

Report: "Homosexual" Artefacts.

The study of 'homosexuality' in ancient Egypt is a difficult task. The term 'homosexuality,' is a modern concept that presupposes sexual classification; a psychophysical division of beings into categories based upon distinct assumptions regarding the sexual preferences of said individual, whether these are sexual acts, desires or pleasures. Unlike the physicality of sex, sexuality is a modern construction used to define, interpret and organise human nature.¹ The use of the term 'homosexual' to represent a being who seeks sexual gratification in members of their own sex, even in modern culture and society, is not always accurate, and must be used with extreme caution and consideration when used in conjunction with reference to the ancients. It is widely accepted that sexuality as a defining characteristic, as opposed to the acknowledgement of sexual preference or pleasures, was not recognised within ancient Egyptian culture.² It must also be noted that since sexuality was not utilised as a defining mechanism, that any modern preconceptions of 'homosexual' attitudes and behaviours must not be projected upon the ancient evidence. Representational evidence for ancient sexualities is ambiguous.³ Recognising and identifying an artefact as exemplifying 'homosexuality,' as opposed to simply recognising 'homosexual' desires, must be certain.⁴

It makes sense, for a culture that did not define sexuality, that the Egyptians would not have an exact term for sexuality; and what modern historians refer to using terms of sexual orientation is interpreted from descriptions of sexual activity or expressions of desire.⁵ The verb *nk*, (to have penetrative sex) carries no connotations, however, *nkw*, (a man on whom penetrative sex is performed) is likened with sexual abuse, and carries with it negative overtones of submission.⁶ This response to the passive role of penetrative sex is one that is recurrent throughout the ancient and classical periods, with even Julius Caesar falling victim to ridicule after submitting to Nicomedes in 46BCE.⁷

¹ Halperin, D. (2003) 131-137; Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 58.

² Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 59.

³ Manniche, L. (1987) 22; Meskell, L. (1999) 94.

⁴ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 39.

⁵ Meskell, L. (1999) 94; Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 58.

⁶ Meskell, L. (1999) 94.

⁷ Kellum, B. (2003) 284-5.

‘Homosexual’ desire, as apparent from the twenty-seventh declaration in the Negative Confessions of the Book of the Dead, Chapter 125, is condemned by society, nonetheless, there is evidence to support that ‘homosexual’ acts were known to the ancient Egyptians and the practice of such acts seems to have been more accepted.⁸ Declaration 27 states: “I did not *nk* a *nkk(w)*.” *nkk(w)* is likened with *nk(w)*, but apparently without the connotations of abuse that the Old Kingdom term once carried, and simply refers to a sexually passive male.⁹

References to ‘homosexual’ acts and desires, however, are very few, and where represented, are usually done so with aggression.¹⁰ In the Coffin Texts, Spell 635 utilises the degrading status associated with sodomy to assert the deceased’s power over the god Atem: “Atem has no power over N. N *nks* his backside (*ꜥrt*).”¹¹ Likewise, in Spell 700, in a passage talking of Geb, the deceased again uses sodomy as a symbolism of power: “his phallus is between the buttocks of his son and his heir.”¹²

Within the boundary stela of Senwosret III, the word *hmjw* is used. It derives from *hm*, (to retreat), but, when used in conjunction with the phallic determinative, as it is in this text, it suggests a sexual connotation, much like that of *nkk(w)*. One possible translation, of which, is ‘pansy.’¹³ However, it must be noted that neither term, *hmjw* or *nkk(w)*, explicitly refer to a person’s sexuality, but rather to their sexually passive role or ‘effeminate’ cowardice.

Known as the Contendings of Horus and Seth, the myth explicitly details the attitudes to ‘homosexual’ intercourse. Whether the tale details that of rape, seduction, or reciprocal sex, depends upon which text is used.¹⁴ Pyramid Text 1036 records a reciprocal approach to ‘homosexual’ desire: “Horus has penetrated Seth’s anus with his seed. Seth has penetrated Horus’ anus with his seed.”¹⁵ Papyrus Chester Beatty I, dating to the 20th Dynasty reign of Ramses V, takes a more aggressive approach. After a banquet, Seth is said to rape Horus in order to shame him and take the crown from his brother, Osiris: “At night, Seth let his

⁸ Johnston, J.J. (2010) 2; Seawright, C. (2001).

⁹ Johnston, J.J. (2010) 2; Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 61-2.

¹⁰ Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 57.

¹¹ Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 64.

¹² Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 64-5.

¹³ Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 66.

¹⁴ Lyons, M. (2013).

¹⁵ Dollinger, A. (2000); Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 65.

member become stiff and he inserted it between the thighs of Horus.” Yet, within the Petrie Papyrus Fragment UC32158, dating to the late Middle Kingdom, the men are shown as lustful and seductive, proclaiming what has been described as the first recorded ‘chat-up line’: “How lovely are your buttocks! And how muscular your thighs...”¹⁶ What is constant throughout each of the representations of the tale is the degrading of the passive participant. In each tale it is said that “Horus placed his hands between his thighs and caught the semen of Seth,” for which Isis severs Horus’ hand and throws it into the Nile. After fashioning Horus a new hand, Horus is instructed to spread his semen upon Seth’s lettuce – to which, unsuspectingly, Seth devours. When Seth later tries to degrade Horus, stating that he has done to him the “work of a male,” Horus calls forth their semen showing Seth to have received his seed and therefore to have been the passive participant.¹⁷ Again, from these accounts, it is the passive role that is disgraced and not the physical ‘homosexuality.’

None of the texts, however, have touched upon the concept of ‘homosexual’ love and relationships. Two elusive examples for evidence of mutual ‘homosexual’ relations can be derived from the Tale of King Neferkare and his General Saset, and the depiction of Akhenaten and Smenkhkare on Berlin stela 17813. The Tale of King Neferkare and his General Saset, originating from the Middle Kingdom, tells of how Pepi II would creep from his palace at night and climb into the house of his general, Saset, and would leave before dawn. It is relevant to mention that Saset is stated as being unmarried, something most unusual in the 6th Dynasty.¹⁸ This tale would suggest, since Pepi was married and therefore unable to maintain a ‘homosexual’ relationship with Saset, that the two men were at least engaging in a mutual, consenting sexual relationship.

The sexual relationship of Akhenaten and Smenkhkare has also been alluded to on the basis of the two men depicted embracing on Berlin stela 17813, however, due to the bizarre style of art during the Amarna period, the figures are rather androgynous.¹⁹ This ambiguity has brought the genders of the males into question, as is the case with ostrakon EA50714. This limestone ostrakon portrays a scene of a man having sexual intercourse with a woman in a

¹⁶ Johnston, J.J. (2010) 4-5.

¹⁷ Johnston, J.J. (2010) 4-5; Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 65.

¹⁸ Rice, M. (1999) 175.

¹⁹ Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 63.

standing position.²⁰ Due to the androgynous nature of the female's depiction it has been suggested that this may in fact portray a 'homosexual' act.

However, the largest debate concerning 'homosexual' relationships surrounds that of the tomb of Niankhkhnun and Khnumhotep. The changing name of this tomb gives an inclination into the progressive research of its occupants; from "the Tomb of the Two Brothers," to the "Tomb of the Manicurists,"²¹ suggesting that the hypothesis of the occupants being brothers was disproved, questioned, or outdated. The Tomb of the Manicurists dates to the 5th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom c.2350BC and was discovered by Mounir Basta in 1964.²² Intrigued by the intimate scenes depicted of the two men, Basta questioned: "Were they brothers? Were they 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?"²³ With the publication of the tomb in 1977 by Moussa and Altenmüller came the interpretation of the scenes as depicting that of two siblings, followed shortly after by Baines identification of the brothers as twins in 1985.²⁴ This identification was based on several hypotheses: the comparison of Niankhkhnun and Khnumhotep with the representation of Suty and Hor on a New Kingdom stela (BM 826), the existence of the occupants' wives and children within the tomb reliefs and similar features within the two names. Baines came to the conclusion that there was a taboo surrounding twins which would lead to the suppression of any indication that the two men were related.²⁵ However, if this was the case, it would be more likely that they withheld their kinship so as to be portrayed as equals within their reliefs,²⁶ as they are in inscription sharing the title of "Overseers of Manicurists of the Palace."²⁷ Baines and Parkinson argue that since the men are depicted with wives, it is not probable to suggest a 'homosexual' meaning upon the embrace of the men, but rather a family kinship.²⁸ Yet, even though the wives are named and presented, the intimacy is reserved solely for the two men.²⁹ The presence of Khnum

²⁰ www.britishmuseum.org

²¹ Gerig, B.L. (2005).

²² Reeder, G. (2000) 193.

²³ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 35; Reeder, G. (2008) 193-5.

²⁴ Howard, J. (2012); Reeder, G. (2008) 143; Wilford, J.N. (2005).

²⁵ Reeder, G. (2008) 145.

²⁶ Lyons, M. (2013).

²⁷ Rice, M. (1999) 98.

²⁸ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 35, 36.

²⁹ Reeder, G. (2000) 196; Wilford, J.N. (2005).

within both names in itself is unexceptional, but when Khnum's responsibility for forming beings from clay is considered, it may be interpreted that the twins would be named after the creator god.³⁰ Baines and Allen both specifically state that they do not interpret the tomb as bearing 'homosexual' connotations.³¹ However, Baines does state: "Since the hand-holding and embracing scenes may be unique between men of equal station in private tombs, little can be said about their meaning beyond the fact that they express publicly the close involvement of the two men."³² This mutual embrace is one normally attested to kings and deities, where it was believed that the king received *k3* from the god this way. If Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were twins, they could be symbolic of each other's *k3*.³³

O'Connor progressed Baines' twin theory: "My suggestion is that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were indeed twins, but of a very special sort. They were conjoined twins, and it was this physical peculiarity that prompted the main depictions of them hand-holding or embracing in their tomb-chapel."³⁴ However, Reeder, as well as Moussa and Altenmüller suggest that Khnumhotep died before Niankhkhnum. Evidence for this is in the inscription describing Khnumhotep as being "honoured by a great god," whilst in the corresponding scene, Niankhkhnum only carries his official titles.³⁵ Also, Khnumhotep is depicted within the Tomb of the Vizier Ptahshepses at Abusir, in several scenes unaccompanied by Niankhkhnum. But also within Room 10, there are two depictions referencing "Barber of the Great House and Ka-servant Khnumhotep." This inscription possibly predates the coming together of the two men as royal manicurists.³⁶ Since no physical remains of the manicurists remain, it is impossible to discover whether the two men were biologically related.³⁷

The case that the tomb depicts a 'homosexual' couple has gained more advocates over the past decades, with the 'homosexual' interpretation appearing as the most popular interpretation in Google web-searches.³⁸ Dowson states that: "It is highly likely that if this tomb was unearthed in the 1990s or later, the idea of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep being

³⁰ Lyons, M. (2013); Vasiljević, V. (2008) 366; Wilford, J.N. (2005).

³¹ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 35; Reeder, G. (2008) 145; Wilford, J.N. (2005).

³² Farrer, S. (2005) 18.

³³ Vasiljević, V. (2008) 368-9.

³⁴ Wilford, J.N. (2005).

³⁵ Reeder, G. (2008) 148; Wilford, J.N. (2005).

³⁶ Reeder, G. (2008) 151-2.

³⁷ Reeder, G. (2008) 152.

³⁸ Wilford, J.N. (2005).

a same-sex couple would have been raised immediately.”³⁹ Baines argues that: “The gay-couple idea is essentially derived from imposing modern preoccupations on ancient materials and not attending to the cultural context.”⁴⁰ Dowson argues that the reluctance to accept the same-sex relationship is grounded in an “overwhelming bias towards heterosexual normality in academe,” and that he does not see why “Reeder and others are required to produce closely argued analyses for why a particular relationship to be seen as homosexual, whereas heterosexual identities are merely and credibly plausible.”⁴¹ Parkinson does not believe that Egyptology is “afflicted with homophobia,” only that people might “conclude that one is seeing what one wants to see,” and that “there is a fine line between reading against the grain ... and producing a reading that’s highly unlikely.”⁴² Parkinson goes on to state that: “it cannot be seen as a modern gay relationship.”⁴³ However, within a culture that does not distinguish sexual preference, it would be illogical for any comparison of the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep with a modern perception of a ‘homosexual’ relationship. Also, due to the fact that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were manicurists and hairdressers, Parkinson worried that “modern stereotypes and caricatures of the homosexual are being projected back into the ancient past.”⁴⁴

Within the entrance hall, there is a double statue of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep holding hands, which bears striking similarities with that of the double statue of Nikaokhnoum and his wife, now in Leipzig.⁴⁵ In scenes, Niankhkhnum is depicted in front of Khnumhotep; the latter taking on the role normally reserved for the wife.⁴⁶ Khnumhotep is frequently depicted throughout the tomb as taking on the ‘female’ role when compared with depictions of male-female relationships.⁴⁷ Within the rock-cut chamber, Khnumhotep is depicted smelling a lotus flower. Lotus-smelling by a man is a rare occurrence in Old Kingdom iconography, with only three men depicted doing so. Usually it is only women

³⁹ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 36.

⁴⁰ Wilfong, J.N. (2005).

⁴¹ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 40; Farrer, S. (2005) 18.

⁴² Farrer, S. (2005) 18.

⁴³ Farrer, S. (2005) 18.

⁴⁴ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 40.

⁴⁵ Reeder, G. (2000) 196.

⁴⁶ Reeder, G. (2000) 196-7.

⁴⁷ Reeder, G. (2000) 198.

depicted smelling lotus flowers.⁴⁸ Also within the Third Register of the Entrance Hall, a comparison may be drawn between that of the representation of Khnumhotep with that of a male-female couple, possibly their parents? Both the female and Khnumhotep are shown holding to their male partners suggesting that the two couples be perceived in the same manner.⁴⁹ At the southern end of the tomb is a scene depicting a banquet. What is striking is that Niankhkhnum's wife, Khentikaus, was originally carved into the scene behind her husband, but for reasons unknown was removed by the tomb decorators.⁵⁰ Even more striking, is that no space was ever reserved for that of Khnumhotep's wife, as he is depicted sat against the wall.⁵¹ Beneath the banquet scene are depictions of musicians where the director is inscribed as saying: "Play the one about the Two Divine Brothers." The epithet *snwj ntwj*, in other contexts, refers to the Contendings of Horus and Seth, where, after a banquet the men engaged in 'homosexual' intercourse.⁵² But it is within the Offering Chamber that we are presented with the depictions of their intimate embrace. "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."⁵³ They are shown facing each other, nose-to-nose, again with Khnumhotep taking on the 'active' role normally associated with the wife in male-female representations.⁵⁴

It was these intimate depictions of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep that led Reeder to interpret them as 'lovers.'⁵⁵ Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are depicted gazing at each other – face-to-face and nose-to-nose – to such a close extent that even the knots of their belts are touching, linking their lower torsos.⁵⁶ This pose is extremely rare and, in scenes of two men, is virtually non-existent.⁵⁷ Reeder suggests that "it is not unreasonable to assume that the two men are shown kissing each other as the Old Kingdom word for kissing, *sn*,

⁴⁸ Reeder, G. (2000) 199-200; Reeder, G. (2008) 147.

⁴⁹ Reeder, G. (2000) 197-8.

⁵⁰ Farrer, S. (2005) 18; Lyons, M. (2013); McCoy, J. (1998); Reeder, G. (2000) 200.

⁵¹ Reeder, G. (2008) 148.

⁵² Lyons, M. (2013); Reeder, G. (2000) 202.

⁵³ Reeder, G. (2000) 203.

⁵⁴ Lyons, M. (2013)

⁵⁵ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 36;

⁵⁶ Reeder, G. (2000) 205; Wilford, J.N. (2005).

⁵⁷ Gerig, B.L. (2005); Reeder, G. (2000) 204; Reeder, G. (2008) 149.

shows two noses coming together.”⁵⁸ Reeder’s identification was largely influenced by the work of Cherpion, whose accumulation of Old Kingdom tomb-reliefs proved useful for comparing the depictions of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep with other male-female couples of the time.⁵⁹ By comparing the iconography Reeder acknowledged the striking similarities between the portrayal of male-female couples and that of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. Cherpion writes:

« L’image la plus étonnante est celle des deux propriétaires qui se donnent l’accolade ; nulle part ailleurs en effet, dans l’art égyptien, on ne trouve l’exemple d’une tendresse aussi affirmée entre deux individus masculins. Pareille démonstration d’affection n’est jamais attestée qu’entre un mari et sa femme ou entre une mère et son fils ou sa fille, et seulement dans des cas rarissimes. Jamais non plus sauf lorsqu’il s’agit de couples, les visages ne se touchent comme c’est le cas ici. »⁶⁰

Another inclination that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep may have been ‘lovers,’ is in the decorative intertwining of their two names above the entrance to the inner rooms. Written as “Niankh-Khnum-Hotep,” which can be translated as; “Joined in life and joined in peace.”⁶¹ Reeder’s interpretation, however, is still not accepted by academia,⁶² whilst Baines twin theory is accepted by most Egyptologists.⁶³

To conclude, the only references to ‘homosexual’ activities within artefacts and non-literary texts refer to a certain antipathy towards sodomy as opposed to the actual ‘homosexuality’ of the relationship.⁶⁴ One also believes that both the twin and ‘homosexual’ interpretation of the Tomb of the Manicurists are plausible, however, taking into consideration Reeder’s close analysis and comparison with the research of Cherpion, appears to display what one believes to be a representation of a same-sex couple who wished to be represented in the same manner as that of a male-female couple.

⁵⁸ Reeder, G. (2008) 151.

⁵⁹ Dowson, T.A. (2008) 36, 40; McCoy, J. (1998); Wilford, J.N. (2005)

⁶⁰ Reeder, G. (2008) 145.

⁶¹ Farrer, S. (2005) 18; Gerig, B.L. (2005); Howard, J. (2012); McCoy, J. (1998); Lyons, M. (2013); Reeder, G. (2008) 147.

⁶² Dowton, T.A. (2008) 36.

⁶³ Wilford, J.N. (2005).

⁶⁴ Parkinson, R.B. (1995) 67; Reeder, G. (2000) 205.

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