

## ‘THE FIRST GAY KISS?’: AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MONUMENT

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They would not guess how early in  
 Their supine stationary voyage  
 The air would change to soundless damage ...  
 How soon succeeding eyes begin  
 To look, not read.

Philip Larkin, *An Arundel Tomb* (1964)

Around 2450 BCE, at the end of the reign of king Neuserre, two Ancient Egyptian courtiers named Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep constructed a tomb in the royal cemetery at Saqqara. Both men held the ceremonial title ‘royal manicurist’, which embodied a prestigious closeness to the king, and both had strikingly similar career paths, although it seems likely that Khnumhotep died first.<sup>1</sup> Their monument included a tomb-chapel, which was accessible to ancient visitors and decorated with standard scenes of the two office-holders in all their elite status. These depictions of the men conformed to the normal conventions of gender and high rank, and they were shown with their wives and children, but also kissing, embracing and sitting with each other, often in scenes where a tomb-owner was usually shown with his wife. Decades later, the whole monument was buried when the causeway of king Unas’ pyramid was built over it, and so it survived remarkably intact, although their burials were robbed in antiquity. The tomb was re-discovered in 1964, and it has become a case study in the uncertainties of interpretation for LGBTQ history.<sup>2</sup>

The embracing men look very much like a same-sex couple to modern eyes. Available evidence suggests that ancient Egyptian society was highly heteronormative, and that there was social and cultural pressure on individuals to marry and have children. This does not, of course, exclude same-sex desires or relationships. Literary texts provide clear examples of these, including *The Tale of Neferkare and Sasenet* about the clandestine sexual relationship between a king and his unmarried general,<sup>3</sup> so sexual relationships between mature men were clearly possible (at least in fiction), although they were apparently regarded as scandalous social

aberrations. In this cultural context, a *state* monument depicting a same-sex couple would be exceptional, and other readings of the unusual scenes are possible. Egyptian tomb scenes can appear immediate and lively to modern viewers, but they display their owners' elite social identities in ways which do not necessarily match the modern idea of a family as a romantic attachment of two individuals, and they do not necessarily show, in Philip Larkins's words, that 'all that survives of us is love'.

The pairing of the two men in the iconography has suggested that they could have been twins, perhaps identical twins.<sup>4</sup> The parentage(s) of both men is not recorded, but their names are strikingly similar. Both names evoke the creator god who shaped children's bodies—they mean 'Life-belongs-to -Khnum' and 'Khnum-is-content'— and since names were given at birth, this suggests a close genetic relationship. While it is conceivable that the men were two unrelated individuals who adopted new matching names when they became a same-sex couple, there is no evidence for such a practice of taking new names from pharaonic Egypt. One banquet scene in the chapel includes a reference to the song of 'the two divine brothers' which might evoke the sibling gods Horus and Seth as mythical prototypes for their genetic relationship. However, this allusion is not without queer possibilities: in mythology, the disorderly god Seth attempted to have sex with Horus, in some versions to humiliate him, but in one version as a result of desire, to judge by his chat-up line 'what a lovely backside you have!'.<sup>5</sup>

A reading as twins is widely accepted by Egyptologists (including me). In contrast, some others have argued that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep's iconography is so similar to that used for a tomb-owner and his wife that it marks them as a same-sex conjugal couple, although their mutual style of embrace is distinct and matches instead scenes of kings and gods kissing.<sup>6</sup> Embraces and kisses are, of course, not exclusively signs of sexual desire, and such gestures can have many meanings. The dividing lines between 'homosocialism' and 'homosexuality' in any culture is unstable and complex, and can be hard to determine for both insiders and outsiders; as

one Egyptian discreetly asked my husband and me on a visit, ‘brothers or friends?’. The passage of time adds to these difficulties, and complicates the issue.

Ancient examples of same-sex desire are important for modern sexual self-awareness and social identity, especially in societies where ‘homosexuality’ is considered to be a modern American or European ‘disease’.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep have been treasured as a ‘positive image’ of LGBTQ history, and they feature extensively as the first recorded male-male couple in human history in many online resources, in modern artworks, and in campaigns for equality.<sup>8</sup> Ancient Egyptian textual evidence, such as that mentioned earlier, certainly supports the assertion that ‘it’s no passing fad, get used to it’,<sup>9</sup> but the historical relevance of these scenes to ancient LGBTQ desire is less certain. Queer archaeology and online commentators have often mocked Egyptology’s opinion that they are twins as being a result of heterosexist bias,<sup>10</sup> and the interpretative dilemma is often staged as a binary dispute between homophobic, heterosexist academics and queer, radical LGBTQ interpreters. At one conference, as a gay Egyptologist who supports the view that the men were twins, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of being told that I was ‘not gay enough’ for holding this view. The problem is perhaps an example of a general dilemma we face as historians, between seeing ourselves in the past and seeing the past as differently constructed.

The interpretative problem is paralleled in a strikingly similar symmetrical pairing on the funerary monuments of two Egyptian architects, Hor and Suty, from around 1375 BCE. They are named after the sibling gods Horus and Seth, and in the inscription Suty says that Hor ‘came forth from the womb with me the same day’, suggesting that they were twins.<sup>11</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the occultist Aleister Crowley suggested that they were *both* twins and incestuous lovers, and more recently the Egyptologist Greg Shubert has suggested that the monument had been erected by a same-sex couple but was later defaced by their outraged families.<sup>12</sup> On his reading, they were unrelated individuals who happened to have the same birth day; while this reading of the text (which does not say explicitly that they came forth from the *same* womb) is conceivable,

other concrete evidence argues against his interpretation of them as a same-sex couple who were later persecuted by their wives: there is another (lesser known) stela on which their wives have been defaced as well as them.<sup>13</sup> Which do we prioritize in assessing the shifting balance of such fragmentary evidence: reading against the grain or reading within a documented context? Reading for similarity, or for difference? With Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, any such additional evidence to help resolve the historian's dilemma is unfortunately lacking. For me, the similarity of the names is the most decisive piece of evidence about the nature of their relationship, and it suggests that they were twins.

These historical uncertainties and ambiguities are frustrating, but they also mirror the fact that, despite the ideological formulations of gender and sexuality in any society, polymorphous human desire tends to resist strict boundaries and black and white definitions. Friendship, affection, desire and love are often parts of a fluid continuum, which is constructed variously even within a single culture, resisting the binary definitions of normativity (both heterosexist and LGBTQ) that cultures often impose on us. The meaning of the scenes of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep has varied for viewers over time. They have always been powerful images of ancient male intimacy, and for a modern LGBTQ viewer it is easy to read them as erotically charged. For many modern people, the scenes have become queer icons, although the cultural context of their creation arguably implies that they were not originally intended to be so. Nevertheless, given the well-documented existence of same-sex desire in ancient Egypt, these probable twins could well have been the objects of ancient queer gazes while the tomb-chapel was still accessible: modern viewers are not necessarily the first to see a parallel for same-sex love in these scenes of fraternal affection. All views are contingent and fashioned within specific political, cultural and personal contexts and the controversy is a reminder that negotiating the relationship between our own experiences and ancient identities is always going to be difficult and complex: we must be self-reflexive and open to all possibilities.

On a wall, two men are shown embracing and kissing; they have been holding hands for over 4000 years. That much is certain, and it seems very probable that they were ancient twins, but the emotional reality of their lives beyond the iconography remains unknowable: as one ancient Egyptian poem noted, 'one cannot know what is in the heart'.<sup>14</sup>

## Suggested Figures

Fig. 1 The tomb-chapel of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in the desert cemetery at Saqqara

Photograph: R. B. Parkinson.

Fig. 2 Perspective drawing of the tomb-chapel of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep by Harold

Parkinson (from Yvonne Harpur, *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom: Studies in Orientation and Scene Content*, Studies in Egyptology (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1987), frontispiece).

Fig. 3 The tomb owners embrace, in Room VII (Harpur and Scremin, p. 612 [57]).

Fig. 4 The tomb owners embrace surrounded by their children, in Room VI (Harpur and Scremin, p. 477).

Fig. 5 ‘Khnumhotep + Niankhkhnum’ by Ryan Long (MeteoDesigns). [emailed for permission, no reply yet]

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed M. Moussa and Hartwig Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep: Old Kingdom Tombs at the Causeway of King Unas at Saqqara*, Archäologische Veröffentlichungen, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo 21 (Mainz: Zabern, 1977); Yvonne Harpur and Paolo Scremin, *The Chapel of Niankhkhnum & Khnumhotep: Scene Details*, Egypt in Miniature 3 (Reading; Oxford: Oxford Expedition to Egypt, 2010). The title of this chapter comes from the headline of an article by William Holland, ‘Mwah ... Is This The First Recorded Gay Kiss? Egyptian Manicurists Become Homosexual Icons’, in *The Sunday Times*, 1 January 2006 (News, p. 3).

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Westendorf, ‘Homosexualität’, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* II (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976), pp. 1272-1273; Greg Reeder, ‘Same-sex Desire, Conjugal Constructs, and the Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep’, *World Archaeology*, 32.2 (2000), pp. 193-208; Greg Reeder, ‘Queer Egyptologies of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep’, in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt: ‘Don your Wig for a Joyful Hour’*, ed. by Carolyn Graves-Brown (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2008), pp. 143-155.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bruce Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature’, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 81 (1995), pp. 57-76; Richard Bruce Parkinson, “‘Boasting about Hardness’: Constructions of Middle Kingdom Masculinity’, in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt: ‘Don your Wig for a Joyful Hour’*, ed. by Carolyn Graves-Brown (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2008), pp. 115-142. Translation of *Neferkare and Sasenet*. Richard Bruce Parkinson, *Voices from Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Middle Kingdom Writings* (London: The British Museum Press, 1991), pp. 54-56.

<sup>4</sup> Yvonne Harpur, ‘Two Old Kingdom Tombs at Giza’, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 67 (1981), pp. 24-35, p. 29 n. 31. See: John Baines, ‘Egyptian Twins’, *Orientalia*, 54 (1985) pp. 461-482, esp. 463-70; Vera Vasiljević, ‘Embracing His Double: Niankhkhnun and Khnumhotep’, *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, 37 (2008), pp. 363-372; Linda Evans and Alexandra Woods, ‘Further Evidence that Niankhkhnun and Khnumhotep were Twins’, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 102 (2016), pp. 55-72. For David O’Connor’s unpublished hypothesis that they were conjoined twins see: see ‘A Mystery, Locked in Timeless Embrace’ <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/20/science/a-mystery-locked-in-timeless-embrace.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Parkinson, *Voices*, p. 120-121.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Reeder, *World Archaeology*, 32.2 (2000), p. 207; ‘Queer Egyptologies of Niankhkhnun and Khnumhotep’. Alternate view: Evans and Woods, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 102 (2016), pp. 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Brian Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. <http://www.newnownext.com/lgbt-history-month-5-gay-love-stories-for-the-ages/10/2016/>; <<https://meteodesigns.deviantart.com/art/Khnumhotep-Niankhkhnun-146712376>>; by ‘Meteodesigns’ aka Robert Long.

<sup>9</sup> Stop-homophobia.com: < <https://twitter.com/wipehomophobia/status/618787355936354305>>.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. ‘Bros’ in Kendra Josie Kirkpatrick, *Informative Ancient Egypt Comics*: <<https://www.kendrajosiekirkpatrick.com/informative-ancient-egypt-comics?lightbox=dataItem-im4zrmx8>>. Thomas A. Dowson, ‘Why Queer Archaeology? An Introduction’, in *Queer Archaeologies = World Archaeology*, 32.2 (2000), pp. 161-5; Thomas A. Dowson, ‘Archaeologists, Feminists, and Queers: Sexual Politics in the Construction of the Past’, in *Feminist Anthropology: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. by Pamela L. Geller and Miranda K. Stockett (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 89-102 (pp. 96-99); Thomas A. Dowson, ‘Queering Sex and Gender in ancient Egypt’, in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt: ‘Don your Wig for a Joyful Hour’*, ed. by Carolyn Graves-Brown (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2008) pp. 27-46.

<sup>11</sup> British Museum EA 826: see < [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=119746&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=119746&partId=1)>. Translation: Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings II: The New Kingdom* (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press 2006), pp. 86-89 (quote from p. 88).

<sup>12</sup> Alesiter Crowley, ‘The Twins’, in *The Winged Beetle* (London: privately printed, 1910), pp. 99-101; Steven Blake Shubert, ‘*Double entendre* in the stela of Suty and Hor’, in *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean*

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*World: Studies in Honor of Donald B. Redford*, ed. by Gary N. Knoppers and Antoine Hirsch (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 143-165.

<sup>13</sup> John Baines and Liam McNamara, 'The Twin Stelae of Suty and Hor', in *The Archaeology and Art of Ancient Egypt: Essays in Honor of David B. O'Connor*, ed. by Zahi A. Hawass and Janet E. Richards (Cairo: Conseil Suprême des Antiquités de l'Égypte, 2007) 1, 63-79. See e.g. Richard Bruce Parkinson, *A Little Gay History: Desire and Diversity Across the World* (London: The British Museum Press, 2013), pp. 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, in Richard Bruce Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940-1640 BC*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 70.