

The Origins of the Sacred Geography Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The representation of territory was a longstanding concern for the ancient Egyptians. They produced a considerable body of documentation that offers valuable insights into their understanding and conceptualisation of their land and areas beyond. Rooted in the religious domain, this body of documents forms what I termed a Sacred Geography Discourse. This discourse is primarily known in its Greco-Roman period form. However, the earliest geographical lists, notably the first processions featuring fecundity figures that personify geographical entities, can be traced back to the Old Kingdom. Originating in the Third Millennium BC, this discourse can be examined through the structure of these documents, the entities they depict, and the accompanying captions related to the fecundity figures. By analysing these elements in conjunction with changes in territorial organisation and the administrative apparatus during the Fifth Dynasty, it is possible to trace the origins of the Sacred Geography Discourse and determine when it began to reflect a deliberate conceptualisation of territory.

KEYWORDS

Sacred Geography Discourse – Sahure – territorial representation – geographical lists – provinces – *pehu*-territories – Old Kingdom

أصول تصوير الجغرافيا المقدسة

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الملخص

كان تمثيل الأراضي شاغلاً قديماً للمصريين القدماء، إذ أنتجوا مجموعة كبيرة من الوثائق التي توفر رؤية قيّمة حول فهمهم لأرضهم والمناطق الواقعة خارجها. وتشكل هذه الوثائق، المتجذرة في الحياة الدينية المصرية القديمة، ما أسميته بـ "خطاب الجغرافيا المقدسة". ويعرف هذا الخطاب أو التصوير أساساً في شكله خلال العصرين اليوناني والروماني. ومع ذلك، يمكن إرجاع أقدم القوائم الجغرافية، ولا سيما الموكب الأول الذي يضم شخصيات تجسد الخصوبة وتمثل الكيانات الجغرافية، إلى عصر الدولة القديمة.

يمكن تناول هذا الخطاب، الذي نشأ في الألفية الثالثة قبل الميلاد، من خلال دراسة بنية هذه الوثائق والكيانات التي صوّرت فيها، والتعليقات المصاحبة المرتبطة بشخصيات الخصوبة. ومن خلال تحليل هذه العناصر بالاقتران مع التغيرات التي طرأت على التنظيم الإقليمي والجهاز الإداري خلال الأسرة الخامسة، يمكن تتبع أصول خطاب الجغرافيا المقدسة وتحديد اللحظة التي بدأ فيها يعكس تصوراً متعمداً للإقليم.

الكلمات المفتاحية

خطاب الجغرافيا المقدسة – ساحورع – التمثيل الإقليمي – القوائم الجغرافية – المقاطعات – أقاليم البحر – الدولة القديمة

INTRODUCTION¹

The study of sacred geography in ancient Egypt primarily relies on documentation from the Greco-Roman period, which has yielded numerous geographical lists of various types.² Consequently, material from the late Pharaonic period is the most extensively examined and best understood. However, the earliest known geographical lists originate from the Old Kingdom, raising critical questions about the origins of Egypt's Sacred Geography Discourse. At what point did such a discourse first emerge in ancient Egypt, and when did it begin to reflect a deliberate conceptualisation of the territory?

WHAT IS SACRED GEOGRAPHY DISCOURSE?

Sacred Geography Discourse refers to the body of documents produced by the ancient Egyptians that present a structured representation of the world based on geographical principles.³ These documents take various forms. The most widespread are geographical processions, in which fecundity figures symbolise different territories (Baines 1985). Other examples include representations in the form of tables, such as those found in the lower register of the *White Chapel* of Senusret I at Karnak (Lacau – Chevrier 1956–1969; Arnaudière *et al.* 2015), circular world depictions such as the representation on the sarcophagus lid of Oureshnefer (MMA 14. 7. 1; see Gardiner 1944: pl. V; Clère 1958: 30–46, pl. V; Calmettes 2017: 25–50), liturgical geography manuals (Derchain 1962: 30–65; Medini 2023: 241–292), hymns like the *Litany of Waset* (Helck 1968: 117–137) and priestly encyclopaedias, with the most comprehensive being the *Great Geographical Text of Edfu* (E I, 329–344; Leitz 2014b; Medini 2014: 245–267). This geographical discourse, regardless of the period, falls within the sacred domain, as it serves religious and ideological purposes.⁴ Depending on the context, it might depict the entirety of Egypt making offerings to a deity, represent the gods of each Egyptian territory, or portray the worship of a deity throughout Egypt. There is always a notion of completeness, reflecting the integrity of the world as conceived by the ancient Egyptians.

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- 1 This article is the result of research conducted at the University of Tübingen, funded by the Postdoc Mobility grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). I am most grateful to Christelle Alvarez and Aurélie Quirion for their proofreading. I also extend my sincere gratitude to the reviewer, whose numerous insightful and valuable suggestions have significantly enhanced the quality of this article.
 - 2 Refer to the various catalogues of geographical lists (Helck 1974: 2–5; Beinlich 1989: 7–41; Beinlich 1990: 59–88; Leitz 2014a: 94–124; Ghiringhelli 2024: 103–161).
 - 3 This expression was coined based on the works of J. Yoyotte, who refers to “textes relevant de la « géographie sacrée »” (see for instance Yoyotte 1990–1991: 137). This corresponds to what J. Quack refers to as “Lineare geographische Abfolgen” (Quack 2008: 141–153).
 - 4 For a comprehensive list of documentation related to the Sacred Geography Discourse, see Ghiringhelli (*forthcoming*).

THE EARLY STAGES OF THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY DISCOURSE

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PROVINCE SYSTEM

The documents related to the Sacred Geography Discourse, including the earliest examples, utilise territorial subdivisions and organise them geographically to shape their representation of the territory. The most significant of these subdivisions, which are the focus here, are the *sepat*. These Egyptian provinces were represented by emblems featuring symbols on standards and, in most cases, the hieroglyph  (Gardiner 1969³: 488, N 24), which corresponds to the term *sepat* (*sp3t*) (Erman – Grapow 1926–1961/IV: 97, 4–99, 6; TLA 132420).⁵

The earliest evidence of the province system, in an early and undeveloped stage, dates back to the First Dynasty. Seal impressions discovered in the tomb of Queen Merneith at Abydos include the inscriptions  and  (Kaplony 1963: 1124, pl. 67, figs. 238–239; Engel 2006: 157–158, Kat. 17). These hieroglyphs could potentially be interpreted as “the provinces of the East of Lower Egypt” and “the provinces of the West of Lower Egypt”. However, these translations remain tentative due to the early stage of hieroglyphic writing at that time (Willems 2014: 11).

By the Second Dynasty, the province system was securely established, as evidenced by the emergence of recognisable emblems. A seal impression bearing the name Sekhemib, found in the tomb of Peribsen at Abydos, displays part of a standard and the rear of a reclining animal, which may correspond to  (Engel 2006: 156–157, Kat. 15). The first complete standards appear during the reign of Khasekhemwy. Seal impressions from this king’s tomb at Abydos clearly depict the provinces , , , , , , and  (Engel 2006: 151–160, Kat. 1–4, 6, 9, 10). Additionally, an ink inscription on a stone vase from Djoser’s pyramid mentions  (Engel 2006: 155–156, Kat. 11). Ilona Regulski has demonstrated that these inscribed vessels date precisely to Khasekhemwy’s reign (Regulski 2004: 949–970). Thus, it is evident that by the end of the Second Dynasty, the province system was well-established, with a significant number of provinces already documented (Willems 2014: 10–11).

THE EARLIEST GEOGRAPHICAL LISTS

The earliest known geographical list – defined as a document presenting a sequence of territories arranged geographically – dates to the Fourth Dynasty. This list is the procession of funerary domains inscribed in Sneferu’s Valley Temple at Dahshur (Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 125–137/1R4; Fakhry 1952–1954: 577–583, pls. VIII–X; Fakhry 1961: 17–58, figs. 9–34, pls. XII–XV; Alexanian 2015). The document depicts a procession of *hwt*-domains, organised by province (Moreno Garcia 1999: 63–150). However, not all provinces are represented; the section dedicated to Upper Egypt concludes with the 16th, 18th, and 22nd provinces of Upper Egypt.⁶

5 The Egyptian term *sp3t* is frequently translated as “nome”, though this is incorrect, as the two concepts – *sp3t* and nome – do not align (see Eller 2022). Despite this, the term “nome” is firmly established in Egyptological practice and remains useful, provided its limitations are acknowledged (see Yoyotte 1966: 46; Yoyotte 1982–1983: 217–221; Yoyotte 1993–1994: 685–689; Guérmeur 2001: 202; Willems 2014: 5–6, no. 8).

6 The 17th, 19th, 20th, and 21st provinces of Upper Egypt were likely never included in this procession. While the antiquity of the list leaves some uncertainty, there is no subsequent instance where the provinces of Upper Egypt are arranged in an order other than the customary one.

Lists of funerary domains are characteristic of the Old Kingdom and continue throughout this period, extending into the reign of Pepy II (Jéquier 1940: 14–17, pls. 21–28; Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 183–199/1R6). They appear in both royal mortuary complexes and private elite tombs. However, most of these documents do not classify domains by province.⁷ Consequently, lists of funerary domains do not appear to be intended to represent the territory in its entirety. Rather, when domains are organised by province, it appears to serve the purpose of showcasing the extent of the list owner's possessions – whether real or fictitious⁸ – and thus presenting an idealised *pr-ḏt* (Moreno Garcia 1999: 90–91).⁹ Furthermore, the presence of these lists in royal mortuary temples and private elite tombs imbues them with a funerary and religious character. These documents are situated within an ideological framework where their primary function is economic, as funerary domains are meant to sustain the mortuary cult (Khaled 2013: 363–372; Khaled 2020). In such a context, geographical considerations are secondary. Would it be otherwise, lists that classify domains by province would not be exceptional, and one would expect royal lists to represent all the provinces known at the time.

Thus, through the lists of funerary domains organised by province, one can gain insight into a geographically ordered representation of Egyptian territory. However, this representation is incomplete and emerges as an indirect consequence of these documents.

THE REIGN OF SAHURE: A PERIOD OF CREATION

The reign of Sahure remains notable for its evidence of processions of funerary domains, with four such lists identified in his mortuary temple at Abusir. Two of these processions, each on a different scale, have survived only in fragmentary form, making their precise location within the temple uncertain (Borchardt 1913: 105–111, pl. 27; Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 145–146/2R5). A third procession decorates the southern and northern walls of the temple's side entrance (Borchardt 1913: 105–111, pls. 26, 28, 31; Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 146–150/2R5; Khaled 2021: 19–27), while a fourth, analysed in the unpublished Ph.D. thesis of Mohamed Ismail Khaled, is inscribed on the causeway blocks (Khaled 2008b; see Khaled 2006: 257–260; Khaled 2013: 366–367).

However, Sahure's reign is marked by significant creations in Sacred Geography Discourse. It is from this period that a considerable number of elements, which would later become standard, are attested for the first time.

NEW GEOGRAPHICAL ENTITIES

The first of these creations is the earliest known procession of provinces, engraved on an altar whose fragments were discovered in Sahure's mortuary temple (fig. 1) (Borchardt 1913: 48–50, figs. 51–54; Wartke 1977: 145–156). Although provinces were occasionally represented in processions of funerary domains, this is the first instance in which they appear as the geographical

7 Helen Jacquet-Gordon catalogues 112 lists of funerary domains, of which only 16 include province emblems (Jacquet-Gordon 1962); for an updated version of Jacquet-Gordon's list, see Khaled (2013: 366, no. 10).

8 For further discussion on this topic, see further (Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 35–36; Moreno Garcia 1999: 93; Moreno Garcia 2008: 4; Willems 2009: 13–28).

9 On the *pr-ḏt*, see Fitzenreiter (2004: 61–75).

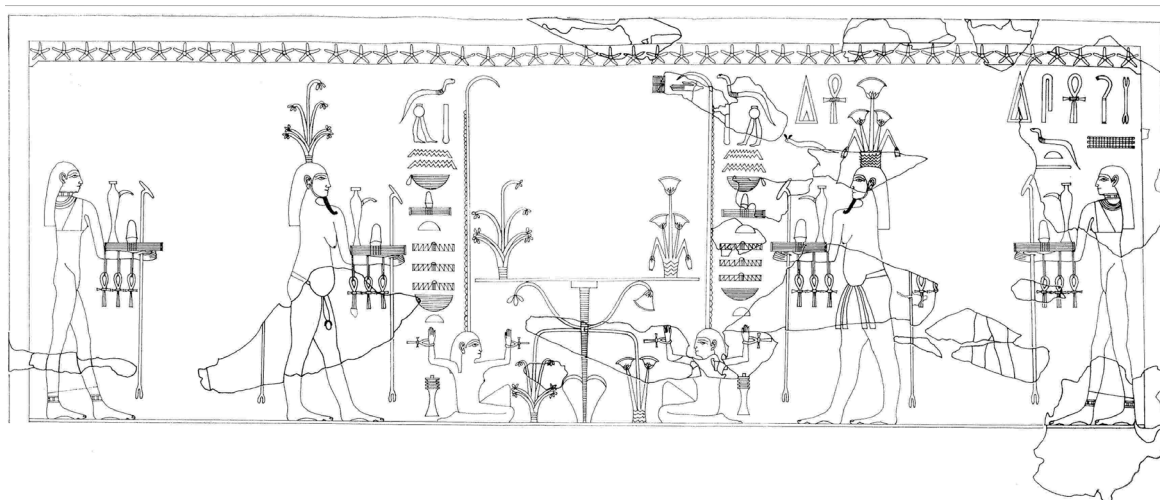


Fig. 1 Reconstruction of Sahure's altar, side A (after Wartke 1977: pl. VII)

entities of reference.¹⁰ The support of this procession is also new; it represents the earliest known example of such a medium used for a geographical procession. This practice would become more frequent in later periods, for both processions of funerary domains and provinces. Altars featuring geographical processions are attested during the reigns of Nyuserre (Borchardt 1907: 68–69, pls. 14–15; Fischer 1959: 129–135; Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 155–157/4R5), Djedkare-Isesi (Megahed 2014: 56–62), Teti (Malek 1988: 23–34), Mentuhotep II (Habachi 1963: 33–35, fig. 13, pl. IX; Baines 1985: 150–151, fig. 94; Bussmann 2010: fig. 4.80), Amenemhat I (Fischer 1959: 137–139; Hayes 1978: 174–175, fig. 105; Baines 1985: 88, fig. 53, 151–152; Arnold 2016: 42–44, pls. 62–65, 99) and Senusret I (Jéquier – Gautier 1902: 22–26, figs. 17–20; Kamal, 1909: 1–3, pls. I–II, no. 23001). It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the first procession of provinces appears on a type of support previously unknown in this context. The choice of an altar may have been driven by its mobility, in contrast to reliefs carved into walls. Only elements already integrated into an established canon would have been engraved on walls. However, this issue warrants further exploration.

The second major creation is the earliest recorded procession of *pehu*-territories. On the causeway of Sahure's mortuary temple, twelve of these geographical entities are depicted across four registers, following the royal funerary domains of Lower Egypt (Khaled 2008a: 194–194; Verner – Benešová 2008: 127; Khaled 2011: 512–517; Khaled 2018: 235–247). Prior to the Late Period, *pehu*-territories referred to territories located exclusively in the Nile Delta (Collombert 2014: 993–1000). These regions lay on the fringes of the province system, unadministered yet economically important as sources of goods from fishing and fowling (Collombert 2014: 996–997; Martinet 2022: 77).

Together, these two types of geographical entities – provinces and *pehu*-territories – represent the entirety of Egyptian territory: the administered regions on one hand and the unad-

¹⁰ Four province emblems are still identifiable, along with 15 figures of prosperity that likely personified provinces. However, the altar has sufficient space for approximately 23 personifications of provinces, in addition to four figures of prosperity representing Upper or Lower Egypt—two on either side of two *sema-tawy* symbols—as well as at least one personification of *df3w*-offerings.

ministered on the other. Furthermore, both lists introducing these new geographical entities are inscribed within Sahure's mortuary temple at Abusir. As such, this monument may be regarded as a site of experimentation in the development of the Sacred Geography Discourse.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAPTIONS

These creations concerning geographical entities can be compared to other changes related to the captions accompanying the fecundity figures. In the earliest geographical processions, only the toponyms associated with these entities are mentioned. This is exemplified by the list of funerary domains from Sneferu's temple at Dahshur (Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 125-137/1R4; Fakhry 1952-1954: 577-583, pls. VIII-X; Fakhry 1961: 17-58, figs. 9-34, pls. XII-XV), as well as by later lists from the Old Kingdom, such as those from the reigns of Nyuserre (Von Bissing 1955: 319-338; Kees 1956: 33-40; Fischer 1959: 140, fig. 4; Edel – Wenig 1974: 17-20, pls. 4-7), Unas (Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 168-182/7R5; Labrousse – Moussa 2002: 90-95, 97-107, 183-189, 192-195, doc. 97-99, 103, 105-121) and Pepi II (fig. 2) (Jéquier 1940: 14-17, pls. 21-28; Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 183-199/1R6).

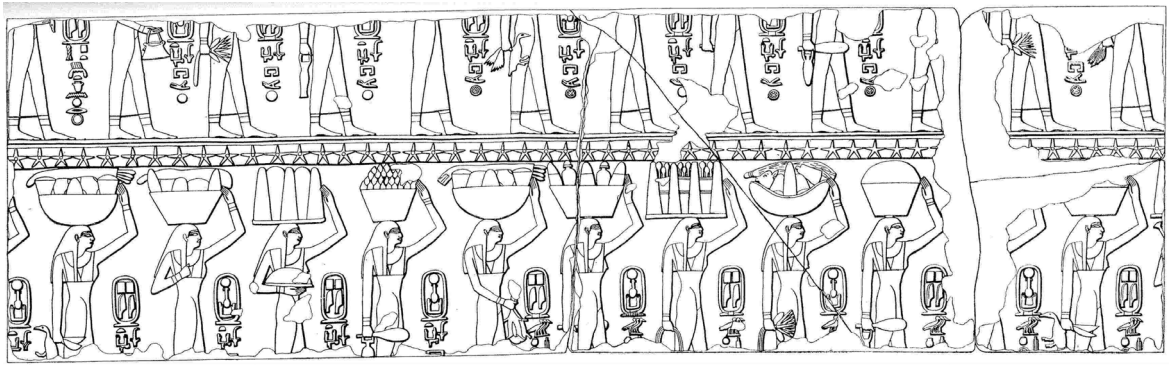


Fig. 2 Procession of funerary domains from the mortuary temple of Pepi I (after Jéquier 1940: pl. 22)

However, from the Fifth Dynasty onwards, more elaborate examples begin to emerge. Fragments from the procession of funerary domains from Userkaf's mortuary temple at Saqqara reveal the earliest known bringing formulas used in geographical processions (Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 140-143/1R5). One relief features a formula inscribed next to the shaft of a standard depicting the 6th province of Lower Egypt. This formula is presented in the form of an infinitive title: *Int ḥtp-ntr t ḥnkt n r^c nb*, „to bring the daily divine offering of bread and beer” (Labrousse – Lauer 2000: figs. 122-123, 133). Behind it are two funerary domains, with captions providing only their names and sizes. A second, more fragmentary relief retains the emblem of the 2nd province of Lower Egypt, along with traces of a similar bringing formula (Labrousse – Lauer 2000: figs. 122-123, 134).

Thus, these bringing formulas are exclusively associated with the emblems of provinces and should be understood as collectively applicable to all domains within the same nome. Furthermore, the formulas are generic, with the offerings being interchangeable. To my knowledge, no other examples of this type of caption have been found.

From the reign of Sahure, however, the earliest captions in the form of full sentences emerge. In the processions of funerary domains of this king, found in his mortuary temple at Abusir, the fecundity figures are accompanied by formulas for generic offerings such as „I bring you all *htp*-offering „ and „I bring you all things“ (Borchardt 1913: 105–111, pls. 26–27, 31; Jacquet-Gordon 1962: 145–150/2R5). Inscriptions of a similar nature are present in the procession of *pehu*-territories, which is engraved on the causeway of Sahure’s mortuary temple (Khaled 2018: 235–247). Each of the four registers in this document is introduced by a generic bringing formula, for instance: “I give you all life and strength and all *htp*-offering that are in the *pehu*-territories” (Khaled 2018: 237, fig. 1). In these instances, the inscriptions remain collective, and the funerary domains in the first procession and the *pehu*-territories in the second, depicted behind the collective bringing formula, are simply named.

During Sahure’s reign, individual formulas also begin to appear. On the offering table discovered in his mortuary temple, two *sema-tawy* symbols are symmetrically positioned, forming an axis around which the provinces are arranged – the provinces of Upper Egypt on one side and those of Lower Egypt on the other (fig. 1) (Borchardt 1913: 48–50, figs. 51–54; Wartke 1977: 145–156). Flanking the *sema-tawy* symbols are four identical inscriptions: “I give you all *htp* -offering”. Although collective bringing formulas continue to be used, this monument also features a brief legend for each province that expresses a blessing, such as “May he give life/while he gives life” or “May she give life eternally/while she gives life eternally”. Thus, the inscriptions adopt a bipartite structure, combining a collective bringing formula with an individual blessing formula.

In summary, Sahure’s reign marks the emergence of the first procession of provinces, the first procession of *pehu*-territories, the first collective bringing formulas in the form of full sentences, and the first individual blessing formulas. The simultaneous development of these significant creations suggests that their introduction was a deliberate decision.

TERRITORIAL REORGANIZATION

These significant creations should be examined in the context of the territorial reorganisation that occurred during the Fifth Dynasty (Martinet 2019: 294–296), particularly under the reign of Sahure (Martinet 2022: 72–102). During this period, several new provinces in the Nile Delta were documented for the first time (Ghiringhelli 2024: 13–14, tab. 1). Similarly, the *Palermo Stone* records the establishment of several domains in six provinces of Lower Egypt for various deities during Sahure’s reign (Sethe 1903: 244, 7–245, 2; Martinet 2022: 76–77). These developments, along with the increased attention to *pehu*-territories, reflect a strategic enhancement of new territories.

The policy behind these changes appears to have been aimed at augmenting the resources available to the central administration (Martinet 2022: 90). This objective is probably connected to the contemporaneous reorganisation of the administrative apparatus (Baer 1960: 296, 299–300; Strudwick, 1985: 337; Baud 1999: 323–327; Willems 2014: 23, no. 76; Martinet 2019: 558–561). The expansion in the number of officials necessitated an increase in the capacity for remuneration (Martinet 2022: 90). While evidence of this administrative reorganization is apparent between the reigns of Neferirkare and Nyuserre, M. Baud notes a lack of specific data for Sahure’s reign (Baud 1999: 327). It is therefore plausible that these transformations

were implemented concurrently; if not, they would have been introduced over a relatively short period. The documentation exhibits a high degree of coherence, suggesting that the administrative data and the Sacred Geography Discourse are closely aligned.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of a Sacred Geography Discourse in ancient Egypt was a gradual process, beginning with the establishment of the province system during the Early Dynastic Period. It was in this era that the foundational geographical entities that compose the territory, the *sepat*, were created. The Fourth Dynasty saw the emergence of the first documents that classified these entities in a geographically coherent manner. At this point, it is possible to consider that a Sacred Geography Discourse was taking shape. However, there was no intention to represent the entirety of Egyptian territory at this stage. Instead, the primary purpose of the lists of funerary domains was religious and economic, with geographical considerations being secondary. Thus, territorial representation during this period was incidental.

It was during the reign of Sahure in the Fifth Dynasty that territorial representation became intentional. This is evidenced by the introduction of the first processions featuring personified provinces and *pehu*-territories. Together, these geographical entities provide a comprehensive representation of the Egyptian territory, encompassing both regions that were administratively controlled and those that were not, yet held economic significance. The deliberate nature of territorial representation is further highlighted by the development of captions, evident in the Fifth Dynasty and especially during the reign of Sahure. The concurrent appearance of these elements reflects a conscious conceptualization of the territory.

This approach must be understood within the broader context of the territorial reorganization and the restructuring of the administrative apparatus during the Fifth Dynasty, especially under Sahure. The Sacred Geography Discourse developed alongside these economic and administrative changes, integrating the evolving territorial framework into a religious and ideological context where the entire territory was mobilized to make offerings to the deity.

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