

Recent discoveries of the *Mission archéologique franco-suisse de Saqqâra* in the funerary complex of queen Ankhnespepy II

Philippe Collombert*

The *Mission archéologique française de Saqqâra* (= MAFS) (French archaeological mission of Saqqara) was founded in 1963 by Professor Jean Leclant and the architect Jean-Philippe Lauer. Its aim was to carry out an exhaustive study of the *Pyramid Texts* preserved on the walls of the pyramids of Unas, Teti, Pepy I and Merenre I, and to collect all scattered fragments of these texts and, by careful study, restore them (at least virtually) on the walls of these pyramids (see Fig. 1). The *Pyramid Texts* constitute the oldest corpus of religious texts known to man. It contains mainly spells for the revival of the king in the afterlife and teems with mentions of gods, places, concepts, objects, etc. which allow us to penetrate the oldest textually preserved religious concepts of humanity.

In 1987, the *Mission* decided to extend its main objective by undertaking excavations in the necropolis of the royal family surrounding the pyramid of king Pepi I, in South Saqqara. During these excavations the funerary complexes of several queens were discovered; wives of Pepi I or Pepi II (Nubnet, Inenek-Inty, Mehaa and her son Behenu, Meretites II, Ankhnespepy II and Ankhnespepy III). The implications of

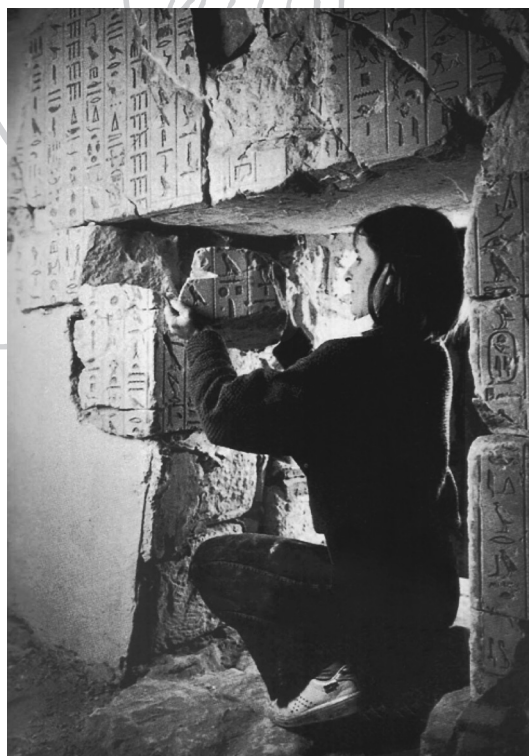


Fig. 1 Restoring the walls of the pyramid of King Pepy I (© MAFS).

these excavations, conducted by Audran Labrousse, on our understanding of history are numerous and have been the subject of several previous publications, while more still are in progress (see fig. 2). Since 2015, the *Mission* has partnered with the University of Geneva under the new name *Mission archéologique*

* Philippe Collombert is a Professor of Egyptology at the University of Geneva, and Director of the Archaeological French-Swiss Mission at Saqqara (*Mission archéologique franco-suisse de Saqqara*). His main research interests are Ancient Egyptian philology, religion and geography.

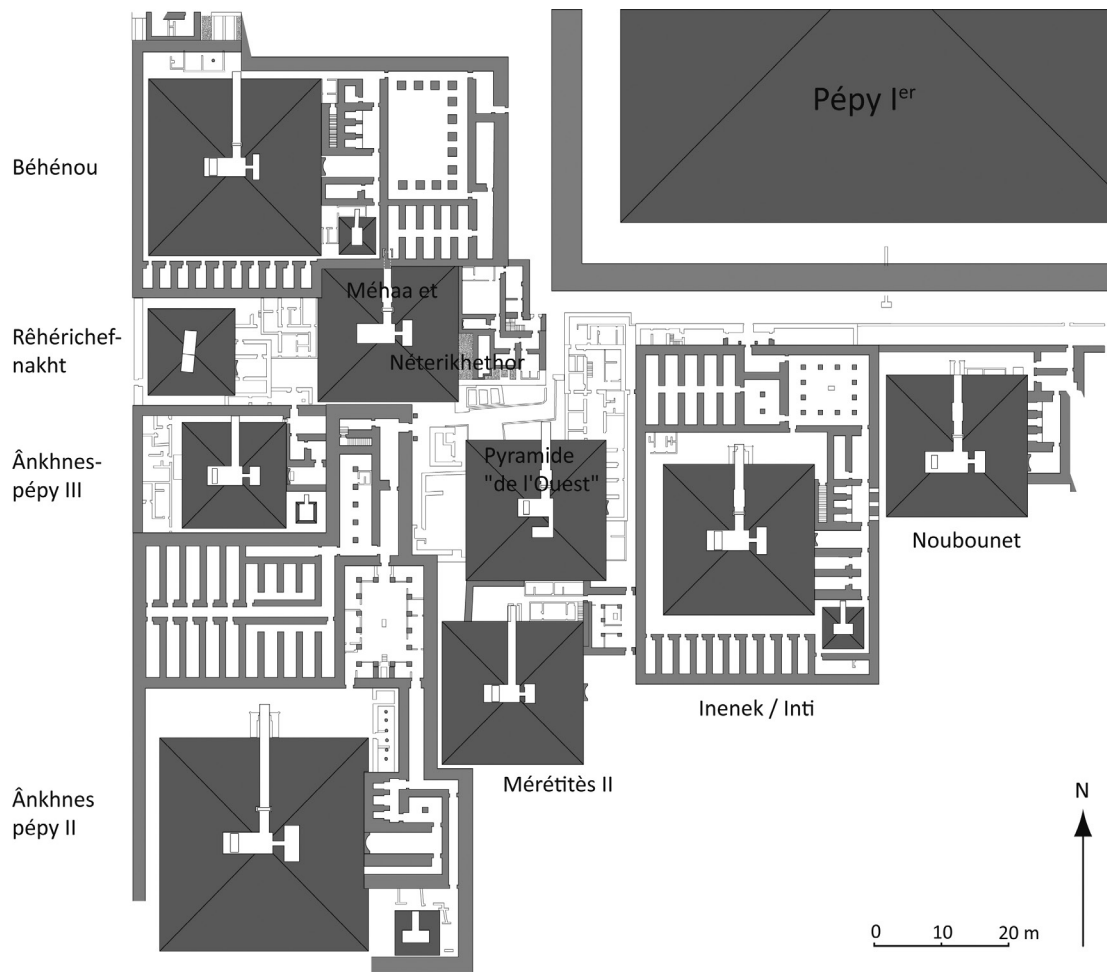


Fig. 2 Map of the necropolis of King Pepy I (proposed reconstruction, 2017, © MAFS).

franco-suisse de Saqqâra (Franco-Swiss Archaeological Mission of Saqqara). The Mission is supported by the *Fondation Gandur pour l'Art*.

One funerary complex stands out among the other funerary complexes of the queens of the 6th Dynasty that the excavations of the MAFS revealed: the funerary complex of Queen Ankhnespepy II. Before the excavations began, this queen was already known from several important sources. On an architectural element discovered in Abydos and erected by a certain Djau (see fig. 3), the latter mentions his two sisters, both

named Ankhnespepy, who both became wives of Pepy I. Scholars henceforth distinguished queen Ankhnespepy I, wife of Pepy I and mother of Merenre I, and queen Ankhnespepy II, also wife of Pepy I but mother of Pepy II, as Djau tells us. Moreover, a magnificent calcite statue ("Egyptian alabaster") kept in the Brooklyn Museum depicts queen Ankhnespepy II seated with little Pepy II, her son, on her knees (see fig. 4). An inscription inscribed in Wadi Maghara, in the turquoise mines of Sinai, dated to year 2 of king Pepy II, designates her as wife of Pepy I and mother of Pepy II (see Fig. 5). Finally, a beautiful calcite vase

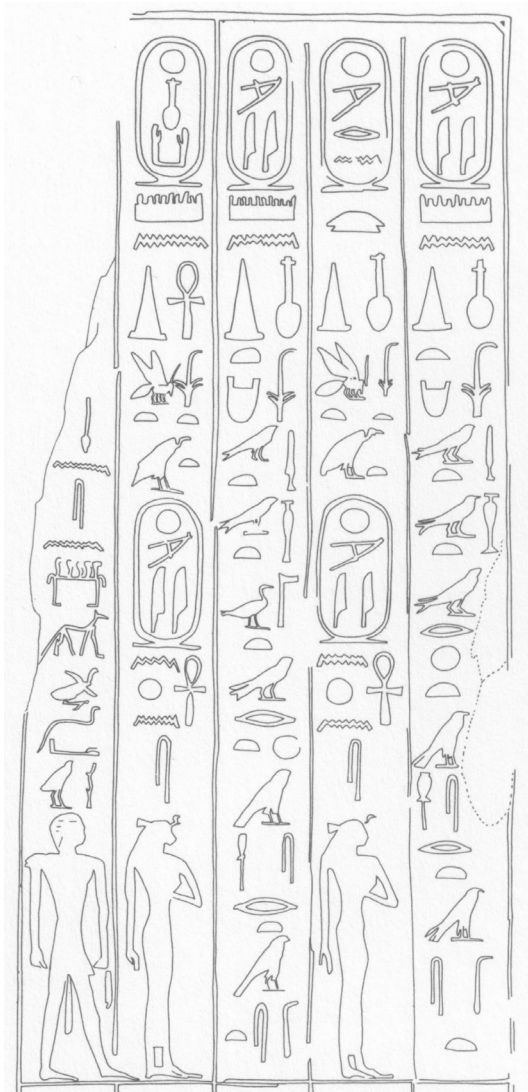


Fig. 3 Detail of the monument of Djau (CGC 1431, from H.G. Fischer, *Egyptian Studies II: Orientation of Hieroglyphs*, 1977, fig. 58).

from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York once again qualifies her as mother of king Pepy II (see fig. 6).

From these attestation it was already possible to define most of the family links of Ankhnepespy II. She came from an important family of Abydos, and she was the sister of a woman also named Ankhnepespy. She married king Pepy I, under circumstances and for reasons that remain unknown, and gave birth to king Pepy II.

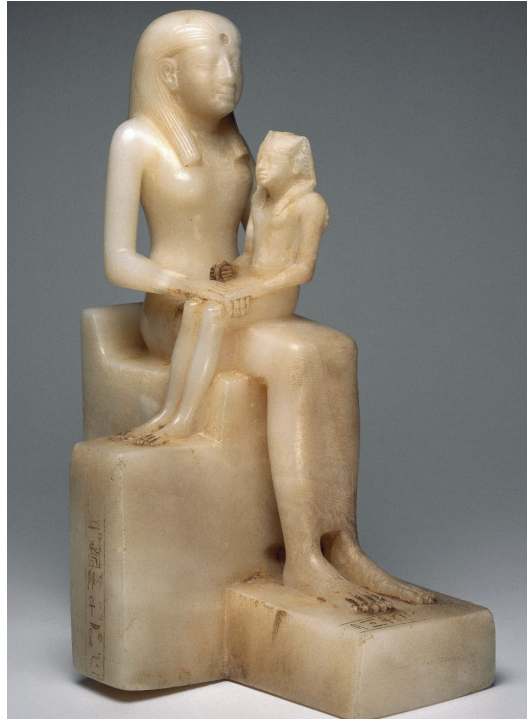


Fig. 4 Statue of Queen Ankhnepespy II (Brooklyn Museum 39.119, © Brooklyn Museum).



Fig. 5 Inscription of Wadi Maghara (from A.H. Gardiner et al., *Inscriptions of Sinäi I*, pl. 9).

The excavation of the complex of queen Ankhnepespy II is a long-term task. The discovery of a huge granite lintel of 3.60 m. wide, weighing more than 17 tons, in April 1997 allowed the identification of the entrance to the complex (see figure 7).



Fig. 6 Calcite vase with the name of Queen Ankhnespepy II (Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York 23.10.10, © MMA New York).

This imposing block was inscribed with the name of “the king’s mother Ankhnespepy (II)”. Initially, there were some hesitations because of the simultaneous discovery of the complex of another queen named Ankhnespepy, daughter of Merenre I and wife of Pepy II (and now identified as Ankhnespepy III),

in the immediate vicinity. The complex of Ankhnespepy II was located at the south-west end of the necropolis (see Fig. 8). Some years ago, excavations revealed a new and unexpected fact. Several blocks found in the funerary complex of queen Ankhnespepy II bear explicit elements of titles that indicate that Ankhnespepy II married Pepy I, but they also reveal that she married his successor king Merenre I, son of her sister Ankhnespepy I, after his death (see Fig. 9). Was Pepy II the son of Pepy I, as the mentions in the text of Djau and the inscription of Wadi



Fig. 8 Map of the complex of Queen Ankhnespepy II (in red) (proposed reconstruction, 2017, © MAFS).



Fig. 7 Lintel in granite with the name of Queen Ankhnespepy II (© MAFS).



Fig. 9 Blocks with the titles of Queen Ankhnespepy II (A II-Ext 36+37+38, © MAFS).

Maghara seem to imply, or was he the son of this newly attested husband of Ankhnespepy II: king Merenre I? We know that king Merenre I reigned a short time, but the exact length of his reign is still debated (the highest known date at the moment would be that of “the year [after] the 5th census”, attested in a very poorly preserved inscription of the quarry of Hatnub). It is also known that Pepy II ascended the throne at a very young age, perhaps at the age of six, as Manetho reported in the 3rd century BC, in his *History of Egypt*. Although Merenre I becomes a potential new candidate for the paternity of Pepy II, Pepy I remains the one favored by many researchers. These excavations that took place in 1997-2004 also led to the discovery of a series of interesting reliefs, such as

a “papyrus shaking” scene where the queen is accompanied by a young princess (see Fig. 10). The iconographic program of her funerary temple largely renews the little of what was known for queenly funerary complexes at that time. These reliefs also testify to an exceptional quality of engraving. It is evident that queen Ankhnespepy II benefited from the best craftsmen of the palace for the decoration of her funerary temple. The culmination of these discoveries came in 2000, when the funerary rooms of the pyramid of queen Ankhnespepy II were reached by the excavators and revealed that the walls of her burial chamber were adorned with the *Pyramid Texts*. Most of the walls had been destroyed for reuse as building material. Nevertheless, over 1200 frag-

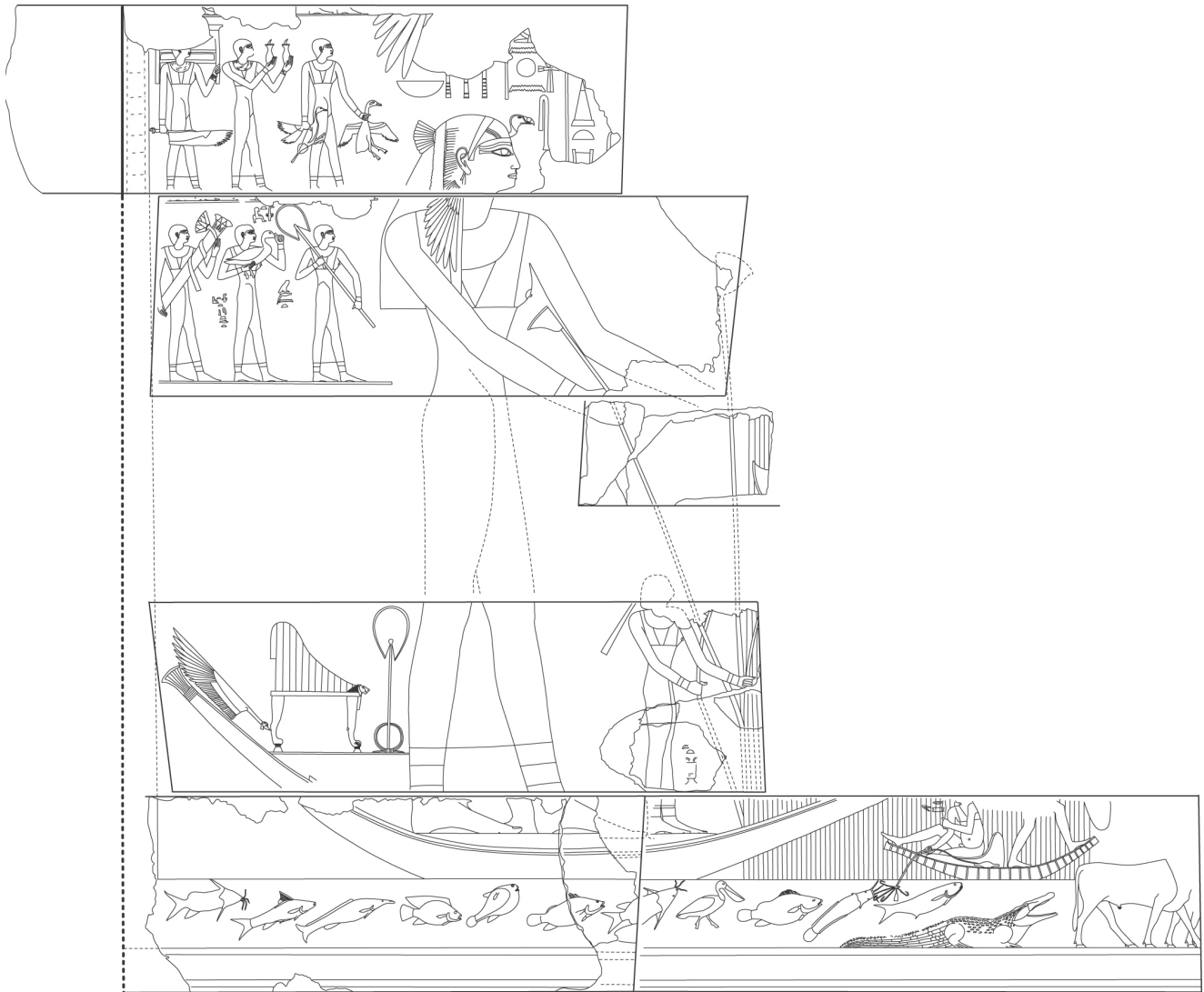


Fig. 10 Scene coming from the funerary temple of Queen Ankhnespepy II (© MAFS).

ments of various sizes were collected. Their study by Bernard Mathieu has recently resulted in an almost complete virtual reconstruction of the texts and their original location. The publication of these results should follow shortly. Ankhnespepy II may have been the first queen of history to engrave these *Pyramid Texts*, formerly reserved for the pyramid of the king, in her burial chamber.

After 2004, the mission focused on other areas and the queen's funerary temple was left untouched for a few years. In 2016, it was decided to resume and complete

the excavation of Ankhnespepy II's funerary complex in order to finally make all the information relating to this exceptional queen available to researchers and to the public.

This work is a long-term project; besides its exceptional decoration scheme and quality, the queen's complex is also exceptional in its size. With an area of about 3500 m², it is - by far - the largest complex for a queen in the royal necropolis of Pepy I. Unlike the other queenly pyramids of the necropolis, the majority of which measures around 21 m long (40 cubits), the pyramid of Ankhnespepy II is 31.40 m.



long (60 cubits). Only the 26.20 m. long (50 cubits) pyramid of enigmatic Queen Behenou, whose complex has recently been excavated, comes close to it.

All these discoveries gave us a much better insight into the role and the status of queen Ankhnespepy II. Successively the wife of kings Pepy I and Merenre I, she was a key figure of the time, ensuring regency during the minority of her son king Pepy II, at the death of Merenre I. It is obviously during her regency that she built and decorated her imposing funerary complex, benefiting from the best royal workshops and of exceptional privileges for a queen. In this regard, the discoveries of the 2017's campaign have been particularly instructive. They have revealed new elements that confirm the singular nature of queen Ankhnespepy II.

In September 2017, we discovered a fragment of granite obelisk of considerable size (see Fig. 11). This piece measures 2.70 m in height (including a peak of 1.20 m) and 1.10 m in width; its original height can be estimated to about 5 m. We know that certain obelisks of the Old Kingdom were higher than this one, but our fragment represents, at the present time, the largest known obelisk fragment from the Old Kingdom. On one of the faces, a lacunar inscription bearing part of the name of the funeral complex of king Pepy II allows us to attribute it to his mother queen Ankhnespepy II.

Another fragment of granite obelisk was found a little further west, which only shows the terminal part, the peak of the object, 1.30 m. high (see Fig. 12). The base of this peak had been carefully flattened and hewed into the shape of a mortise in order to fix under it an element with a tenon. This strange process seemed to forbid interpreting the fragment as



Fig. 11 Fragment of an obelisk in granite (© MAFS).

an obelisk part, since Egyptian obelisks are normally made of one single block. Could it be the pyramidion of the queen's pyramid? The slope of the peak speaks against such an interpretation. Finally, the discovery of another small fragment of granite bearing the traces of an inscription similar to that found on



Fig. 12 Peak of another obelisk in granite (© MAFS).



the other obelisk and adjusting perfectly under the base of the peak allowed us to identify the original object: contrary to Egyptian customs, it must have been an obelisk built in two parts, one for the peak and one for the trunk. Why was this strange process used here? One can imagine that the block initially made of one single piece had broken down and that a makeshift repair had been carried out, by assembling two pieces of granite. It is possible that coatings that

have disappeared today rendered the joining line of these two pieces invisible. Anyway, we were now in the presence of two obelisks attached to the complex of the queen. This discovery is not surprising in itself, because it was customary to place, on either side of the entrance of the funerary complexes of queens of the 6th Dynasty, a pair of obelisks identifying the owner of the place. What is more surprising is the place of their discovery: they were not found at the entrance of



Fig. 13 View on the Hall of offerings from the East (© MAFS).



the complex, but much further south, at the level of the “intimate temple”, east of the pyramid itself. Presumably, the quarrymen of later times moved the monument towards the wadi and the valley, in order to re-use it more easily. Even more surprising is the original height, estimated at 5m, of this pair of obelisks. If the other queens of this time have almost inevitably a pair of obelisk at the entrance of their complex, it is usually much smaller, ranging between 1.10 m and 2.20 m high. Moreover, the material used is always limestone and not granite, as it is here. Once again, the gigantism and the use of a noble material testify to the very special place of this queen Ankhnepespy II within the dynasty.

The search of the Hall of offerings also reserved a surprise. This room is the heart of a funerary complex, since it was here that lied the false-door, directly backed by the pyramid on its east side, where the queen’s ba was supposed to have direct access to daily offerings deposited on her altar. This room therefore had a marked character of purity. Unfortunately, as everywhere else on the site, the quarrymen worked here and not a single stone of the walls or of the false-door remains in its place (see Fig. 13). Happily, the floor slabs that formed the base of the walls were mostly preserved in this area, and, at the level of the Hall of offerings, a slight recess of about 7 cm indicated that the floor of this room was initially composed of special slabs of this height.

The process is so far unique for floors of queen complexes of the necropolis, but the explanation is perfectly clear, thanks to the discovery, in this room, of very numerous fragments of calcite: instead of the traditional limestone floor, Queen Ankhnepespy II had installed, in this very special room, a pavement made of thin glittering slabs of calcite, the symbol of purity *par excellence*. If this use of calcite is exceptional for the queens of this necropolis, it is however common for the kings of this time in the Hall of offerings. Once again, queen Ankhnepespy II enjoyed royal privileges for the architecture of her complex.

Another discovery gives us some valuable information concerning the role of the queen during her regency. A big fragment of limestone (a doorjamb?) is nicely inscribed with a text in four columns which describes the different elements composing the funerary complex of the queen. This text is unfortunately very incomplete. By a happy coincidence, however, the lower part of the text is preserved; it consists of a single line, which closes and unifies the description in columns, and functions as a kind of general conclusion to the text (see Fig. 14). This line is as follows: “His Majesty did (that) [for] her while she was in the Residence”. But why did the editor insist on the fact that the queen was “in the Residence” when the king granted her this favor? The king mentioned in the inscription is likely to be Pepy II, since Queen



Fig. 14 Detail of the consecration text of the funerary complex of Queen Ankhnepespy II (© MAFS).



Ankhnespepy II had her own funerary complex decorated during the reign of her son Pepy II, as evidenced by all the reliefs found there. We know that King Pepy II ascended the throne while he was still a child, and everything suggests that it was his mother Ankhnespepy II who held the reins of power. Therefore, it seems legitimate to interpret the mention of “the Residence” here as a designation of the actual place of governance and to understand that the editor wanted to signify that the queen was in this nerve center of power, and therefore directed *de facto* the country. This reality was however in contradiction with pharaonic ideology, which states that the king, with extended divine powers, was endowed “already in the egg” with full conscience and science of governance (note that, in the line of text, he is the one who acts);

at the very least, the real exercise of power by a royal mother did not enter into the pharaonic ideological patterns. The circumvolution employed here thus probably allowed one, by a euphemistic effect of language, to express a reality without hurting royal ideology; in short: to say the unspeakable. We certainly have here an almost explicit mention of the regency of queen Ankhnespepy II and of her actual exercise of power.

The completion of the excavation and the study of queen Annekhepepy II’s complex will certainly bring us more surprises, but it is already certain that this year’s discoveries shed a welcome light on this extraordinary queen.

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<http://mafssaqqara.wixsite.com/mafs>

