inspection of the South Boat.

The aforesaid text on fragment B resulted in a geophysical and archaeological exploration of the area on the southern side of Neferirkare’s pyramid which eventually was topped off with the discovery of the remains of the South Boat (Fig. 1.1).³ Originally, the boat had been placed in a boat-shaped structure built of mudbrick which was very probably roofed with wooden planks (Fig. 2). Unfortunately, the masonry of the boat-shaped structure had in the course of time decayed and largely collapsed over a rather simple boat of cedar wood about ten meters long, of which only tiny rotten fragments and an impression in the ground survived (Fig. 3). The east-west orientated South Boat lay precisely in the north-south axis of Neferirkare’s pyramid. Very probably, the North Boat was placed alongside the northern side of the king’s pyramid, symmetrical to the South Boat. However, the exploration of the latter boat was not carried out, due to the risk that any excavation in this place might disengage a massive layer of debris from the pyramid’s core. Judging by the size of the South Boat and its mudbrick case, there seems to be no doubt that Neferirkare’s funerary boat graves were built and buried under a time stress due to the king’s early death.

 Shortly after the discovery of Neferirkare’s South Boat, a pair of model boats, also made from cedar wood, were found in the adjacent pyramid complex of Neferefre (Fig. 1.2). Tenons in the prow and stern of the wooden hull indicate that Neferefre’s models were

¹ As for the most up-to-date attempt to sum up and assess the hitherto theories on the meaning of the boat graves in Old Kingdom royal funerary complexes, see T. El-Awady, Sahure – The Pyramid Causeway. History and Decoration Program in the Old Kingdom, Abusir XVI, Prague 2009 [= Sahure], pp. 1–264 and Pls 1–14.
³ M. Verner, Excavations at Abusir. Season 1978/79, ZAS 107, 1980, pp. 168f. and Fig. 11.
of the same type as Khufu’s boat (Fig. 4). The boat models – about three meters long – had been damaged by probably an accidental fire and were subsequently ritually buried and magically protected and sealed in one disused room in the central part of Neferefre’s mortuary temple. Doubtless, the models of the boats were considered an important part of Neferefre’s pyramid complex. Due to their size (they were too large to be manoeuvrable within the temple confines) they could have hardly played any role in the rituals and ceremonies which took place in the mortuary temple. Very probably, the models of boats were originally kept in a protected place in the pyramid complex (perhaps within two long magazines between the slaughterhouse and the south-east wing of the temple or, as the case might be, elsewhere in the pyramid courtyard?). These models must have represented

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4 Id., Funerary Boats of Neferirkare and Raneferef, [in:] U. Luft (Ed.), The Intellectual Heritage of Egypt. Studies presented to László Kákosy by friends and colleagues on the occasion of his 60th birthday, StudAeg XIV, Budapest 1992, pp. 592–594 and Fig. 5.

5 Not surprisingly, there is no mention of these boats in the papyri revealed in Neferefre’s mortuary temple, see P. Posener-Krieger, M. Verner, H. Vymazalová, The Pyramid Complex of Raneferef. The Papyrus Archive, Abusir X, Praha 2006.
a substitute for the full-sized boat graves, due to the fact that there had been no time in which to build their graves and bury them, due to the time stress under which the burial of the unexpectedly deceased king had to be arranged.

However, boat burials were not confined to kings only: they also occur in the tomb precincts of some queens and high officials. For instance, the place for a boat grave was also prepared in the mastaba of the vizier and titular king’s son, Ptahshepses, in Abusir as is clearly indicated by a large, boat-shaped room in the south-western part of the mastaba (Fig. 1.3).6 Unfortunately, there is no archaeological evidence that a boat (or, as the case might be, a pair of boats) was eventually buried in this room. Nevertheless, the existence of a boat-shaped room in the Ptahshepses mastaba shows how an important part of not only the royal but also a high-ranking official tomb the boat burial at that time in the Abusir cemetery was.

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Judging by the aforesaid evidence there is a not unimportant opportunity to identify and reveal burials of funerary boats in the remaining two royal tombs in Abusir namely, the pyramid complex of Sahure and the pyramid complex of Niuserre. As a matter of fact, both of these complexes have large parts that have remained unexplored after L. Borchardt’s excavations at the beginning of the twentieth century. As proved by the recent discovery of blocks from richly decorated walls of the causeway leading to Sahure’s pyramid, see Z. Hawass, M. Verner, Newly Discovered Blocks from the Causeway of Sahure, MDAIK 52, 1996, pp. 177–186, and El-Awady, Sahure, pp. 121ff.
the more regrettable because just these two complexes in the Abusir cemetery are the only ones that were completed.

In Sahure’s pyramid complex, L. Borchardt only unearthed the valley temple and the mortuary temple – including the cult pyramid – but the courtyard and the enclosure wall around the king’s pyramid were left unexplored. In the future, it would particularly be desirable to examine the central part of the southern (c. 13m broad) and northern (c. 14m broad) wings of Sahure’s pyramid courtyard under the pavement of which, as in Neferirkare’s pyramid courtyard, boats could have been buried (Fig. 1.4 and 5).

As in Sahure’s pyramid complex, also in Niuserre’s complex large portions of the pyramid courtyard were left unexplored, particularly around its western and northern wings. Fully unearthed was only the very narrow southern wing of the courtyard and a small part of the northern wing in front of the entrance to the pyramid. Obviously, if boat graves exist in Niuserre’s pyramid complex, due to the non-standard plan of this mortuary temple, they should be sought rather under the pavement of the western and northern wings of the pyramid courtyard (Fig. 1.6 and 7).

Only future archeological exploration will show whether the above presented suggestions are likely to be valid. Indeed, it would be strange to have a cemetery of one royal family with four pyramid complexes from which the boat graves in only two of the complexes would have been built. It is hard to believe that the burial customs within one royal family would have changed within the course of three generations – approximately only half a century.*

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8 L. BORCHARDT, Das Grabdenkmal des Königs S’-hu-re, WVDG 14/26, Leipzig 1910, pp. 67f. and plan on Bl. 16.
9 Ibid., Bl. 12 and 16.
10 Ibd., Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Ne-user-re, WVDG 7, Leipzig 1907, p. 96 and Bl. 28.

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