

GENDER DIS-ORIENTING INTERPRETATIONS AT SAQQARA, EGYPT

By Davide Mazzone

Due to its uncommon scenes, the so-called ‘mastaba of the two brothers’, of *Nj-Ankh-Khnum* and *Khnum-Hotep*, seems to be one of the most discussed funerary monuments of the necropolis of Saqqara, situated on the west bank of the Nile, 33km south of Cairo. Ever since the unearthing in 1964, and the full publication and restoration in the 1970s (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977), archaeologists have been puzzled by the sentimental images of the two men portrayed in a series of funerary scenes. Some painted reliefs on the walls, particularly at the entrance and on the east wall of the small offering chamber (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: plates 51, 73, 90, 91), transmit a feeling of ‘exaggerated affection’ between the two individuals (Baines 1985, 479). For the considerate visitors, the reliefs portraying the couple held in the *scene of the kiss* are truly touching. However, the hypothetical lack of clear indications of the relationship between the two men ‘provides fertile ground for speculation’ (Reeder 2000, 195). For that reason, the monument offers an interesting case of vivid debate about gender studies (Reeder 2000; 2008). Westendorf (1977), but also Reeder in a more recent series of articles (2000; 2008), has already proposed an original interpretation: we are facing here a case (rare) of homosexual relationship in ancient Egypt. In this respect, as a homosexual icon, the tomb is acquiring fame as a popular destination for gay tourists in Egypt (Holland 2006). The idea to which Reeder refers in his papers has obtained the exposure needed to challenge the more ‘conservative’ brothers/twins interpretation (Baines 1985; Parkinson 1995). Were these intimate individuals, ‘superintendents of the royal manicurists’ at the court of the king *Nj-Wsr-Ré* (Old Kingdom, c. 2494-2345 BC), engaged in a homosexual relationship? To what extent is this suggestion convincing?

Without traces of human remains or biological information, archaeologists have not been able to establish a convincing explanation of the kind of connection that might have existed between the two individuals. Certainly, the depiction of the spouses and children of both men within the scenes (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: plates 4, 5, 51, 55) suggests that we are looking at the lives of men who died in mature age, probably after having enjoyed an ordinary middle-class family life. The key to their potential fraternal union could be in the ancient word *sn*, a term that appears in the scenes and is generally used to denote ‘brotherhood’ or ‘friendship’; however, the meaning is still subject to divergent interpretations. While scholars search for a definitive clarification of this term, Reeder’s approach suggests the possibility of other types of relationships in ancient Egyptian society, thus positing the existence of potential non-heterosexual relationships in the conventional patriarchal social system. Of course, every idea has equal chance at convincing the audience; many scholars have argued that sexuality in the past is often a complicated subject of investigation.

Contrary to the sexuality-oriented interpretation, Baines’s interesting study on Egyptian twins (1995) read the funerary scenes as depictions of twinning. Baines argued that scenes with a man holding another man are very common in Egyptian pictorial art and almost always have no sexual connotations attached. Reeder, on the other hand, sees these scenes of men holding hands, with arms around one another, as implicit indications of a homoerotic connection. Many scholars mention the lack of elements to support a homosexual association between the two men, and stress the fact that wives and children are also depicted in the tomb. But Reeder defends his idea, arguing that even married men can have homoerotic desires. Despite the lack of statistics that display the prevalence of homosexual desire in heterosexual marriages, observers still suggest that such a phenomenon could have been common in the past, as it might also be in the present. This seems very difficult to sustain. According to sociologists, marriage is likely to continue if the spouse is not conscious of the true sexual inclination of the partner; however, discovery of the sexual orientation could lead to a separation. Arguably, in the ‘mastaba of the two brothers’, this homoerotic desire could be the reason of the erasure of *Nj-Ankh-Khnum*’s wife, *Kntj-K3w.s*, from the scene of the banquet (Reeder 2000, 201); having discovered the affair of her husband, *Kntj-Kns*

might have decided to avoid appearing in close proximity to him in the scene of feast (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: plate 68). Indeed, the epithet *sn.nw ntr.nw*, the ‘two divine brothers’, in the same scene around the banquet is, according to Reeder, nothing other than a reference to the *Contending of Horus and Seth* and the attempted sexual penetration narrated in the popular account of the *Chester Beatty Papyrus I* (c. 1160 BC): “Then Seth said to Horus: “come, let us have a feast day at my house.” And Horus said to him: “I will, I will”. Now when evening had come, a bed was prepared for them, and they lay down together. At night, Seth let his member become stiff and he inserted it between the thighs of Horus’ (Lichtheim 1976, 219).

Regardless of the explanation for the two manicurists’ case, pictorial representations from ancient sources do show that gender roles can be the subject of different interpretations. The construction of homosexuality in the past – and this case may indeed be an example of this – is based on methods of interpretation and assumptions that have some similarity with the feminist approach. Arguably, this tomb replicates, in pictorial representation, a standard of the Egyptian society: namely, the passive and secondary position of women in the past. As an alternative to this reading, Reeder uses the book by Cherpion, *Sentiment conjugal et figuration à l’Ancien Empire* (1995), to support his homoerotic interpretation (Reeder 2008, 145). Reeder argues that this potentially homosexual couple had requested for their tomb to have the same aesthetic representation of ‘intimate relationship’ as that depicted on the tombs of heterosexual partners. Finally, at least within their last resting place, the two manicurists seem to have obtained some kind of acceptance of their homosexuality. But this sort of sexual honesty depicted in a tomb would not be easily justifiable before the gods at the tribunal of the weighing of the heart. Reeder perhaps does not consider that, amongst the forty-two morals in the magic prayers of the *Spell of coming forth by day*, there is the strict prohibition of homosexual acts (Parkinson 1995, 61-2).

Certainly, transgender studies in recent years have led to new intriguing definitions of sexual differences in ancient societies. Of course, these new definitions demand attention from the audience, especially when several scholars have already persuaded that males dominated the greater part of events in ancient societies (Conkey and Spector 1984). However, it is hard to reject alternative interpretations of data – albeit twisted by a different bias – that show how socio-political and sexual minorities have featured in ancient art. Whatever the relationship between the two men was at the time, it seems that, for various reasons, this funerary scene evades interpretations (intentionally or not) in a way that further complicates our reconstruction of past Egyptian society. When similar pictorial representations have been used as data for the interpretation of archaeological records, they seem unconvincing. Parkinson (1995, 63) notes, for instance, that ‘homosocialism’ is not necessarily sexual and is difficult to recognize in Egyptian pictorial art. The suggestion of any sexual relationship in the monument at Saqqara is, honestly, very tenuous. If past archaeological studies on gender roles in ancient societies have misinterpreted such visual representations and used them to legitimize an andocentric view, then revisions of these studies could provide a more positive viewpoint on human relationships of the past. In this context, scholars of lesbian and gay studies have, since the 1970s, produced interesting debates that challenged the status quo. However, as with early feminist studies in archaeology, for example, these do not seem to be an inspiring and convincing approach for many, or at least not as much as they were in the 1980s when sexuality was at the center of attention for feminist groups.

Concerns surrounding issues of sexuality such as prostitution, gay and lesbian literature are important matters of argument and provide stimulus for new approaches in social sciences, such as in archaeology. Ideas of gender and sexual identity, amongst many others notions, have been debated by feminists and liberal-minded activists in a way completely different from the traditional approach used in archaeological research. These innovative movements also aim to revise the approach to the use of visual images in archaeological contexts. Needless to say, reconstructions and interpretations of visual art provide critical evidence that is useful for archaeological explanations. Scholars, in general, argue that visual data is not neutral, and is often unbalanced when used to interpret gender matters or interactions between males and females (Voss 2000). Indeed, there is the feeling that the tomb under discussion was initially designed for the first superintendent of manicurists, *Nj-Ankh-Khnum*, and his wife, *Kntj-Kws*, following the

more traditional funerary institution at Saqqara, and in respect of the order of *ma'at* (the principle of justice, order and truth). This is evident in the scene of the banquet where the couple was originally united. The tomb was 'usurped', in a later phase, by *Khnum-Hotep*. When *Nj-Ankh-Khnum* died, the tomb was probably still under construction and the building project was only at the preliminary stage. The second inspector of manicurists and the new occupant of the tomb, *Khnum-Hotep*, in a sort of *amore platonico*, wanted to be the 'sentimental substitute' of *Kntj-Kw's* by imposing his own name and image close to that of *Nj-Ankh-Khnum* in the tomb. One last consideration: as pointed out by Vasiljevi (2008, 369), the indubitable coincidence of careers, title progressions and duties seems to suggest a correlation of timeline between the two men, which implies, most likely, a consanguineous rather than a sexual connection.

Of course, those visiting or interested in this exceptional tomb at Saqqara are left to draw their own conclusions.

© Davide Mazzone, 2009
MA Egyptian Archaeology
Institute of Archaeology, UCL

References

- Baines, John, 'Egyptian Twins'. *Orientalia*, 54.4 (1985): 461-482.
- Cherpion, Nadine. 'Sentiment Conjugal et Figuration à l'Ancien Empire'. *Kunst des Alten Reiches: Symposium im Deutschen Archäologischen Institut Kairo am 29. und 30. Oktober 1991*. DAI Kairo Sonderchrift 28 (1995): 34-45.
- Conkey, Margaret Wright and Janet D. Spector, 'Archaeology and the Study of Gender', *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 7 (1984): 1-32.
- Holland, William, 'Mwah ... is this the first recorded gay kiss?', *The Sunday Times*, 1 January 2006, section UK News.
- Lichtheim, Miriam. *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Vol. II. The New Kingdom*. Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1976.
- Moussa, M. Ahmed and Hartwig Altenmüller. *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep*. Mainz: Philip v. Zabern, 1977.
- Parkinson, B. Richard, 'Homosexual Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature', *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 81 (1995): 57-76.
- Reeder, Greg, 'Same-Sex Desire, Conjugal Constructs and the Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep'. *World Archaeology*, 32.2 (2000): 193-208.
- , 'Queer Egyptologies of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep', *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt*. Ed. Carolyn Graves-Brown. Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2008. 143-155.
- Vasiljevi, Vera, 'Embracing his Double: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep', *Studien Altägyptischen Kultur* 37 (2008): 363-372.
- Voss, L. Barbara, 'Feminisms, Queer Theories, and the Archaeological Study of Past Sexualities' *World Archaeology* 32.2 (2000): 180-192.
- Westendorf, Wolfhart, 'Homosexualität', *Lexicon der Ägyptologie* 2 (1977): 1272-1274.