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Same-sex desire, conjugal constructs, and the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep

Greg Reeder

Abstract

Discovered in 1964, the tomb of the manicurists Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep from the Fifth Dynasty of Old Kingdom Egypt depicts the two men in intimate poses usually reserved for husband and wife. Initial archaeologies suggested the two men were close friends, but soon the idea of them as twins was being advocated to explain their 'exaggerated affection'. This paper uses recent research on conjugal figuration during the pictorially innovative Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Dynasties and internal evidence from the tomb itself to offer insight into the unique relationship between the two manicurists.

Keywords

Same-sex desire; Egypt; Fifth Dynasty Old Kingdom; Niankhkhnum; Khnumhotep.

Introduction

On 12 November 1964 Mounir Basta, the Chief Inspector of Lower Egypt, together with the chief workman, descended a ladder into the darkness of a newly cleared shaft just south of the causeway of Unas in the Necropolis of Saqqara. Holding only a kerosene lamp, they crawled on their hands and knees into a small Fifth Dynasty offering chamber (circa 2400 BC). To their excitement the walls were inscribed, but the light revealed something Basta had never seen before in any of the Saqqara tombs. There, carved in the space between two false doors, stood two men embracing one another (Plate 1). Their names and identical titles were carved above them: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, manicurist of the king and the inspector of manicurists of the Palace.

Basta was both impressed and intrigued:

The scene is repeated on two other walls. . . . The importance of the discovery of this tomb can be connected with this unique scene. The inscriptions of the tomb do not lead us to any solution, concerning the relationship between the two deceased. Were they



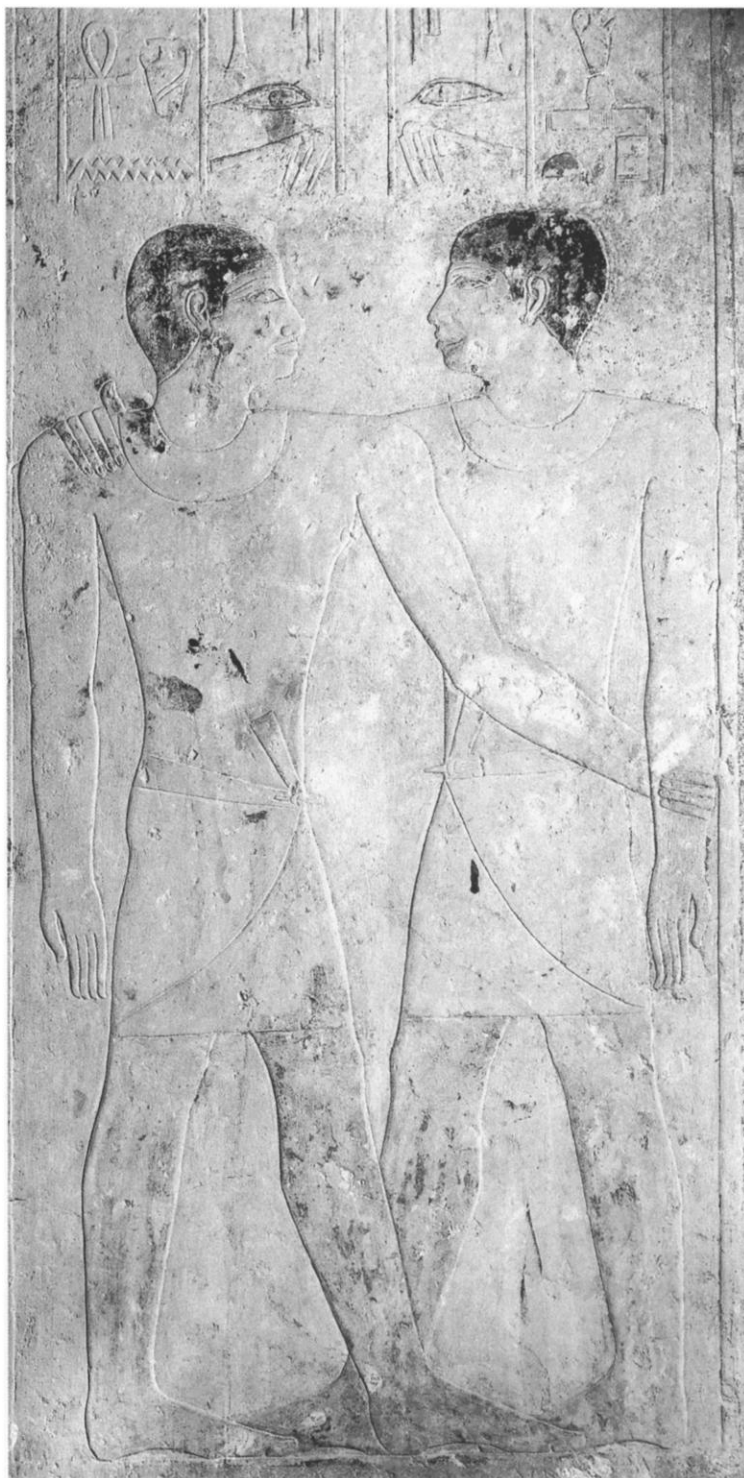


Plate 1 Detail of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep embracing between the false doors (Photo: Greg Reeder).

two brothers? Were they the father and son? Or were they two officials in the king's palace who had enjoyed a cordial friendship in life and wished to keep it after death in the nether world.

(Basta 1979: 47)

Other blocks from the tomb were soon discovered in the building material of the causeway of Unas itself. These were recovered and the mastaba and rock-cut tomb reconstructed, restored, and published (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977). The scenes of the two men embracing provided fertile grounds for speculation. Altenmüller and Moussa suggested Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were brothers, possibly twins. It was John Baines, though, who, in his seminal study entitled 'Egyptian twins', creatively dealt with the questions raised by the 'exaggerated affection' publicly displayed by the two men by suggesting their 'twins' necessitated the ancients viewing them as special liminal beings, dual anomalies, in need of symbolic correction to be acceptable, therefore treating the 'twins' as a single social person (Baines 1985: 480). Baines's 'twins' label has been the epithet with the most staying power.

The argument for twinship was constructed around the case of Eighteenth-Dynasty 'brothers' Suty and Hor. Their stela, now in the British Museum (BM 826), states in unusual language they are brothers (*sn*), and that 'He came forth with me from the womb on the same day' (Lichtheim 1976: 88). This inscription has been widely accepted as a reference to their 'certain twinship'. Recently, however, this 'certain twinship' has been called into question by Jean Revez in his research on the metaphorical use of the word *sn*.

The kinship term *sn*, 'brother', may metaphorically be translated either by 'friend', 'lover', 'husband', 'colleague', 'confrere' or 'coregent'. In such cases, *sn* refers to an alter ego, a person who is on an equal footing with someone else, because both share the same values or hold the same power. The relationship which binds a *sn* 'brother' to another, is therefore one of complementarity.

(Revez 1997)

Consequently, Revez proposed the possibility that the language used by Suty and Hor on their stela to describe their 'twinship' was, in fact, metaphorical.

Whether Hor and Suty were 'what appears to be the only unambiguous reference to twin or multiple birth from dynastic Egypt' as John Baines writes in his excellent article on Egyptian twins, or whether the expression *pr.n.fm ht hn' .i m hrw pn* – 'he went forth with me from the womb on that day' is simply a Semitic figure of speech, is open to question. A letter written by the king of Amurru to another, unrelated one, namely the king of Ugarit, tends to support the second alternative: 'My brother, look: I and you are brothers. Sons of a single man, we are brothers. Why should we not be in good terms with each other? Whatever desire you will write to me, I will satisfy it; and you will satisfy my desires. We form a unit.' The expression 'sons of a single man' is very similar to 'he went forth with me from the womb on that day'. In my opinion, it is very risky to conclude to any blood ties between brothers, whenever the equal status between two people is clearly emphasized, such as in the last example, the case of Hor and Suty, or that of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III.

(Revez 1997)

Though the foundation of Baines's twin theory may now be called into question, the intimate poses and gestures of the two manicurists in the iconographic displays within their tomb still requires attention. Are the two manicurists closer to Revez's definition of metaphorical 'brothers', perhaps alter egos of men who are on equal footing with each other, both sharing the same values and holding the same power? They both shared the same titles of royal manicurist and overseer of the manicurists in the palace of the king. They also both received equal offerings in the tomb and are portrayed the same number of times. But there are curious subtle differences in their representations and intimate nuances that need to be addressed.

Nadine Cherpion, in her work '*Sentiment conjugal et figuration à l'Ancien Empire*' (1995), provides a useful model for cataloguing and analysing intimate scenes in Old Kingdom iconography. Cherpion gathered intimate portraits of husbands and wives from tombs of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, and demonstrates that certain innovative iconographic principles existed in the Old Kingdom to portray conjugal sentiment. Comparing the representations of the pairing of the two manicurists with Cherpion's identifications is, I believe, a plausible methodology for showing how the pairing of the two manicurists relates to iconographic trends that existed in the Old Kingdom. This analysis then allows me to speculate on the nature of the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. Adopting such a methodology is all the more important because of the total lack of any inscription indicating the two men's biological relationship to each other.

Both Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep had wives and children. But the portrayal of the two men with their respective wives in their joint tomb reveals none of the innovative intimacies of the times. Instead, that intimacy was reserved for the two men to share. The wives are shown throughout this tomb except in the offering chamber. I discuss the imagery found in the entrance hall, the inner rock-cut chamber, and the offering chamber.

Entrance hall

Just inside the entrance, past the names and titles of the two manicurists, is an example of the fowling and fish-spearing motif. On the western side of the doorway Niankhkhnum, in the presence of his wife and children, is shown fowling while his wife smells a lotus. In contrast, Khnumhotep, on the eastern side of the door, also in the presence of his wife and children, is shown spearing two fish; his wife also smells a lotus.

Beyond the marsh hunting scene on the jams of the doorway opening into the tomb are scenes depicting the transport of the statues of the deceased. Here there is a double statue of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep holding hands. This portrayal of the statues of the two men holding hands compares with other Old Kingdom statues of husbands and wives holding hands, indicating conjugal sentiment, as in the double statue of Nikaoukhnum and wife, now in Leipzig (Cherpion 1995: pl. 4c, Ägyptisches Museum 3155, Leipzig).

Inside the doorway on the eastern wall of the entrance hall sit Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in an interlocking, and almost equal embrace, greeting the offering bearers to their tomb (Fig. 1; see also Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: pl. 28). Here though, as throughout the tomb, Niankhkhnum is positioned in front of his companion Khnumhotep;

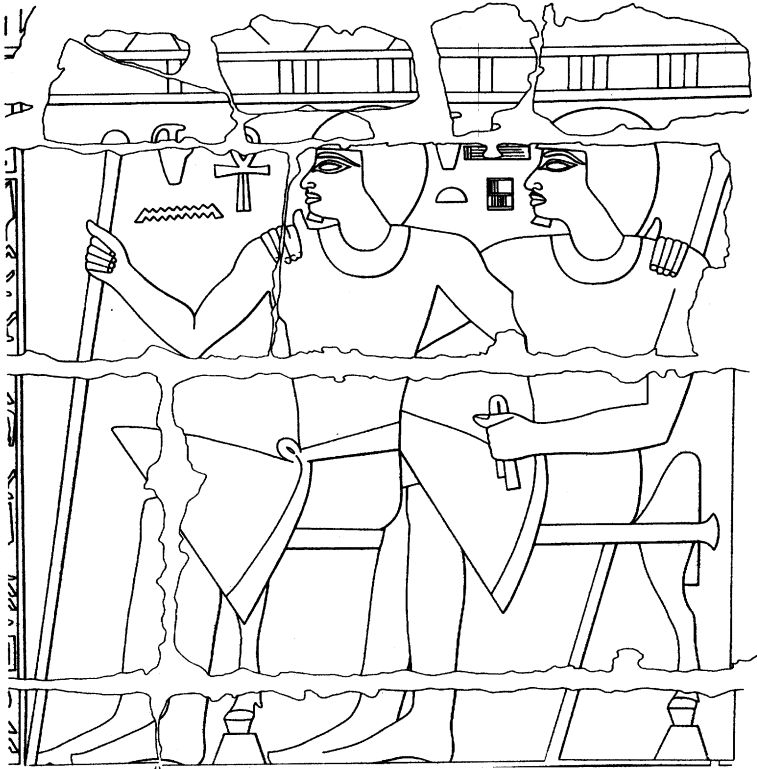


Figure 1 Detail of the two manicurists sitting and receiving offerings (after Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Abb.11. Line drawing: W. Ruhm. Permission Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

the latter depicted in a position usually taken by the female in scenes of different gendered couples (Schäfer 1986: 174–5). Cherpion provides a similar example of coupling in the statue of Imapepi and his wife, as seen from behind (Cherpion 1995: pl. 7a). Also, an offering slab recovered from deeper in the tomb for the son of Niankhkhnum, Hamre, and his wife Tjeset shows the common iconographic portrayal of husband and wife (Plate 2). Hamre and his wife sit in chairs receiving their son, the offering bearer. Hamre is in front, while his wife is seated behind him, extending her arm behind her husband's back grasping his right shoulder.

Below the scene of the two men sitting, greeting their offering bearers, are five registers. The first two registers are of ten offering bearers each, while the third is of ten individuals portrayed slightly larger than the offering bearers above (see Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: pl. 29). The scene in the third register is central to the main argument put forward by researchers to advocate a genetic relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. Depicted at the front of this line of figures is a male and female couple followed by two men, three women, and three men. Most of the people in the line have connections to weaving, but the man in front is a ship's captain. The two men at the end of the line are shown holding hands. Their names just above identify them as Niankhkhnum, who is leading, and Khnumhotep.



Plate 2 Detail of Hamre and his wife Tjeset (after Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Tafel 80b. Photo: D. Johannes. Permission Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

The argument proposed by Baines, Moussa and Altenmüller, and others is that the man and women are the parents of the two who follow, i.e. the two manicurists are siblings. But, there are in fact three possibilities that need to be considered. First, the man and women are the parents of both Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. But also, the man and women could be the parents of one of the men, probably Niankhkhnum as his family has a slight prominence in the iconography of the tomb. Or, finally, the man and woman are not the parents of either Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. As is usually the case Old Kingdom tombs, there is no textual statement identifying family relationships in such scenes.

Whatever the relationship between the leading male and female couple to the following Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, viewers are confronted with a leading male and female couple balanced by a same-sex couple behind. Interestingly, both the female of the leading couple and Khnumhotep are shown not raising one arm to their chests while holding on to their male partners. This suggests the two couples were perceived to be alike in some way. It should be noted here that it is Niankhkhnum who leads his companion by the hand in this group, and into their tomb.

The endowment text, which was placed in front of the two embracing men, states, in language, though not unique to this tomb, that their families (the children of their wives

or anyone else) shall not interfere in their funeral arrangements, and mentions ‘fathers and mothers and those who are in the necropolis’. Though it cannot be said whether the use of fathers and mothers in the plural refers to more than one generation, it is clear the tomb owners wanted their funeral arrangements to be as respected for themselves as for the fathers and mothers who are in the necropolis (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Sz.12.1). Once again Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were aligned with married couples.

On the southern wall of this entrance hall, there is a representation of the two men holding hands and walking on a tour of inspection (Plate 3). Again, it is Niankhkhnum who leads Khnumhotep by the hand into the inner spaces of their tomb. This bears a close resemblance to a husband and wife scene (Fig. 2), where Mereruka leads his wife Wa'tetkhethor into the tomb and into their conjugal bed (Cherpion 1995: 47).

Inner rock-cut chamber

At the entrance to the inner rock-cut chamber the two men appear above the doorway on opposite sides with offerings piled up between them (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Sz. 24.1–24.2). Niankhkhnum is on the western side and Khnumhotep sits on the eastern side smelling a lotus. Lotus-smelling by a man is a rare occurrence in the Fifth Dynasty



Plate 3 Niankhkhnum leading Khnumhotep by the hand into their tomb (after Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Tafel 35a. Photo: D. Johannes. Permission Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

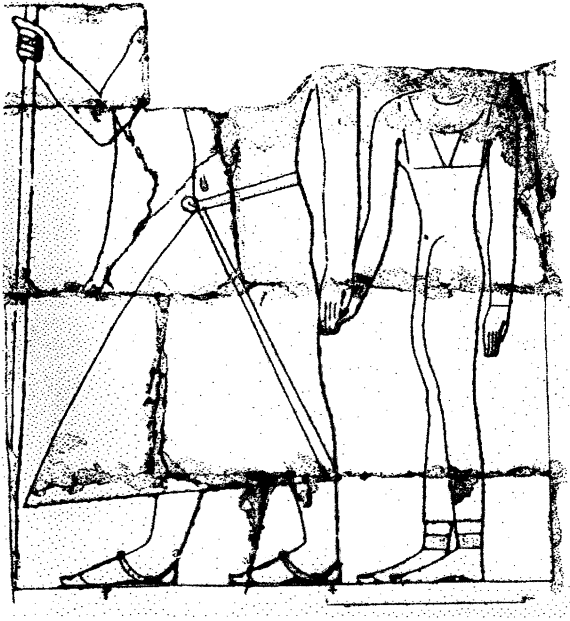


Figure 2 Mereruka leading his wife by the hand (after Duell 1938: pl. 14).

iconography (see Harpur 1987: fig. 52, where her example of a man smelling a lotus is in fact of Khnumhotep). It became much more prevalent in later Dynasties (common in Eighteenth Dynasty). Usually it is women who are shown smelling lotus at this time in the Old Kingdom. In this tomb it is only the women and Khnumhotep who are depicted smelling lotus.

Moving into the rock-cut chamber, and on the far southern end, is an elaborate banquet scene (Fig. 3). Here Niankhkhnum is pictured on the eastern side and Khnumhotep on the western side. This banquet scene is not only noteworthy for its fine details of musicians, dancers, and singers but also because of what was purposefully erased by the ancient craftsmen. Just behind Niankhkhnum was a carving of his wife, Khentikaus, originally represented only slightly smaller than her husband. This would have been the only place in the tomb where a wife was portrayed almost equal in height to her husband and pictured embracing her husband. In all other representations of the two men's wives in this tomb, the women are noticeably smaller than their husbands. This is, in fact, a common way of depicting wives.

This particular scene is noted by Cherpion as an example of conjugal figuration (Cherpion 1995: 46). But Khentikaus was removed by the designers of the tomb, leaving only suggestive remnants of her presence. All that remain are faint outlines of her fingers; one hand can be seen grasping Niankhkhnum's shoulder, while her other hand holds his arm. For some reason it was decided to change the content of this banquet scene significantly, and Khentikaus's image was plastered over, making the two companions Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep the only honoured guests at their banquet (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Sz. 31).

Interestingly, on the opposite side of the banquet scene, where Khnumhotep is seated, no room was planned for his wife to be depicted seated behind him. His back is up against

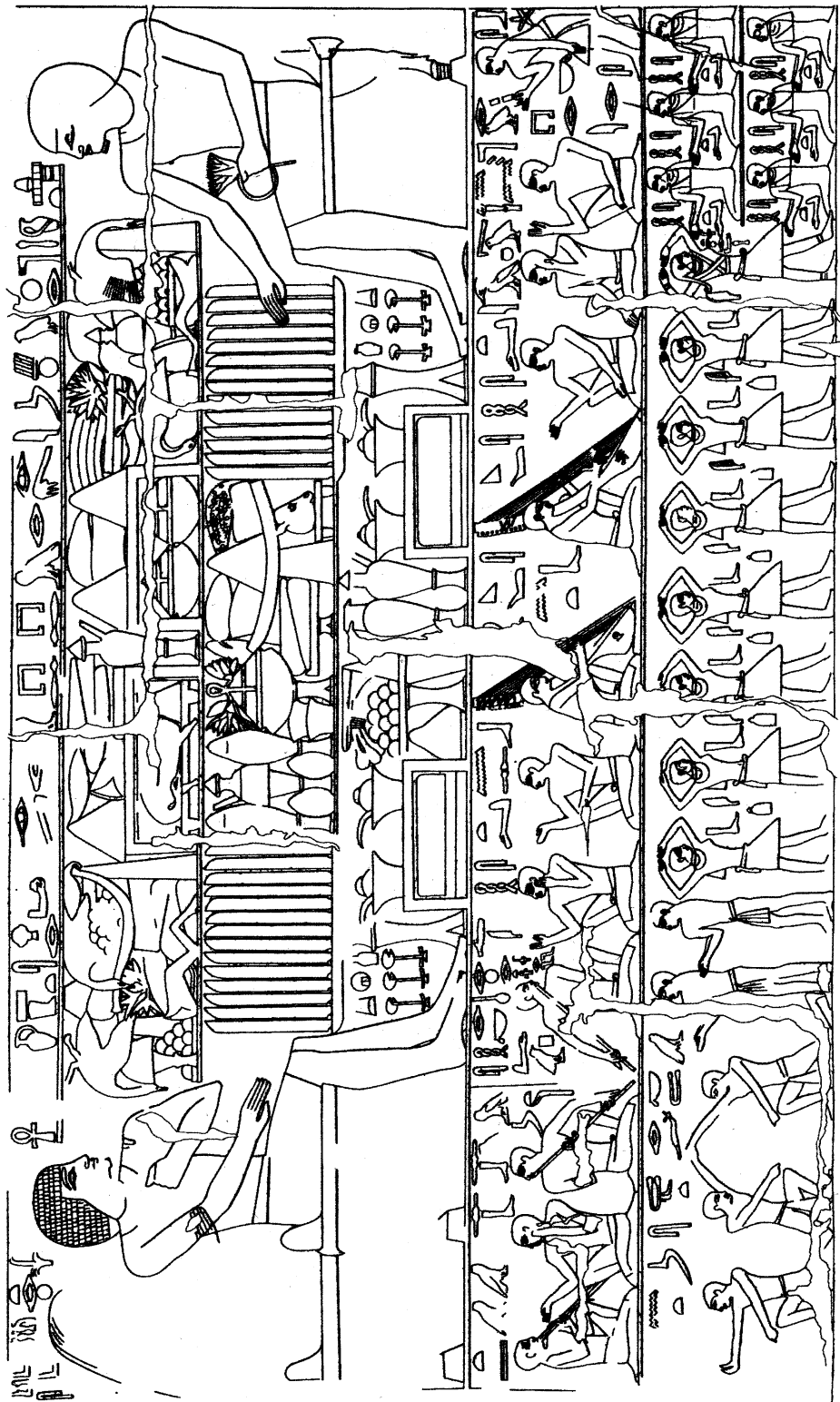


Figure 3 The banquet scene (after Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Abb. 25. Line drawing: W. Ruhm. Permission Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

the wall, and he sits holding a lotus. Perhaps it was originally thought only Niankhkhnum had the stature not only to allow his wife to be shown but also to allow a false door and offering tables for his eldest son Hamre and his wife Tjeset. This would also explain the earlier ‘family’ scene (if that is indeed what it is) featuring only Niankhkhnum’s family. Khnumhotep then was repeatedly treated more like Niankhkhnum’s spouse.

Underneath the image of Khnumhotep holding a lotus is a special musical scene (Fig. 4). A musical director is facing three singers and two harpists. He makes a very interesting comment that is carved in front of him. He tells this group to ‘play the one about “The Two Divine Brothers”’ (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Sz. 31.2). The epithet ‘*snwj ntrwj*’ in other contexts refers to Horus and Seth (see Erman and Grapow 1926–63: 4, 145.8), and it should be considered as such here. There are strong suggestions as to what kind of song might have been sung to two intimate male friends at a banquet, a banquet that, when shared by husband and wife, could have had erotic elements coded into the scene (Robins 1988: 63). An account of Horus and Seth from the ‘Chester Beatty Papyrus I’ is famous for its bawdy descriptions of the attempted sexual penetration of Horus by Seth, said to have taken place after a banquet. Another Middle Kingdom hieratic text on papyrus from el-Lahun also speaks of this narrative myth of Horus and Seth. Parkinson suggests the seduction of Horus is motivated by desire, for Seth utters to Horus what Parkinson refers to as ‘The earliest recorded chat-up line – “How lovely your backside is”’ (Parkinson 1991: 120).

Texts discovered in the Pyramid of Pepi I bring the tradition closer in time to the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, and describe the encounter between Horus and Seth as a much more mutually reciprocal sexual action. It states: ‘Horus insinuated his semen into the backside of Set and Set insinuated his semen into the backside of Horus’ (Parkinson 1995: 65). This is the earliest indication we have that defines the sexual encounter between Horus and Seth, though violent, as completely reciprocal. The oral tradition associated with these tales makes the likelihood of their inclusion in song not that hard to accept, particularly a song we know was entitled ‘The two divine brothers’. This was possibly a ribald song sung as part of the entertainment at this elaborate banquet.



Figure 4 Detail from the banquet of the musical conductor asking to ‘play the one about The Two Divine Brothers’ (after Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Abb.25. Line drawing: W. Ruhm. Permission Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

Offering chamber

The first extremely intimate portrait of the two companions appears at the entrance to their offering chamber, to the west of the banquet scene (Plate 4). Niankhkhnum is on the proper right, in front of and supporting Khnumhotep's forearm, while Khnumhotep embraces his companion with his arm placed behind Niankhkhnum's back grasping his shoulder. Khnumhotep embraces while Niankhkhnum supports. Their children surround them, but their wives are not included. This is paralleled in the tomb of Kai at Giza, where the wife embraces her husband, and the children are depicted on either side of the couple (KMT 1997: 23). Another example can be found in the tomb of Uhemka at Giza, where the wife places her hand on her husband's shoulder, just as Khnumhotep does, and clasps her husband's forearm as Niankhkhnum does (Cherpion 1995: 41).

Inside the small offering chamber of the tomb two false doors were constructed, one



Plate 4 The embrace at the entrance to the offering chamber (Photo: Greg Reeder).

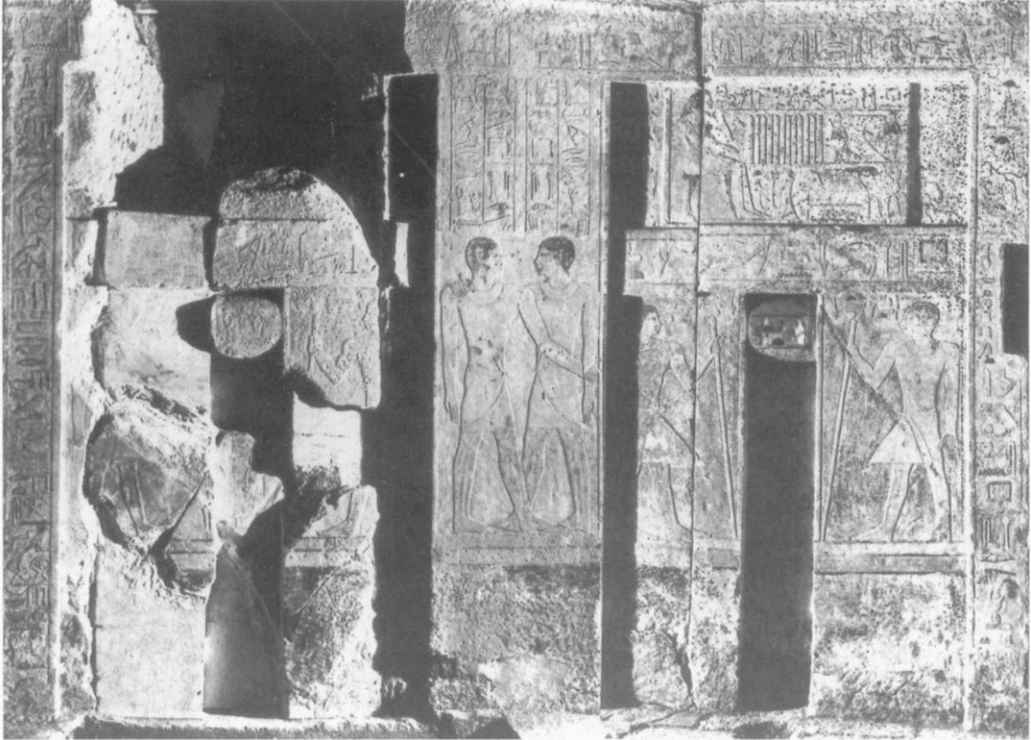


Plate 5 The false doors of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep (after Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: Tafel 92a and b. Photo: D. Johannes. Permission Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

each for Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep on the west wall. Khnumhotep's false door is to the right and Niankhkhnum's to the left (Plate 5). Niankhkhnum's false door was almost completely destroyed by ancient grave robbers but enough of it remains to understand its composition.

The intimate embrace between the two manicurists between these two false doors is that image Basta first saw in 1964 (Plate 1). In keeping with other representations of the couple in the tomb, Niankhkhnum is on the proper right supporting the embracing Khnumhotep. Though face to face, they are not as intimate as in the embrace at the entrance to the offering chamber. This entire composition closely resembles, and could very well have been copied from, the only slightly earlier tomb of Nefer and Kha-hay. This tomb is located in the same part of the cemetery, near the causeway of Unas. The composition and iconographic vocabulary of the false doors here are almost identical to the tomb of the two manicurists (Moussa and Altenmüller 1971: 32). Kha-Hay stands on the proper right facing his wife Meret-Yetes. They gaze directly at each other, a rare pose in and of itself (Plate 6). Their own false doors flank the scene. The entry in the publication of the tomb is worth noting. 'The space between the false doors of Ka-Hay and Meret-Yetes depicts the couple in an affectionate face to face position. The wife passes her right arm behind her husband's back, the hand clasping his right shoulder' (Moussa and Altenmüller 1971: 36).

Directly opposite the false doors, and on the reverse side of the entrance column where

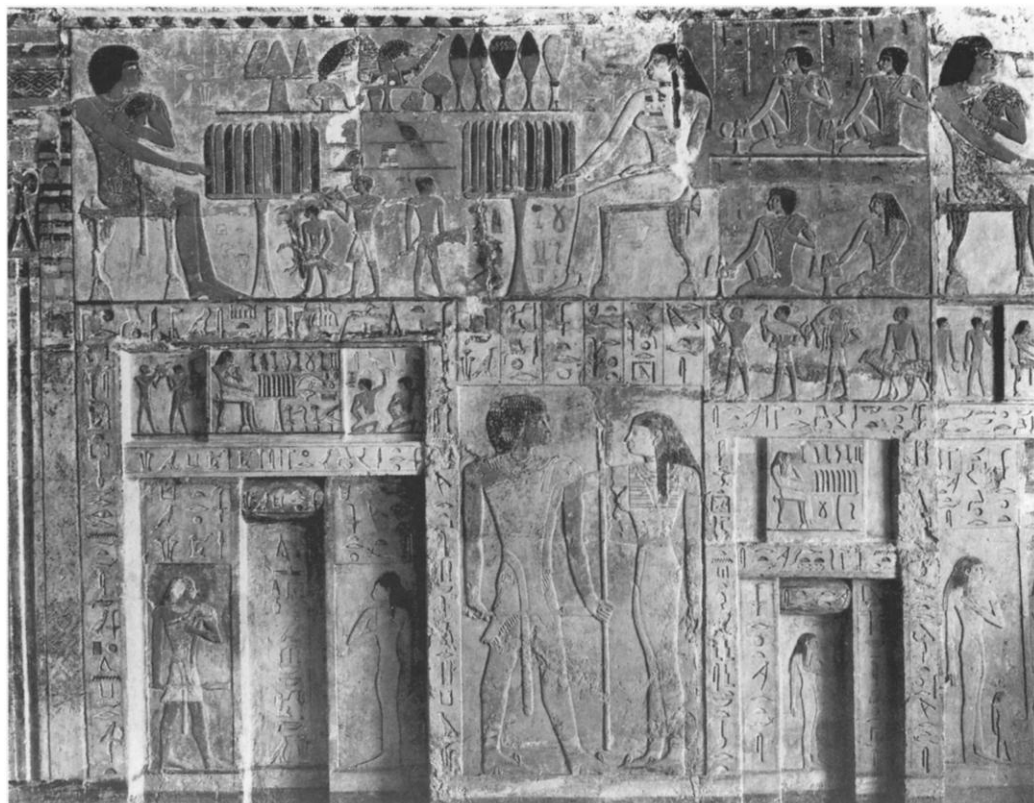


Plate 6 The false doors of Kha-Hay and Meret-yetes (after Moussa and Altenmüller 1971: pl. 32. Photo: D. Johannes. Permission Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

the two men embrace surrounded by their children (Plate 4), is the most intimate embrace of all between the two men: Niankhkhnum to the right and Khnumhotep to the left (Plate 7). This time they are more intimate than before, and much more so than the image of husband and wife in the Nefer and Kha-Hay tomb. Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are not only shown very close here – face to face and nose to nose – but so close that the knots on their belts are touching, linking their lower torsos. As in the tomb of Nefer and Kha-Hay, the couple direct their gaze towards each other.

Conclusion

Space here does not permit a detailed survey on the subject of homosexuality in Ancient Egypt (see Parkinson 1995). Suffice it to say that the few references there appear to refer to a certain antipathy towards the specific sexual act of anal intercourse rather than male to male intimacy and affection in this phallocentric society (Hare 1999: 145 ff). The ideal Egyptian family consisting of father, mother, and children was central to society and official discourse. But sometimes we see glimpses of other relationships existing in spite of official attitudes. Cherpion (1995) suggests that during the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth



Plate 7 Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep embrace in the offering chamber (Photo: Greg Reeder).

Dynasties there was much experimentation in the ways that affection could be represented between husband and wife on official monuments. It was during this window of opportunity that two men, manicurists to the king, were able to construct their own monument.

Cherpion's analysis in identifying and classifying conjugal constructs offers a chance to view the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in a different light. Choices were made in the way Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep planned the 'decoration' of their tomb. Although evidence exists that other family members were buried in their tomb, the tomb was built for the two manicurists to co-habit for eternity. Their wives'

appearance is perfunctory and in a known instance where space was initially planned to show a wife (the banquet scene in the rock chamber) a decision was made to remove her figure *after* she had been placed there. The choice was also made to not show husband and wife gazing into each other's eyes as in the tomb of Nefer and Kha-Hay. Instead the choice was made to show the two men directing their gaze into each other's eyes, while in intimate embraces.

I agree somewhat with John Baines when he says: 'Since the embracing and hand-holding scenes are unique in private tombs, little can be said about their meaning beyond the fact that they express publicly the close involvement of the two men' (Baines 1985: 467). The hand-holding and embracing scenes may be unique between men of equal station in private tombs but not for husband and wife. It is when the totality of intimate scenes in the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are compared to the innovative conjugal figurations of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Dynasties of the Old Kingdom that same-sex desire and sentiment must be considered as a probable explanation. Whatever the biological relationship may have been between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, their iconographic vocabulary was most closely aligned to that used to portray conjugal sentiment between husband and wife. Their representation was unique, and deviates from what appears to be the norm for the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Dynasties of the Old Kingdom.

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