

## SOME ASPECTS OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SEXUAL LIFE

BY

LISE MANNICHE

University of Copenhagen

With few exceptions, erotic aspects of the civilisation of ancient Egypt have been treated with the utmost discretion, the published comments most often reflecting the moral attitude of the authors or of their period, and not that of the ancient Egyptians themselves.

Wiedemann was the first to attempt a general discussion in 1920,<sup>1</sup> followed by Keimer in 1941,<sup>2</sup> and particular topics have since been treated by Montet (prohibitions) in 1950,<sup>3</sup> and by Deakin and Goedicke (homosexuality) in 1965 and 1967.<sup>4</sup> A short but comprehensive account of sexual life was given by Yoyotte in 1959,<sup>5</sup> and de Rachewiltz (1963) elaborated on comparisons with other African cultures.<sup>6</sup> A publication by Omlin of the erotic papyrus in Turin has recently appeared.<sup>7</sup>

Although the material from ancient Egypt is scanty by comparison with that collected from other ancient civilisations, there are certain specific points that may be more closely documented.

For numerous suggestions and references I am indebted to Professor J. R. Harris who also provided the material for fig. 1 and pls. I-II (photographed by A. Bülow-Jacobsen).

<sup>1</sup> A. Wiedemann, *Das alte Ägypten*, pp. 99-103.

<sup>2</sup> L. Keimer, *Études d'égyptologie*, fasc. III (1941), pp. 4f. (nos. 14-17); and cf. fasc. IV (1942), pp. 26-8.

<sup>3</sup> P. Montet, *Kémi*, XI (1950), pp. 104-5, 112-3, 116.

<sup>4</sup> T. J. Deakin, *Greek Love*, I (1965), pp. 31-8; H. Goedicke, *JARCE*, VI (1967), pp. 97-102.

<sup>5</sup> In G. Posener (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la civilisation égyptienne*, s.v. érotisme.

<sup>6</sup> B. de Rachewiltz, *Eros nero* (1963), translated as *Black Eros* (1969), to which reference is made below.

<sup>7</sup> J. A. Omlin, *Der Papyrus 55001 und seine satirisch-erotischen Zeichnungen und Inschriften* (1973).

### I. The attitude of the ancient Egyptians towards sex

The most explicit statement concerning the Egyptian attitude towards sexual behaviour refers not to the act itself, but to the circumstances, and is given by Herodotus:<sup>8</sup> "The Egyptians were the first to make it a matter of religious observance not to have intercourse with women in temples nor to enter a temple without washing after being with a woman".

A temple was a place where physical purity was the rule, at least for those allowed to go beyond the forecourt (only priests and high officials were allowed to do so). That intercourse makes a man impure and unfit to enter a holy place is well known in Islam, and it is undoubtedly the same idea that lies behind the ancient prohibition. That some women were allowed to be present with men in the temple is evident from Herodotus' remark, and if those with whom a man might have intercourse were ordinary women coming from outside it is not easy to imagine the circumstances, unless they were prostitutes seeking their clientele in the crowd. It is far more likely that members of the female staff of the temple are meant, though whether temple prostitutes existed, as elsewhere in the Near East, in ancient Greece, and in India,<sup>9</sup> cannot be ascertained on the basis of the available material, which is practically non-existent.<sup>10</sup> Herodotus has another important observation in I,182, namely that the woman who slept in the temple at Thebes had no intercourse with men. The woman in question was undoubtedly the *hmt ntr*, the "god's wife". The gods, particularly the ithyphallic Amūn, also had a harim consisting of *hnrwt*, but there is no indication that these women ever had intercourse with anyone in this function.<sup>11</sup>

That intercourse in holy places was considered unseemly at a

<sup>8</sup> II, 64: the translation is that of A. D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>9</sup> E. M. Yamauchi, in H. A. Hoffner (ed.), *Orient and Occident: Essays presented to Cyrus H. Gordon* (= *Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, XXII, 1973), pp. 213-22; H. Licht, *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* (1932, repr. 1971), pp. 388-95.

<sup>10</sup> The ptolemaic "Bes chambers" found at Saqqara suggest that erotic activities may have taken place under the protection of this god of physical love: J. E. Quibell, *Excavations at Saqqara 1905-06*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., however, Strabo, XVII, 46, discussed by Blackman, *JEA*, VIII (1922), pp. 19-20. The *hnrwt* of the royal harim were undoubtedly less chaste.

much earlier date appears from the text of the Book of the Dead, where the negative confession includes a statement that "I did not fornicate in the sacred places of the god of my town".<sup>12</sup>

The Egyptians knew that pregnancy resulted from intercourse, or rather from the introduction of semen into the woman's body, whether through the vagina, the anus, the mouth, or the ear.<sup>13</sup> Procreation was a necessity of life,<sup>14</sup> but the existence of various contraceptives suggests that this was not the only purpose of the act.<sup>15</sup> That it was also performed for pleasure is evident from many literary references,<sup>16</sup> and from the fact that one of the words used was *ndmndm*, though mostly when a god was involved.<sup>17</sup>

As far as extra-marital intercourse and adultery are concerned, there is universal condemnation, except for a reference to the king in the Pyramid Texts.<sup>18</sup> The result was fatal to the woman, and only in the Late Period could she escape by being divorced.<sup>19</sup> Men were advised against it,<sup>20</sup> just as they were also recommended

<sup>12</sup> P. Nu CXXV, introd., 12 (ms. Amenophis III): E. A. W. Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (1898), text, pp. 250-1 = translation, p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> H. Grapow, *Anatomie und Physiologie* (Grundriss der Medizin der alten Ägypter, I), pp. 10-11; cf. L. Störk, *GM*, V (1973), pp. 33-8; VIII (1973), pp. 39-42.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. also the wisdom literature recommending procreation: P. Anii (ms. XXII dyn.), translated by Erman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* (1927, repr. 1966), p. 235, and the Instructions of Onkhsheshonqy, col. 11,7 (ms. late ptolemaic, composed 4th or 5th cent. B.C.): S. R. K. Glanville, *Catalogue of Demotic Papyri*, II (1955).

<sup>15</sup> See H. von Deines, H. Grapow & W. Westendorf, *Übersetzung der medizinischen Texte* (Grundriss . . . , IV,1), pp. 227-8. Abortion was known, and legally condemned, at least in Ramessid times; cf. P. Turin, 1887, verso 3,1 (A. H. Gardiner, *Ramesside Administrative Documents*, p. 81).

<sup>16</sup> The story of the Two Brothers (W. K. Simpson (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (1972, repr. 1973), pp. 92f.), the affair of Webaoner's wife (*ibid.*, pp. 16f.), the story of the Blinding of Truth (*ibid.*, pp. 127f.), and love poetry, particularly P. Chester Beatty, I, verso § C,III: *ibid.*, pp. 323-5; S. Schott & P. Krieger, *Les chants d'amour de l'Égypte ancienne*, pp. 51-4.

<sup>17</sup> Wb. II, 381.

<sup>18</sup> PT 510.

<sup>19</sup> Wife slain and thrown to the dogs: Two Brothers (cf. n. 16); wife burnt and ashes thrown into river: Webaoner's wife (cf. n. 16; on the burning of the victim cf. G. A. Wainwright, *The Sky-Religion in Egypt*, pp. 55, 56-7, 89). Cf. also Herodotus, II, 111; for divorce see P. W. Pestman, *Marriage and Matrimonial Property in Ancient Egypt* (1961), pp. 55-6.

<sup>20</sup> P. Anii (cf. n. 14); Instructions of Onkhsheshonqy (cf. n. 14), cols. 21, 18-9,

province (Mendes), a woman having open intercourse with a he-goat". Herodotus calls it a "monstrous thing" (τέρας), but it should be borne in mind that the he-goat was a sacred animal (as he himself says), and that the performance would therefore have had a religious significance. As the generative power of the new Apis bull was strengthened by women exposing themselves in front of it (Diodorus, I,85) the sacred goat might thus prove his virility.

Intercourse with animals existed in the imagination of the Egyptians, if not in reality. A dream book, probably from the reign of Ramesses III, envisages the combination of man/jerboa, man/kite, and man/pig.<sup>38</sup> Another dream book, written 1500 years later, deals with the dreams of a woman. The species of animal with which she might have intercourse in a dream are numerous: mouse, horse, donkey, goat, ram, wolf, lion, crocodile, snake, baboon, ibis, and falcon. In most cases it is taken to mean that something bad will happen to her.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of intercourse with an animal, specifically with a donkey, also occurs in another context, namely as a curse: "May a donkey copulate with his wife and his children".<sup>40</sup> This apparently inspired the maker of a faience figurine now in Berlin that represents a donkey mounting a woman from behind.<sup>41</sup> The donkey was associated with Seth and thus symbolized evil, as well as being an animal of aggressive sexuality.

Another form of unnatural intercourse attributed to the Egyptians is necrophilia. When speaking of mummification, Herodotus says<sup>42</sup>: "Wives of notable men, and women of great beauty and reputation, are not at once given over to the embalmers, but only after they have been dead three or four days; this is done

<sup>38</sup> P. Chester Beatty III, 7,3, 8,10, 9,15: A. H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, pp. 16, 17, 18.

<sup>39</sup> P. Carlsberg XIII, b 2,17-18, 20-30 (cf. n. 31). In Old Testament legislation intercourse with animals merited execution: H. A. Hoffner, in *Orient and Occident: Essays . . . Gordon*, p. 81. In Hittite legal texts, on the other hand, there is a distinction depending upon the kind of animal. If a man had sexual relations with a cow, a sheep, a pig, or a dog he was guilty, and worthy of death, but relations with a horse or a mule were not considered illegal: *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>40</sup> W. Spiegelberg, *RT*, XXV (1903), p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> E. Brunner-Traut, *Die altägyptischen Scherbenbilder* (1956), Abb. 17, p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> II, 89: translation by A. D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library.



Figure 1. Sketch on a fragment found in the tomb of Puyemrē (see n. 57): actual size.

that the embalmers may not have carnal intercourse with them. For it is said that one was found having intercourse with a woman newly dead, and was denounced by this fellow-workmen."

At a different level, the novelist Xenophon of Ephesus relates

how a man kept the mummified body of his wife in his bedroom,<sup>43</sup> though why he did so is open to interpretation.

In the first case it is implied that intercourse took place before mummification, and several extant mummies actually show signs of advanced decomposition, the bodies having been left for some time before being treated.<sup>44</sup> The second reference may suggest the practice of necrophilia with a mummified body.

That a man might keep his sexual power after his death is well attested in Egyptian funerary belief, and above all in the Osiris legend. The *ba* of the deceased was conceived as his agent in sexual activities, and was thus a danger to the living.<sup>45</sup>

#### IV. The positions of intercourse

Owing to the doubtful statistical value of the very limited evidence, it is hardly possible to form any definite general conclusions as to the habits of the ancient Egyptians when performing intercourse. There are, however, certain indications as to what the Egyptians considered the normal position. In a text to the glorification of Osiris, written in the XXVIth dynasty, it is said: "I am thy sister Isis. There is no other god or goddess who has done what I have done. I have played the part of a man though I am a woman, in order to make thy name live on earth, since thy divine seed was in my body".<sup>46</sup> This clearly refers to the union of Isis with her husband after the death of the latter. His body was cut to pieces and scattered all over Egypt, but Isis managed to assemble it. Although Plutarch claims that the male member was missing,<sup>47</sup> another authority of more ancient date relates that it was found.<sup>48</sup> Osiris, however, was not able to proceed in the usual way, and it was Isis herself "who revived what was faint for the Weary One (Osiris), who took in his seed

<sup>43</sup> V, 10–11.

<sup>44</sup> G. Elliot Smith & W. R. Dawson, *Egyptian Mummies* (1924), pp. 125–6.

<sup>45</sup> L. V. Žabkar, *A Study of the Ba Concept in Ancient Egyptian Texts* (1968), pp. 101–3.

<sup>46</sup> P. Louvre 3079, col. 110,10; cf. A. Klasens, *A Magical Statue Base* (1952), pp. 74.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. n. 34.

<sup>48</sup> J. Vandier, *Le papyrus Jumilhac* (1962), IV, 16 and 21 (lower) (ms. ptol.).



Figure 2. Ostrakon no. 11198 in the Cairo Museum (omitting illegible hieratic text).

and provided an heir".<sup>49</sup> How she did this is not infrequently represented in a symbolic manner: Isis rests on the abdomen of Osiris in the shape of a bird with outstretched wings<sup>50</sup> or, more clearly—the Osiris-legend being transferred to private persons—as a woman.<sup>51</sup> Already in the Pyramid Texts it is said: "You (Osiris) have placed her (Isis) on your phallus and your seed goes into her",<sup>52</sup> so that from earliest times this was the way

<sup>49</sup> Stela C 256 in the Louvre (XVIII dyn.); cf. *BIFAO*, LIII (1953), p. 19, n. 1.

<sup>50</sup> See E. Otto & M. Hirmer, *Osiris und Amun* (1966), pl. 17 (temple of Sethos I at Abydos), pl. 20 (Hathor temple at Dendera: Ptol. X – Cleopatra VII), and pls. 18–9 (Osiris bed in Cairo: XXVI dyn.).

<sup>51</sup> Stela 1372 in the British Museum, and a Berlin sarcophagus (both MK); cf. *BIFAO*, LIII (1953), pp. 19–24.

<sup>52</sup> PT 632 b-c.

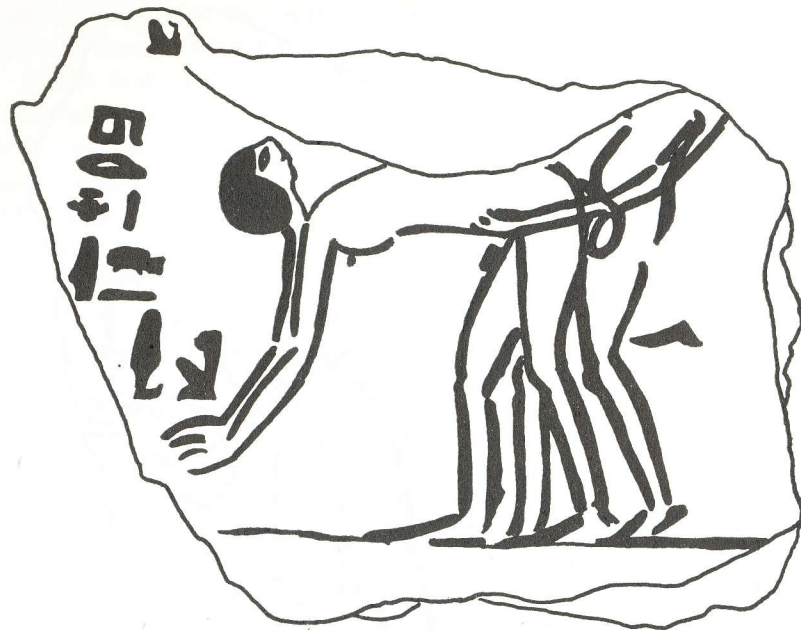


Figure 3. Ostracon no. 50714 in the British Museum.

in which it was imagined that Isis and Osiris united to create Horus. When the later text has Isis say: "I have played the part of a man", it can only be understood that it was the opposite position that was usual, i.e. with the man on top of the woman, both of them lying down face-to-face. A hieroglyph at Beni Hasan shows this simple position, but is the only clear illustration of it.<sup>53</sup>

A variant of the face-to-face posture may have been considered equally "normal", the woman in this case lying with legs sprawled.<sup>54</sup> In the Roman world this was apparently the preferred position.<sup>55</sup> Another variant shows the woman reclining with one leg outstretched, and the other on the shoulder of the man.<sup>56</sup> A well-executed figurine of blue glazed faience (length 4.5 cm)

<sup>53</sup> Lepsius, *Denkmäler*, II, pl. 143a/b (XI dyn.).

<sup>54</sup> Sami Gabra & E. Drioton, *Peintures à fresques et scènes peintes à Hermoupolis-ouest* (1954), pl. XII.

<sup>55</sup> Ovid, *Ars amatoria*, III, 787-8.

<sup>56</sup> Turin erotic papyrus: Omlin, *op. cit.*, pl. IX (left).



Figure 4. Graffito in an unnumbered tomb at Deir el-Bahari.

represents a woman lying on her left side, supporting her head with her arm and embracing a sitting man with her legs (pls. I-II). Other possibilities included the woman seated on a chair and the man standing in front of her<sup>57</sup> (fig. 1), or the woman embracing the neck of the man with her legs, he kneeling in front of her<sup>58</sup> (fig. 2). This latter may indeed have been a particularly common Egyptian position since it is represented in several sketches.

Among other face-to-face positions was the simple one with the couple standing.<sup>59</sup> In the Turin erotic papyrus the imaginative couple are trying out variants with the man carrying the girl seated on his lap,<sup>60</sup> and—recalling the Isis inversion—the man reclining on the ground with the woman standing above him.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pl. V (middle); sketch on a fragment found in the tomb of Puyemrē: see fig. 1 (from a tracing made by Davies, now apparently lost: the fragment was noted as being from a coffin, but this seems a little unlikely).

<sup>58</sup> Ostracon Cairo 11198: see fig. 2 (from a photograph taken by the late Dr. Ramadān Saad), cf. de Rachewiltz, *op. cit.*, fig. on p. 60; Keimer, *op. cit.* (cf. n. 2), no. 14; Turin erotic papyrus: Omlin, *op. cit.*, pl. I, lower, 3rd scene from the left.

<sup>59</sup> Keimer, *op. cit.*, no. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Turin erotic papyrus: Omlin, *op. cit.*, pl. VI (right).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pl. VII (left).

Here one is strongly reminded of representations of Nut bending over Geb, who is occasionally shown with an erect phallus.<sup>62</sup>

The Turin erotic papyrus illustrates an agitated variant of the face-to-face position: the man stands, pulling the hair of the girl, who seems to have been caught while performing a dance. Her right hand rests on a lyre, and her left supports the heel of her left leg, raised above the head of the man, while her right leg is bent.<sup>63</sup>

Intercourse from behind ("dog-fashion") also seems to have been rather popular in Egypt, to judge from the number of extant representations of this position, the man most frequently standing, with the woman bending over<sup>64</sup> (figs. 3, 4). Whether any of these examples indicate anal intercourse cannot be determined from the representations alone, but it seems rather unlikely in that no practical purpose would have been served (cf. the Egyptians' beliefs concerning conception). The only literary reference to coitus from behind occurs in a story where Anat is attacked by Seth while bathing in a river: "He (beheld Seth as he mounted?) upon her back, leaping (her) even as a ram leaps",<sup>65</sup> etc. In a note on this passage Dawson says<sup>66</sup> that defloration resulted, but this is nowhere explicitly stated. Te Velde<sup>67</sup> stresses the fact that the attacked goddess was dressed like a man, and that Seth's desire was thus of a homosexual nature. The goddess, however, was bathing at the time and would presumably have been only partly dressed, if not completely naked. Unless, therefore, Seth was attracted by the idea of her when dressed (as a man), it is

<sup>62</sup> Papyrus of Tameniut (British Museum); cf. V. Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, fig. on p. 46. For the symbolism cf. R. T. R. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (1959), p. 50.

<sup>63</sup> Turin erotic papyrus: Omlin, *op. cit.*, pl. IX (right).

<sup>64</sup> Ostrakon BM 50714: see fig. 3 (from de Rachewiltz, *op. cit.*, p. 63); grafitto in tomb at Deir el Bahari: see fig. 4 (from a photograph taken by the late Dr. Ramadân Saad); Turin erotic papyrus: Omlin, *op. cit.*, pl. VIII (left); Sami Gabra & E. Drioton, *loc. cit.* (cf. n. 54); de Rachewiltz, *op. cit.*, fig. 44 (bottom left).

<sup>65</sup> P. Chester Beatty VII, 1. 5 (ms. Ramesses II): Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, p. 62.

<sup>66</sup> *JEA*, XXII (1936), p. 107, n. 4. J. G. Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth* (1960), p. 42, n. 5, appears to have missed the point, since he refers to the "abnormal" way of intercourse.

<sup>67</sup> H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion* (1967), p. 37.

more likely that her feminine attributes aroused his desire. He was certainly not homosexual only, but bisexual, as shown by his attraction to Isis,<sup>68</sup> and it is just as likely that he performed normal *coitus a tergo* as *coitus per anum*. This will also apply to the representations of ordinary couples.

Other examples of intercourse from behind show the woman crouching on the ground or on a bed,<sup>69</sup> or bending with her head touching the ground.<sup>70</sup> An acrobatic performance *a tergo* is also given by the couple in the Turin papyrus: the woman drives a chariot drawn by two girls, while the man copulates with her.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> P. Chester Beatty I, 6,4f. (ed. Gardiner).

<sup>69</sup> de Rachewiltz, *op. cit.*, p. 45 (bottom); R. Anthes, *Mit Rahineh 1956*, no. 210; and others.

<sup>70</sup> Turin erotic papyrus: Omlin, *op. cit.*, pl. IV (right).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pl. IV (left) and pl. V (right).



Faience figurine (see p. 22): front.



Faience figurine: back.



Faience figurine: oblique view, showing thickness between mould impressions.