

THE JOURNAL OF
Egyptian
Archaeology

VOLUME 41
DECEMBER 1955

PUBLISHED BY
THE EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY

2 HINDE STREET, MANCHESTER SQUARE, LONDON, W. 1

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A NOTE ON THE RECENTLY DISCOVERED BOAT OF CHEOPS

By JAROSLAV ČERNÝ

THE discovery on May 26, 1954, of a boat alongside the southern side of the pyramid of Cheops with the probability of another buried immediately to the west was a surprise, not only because of the perfect state of preservation of one at least of these two boats, but also because they brought up to five the total number of boats placed in the vicinity of this pyramid, for, in his excavations east of the pyramid of Cheops, Selim Hassan had already found three cavities which, judging by their shape, once contained or were destined to contain boats, two along the east side of the pyramid, north and south of the mortuary temple situated against the centre of this side, and one parallel with the end of the causeway leading from the valley to this temple.¹ While we have thus obtained the same number of boats for Cheops as had been found at the pyramid of Chephren,² we once again face the problem of determining the character and purpose of these boats and explaining their number.

The first reports which were published in newspapers and illustrated magazines declared the newly found boat of Cheops to be solar, an explanation probably suggested by their fortunate discoverer,³ but soon voices could be heard insisting on the uncertainty of any guess made as to the nature of the boats before they had been completely cleared, studied, and published. Such caution is undoubtedly justified from the strictly scientific point of view. Pending the final publication, however, frequent reference to the boats is almost inevitable, and it therefore seems excusable to print, even at this early stage, a warning against any hasty acceptance of their solar character. The remarks which follow are essentially the result of considerations suggested to the present writer by a study of information then available, and submitted to a small circle of students at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, on March 14, 1955. They would have remained unprinted had not a small volume⁴ recently come to my notice which contains no longer mere unauthoritative views of journalists concerning the boats, but the opinions of a number of Egyptologists, most of them renowned for their special studies in Egyptian religion. As could only be expected, their opinions are reserved, though in the main they express doubts as to the solar nature of the two new boats.⁵ The present note is an attempt to justify my own doubts which had been reached

¹ Selim Hassan, *Excavations at Giza*, VI, Part I (1934-5), (Cairo, 1946), pp. 40 ff. and fig. 14.


² *Ibid.*, pp. 56 ff.

³ Evidently following Selim Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. xiv, who thinks 'that the boats orientated east-west, whether occurring singly or in pairs, are easily recognized as being solar-boats'. From his conclusions on p. 55 (point 3) it appears that he considered the boats directed north-south as solar-boats also.

⁴ *Les Grandes découvertes archéologiques de 1954, La Revue du Caire, Numéro spécial* (Cairo, 1955).



⁵ A mere possibility of the solar character of the boats is admitted by Stock (*loc. cit.* 97) and Ricke (p. 132);

quite independently, and to suggest an explanation which seems to agree with the facts so far known.

Before discussing the character of the boats buried round the pyramids, however, it seems worth while first to examine the position in its groove of the eastern and, so far, the only accessible one of the new pair, the blocking of the western one being still untouched so that nothing whatsoever is yet known about the boat which it presumably contains. The photographs taken through the breach effected in the blocking of the eastern boat show that its two ends were formed by wooden posts in the shape of a bundle of reed or papyrus flowers held together by rope indicated by several rings carved in the wood. The boat is therefore of a type frequently found in Egyptian representations and which is nothing else but an enlarged imitation in wood of a primitive reed or papyrus boat or raft. The bow and stern of such boats differed in so far as the prow-post protruded in a slight curve, while the stern-post first turned at a sharp angle towards the inside of the ship (i.e. in the direction of the movement of the ship) and only then curved gradually upwards, as is shown in the hieroglyphic sign  (P₃ in Gardiner's *Catalogue*).¹ One wooden model of this type is found among the sixteen boats of Queen Neith (Sixth Dynasty);² from the Middle Kingdom several are known, among them two of Meketrē,³ and four again come from the tomb of Tut'ankhamūn.⁴ It was Reisner who pointed out their funerary use,⁵ though boats of other types occasionally show one end or both shaped like a bunch of reed flowers. The sun-boats depicted in reliefs or wooden models show prows and sterns curved in a very similar way, though not always ending in bunches of reeds, but this is enough to show that they too have their origin in reed boats or rafts.⁶ The distinctive marks of sun-boats are, however, various symbolical objects on the deck and a curtain or mat hanging on the prow, but these all seem to derive from the royal ships of the earliest dynasties.⁷ Anyhow, no trace of their presence in the boat of Cheops has been reported.

The two end posts of Cheops's boat had been dismantled for lack of space in the groove and had been placed beside the body of the boat. The photographs taken in the direction of the eastern end of the ship⁸ show clearly that its post is only slightly curved; it is correct, therefore, to label this eastern end of the boat as the prow as has been done under the published photographs; consequently the boat faced east. The

sceptical are Lauer (p. 89), Kees (p. 102) and Vikentiev (p. 111 and especially p. 122); definitely against are Sauneron (pp. 105-6) and Mme Desroches-Noblecourt (p. 127), while Abubakr (p. 34) and Drioton (p. 74) are entirely non-committal.

¹ The hieroglyph P₂ shows approximately the same boat provided with a mast and a sail, but it faces in the wrong direction in the fount:  instead of .

² Jéquier, *Les Pyramides des reines Neit and Apouit*, p. 34, fig. 18, and pl. 33. They have been studied by J. Poujade, *Trois flotilles de la VI^{ème} dynastie des Pharaons* (Paris, 1948), pp. 7 ff. (I owe this reference to Caminos.)

³ Winlock, *Models of Daily Use in Ancient Egypt from the Tomb of Meketre at Thebes*, figs. 45-48, and 78-81 (see also p. 61).

⁴ Carter, *The Tomb of Tut'ankhamen*, III, p. 58 and pl. 61, A. The total number of Tut'ankhamūn's boat models was fourteen (op. cit., p. 56).

⁵ Reisner, *Models of Ships and Boats (CCG)*, pp. xxi ff. (Class V, Form I).

⁶ Op. cit., p. xxv (Type VI).

⁷ See the determinative of the expression for the royal progresses *šms-Ḥr* on the recto of the Palermo Stone.

⁸ *Les Grandes découvertes*, &c., figs. 27 and 30.

curve of the end-post on the opposite side is invisible on the photographs, and it will probably be some time before we hear whether it really has the expected sharp angle of a stern, and more time still before the blocking of the western boat is opened and the direction of this boat is determined. It seems, however, reasonable to expect that this latter boat will be found heading west.

Though there is nothing in the shape of the boat which would definitely preclude its being considered a solar boat, it is the numerical factor that makes such a conclusion unjustifiable. For sun-boats were at all periods thought to consist of two only, one for travel by day (*mcndt*) and one for the night journey (*msktt*), and nothing authorizes us

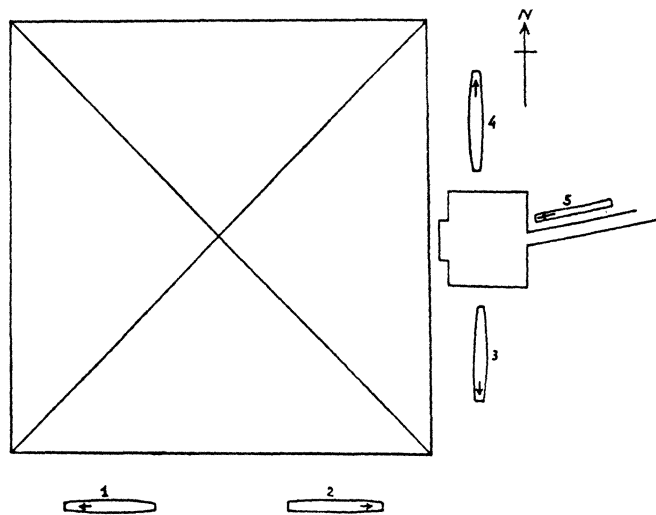


FIG. 1. Boats of Cheops.

(Adapted from Selim Hassan, *Excavations at Giza*, VI, Part I, p. 41, fig. 14.)

to increase their number to four (if we count only the boats along the southern and eastern side of Cheops's pyramid), or to five (if the boat beside the end of the causeway is included). Moreover, even if we suppose that the later belief that the king after his death joined the sun-god $R\bar{e}^c$ was fully developed at this early stage—though neither Cheops nor his successor Djedefr \bar{e}^c call themselves sons of $R\bar{e}^c$ —still it should be clear that it was quite unnecessary for the king to provide solar boats. He was not expected to bring the (or a) *mcndt* and *msktt* to $R\bar{e}^c$, because the sun-god had his two boats already, and the belief never went any farther than that the sun-god admitted the deceased to his two boats as a travelling companion. And the Egyptians were logical even in such matters.¹

Assuming then that the two boats south of the pyramid (1 and 2 in fig. 1) faced west and east respectively (as indicated by arrows in the accompanying figure)—an assumption against which there seems no argument so far—and that the two boats along the

¹ It is only much later, in the Middle Kingdom, that models of real solar boats appear and then very seldom (see Reisner, *op. cit.*, p. xxv, to whom only three are known). The case of the solar boat which was built in the vicinity of a sun-temple in the Fifth Dynasty is quite different. Here the boat was a materialization of the sun-god's own barque.

eastern side (3 and 4 in fig. 1) faced south and north, we obtain four boats heading towards the four cardinal points of the sky, ready for the dead king whenever he chose to depart for any destination he liked. The fifth boat (no. 5 of fig. 1) could then only be the actual boat which brought the body of the dead king from the valley, was hauled up the causeway and, after the king's body had been disembarked in front of the funerary temple, was buried outside and parallel to the causeway at this spot since it could not be used for any other purpose.¹

A generation later, at the death of Chephren, the same number of five boats was buried near his pyramid (fig. 2) but it was no longer thought necessary that they should

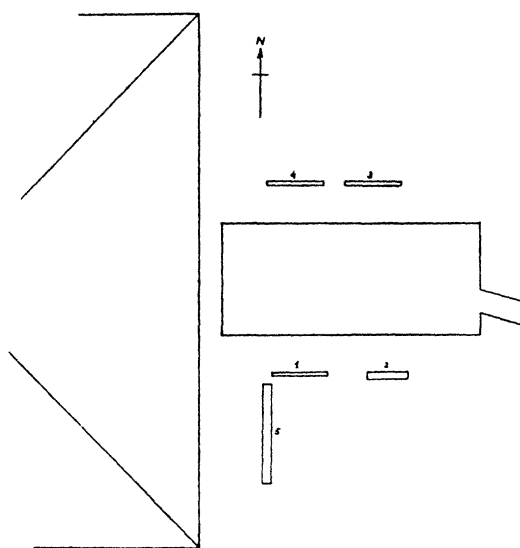


FIG. 2. Boats of Chephren.
(After Selim Hassan, *Excavations at Giza*, VI,
Part I, Pl. opposite p. 40.)

face the four cardinal points. We can conjecture that the boats 1-4 were meant for use in the Beyond, while no. 5 was the boat that had served for the funeral. Under the Sixth Dynasty Queen Neith has only small models (sixteen in number) ranged side by side in a row outside her pyramid. We can thus roughly trace the decline of the practice.

It was Erman who first saw² that the 'two *zhn*', $\overline{\text{⊙}} \overline{\text{⊙}}$, so frequently mentioned in the Pyramid Texts,³ were primitive reed rafts on which the sun-god, with the king in his company, was supposed to cross the sky, and Breasted found such rafts still in use in Nubia.⁴ The 'two *zhn*' were thus predecessors of the two sun-boats of later less primitive times.⁵ In fact the shape of these later sun-boats, as we have seen, still

¹ The single boat, the cavity of which was found parallel to the causeway of Unas (though south of it) at this point (Selim Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 82), was undoubtedly of the same nature.

² *ZÄS* 31, 80-82.

³ *Pyr.* 337a-d; 342a-d; 351a-c; 358 a, c, e, g; 926 a, c; 927 a, c; 932 a, c; 933 a, c; 999 b, c; 1000a; 1084c; 1085 a, c, e; 1086a; 1103a, b; 1179a; 1206c, e; 1705a; 1706a. The word is not attested outside the Pyramid Texts, see *Wb.* III, 471, 3-8.

⁴ *JEA* 4, 174-6, and the then Editor's note on p. 255. See further Dawson, *JEA* 10, 46.

⁵ Breasted, however, took the 'two *zhn*' for the two reed-bundles forming one single float, while they clearly

betrays their original construction in reed (or papyrus). In one passage (*Pyr.* 464*b*), however, the 'western gods, eastern gods, southern gods and northern gods' give the deceased king 'four *zhn*' on his coming up (*prt*) to the sky, evidently so that he might join them in their respective seats.¹ Is it too rash to interpret these four floats as predecessors of wooden boats such as the four which we find round the pyramid of Cheops? If we follow his boats west to north, in the order in which they are numbered in fig. 1, we even obtain the same peculiar sequence of cardinal points² used for enumerating the four groups of gods in *Pyr.* 464*a* west-east-south-north!

The boats which have occasionally been found outside tombs of private individuals of earlier periods³ were, of course, also destined to transport the deceased in the imaginary world beyond, but owing to the more modest status of the tomb owner they appear singly.

There is no reason for thinking that a sun-boat or the cavity for one has been found excepting the brick boat near Neuserrē's sun-temple at Abusir. Nor is there any reason ever to expect one to be found beside a tomb, whether royal or private.

Postscript

H. W. Fairman, who read the manuscript of the foregoing note, has pointed out two facts which are not mentioned there. The first, namely, the existence of a *single* boat on the south side of the northernmost of the three Queen's pyramids associated with the pyramid of Cheops (G 1*a* of Reisner).⁴ I had not overlooked it, but I refrain from discussing it until more is known about it from the excavator's notes than can be learnt from a photograph.⁵ It had, on the other hand, completely slipped my memory that the groove of a second boat was found in 1949 parallel to the one situated by the Unas causeway.⁶ Here indeed the occurrence of *two* boats would admit of interpreting them as solar, but before the possibility of this issue is seriously considered, the vicinity of the pyramid of Unas should be explored with an eye to the possible existence of further boats there. Should any such boats be traced, the problem would again get back to the stage where the number exceeding two would have to be accounted for, as with the boats of Cheops and Chephren.

are two separate floats. This is proved by the occurrence of 'four *zhn*' in the passage of the Pyramid Texts now to be discussed. Selim Hassan, in his long discussion of *zhn* (*Excavations at Giza*, VI, Part I, pp. 1-29) follows Breasted.

¹ Note also that according to *Pyr.* 1355*a* the deceased has to go on 'four roads'.

² Also *Pyr.* 164-6, 554, 1588; order different in *Pyr.* 321, 1252, 1593, and 1603.

³ Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty*, p. 75 and pl. 19, A; *Illustrated London News*, No. 6048 (March 19, 1955), pp. 500-1; Zaki Youssef Saad, *Royal Excavations at Saqqara and Helwan (1941-1945)*, (*Supplément aux ASAE*, no. 3), p. 111 and pls. 40, 59.

⁴ For its position see Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis*, I, Maps 1 and 3; Reisner-Smith, *A History of the Giza Necropolis*, II, fig. 1.

⁵ Baikie, *The Glamour of Near East Excavations*, pl. opp. p. 80; Grinsell, *Antiquity*, 17, pl. 5. The latter (*loc. cit.*, pp. 47-49) lists further examples from Abu Roash, Saqqārah and Dahshur.

⁶ So far the only account and photographs of it are by U. Schweitzer, *Orientalia*, 19, p. 120 and pl. 1, fig. 2; *Forschungsergebnisse in Ägypten in den Nachkriegsjahren* (Gebr. Gerstenberg, Marburg, 1951), 9 and fig. 5.