

SEX AND GENDER IN ANCIENT EGYPT

'Don your wig for a joyful hour'

Editor

Carolyn Graves-Brown

Contributors

Kathlyn M. Cooney, Thomas A. Dowson,
Terence DuQuesne, Jiří Janák, Renata Landgráfová,
Heather Lee McCarthy, Hana Navrátilová, R.B. Parkinson,
Greg Reeder, Carolyn Routledge, Racheli Shalomi-Hen,
Deborah Sweeney



The Classical Press of Wales

First published in 2008 by
The Classical Press of Wales
15 Rosehill Terrace, Swansea SA1 6JN
Tel: +44 (0)1792 458397
Fax: +44 (0)1792 464067
www.classicalpressofwales.co.uk

Distributor
Oxbow Books,
10 Hyatt Bridge Street,
Oxford OX1 2EW
Tel: +44 (0)1865 241249
Fax: +44 (0)1865 794449

Distributor in the United States of America
The David Brown Book Co.
PO Box 511, Oakville, CT 06779
Tel: +1 (860) 945-9329
Fax: +1 (860) 945-9468

© 2008 The authors

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-905125-24-1

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset by Ernest Buckley, Clunton, Shropshire
Printed and bound in the UK by Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion, Wales

The Classical Press of Wales, an independent venture, was founded in 1993, initially to support the work of classicists and ancient historians in Wales and their collaboration from further afield. More recently it has published work initiated by scholars internationally. While retaining a special loyalty to Wales and the Celtic countries, the Press welcomes scholarly contributions from all parts of the world. The symbol of the Press is the Red Kite. This bird, once widespread in Britain, was reduced by 1905 to some five individuals confined to a small area known as 'The Desert of Wales' – the upper Tywi valley. Gamekeepers report that the stock was saved from certain extermination by the arrival of one very female bird from Germany. After much careful protection, the Red Kite now thrives – in Wales and beyond.



CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction: Gender, sex and loss of innocence <i>Carolyn Graves-Brown</i> (Swansea University)	ix
1. The problem of female rebirth in New Kingdom Egypt: the fragmentation of the female individual in her funerary equipment <i>Kathryn M. Cooney</i> (Gerry Research Institute)	1
2. Queering sex and gender in ancient Egypt <i>Thomas A. Dowson</i>	27
3. Power on their own: gender and social roles in provincial New Kingdom Egypt <i>Terence DuQuesne</i>	47
4. People vs. P. Tutin 55001 <i>Jiri Janák and Hana Nurišková</i> (Czech Institute of Egyptology, Prague)	63
5. Breaches of cooperative rules. Metaphors and parody in ancient Egyptian love songs <i>Renata Landgrábová</i> (Czech Institute of Egyptology, Prague)	71
6. Rules of decorum and expressions of gender fluidity in Tawosret's tomb <i>Heather Lee McCarthy</i> (Institute of Fine Arts, New York)	83
7. Boasting about hardness: constructions of Middle Kingdom masculinity <i>R. B. Parkinson</i> (British Museum)	115
8. Queer Egyptologies of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep <i>Greg Roder</i>	143
9. Did women 'do things' in ancient Egypt? (circa 2600–1050 BCE) <i>Carolyn Rowledge</i> (National Museums Liverpool, and University of Liverpool)	157

Contents

10. The bearded woman and the queen. The formation and transformation of female divine classifiers
Racheli Shalom-Hen (University of Jerusalem) 179
11. Gender and requests in New Kingdom literature
Deborah Sweeney (Tel Aviv University) 191

Index

215

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my colleague Wendy Goodridge, and former colleague Stuart Williams, who together did most of the hard work in organizing the conference from which this book emerged. This was a conference organized on a shoestring and a conference which, because of its egalitarian approach, was not always a smooth ride. Wendy and Stuart have been the driving force behind several of the Egyptological conferences held in Swansea, admirably complementing the work of the University's degree schemes. It has been an honour to work with them.

I would particularly like to thank Anton Powell for his moral support in the lead up to and during the conference, and also for agreeing to publish this volume. Both Anton and Ernest Buckley (who has splendidly typeset this volume) have been constantly good humoured in their support of a novice editor.

There have been several individuals and organisations whom I know Wendy and Stuart would wish to join me in thanking. Firstly, UWICAH were able to provide a financial contribution toward the conference, for which we were extremely grateful.

Several individuals gave up their time to ensure that the event went smoothly. We are much obliged to Bob Partridge and Peter Phillips who provided practical help, laughter and advice, even running the conference raffle which enabled us to continue our Saturday Workshops for disadvantaged children. Our volunteers gave out packs, helped with food, and generally made all feel welcome. Especial thanks go to Kenneth Griffin for his technical support ensuring that presentations ran without a hitch.

We are grateful to all participants who enabled the friendly and scholarly atmosphere of the conference, and particularly to those participants who generously submitted papers to this volume. Thanks are further due, without incrimination, to the conference chair, Thomas Schneider.

Alan Lloyd has been a great supporter of Egypt Centre's several conferences and immensely helpful in contributing his wisdom toward this volume. Finally, thanks to Greg Reeder for allowing us to use his image of 'The Two Brothers' on our publicity material.

Carolyn Graves-Brown

QUEERING SEX AND GENDER IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Thomas A. Dowson

...not only do we have a hard time understanding the logic at work in other historical cultures' organizations of sex and gender, but we have an even harder time understanding our own inability to understand them.

(David Halperin 2002, 3)

In recent years I have become increasingly aware of the various ways in which the practice of archaeology authorizes a heterosexual history of humanity. Heterosexuality is perceived to be natural and normal, an intrinsic and obvious aspect of daily life from the earliest times to the present. Heterosexuality does not require evidence or explanation – in fact it is evident upon inspection. But heterosexuality is not immutable, it is a modern concept, one that was invented by the West to make sense of yet another Western construct, i.e. homosexuality. Homosexuality is generally considered to be an aberration of modern society and its values and beliefs; it is both anti-social and anti-historical. Its presence in the past is either simply denied or hotly debated. If and when homosexuality is thought to have existed in the past, or when it simply can not be ignored, unlike heterosexuality it requires robust evidence and considered explanation. In these instances homosexuality is expediently linked to anti-social behaviour such as paedophilia, as in the ancient Greeks (see, for example, Halperin 1990). In fact, homosexuality and paedophilia are so often coupled together that they are often thought of as one and the same sets of deviant sexual behaviours. A rather obvious and high profile contemporary example of this widespread attitude is the Catholic Church's response to the many accusations of sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests: a ban on homosexual priests because it is homosexuality that is to blame for the sexual abuse of children. This repugnant but widely held view also finds its way into archaeology, including Egyptology.

Guillemette Andreu (a Professor of Egyptology at L'Ecole du Louvre and a member of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the Louvre Museum, Paris), in a book that attempts to construct the daily life of

Egyptians in the age of the pyramids, cites the writings of an ancient Egyptian sage who, she says,

advises young men to found a household and watch over their wives [and] gives stern warning against the attractions of homosexuality and paedophilia: [the sage writes] 'do not copulate with an effeminate boy, do not allow him to spend the night doing what is forbidden: ...thus he will be calm after staving off his desire' (Andreu 1997, 84)

Putting aside the immediately apparent epistemological problem of how the views expressed in *one* ancient text can be taken as evidence for a whole set of cultural beliefs, attitudes and morals for many thousands of years, and indeed the various discussion about what this specific text actually means, what is immediately striking is a causal link between homosexuality and paedophilia – a link that draws on contemporary fears about homosexuality, and the immorality of homosexuality. From both an anthropological and an archaeological perspective Andreu's analysis, such as it is, is extremely problematic and entirely inappropriate. But because she is supposedly stating the obvious, her methodologically naive interpretation is taken as valid and goes unquestioned. Because she implies what a lot of people think is indisputable, i.e. homosexuals abuse children, there is no need for methodological rigour. Constructions like these not only draw on contemporary fears about homosexuality for their validity, they also recursively sanction and legitimize those fears by giving them historical precedence. Consumers of these constructed pasts think there is nothing wrong in contemporary society's negative attitudes towards homosexuality because even way back in ancient Egypt they knew homosexuals were paedophiles.

One of archaeology's dominant representations of the past is to present both homophobia and heterosexuality as being old as humanity itself (for the supposed archaeological origins of homophobia, see Taylor 1996; but see also Fone 2000). When I encountered the work of Greg Reeder on the ancient Egyptian Fifth Dynasty tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep I realized here was a desperately needed challenge to that dominant representation of the past. My initial interest in Reeder's research was piqued when I read of his work in Rictor Norton's book *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual*. Norton (1997, 86) describes Reeder's website as 'one of the best World Wide Web sites on the Internet'. I looked at the website, and ordered Reeder's journal article (1993). I also wrote to Reeder and invited him to contribute a paper to a volume of *World Archaeology* I was editing at the time, which he did (Reeder 2000). It was immediately apparent to me that Reeder was not simply reinterpreting the so-called two brothers as homosexual in a casual and careless manner. Rather, he produced a considered and valid

critique of a specific method of interpretation in ancient Egyptian studies. But his research has been strongly and at times inappropriately challenged by established Egyptologists. As part of my general endeavours to *queer* the dominant representation of the archaeological past and, more specifically in the context of this paper, the construction of sex and gender in ancient Egypt, I do not intend to develop another argument to determine whether Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were brothers or 'lovers' (whatever that word may have meant in the context of the Fifth Dynasty). In fact I do not feel I am in a position to do so even if I wanted to; I am not an Egyptologist. Rather, my objective here is to examine critically the way in which Reeder's research has been received, in both academic contexts and the popular press. This paper is not about Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep *per se* (see Reeder 1993, 2000; see also this volume), but rather about the place of homosexuality in the sexual politics of Egyptology; the 'debate' about the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep provides a very good case study to begin such a discussion. Here, I argue that the reception, both popular and academic, of Reeder's research has been such that it works to preserve the dominant representation of the past mentioned above, that is to maintain a heterosexual history of humanity, a representation that desperately and constantly needs to be *queered*.

I begin by briefly outlining what it means to *queer* archaeology, in particular our constructions of sex and gender. I then explore one way in which the ancient Egyptian past and our study of it has been said to be *queer*. Rather than radically challenging our constructions of the Egyptian past, this misuse of the term 'queer' sadly reinforces age-old racial and sexual stereotypical thinking of the past. Having shown how this stereotypical thinking operates in a seemingly politically correct study, I am able to show how a similar epistemological privilege is at work in the archaeological reception of Reeder's research on the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep.

Queer Theory, Queer Archaeology

The kind of approach to sex and gender in the past as exemplified by Andreu is one that can be found in all fields of archaeology, in studies of the earliest hominids to the analyses of more recent historical periods. There are two aspects of this kind of approach that are particularly problematic (for a more extensive and very readable discussion of some of these issues, see, for example, Fausto-Sterling 2000). The first of these problems has to do with how gender is perceived: gender – whether male or female, heterosexuality or homosexuality – is either biologically innate or it is the cultural expression of a biologically determined sex. Either way, in both the essentialist and the constructivist approaches, gender is a stable state of

being. The stability is either biological, it is coded in the genetic make up of the individual (male or female, and some believe in a 'gay gene'), or it is culturally stable in that a specific set of beliefs and meanings is inscribed on an already sexed individual (masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual). The second problem is that there exists a gender hierarchy that is explicitly heteronormative: relations between genders are unequal and ranked, with an overt bias towards the heterosexual, to the extent that practices and institutions legitimize and privilege heterosexuality as normal and natural within society.

In an attempt to counter some of these problems in the archaeological study of sex and gender some archaeologists have drawn on the work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993) to examine, archaeologically, the social mechanisms through which gender is produced. As important as rethinking sex and gender along these lines is, this new research stops short. I believe in considering broader heteronormative practice in archaeology. Butler's thinking about sex and gender is part of a growing body of literature being termed 'queer theory'. Queer theory is concerned with challenging normative thinking not only in the study of sex and gender, but also in heteronormative practice more widely; and elsewhere I have argued for its relevance in all aspects of archaeological practice (Dowson 2001, 2006, 2008).

Very briefly, queer theory derives from, and continues to be actively grounded in, political movements outside the academy. But it is also drawn into challenging the academic establishment, because that establishment forms an integral and influential part of a wider set of hegemonic social and cultural formations. In contrast to gay and lesbian identity, queer identity is not based on a notion of a stable truth or reality. As Halperin (1995, 62) explains, "queer" does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers* [original emphases]. Consequently, queer theory is not about providing a positivity, rather 'a positionality vis-à-vis the normative' (Halperin 1995, 62).

To effect that positionality Queer Theory 'takes on various shapes, risks, ambitions and ambivalences in various contexts' (Berlant and Warner 1995, 343). In so doing, it allows for 'reordering the relations among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-constitution, and practices of community – for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire' (Halperin 1995, 62; see also de Lauretis 1991). Queer Theory is thus very definitely not restricted to homosexual men and women, but to any one who feels their position (sexual, intellectual or cultural) to be

marginalized. A queer position then is no longer a marginal one considered deviant or pathological; but rather multiple positions within many more possible positions – all equally valid positions in their own right from which to challenge heteronormativity, those practices and institutions that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality as normal and natural within society.

Meskel's queer fantasy of ancient Egypt

Queer Theory has already been invoked to advance our understanding of ancient Egypt. In fact, one of the earliest and certainly most explicit uses of Queer Theory in archaeology is an analysis of the West's fascination with ancient Egypt by Lynn Meskel (1998). In this sweeping but rather brief paper Meskel argues that many popular and academic 'constructions of Egypt have... been queered', that we in the West have constructed a 'queer legacy' for pharaonic Egypt (1998, 64). Meskel examines the way in which the ancient Egyptian body, the mummy, has been consumed by the West from early modern times to the present. During the sixteenth century there was a literal consumption of the Egyptian body; mummies were believed to be a source of healing power and an aphrodisiac. In the early nineteenth century the Egyptian body, in particular Cleopatra's body, was captured (and fantasized about) on canvas. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Egyptian body appears in popular fiction which is developed considerably into the twentieth century with the advent of cinema. Thus it is that the Egyptian body, with its 'dripping and languid sexuality' (1998, 66), has enjoyed a fetish status for some five hundred years. Our 'sexualization' and 'eroticization' of the Egyptian body, a desire that is both physical and visual, is according to Meskel *queer*. The West's sexual fascination with the Egyptian body is a fantasy that unquestionably centres on normative perceptions of sex and gender, and how these interconnect with such issues as the Other and race. The consumption of the Egyptian body over the last five hundred or so years in the West is queer because it is linked to 'queer' in the traditional and pejorative sense of the term, a perverted sexuality. Meskel's 'queer legacy' explicitly draws on 'David Halperin's definition (sic) of queer' (1998, 64), but it is, I argue, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Halperin, and a profound and disturbing misunderstanding of queer politics and Queer Theory more generally.

The necrophilic appeal of the Egyptian mummy during early modern times represents for Meskel the start of the queering of constructions of ancient Egypt. But it is this linking of necrophilia with *queer* that requires close attention. Halperin, whose lead Meskel is following, is quite clear that "queer" does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object' (Halperin 1995, 62). Or, more directly, queer 'does not designate

a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions' (Halperin 1995, 62). Meskell (1998, 64) acknowledges these comments, and offers her own examples: 'not *all* sexual practices can be sanctioned: sexual abuse, paedophilia and incest for example, cannot be subsumed within the category of queer [original emphasis]'. It is more than interesting to note that the examples Meskell offers relate to concerns that are being played out with very, very strong feelings in contemporary social and political debate. Paedophilia, incest and sexual abuse, unlike necrophilia, feature regularly in our daily news. This begs the question: is it because necrophilia is eliminated from these contemporary discussions that Meskell believes necrophilia to be queer? Necrophilia is a designated class of objectified perversion. To identify as queer what is generally accepted to be a pathological sexual practice in the production and consumption of ancient Egypt runs counter to the *queer* project rather than providing evidence for a queer legacy.

A similar misunderstanding of queer theory and how it might be applied to Egyptology is at work in Meskell's discussion of the way in which the contemporary novelist Anne Rice evokes ancient Egypt in her works. First, we are told that Rice 'has a strong following in the gay community in the USA' (Meskell 1998, 68). This throwaway comment is then followed by a superficial analysis of one of Rice's novels, in which we are informed that it is the homosexual encounters between the characters, some of which 'border on the incestuous', that constitute the queer elements in Rice's novels. These homosexual encounters are experienced by the characters during their pasts, while at school or studying together at an Oxbridge-like institution. Later these characters extricate themselves from this shadowy past and then embark on heterosexual relationships.

Meskell's portrayal of the sexual relationships, experiences and fetishes in Rice's novel as queer is contradictory. Meskell (1998, 64) explicitly states that queer does not include incest, and yet we are told that it is Rice's homosexual relationships that 'border on the incestuous' (1998, 68) that are queer. This obvious contradiction arises out of the way in which the 'queer' elements that Meskell identifies in Rice's novel conform to standard, contemporary constructions of sexuality that contrast heterosexual relationships as the norm, with homosexuality as deviant, pathological and perverse. They are not *queer* in the sense adopted by Queer Theorists such as Halperin, they are *queer* in the sense contemporary society uses the term as a form of insult. The main characters in Rice's novel have homosexual encounters in their youth. These encounters are part of a shadowy past, and are treated as marginal in the novel. The characters do not develop meaningful same-sex relationships, but go on to develop heterosexual relationships that are more lasting. This is the normal way of life for respectable people. Rather than using her novel to

challenge contemporary constructions of homosexuality, Rice in fact privileges a heteronormative construction of sexuality. There is nothing *queer* in the way in which Rice draws on sexual experience to sexualize and eroticize ancient Egypt. The fact that gay men idolize Anne Rice does not make the fetishization of the Egyptian body more acceptable. On the contrary, it shows that gay men, like anyone else, are caught up in the same process of conforming to heteronormative social discourse.

In Meskell's analysis of a cinematic representation of ancient Egypt, the Hollywood film *Stargate* (1995), we witness yet another way in which the thread that connects paedophilia and homosexuality is drawn upon and maintained. *Stargate* could be described as popular science fiction meets Egyptology. James Spader plays a somewhat nerdy Egyptologist, Daniel Jackson, whose linguistic expertise is called upon for decoding inscriptions on tiles discovered at an Egyptian archaeological site. These turn out to be the key that turns the lock in an enormous artefact called the 'stargate', an intergalactic portal to the 'far side of the known universe'. Kurt Russell is Colonel Jack O'Neil, the borderline-suicidal (his baseball-loving son died when he was young) military commander of a mission to the other side of the stargate. Accompanied by his crack troops and Jackson, they enter the gate and emerge in a landscape that most people would identify as pharaonic Egypt. As the three moons in the sky soon prove, they have in fact arrived on the planet of the Egyptian sun god Ra (played by Jaye Davidson) and his people.

Ra created human society on Earth and it was through the stargate that Ra was able to move between his planet and Earth. But his abilities to move between Earth and his planet were brought to an end when the ancient Egyptians closed their side of the stargate. Now with the stargate operating once again as a space/time corridor, Ra decides to exact revenge on the world. What develops then is a battle between the military might of the West and a ruthless god-like being. The military men, the hardest crack troops that exist, are in stark contrast in many ways to the deviance of the sun god Ra. Ra is extremely effeminate and is almost always surrounded by semi-naked young boys. Although there is sexual tension portrayed between Ra and the Egyptologist, rather than Ra and the young boys, the presence of scantily-clad young boys certainly adds to the visual impact of Ra's personal space in his palace – luxuriantly draped with flowing pink silk voiles. Meskell suggests that it is the 'theatricality of this construction [that] connotes another gay stereotype through the deployment of camp iconography (colour, costume, *mise en scène*), to produce the queer spectacle' (1998, 72).

Ra is, it is quite strongly suggested, 'homosexual' – he desires the Egyptologist, and to add an edge to his character, to remove any doubt,

he also has paedophile tendencies – ensuring his character is received with disgust. Not surprisingly, Ra is easily defeated by the great military might of the West – the very essence of traditional masculinist character. Rather than presenting a *queer* spectacle, this film is decidedly traditional and stereotypical in its representation of sexuality and the Other. Stargate quite explicitly draws on the idea of deviant sexual beings, linking at once non-Westerners, homosexual and paedophiles as one-in-the-same beings. These deviant beings need to be eliminated, and indeed they are. Archaeology provides the platform on which these sexual politics are played out.

The sexual fetishized consumption of the Egyptian Other is merely part of the West's sexual desire for and appropriation of the deviant Other more generally. There is nothing politically radical about it. Where a homosexual element emerges we witness the homophobia of the society creating and consuming that representation. Such representations are *queer* in the derogatory and traditional sense of the word. Why it is important to draw the distinction I have here, is that the way in which Meskell has identified the scholarly and popular representations of ancient Egypt as *queer* does nothing more than support the stigmatization of lesbians and gay men, who can now be regarded (once again) as sad, benighted folks, still locked...into an old-fashioned, essentialized, rigidly defined, specifically sexual (namely, *lesbian* or *gay*) identity' (Halperin 1995, 65). Rather than challenging the way in which stereotypical thinking influences the way in which the past is used in the present, Meskell has in fact reinforced this derogatory discourse. *Queer*, as Halperin and others intend the term, challenges the very idea of stable sexual identities in the present, and this can be achieved for the construction of sexual identities in the past. What Meskell has demonstrated so well is that both popular and academic consumptions and representations of the ancient Egyptian past are founded on normative racial and sexual stereotypes. In these representations of the Egyptian past, it is the present that is projected onto the Egyptian past, and then used by the consumers of those representations to legitimize the present. And the same discursive processes are at work in thinking about the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep from the time their tomb was discovered to the present.

Brothers or lovers

The tomb built for Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep was unearthed in 1964 and reconstructed in 1971. A preliminary report was published by the Chief Inspector of Lower Egypt (Basta 1979), and an extensive monograph was also produced by Mousa and Altenmüller (1977). In the bas reliefs of the tomb Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are often depicted together quite intimately; in fact a number of writers are struck by the apparent closeness of

the two men. Cherpion (1978, 66, original emphasis), for example, 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.

As all the Egyptologists writing on this tomb point out, nowhere are there any inscriptions that explicitly reveal the nature of the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. And it is the nature of their relationship that has been debated since. I examine critically that debate here, because it shows how archaeology continues to underwrite a heterosexual history of humanity, a history of humanity that gets incorporated into popular material culture, as I have just argued above, to legitimize the contemporary West's sexual politics.

Initial archaeological discussions of the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are rather predictable. Basta (1979, 47), clearly intrigued by the 'exaggerated affection' that the images of these two men display, asks:

Were they two 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?

Not long after, Baines, following a suggestion made by Harpur (1981), suggested Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep might be twins (1985). The images of two men embracing and holding hands were widely thought to be unique in private tombs, and Baines felt that 'little could be said about their meaning beyond the fact that they express publicly the close involvement of the two men' (1985, 467). But Baines goes a step further and rules out a 'sexual meaning' because images of embracing or hand-holding do not have a sexual meaning when used elsewhere. There is nothing sophisticated about Baines' iconographic analysis; it centres on interpreting the various scenes in the tomb as 'family' scenes. The argument is in fact quite unconvincing and rather simplistic: 'close involvement' equates to twins. This suggests to me that Baines was more comfortable accepting Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep as twins (even though twinning could not be proved, see Cherpion below) than in entertaining any sexual dimension to their relationship.

These interpretations are not surprising, particularly for the 1970s and early 1980s. After all, explicit discussion about considering the role of women in the past was still some years off. Archaeology, and Egyptology, at

this time was decidedly masculinist in character. The very idea of same-sex couples would have itself been alien to the archaeologists of the time, let alone the idea of same-sex couples in the past. Where 'homosexuality' could not be ignored, i.e. ancient Greece (see Dover 1978), there existed a link between pederasty and homosexuality, that in the minds of modern historians joined a very restricted notion of Greek pederasty and modern homosexuality (Halperin 1990). Although we will surely never know, it is highly likely that if this tomb were unearthed in the 1990s or later, the idea of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep being a same-sex couple would have been raised immediately, certainly more explicitly than is hinted at by Baines, if only to be dismissed.

At the same time as John Baines was thinking about twinning in ancient Egypt, Greg Reeder was also thinking about Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. Reeder's interest began when he read a travel guide of a tomb at Saqqara with images of two men embracing each other. He tried to visit the tomb in 1981 but it was closed to the public. His first article was published in a popular gay men's magazine, *The Advocate*, which was followed by his article in *KMT* (Reeder 1993). It was the intimate depictions of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep embracing and holding hands that led him to think they were 'lovers'. Reeder's initial intuitive views were supported by the publication in 1995 of Nadine Cherpion's analysis of the way in which dynastic artists chose to represent husband-and-wife couples in Fourth-, Fifth- and Sixth-Dynasty tombs (Cherpion 1995). By comparing the iconography used to portray Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep with the way in which men and women in marital relationships were depicted, as detailed by Cherpion, Reeder was able to develop his argument further (Reeder 2000).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Reeder's critique was not, and is still not, accepted by the academic establishment. In a very measured review of 'homosexual desire' in the Middle Kingdom, Parkinson, commenting on Reeder's earlier work (1993) and anticipating Cherpion's analysis, states that

in the iconography of the Fifth Dynasty tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep the relationship between the two men replaces the usual relationship between the tomb-owner and his wife. This has been cited as showing a same-sex couple, although both men have wives; however, the iconography is more plausibly explained as showing a pair of twins [citing Baines]. (1995, 62)

Interestingly, Cherpion (1978, 67), also commenting on the iconography of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in a paper that appeared soon after the publication of the monograph by Moussa and Altenmüller, was not as quick to accept the idea that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were twins: 'Altenmüller propose que nous aurions affaire à des jumeaux; certes, ce n'est pas impossible, on ne peut le prouver.' Parkinson is in fact inconsistent: he

acknowledges that the manner in which Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are depicted is more usually deployed to show husband and wife, but then asserts that the iconography shows they were twins – not something Baines was able to demonstrate, not surprisingly in light of the subsequent analyses by Cherpion (1995) and then Reeder (2000), and not something Parkinson attempts himself.

In a later discussion about same-sex relations in ancient Egypt, Meskell (2002, 144) introduces an altogether different kind of criticism: she rather gratuitously asserts 'there has been a tendency to push the ancient data in the service of contemporary sexual politics, irrespective of the evidence (e.g., Reeder 2000)'. There is no reasoned critique of Reeder's analysis; what there is, is a subtle indication that Reeder is gay, and that all he is doing is using the past for a contemporary pro-gay agenda.

Ironically, the point I would now make in response to Meskell's offhand dismissal of Reeder's critique is similar if not identical to a point Meskell herself has already made. In an earlier publication responding to critics of those authors whose research of ancient peoples was influenced by Foucault, Meskell writes:

...personal motivations have been called into question and fingers have been pointed at various groups in the gay, feminist and other radical social movements who have appropriated elements of Foucault's theory or historical research in order to advance their respective political struggles (Lamour et al. 1998a, 12). Why such subjectivities should be singled out against other political positions surprises me, as if we can ever be objective in our interests or arguments, and at least in this case feminists and queer theorists have been up front in their politics. (Meskell 1999, 92–3; see also Wylie 1990, 2002)

In her later publication Meskell (2002) does not offer the same support to Reeder; in fact she becomes one of those pointing the fingers at a gay writer, accusing him of using archaeology to service contemporary sexual politics. It is this idea of the political abuse of the past by Reeder, much like the way the Nazis abused the past – widely accepted to be the worst abuse of archaeology, that influences all that gets said in 'critique' of his work from here on.

Although as yet there has been very little in the academic press commenting on Reeder's research, an article that appeared in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (28 October 2005), entitled *Is this the earliest image of a gay couple?* by Steven Farrar, presents some interesting comments. The article was in fact quite timely, and the title not as straight-forward as might first seem. The article was written to publicize a then forthcoming conference on Sex and Gender, which was held at The Egypt Centre of the University of Wales Swansea, and it reported the views of some of the speakers billed to discuss Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at the conference (O'Connor, Parkinson,

Reeder and myself). More interestingly, and this is where the wording of the title becomes significant, this article appeared just weeks before same-sex unions became legally recognized in the United Kingdom. At a time when the UK was debating (legality does not equate to social acceptance) the idea of same-sex 'marriage', so too academics were debating the idea of same-sex unions in ancient Egypt, the debates being informed by each other, no matter how subconsciously.

In the article we learn that the establishment favours the twin theory, with a significant development: perhaps they were Siamese twins (O'Connor). But the most engaging comments are those from Richard Parkinson, who we are informed is Assistant Keeper in the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum; thus establishing his credentials (Reeder was described as a respected non-academic). I quote the final section of the article that includes his contribution:

[Parkinson] feels the homosexual interpretation of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep's tomb could in fact imperil queer theory in Egyptology.

'If one is trying to find queer images in the past, one has to be absolutely certain. Otherwise people might conclude that one is seeing what one wants to see and that all such investigations might be slightly flawed,' he says. 'There is a fine line between reading against the grain in a new historicist, queer theory manner and producing a reading that's highly unlikely.'

The evidence, Parkinson believes, suggests the two men were twins, the similar elements in their names and the lack of any other case adding to his conviction. Furthermore, his research into ancient Egyptian texts has revealed that in Niankhkhnum's and Khnumhotep's time, homosexual desire was recognized but sexual acts between men were seen as irregular and on a par with adultery.

'Both men are married and both have children so whatever the relationship is, it cannot be seen as a modern gay relationship,' Parkinson says. 'It is hard for the European eye to resist seeing images of men being physically intimate as homoerotic. And the two men have short hair and moustaches and have titles to do with hairdressing – there is the worry that modern stereotypes and caricatures of the homosexual are being projected back into the ancient past.'

I am all too aware of the context in which Richard Parkinson's comments appeared, but his comments are nonetheless the kind of statements that are frequently found in archaeology (for example, Parkinson's and Meskell's dismissal of Reeder cited above). If anything, comments like these are simply more outright but no less revealing than those one might find in strictly academic texts; they are certainly not beyond close scrutiny. There are five specific points I now discuss.

First, I must dismiss at the outset the implication that the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep is said to be a 'modern gay

relationship'. This kind of comment appears quite frequently. O'Connor, during his presentation at the Swansea conference, referred to recent interpretations of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep as having being likened to a 'gay husband and wife pair'. Ignoring the offensive nature of referring to a same-sex couple as a 'gay husband and wife pair', nowhere has Reeder said anything of the kind. Interestingly, but not at all surprising, when O'Connor made his remark there was an audible groan from the audience. The audience were not groaning at the fact that O'Connor had got it wrong, rather they were groaning at the ridiculousness of the idea. Comments like these rely on an underlying social homophobia, and are employed to ridicule any serious discussion of whether we might be dealing with a same-sex couple, and as such close down further academic discussion. Of course the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep was nothing like that of a modern gay relationship, a blatantly absurd idea!

My second point concerns the burden of proof placed on Reeder (see Wylie 2002, 185–99, for more on the constitution of archaeological evidence and sexual politics). Meskell suggests that Reeder ignores the evidence, but interestingly it is Meskell who is ignoring the evidence; she can simply and authoritatively dismiss what Reeder says in one sentence without herself having to produce a reasoned argument. Because she apparently 'exposes' Reeder's work as being in the service of sexual politics, it must surely be nonsense: the past is not there to be used to service contemporary politics (I shall return to this particular point below). Meskell is therefore not required to argue her case. The same does not apply to Reeder, as Parkinson so succinctly shows, 'if one is trying to find queer images in the past, one has to be absolutely certain'. Because archaeology authorizes a heterosexual history of humanity, anything that challenges that ideology has to be 'absolutely certain'. But when it comes to identifying heterosexual relationships in the past, an archaeologist merely has to state 'this is a man and his wife' for such a relationship to be accepted as fact, no one would even bat an eyelid upon hearing or reading such a remark. But when two men are discovered in extraordinarily unique and intimate scenes, the idea that they may have been more than just friends is not only met with ridicule, it has to be closely argued. Heterosexuality is as much a Western construct as is homosexuality (see for example, Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990, Katz 1995), and would have been as alien to ancient Egyptians as a modern gay relationship.

These two points lead to my third point. There is a strong suggestion that Reeder not only manipulated the evidence but that he has not produced a closely argued case for Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep being anything but twins. Reeder's first few articles were based on an intuitive feeling that the depictions of intimacy could suggest that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep

might be 'lovers'. In science, such an overt reliance on *intuition* is considered 'bad science'. But as a number of feminist philosophers have argued in relationship to feminist scholarship, such a view of scientific method is misguided and does little to advance knowledge. As Sandra Harding (1993) argues, it is so-called marginalized people who are capable of asking the best questions. Reeder was right to challenge the heterosexist interpretation of the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. Given that a few scholars had already commented on the overt and unparalleled display of intimacy between the two men (e.g. Cherpion 1978, Baines 1985, cited above), Reeder's initial reaction to the images of same-sex intimacy was not that extraordinary, unless of course the idea of same-sex relationships is tainted by modern homophobia.

Later, after the publication of Cherpion's analysis of depictions of Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Dynasty tomb-owners and their wives (1995), Reeder was able to compare these to the way in which Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are portrayed in their tomb (2000). His analysis is careful and measured: he examines each depiction of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep and compares these to the equivalent images found in tombs that are said to be that of a man and his wife. He has not manipulated or ignored evidence. Putting aside the idea that evidential constraints in archaeology are such that archaeological data can not simply be manipulated at will (see Wylie 2002 on evidential constraints), Reeder's analysis of the tomb is thorough in its attention to detail. [Unlike, for example, Schumann Antelme and Rossini (2001, Fig. 6.5) who misidentify an image of a father and his son as Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep to illustrate an example of homosexuality.] Reeder presents us with a straightforward challenge to Egyptian archaeology. Either, the two men did have an intimate, perhaps accepted, sexual relationship, in which case archaeologists would need to rethink the nature of sexual relationships in ancient Egypt at this time. Or, Niankhkhnum's and Khnumhotep's relationship was not sexual, in which case the accepted iconographic analysis that reveals a heterosexual man and his wife (as offered by Cherpion 1995 and implied by Parkinson 1995, 62) is itself wide of the mark. Which then begs the (rhetorical) question, why the attention on Reeder's work and not on Cherpion's? Reeder's study shows unequivocally that there exists an undeniable heterosexist bias in archaeological interpretation of this particular tomb.

A fourth concern is Parkinson's 'worry that modern stereotypes and caricatures of the homosexual are being projected back into the ancient past'. Because Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were manicurists to the king, there is the concern that this plays into a contemporary pejorative stereotype of gay men, the camp and effeminate hairdresser. I sympathize with the

issue, particularly given the way the popular, gay and straight, media present Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep as 'Queens of the Nile'. But, I feel as archaeologists we are approaching this issue from the wrong direction, from a heterosexist/homophobic point of view.

When the famously camp actor John Inman died, I heard a programme on BBC's Radio 4 discussing his contribution to the arts. Besides talking to people who knew Inman well, the presenter also read out emails from listeners. One person, openly gay, wrote in to say he was glad Inman had died because now the stereotype of the effeminate gay man could be laid to rest once and for all. This kind of internalized homophobia within the so-called gay community is commonplace. Gay men themselves are incredibly antagonistic towards effeminate gay men, and many gay men like to refer to themselves nowadays as 'straight-acting'. The origins of these negative feelings are perhaps understandable, but they are certainly not excusable. Popular representations of gay men have for a long time drawn on the stereotypically camp hairdresser, and they still do. Gay men are right to challenge this stereotypical representation, but not in a manner that is antagonistic towards those men (gay or straight) who are effeminate and camp. The gay community needs to accept that there is a diversity of masculinities in gay men. Just because we act straight, does not mean gay men will be more accepted in society, gay men more than anyone need to stop their caricaturing of effeminate men. The problem then is the way in which we, academic and non-academic alike, are reifying the caricaturing of sexual identities in the present and projecting these onto the past, rather than accepting a heterogeneity of masculinities.

Finally, a common thread running through the four points I have just discussed is a concern with projecting the present back onto the past, or more forcefully, using the past in the service of contemporary politics. The idea that Reeder's study manipulates the past in service of the present any more than does any other archaeology is misinformed. All archaeology is conducted in the present and in so doing is at risk of being used to service some or other agenda of the present. This is just the kind of accusation that was levelled to dismiss pioneering feminist-inspired archaeologies (see, for example, Wylie 1990). Interestingly, many of the critical comments against Reeder, cited and discussed above, include overt examples where some aspect of the present is projected onto the past, the difference being in these instances it is a heterosexual present that is projected back, not a homosexual one. A wonderfully amusing example is the statement that because Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were both married and had children, whatever the relationship was it could not have been the same as a modern gay relationship. Being mischievously contrary, I would argue that their being married with children is probably good evidence for their relationship to be very much like

that of some modern gay men. There are still a large number of modern gay men who are or have been married (to women) and have children. Many gay men still get married (to women) and have children in the belief/hope they will 'change'. But there is a more serious point to make.

I do not have a problem with the past being used in the present. I was trained as an archaeologist in South Africa, and there it was a past that only some archaeologists constructed that was used to challenge some of the myths created by the apartheid regime. Other archaeologists used the very same archaeological evidence to support certain aspects of the apartheid ideology. The past has always been used in the present, and this will continue; it will never stop. A seemingly innocuous set of dioramas showing family units in the Stone Age, in the Iron Age, and in the Anglo Saxon and Roman periods show 'the family unit' (a modern political construct our politicians manipulate to get votes) to be as old as humanity itself (Dowson 2006). This is an obvious example of where the past is used in the service of contemporary sexual politics. But because it is the politics of heterosexuality it is never questioned, by producers or consumers. The use of the word homosexuality, certainly a modern construct, when discussing same-sex relationships in the past is as problematic as using terms such as male, female, marriage and heterosexuality.

We do well to remember that the past is not some objectified entity that exists out there waiting for the archaeologists to excavate it and carefully reconstruct it. Pasts are constructed in the present. Hence Chakrabarty's (2000, 109) comment that past communities are always in some sense our contemporaries.¹ And if the past is used to challenge contemporary homophobia by showing that same-sex relationships have always existed, in whatever form, so be it.

Just because earlier historical cultures may differ from modern ones in their organization of sex and gender, and just because Greek Pederasty differs in a number of crucial respects from contemporary metropolitan gay male identity, it does not follow that metropolitan gay men today cannot or should not identify with ancient Greeks. We don't only identify with those who are the same as us, after all: if other people weren't *different* from us, what would be the point of *identifying* with them? ... It is possible, after all, to recruit the queerness of past historical periods not in order to justify one or another partisan model of gay life in the present, but rather to acknowledge, promote, and support a heterogeneity of queer identities, past and present. (Halperin 2002, 15–16)

Suggesting that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were the first gay male couple (Farrar 2005) is surely not the best way in which Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep can be used to challenge homophobia today. But we can examine and theorize their relationship, free of heterosexist bias, in an attempt to understand better the heterogeneous nature of sexual identities

past and present. We do not have all the answers. Reeder does not claim to have definitively proved that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were lovers, and his thinking has developed considerably over two decades and more. But we shall never get any further if we continue to allow our discussions of Reeder's work to be bogged down with a fear of homosexuality. This is not to imply we can not and should not be critical. On the contrary, we need to remain critical, *queerly critical*; after all, it was a questioning of a heterosexist interpretation of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep that gave rise to the debate I discuss here.

A final question: Is Cheripion right or wrong?

Homosexuality – and for now I take homosexuality to be sexual relations between members of the same sex – is a well researched topic in primatology. One primatologist, Paul Vassey, writes:

...there exists robust evidence that homosexual behaviour, and by extension, other nonreproductive sexual behaviours, are the products of a long evolutionary history that occurred independent of human culture. While homosexual behaviour is widespread among our primate relatives, aggression specifically directed toward individuals that engage in it appears to be a uniquely human invention. (Vassey 1993, 197)

And according to Classical writers, the practice of homosexuality was thought to be widespread amongst the so-called Celts of Europe (James 1993, 53). For example, Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae*, Gullik 1928, cited in James 1993) writes 'the Celts also, though they have very beautiful women, enjoy boys more: so that some of them have two lovers to sleep with on their beds of animal skins'. It is more than just probable that sexual relations between members of the same sex have been practiced in humans since the earliest hominids, and it is becoming increasingly evident that 'normal sexuality' can no longer be thought of in terms of reproductive behaviour between two people, each of the opposite sex.

This is not to suggest or imply, in any way, that homosexuality as we know it today was anything like this in the past. The meaning and significance of sexual relations between members of the same sex is not the same around the world today. But the same is true for heterosexuality. And I believe we have to accept as well that homosexuality was almost certainly forbidden in other societies in the past, just as it is not accepted by all societies and cultures today. But, it does not logically follow that to prove it was forbidden in a particular society is to prove that same-sex relations did not exist. Also, just because ancient Egyptians thought homosexuality was on a par with adultery, it does not follow that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep could not have enjoyed in some way a same-sex relationship.

It is into this kind of approach to our understanding of sexuality that we need to insert our discussion of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. But before we can do that, Reeder's critics need to answer one question, and hopefully avoid the heterosexual authority of archaeology we have witnessed thus far. Greg Reeder has convincingly argued that the way in which Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are portrayed in their joint tomb is similar, if not identical, to the way in which contemporary male tomb-owners are depicted with their wives, as demonstrated by Nadine Cherpion. The question for Reeder's critics is this: is Cherpion's analysis right or wrong? Once we have a reasoned response to that question, those of us interested in exploring the heterogeneity of queer identity past and present can incorporate Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in to our constructions of *queer* identities in the past in a more meaningful manner and Egyptology can play a more significant role in contemporary discussions about the nature and diversity of sexual identity. If Cherpion's analysis is considered to be valid, i.e. that there *was* an accepted canon for depicting a husband and wife, what then is the significance of that same canon being used for Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep? If Cherpion is wrong, i.e. the canon does not exist, or it does not represent what she says it does, what does it depict and why? Why were a number of male-female couples depicted like this and only one male-male couple? Parkinson's comment quoted above (1995, 62) suggests that the answer to this crucial question is that Cherpion is right in her analysis; he clearly accepts her identifying an iconographic canon to represent a man and his wife. In which case, let the mature, non-homophobic discussion begin.

Acknowledgements

First I thank the staff and volunteers of the Egypt Centre, University of Wales Swansea, who made the Sex and Gender conference, at which an earlier draft of this paper was presented, a truly memorable occasion. Part of that conference was a series of papers on Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep presented by David O'Connor, Richard Parkinson, Greg Reeder and myself. After the session one person jokingly said to me 'it looked like it was going to be handbags at dawn', but it was not. The session was unquestionably the best and most rewarding conference debate I have ever participated in. I thank my co-presenters for their scholarly professionalism. I also thank David and Richard for answering many questions and taking the time to continue discussions with me. I may not always have agreed with them but they truly are scholars and gentlemen. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Greg, who has always supported my own work in queer archaeology, and helped in many, many ways. But without the constant encouragement of Stuart Williams and Carolyn Graves-Brown this paper would never have come to fruition in its final form.

Bibliography

- Andrew, G.
1997 *Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids*, London.
Baines, J.
1985 'Egyptian twins', *Orientalia* 54, 461–82.
Basta, M.
1979 'Preliminary report on the excavation at Saqqara (1964) and the discovery of a tomb from the 5th Dynasty', *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 63, 1–50.
Berlant, L. and Warner, M.
1995 'What does queer theory teach us about X?', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 110(3), 343–9.
Butler, J.
1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, London.
1993 *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*, London.
Chakrabarty, D.
2000 *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton, New Jersey.
Cherpion, N.
1978 'Deux manuscrits royaux de la Ve dynastie', *Acta Orientalia Belgica* 4, 65–72.
1995 'Sentiment conjugal et figuration à l'Ancien Empire', *Sonderdruck des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts in Kairo* 28, 34–45.
de Lauretis, T.
1991 'Queer theory: lesbian and gay sexualities, an introduction', *Difference* 3(2), iii–xviii.
Dover, K.
1978 *Greek Homosexuality*, Cambridge, Mass.
Dowson, T.A.
2001 'Queer theory and feminist theory: towards a sociology of sexual politics in rock art research', in K. Helskog (ed.) *Theoretical Perspectives in Rock Art Research*, Oslo.
2006 'Archaeologists, feminists, and queers: sexual politics in the construction of the past', in P.L. Geller and M.K. Stocker (eds.) *Feminist Anthropology: Past, present, and future*, Philadelphia.
2008 'Queer theory meets archaeology: disrupting epistemological privilege and heteronormativity in constructing the past', in N. Giffney and M. O'Rourke (eds.) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, London.
Farrar, S.
2005 'Is this the earliest image of a gay couple?', *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, No. 1715, 18–19.
Fausto-Stirling, A.
2000 *Sexing the Body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality*, New York.
Fone, B.
2000 *Homophobia: A history*, New York.
Halperin, D.
1990 *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, New York.

