

The “Sun Temples Project” is an interdisciplinary project that aims at deepening our knowledge of a so far unparalleled category of royal monuments in ancient Egyptian history, the so-called “sun temples”.

Sun temples were built over a quite short period of time, approx. 100 years, concentrated during the Fifth Dynasty (mid-Third Millennium BC, usually called Old Kingdom by scholars), and had a pivotal role in both the religious and economic life of Egypt of that time. Nevertheless, they were suddenly abandoned by the end of the Fifth Dynasty and not replaced by any similar buildings for several generations. Most importantly, sun temples were the first sanctuary, in the pharaonic civilization, to be dedicated exclusively to the cult of the solar god Ra. Throughout Egyptian history this god was considered a supreme creator god, and temples were erected in his honor all over the country. In a specific moment of Egyptian history, namely the mid-II Millennium BC, with the famous heretic pharaoh Akhenaton, the sun god became so important as to knock all other gods off the pedestal, and pave the way to future developments of modern-day monotheistic (one-god-only) religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islamism).

Despite their importance in the history of ancient Egypt, our knowledge of sun temples is still blurred. This is all the more true when we consider that out of 6 temples known from historical sources, only 2 have been uncovered so far. Out of them, only one – the sun temple of Niuserra, located in the site of Abu Ghurab, c. 20 km south of modern-day Cairo – is still preserved enough today to give us an idea of how these temples should look like.

The first objective of the present project is thus to re-study and re-excavate this sun temple. This is made possible by the fact that an archaeological mission, directed by the principal investigator of this project, is working on the site over the past 9 years.

One of the primary target of this re-investigation is study of the material culture connected with the temple. In fact, the archaeologists who discovered and excavated the temple in 1898-1901, paid attention only to its architecture and decoration, by neglecting completely the testimonies of the past which more than any other can give us an idea of the cult carried out in the temples. This documentation is composed primarily by the diverse material produced for the temple cultic activities (pottery, tools and implements for the cult, material for accountancy of the temple economy, remains of foodstuff, etc.). This documentation was abandoned on the spot without any detailed analysis and finally not even published, a gap that we intend to fill by means of this project.

However, through the investigation of the abovementioned material culture, the project wishes to explore not only the nature of the rituals and ceremonies carried out in the temple, but, first and foremost, the daily life of the communities living around it. In fact, as we know for many other temples which have been explored more recently and with different methodologies, sun temples, too, should have acted as centers of attractions of local communities, and small towns/villages/settlements should certainly have been based around them.

The latter aspect is connected to the second goal of our project: investigating the wider area between the two sun temples known so far, which has never been archaeologically explored. In recent years, the principal investigator of this project has analyzed all the available historical sources and the maps produced by travelers and explorers of the last two centuries. This study has evidenced the possible presence of unknown archaeological evidence in the area between the two temples, which have been variously described in the past and then disappeared. At least some of the structures might be one of the lost sun temples, with their related settlements. Their discovery, as easily imaginable, would not only give a significant contribution to the scientific knowledge of the matter, but would also represent an incredible and unique archaeological discovery.

To reach this goal the project wishes to intertwine traditional dataset (historical, archaeological, religious and textual data) with interdisciplinary methods of analysis of the geo-morphology of the area into account, namely the new technology of space observation and analysis (remote sensing). The results of this combined analysis will be finally crossed with topographical and archaeological information acquired on the field during the project, including, for the first time, a geo-magnetic investigation of the whole site of Abu Ghurab.

The final project's outcome is to create an open-access Historical Geographical Information System (HGIS) on sun temples and the related issue of the solar cult in Third Millennium BC Egypt. This will allow the project to structure and present on a digital, multi-layered map, information extracted from the analysis of different types of data, as well as to extrapolate and visualize, on a historical base, all possible relationships among the different components of the data enquiry. By the end of the project a short, selected version of the database will be made freely accessible online, and all data produced by the project will finally benefit the wider community of the public audience.