

Session 3 – 06/11/2025

The religious life of women in ancient Egypt: religious roles and private practices

HPHI5032/6032 Women and Religion

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and Heritage

Readings

- Ayad, M. 2019. Women's Self-Presentation in Ancient Egypt. In H. Bassir (Ed.), *Living Forever: Self-presentation in Ancient Egypt* (pp. 221-245). Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.
- Ayad, M. 2022. *Women in Ancient Egypt: Revisiting Power, Agency, and Autonomy*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press
- Budin, S.L.; Turfa, J.M. 2016. *Women in Antiquity: Real Women across the Ancient World. Rewriting antiquity*. London: Routledge. → especially part 2
- Lesko, B. 1999. Women's earliest records: from ancient Egypt and western Asia <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/2027/heb04310.0001.001>
- Capel, A. K., G. E. Markoe (eds.). 1996. *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven. Women in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Hudson Hills Press.
- Fischer, H.G. 2000. *Egyptian Women of the Old Kingdom and of the Heracleopolitan Period*. 2nd Ed. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- McDowell, A.G. 1999. *Village Life in Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: OUP.
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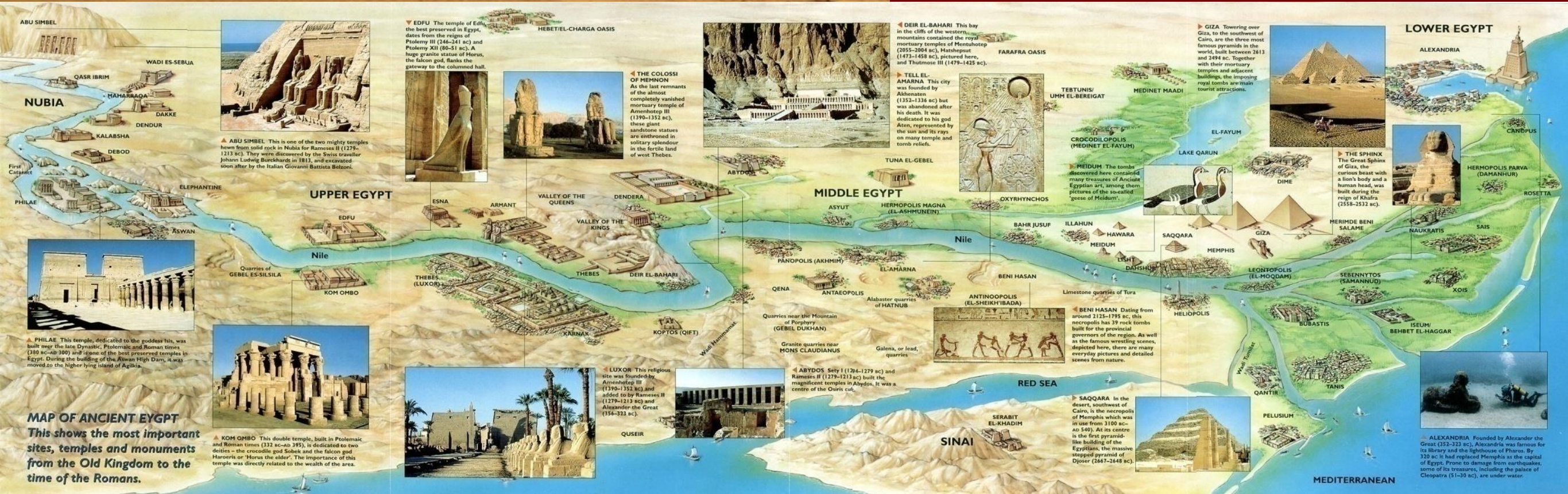
Readings

- ❑ Robins, G. 1993 (or any other edition). *Women in Ancient Egypt*. Cambridge: Harvard University Pr.
- ❑ Quirke, S. (1999) 'Women in Ancient Egypt: Temple titles and funerary papyri', in *Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honour of H.S. Smith*. (eds., Leahy, A. and J. Tait), London: EES. 227-235.
- ❑ Sabbahy, L. 2013. Gender, Pharaonic Egypt. In: Bagnall, R.S. (ed). *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*. New York: Blackwell. 2876–2878.
- ❑ Sabbahy, L. 2022. *Daily Life of Women in Ancient Egypt*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood.
- ❑ Sweeney, D. 2011. Sex and Gender. In; Froom, E. W. Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles.
<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3rv0t4np>



Mapping ancient Egyptian Religion in Time and Space

SPACIAL AWARENESS AND CHRONOLOGY





All Periods

- Pre- and Early Dynastic Period
- Old Kingdom
- First Intermediate Period
- Middle Kingdom
- Second Intermediate Period
- New Kingdom
- Third Intermediate Period
- Late Period
- Ptolemaic and Roman Period



Periods

Dynasties

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Pre- and Early Dynastic Period | ☐ Predyn. (5300-3000BC), 0-2 |
| ☐ Old Kingdom | ☐ 3-6 |
| ☐ First Intermediate Period | ☐ 8-11 |
| ☐ Middle Kingdom | ☐ 11-12 |
| ☐ Second Intermediate Period | ☐ 13-17 |
| ☐ New Kingdom | ☐ 18-20 |
| ☐ Third Intermediate Period | ☐ 21-24 |
| ☐ Late Period | ☐ 25-30 |
| ☐ Ptolemaic and Roman Period | ☐ No dynastic time anymore
(332BC -331AD) |

Before we get to Women and
Religion in Ancient Egypt...

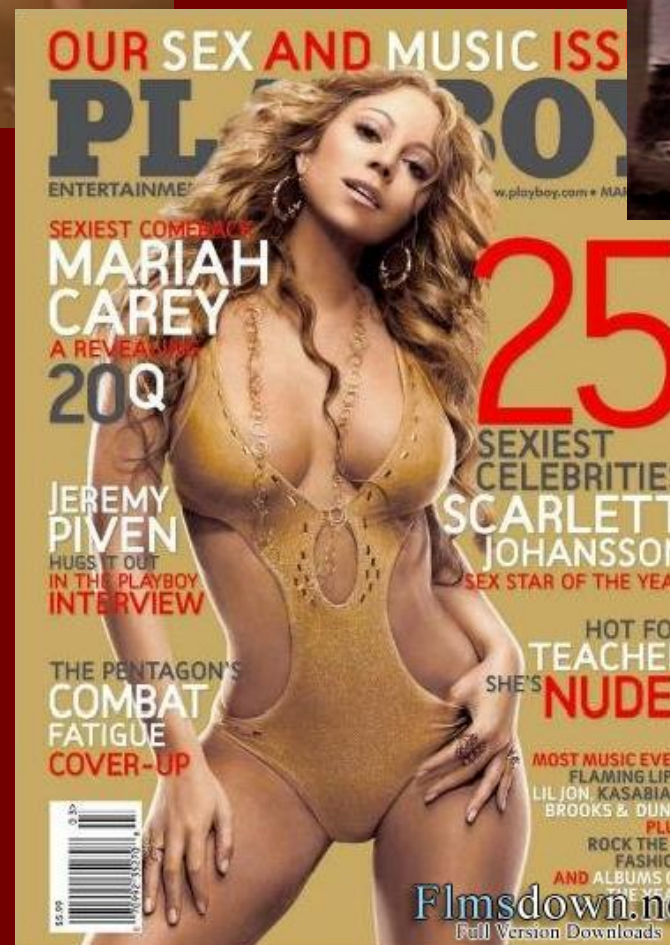
**The material culture of
gender in AE –
representations: how to use
sources**

Gender (Re-)Presentations

The real world?



“My Body Is Not
an Ornament” -
movement



CODES → DECORUM

- Seeing / reading / experiencing women and men in ancient Egypt
- VERY DIFFERENT
- visual art is coded: Egyptian **formal art is symbolic, not meant to** represent reality → an ideal world
- will be comprehensible to others of that society
- codes & symbols are culturally specific
- DECORUM
 - representations follow specific conventions – unwritten rules
 - → you don't show a picture of the queen on the toilet



Taking visual sources...: Possible purposes of art

Ceremonial - ritual, celebration, artworks created to support worship ceremonies

Artistic expression - artwork to express or communicate emotions, ideas, feelings or to beautify objects

Narrative - artworks that tell stories, describe and illustrate experiences

Functional - artistic objects used in everyday life that serve an actual purpose

Persuasive - artworks that promote ideas, philosophies, or products

Egyptian art and Art Theory

- ❑ Egyptian artisan bound by conventions and the client
- ❑ BUT once mastered rules = free to bend rules to his vision
- ❑ Egyptian art = portrayal of Egyptian cultural idea of the world with its own sense of time and space and its own realism
- ❑ Aspective Egyptian Art = product of the collective perceptual attitude and creative solutions to the various problems present in representing three-dimensional images

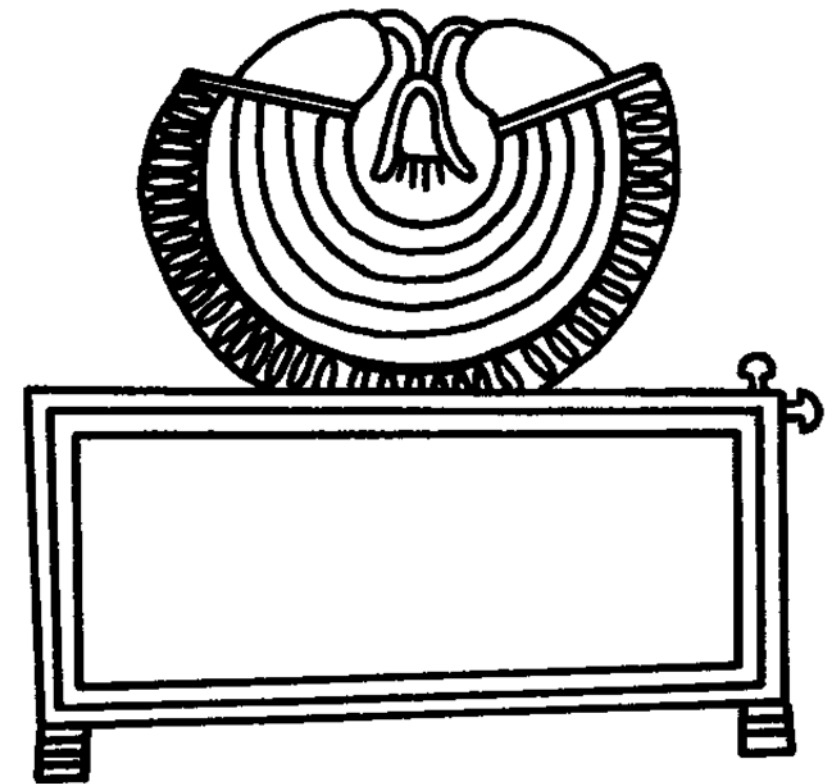
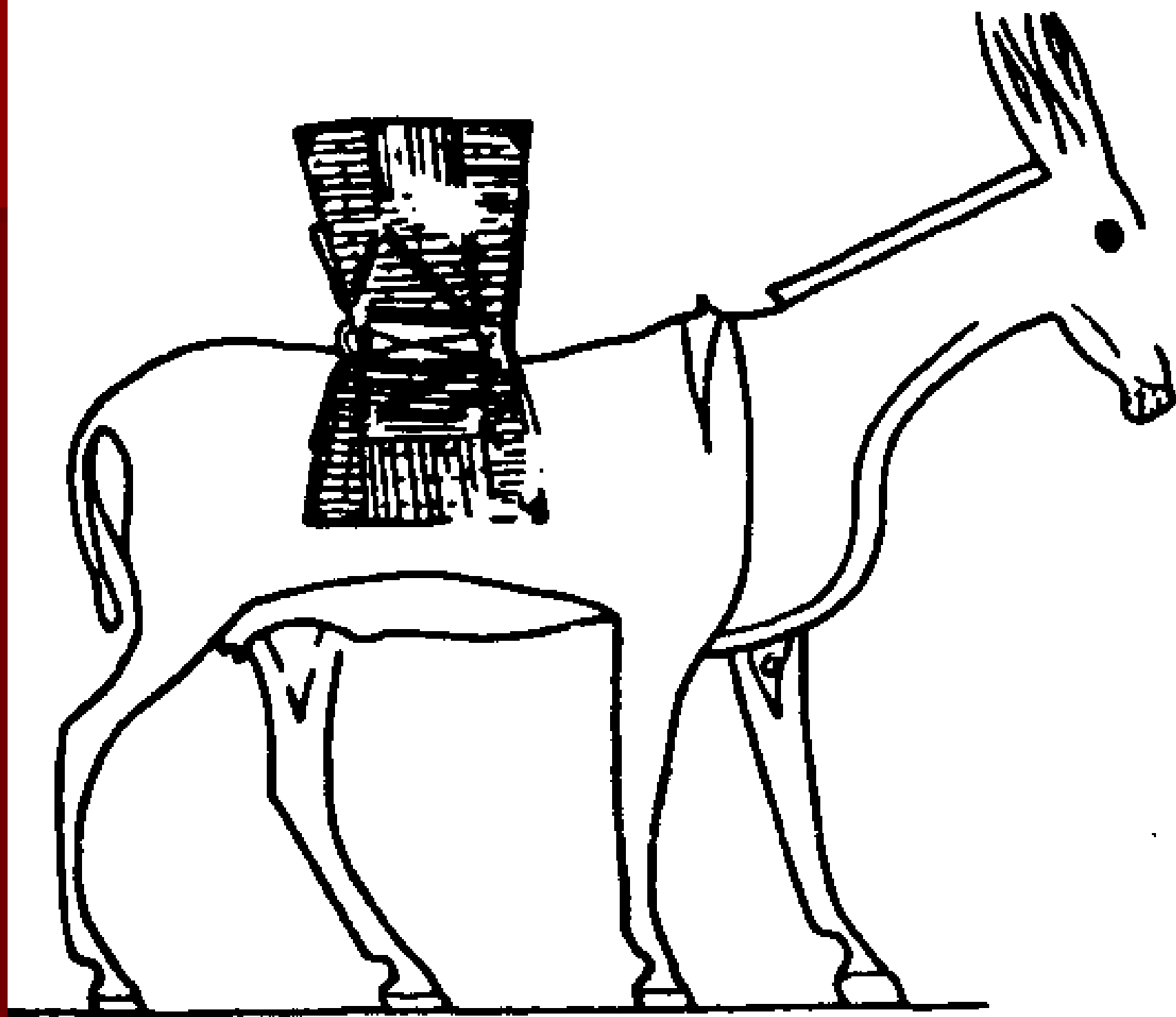


FIGURE 1.1
Representation of a box containing a necklace, TT 100,
eighteenth dynasty, after Davies 1943, Plate 90.

Conventions of Egyptian art:

Perspective - aspective

- ❑ → combination of views = product of the Egyptian solution to the problem of reproducing a three-dimensional figure on a two-dimensional surface
- ❑ German Egyptologist Emma Brunner-Traut developed term to describe this phenomenon: ASPECTIVE
- ❑ = perceptual attitude (like perspective), based on same in the underlying thought (and while they are different in execution they are the)
- ❑ Be aware: lack of conventional perspective doesn't mean *without space*



Perspective / aspective of Atef crown



Iconographic descriptions of artefacts

□ Iconography

- pictorial material relating to or illustrating a subject
- traditional or conventional images or symbols associated with a subject (religious, legendary)
 - **ICONOGRAPHY AS VISIBLE RELIGION**
- imagery or symbolism of art

□ Description

- account – what do you see?
 - Explanation – how do we have to understand this?
- Narrative – what are the cultural ideas behind that?

□ Artefact

- system used to depict an idealized version of reality
- applicable to only the figures within an artwork and not the artwork as a whole (this is following the principle of importance)

Proportional grid lines

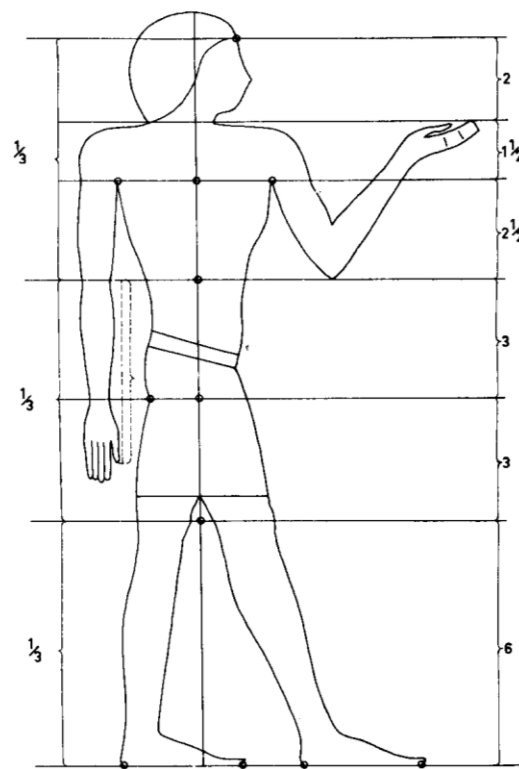


Abb. 16: Der Kanon des Alten Reiches

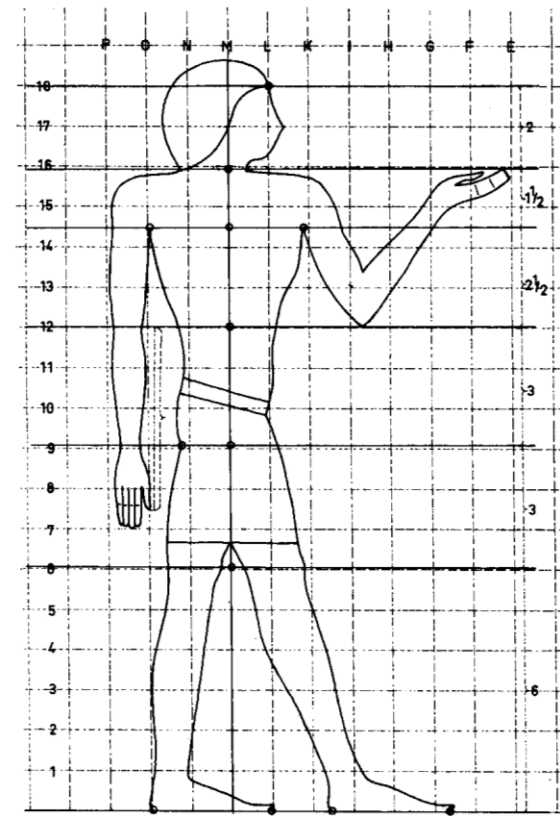


Abb. 17: Der Kanon des Mittleren Reiches, Standfigur

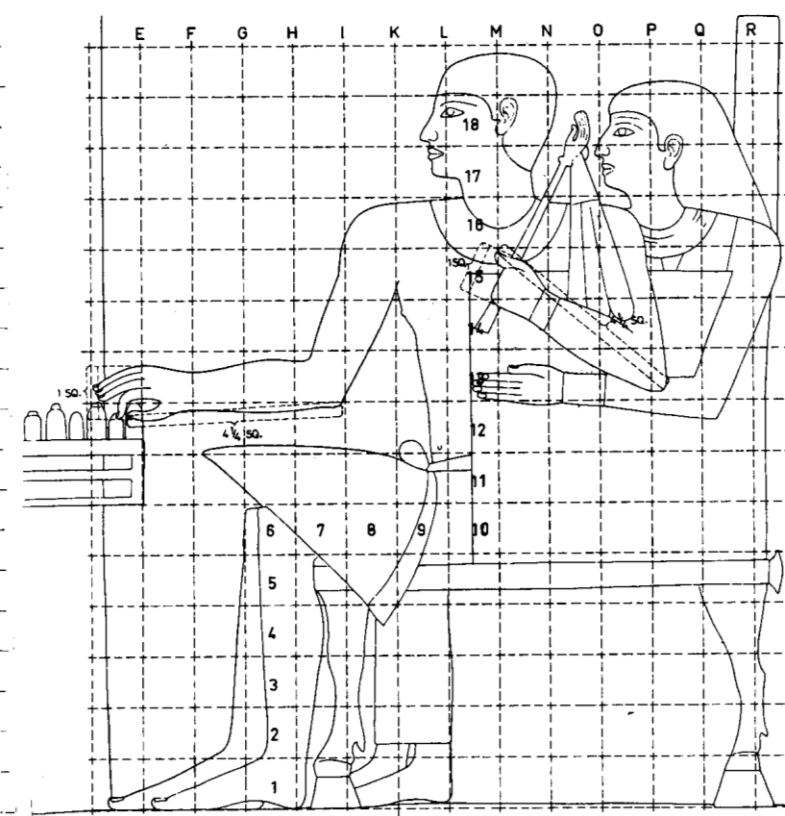


Abb. 18: Der Kanon des Mittleren Reiches, Sitzfigur

The Statues of Rahotep and Nofret



- Old Kingdom, 4th Dynasty, Reign King Snefru (ca. 2575- 25551 BCE), from Meidum, Mastaba tomb of Rahotep
- Material: Painted Limestone, eyes inlaid with rock-crystal, calcite and outlined with copper
- Current Location: Egyptian Museum, Cairo, Egypt (room 32)
- In contrast to Greek statuary, Egyptian statues are meant to be seen from the front





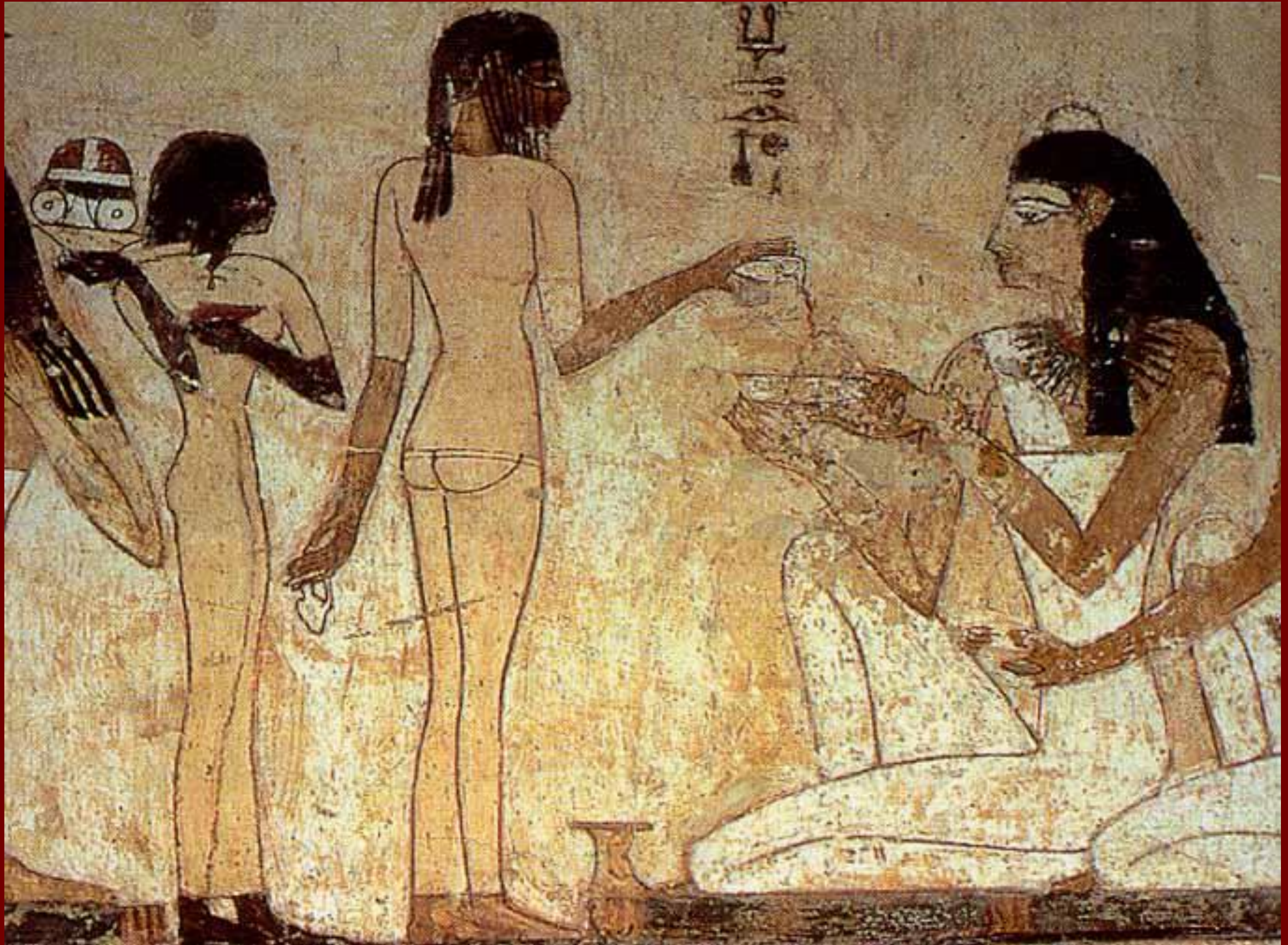
Human representations and gender

- **Gender is made clear**
- Men depicted larger than women (greater importance?)
- Men: brown, or dark skin
- women had pale white or yellowish (reflecting being indoors and spending less time out in the sun?)
- Standing statues: men striding, women feet together (passiv? or powerful?) → suggesting difference between being physically active versus passive

Human representations and gender

- Groups: person who touches or holds another person = less important than the person being touched → almost always, a woman is shown touching her husband/son
- tomb statuary + relief decoration: men = shown young (in prime physical shape), or old and corpulent (signifying wealth/power; women shown young + beautiful (irrespective age)
- Women NOT excluded but take second place

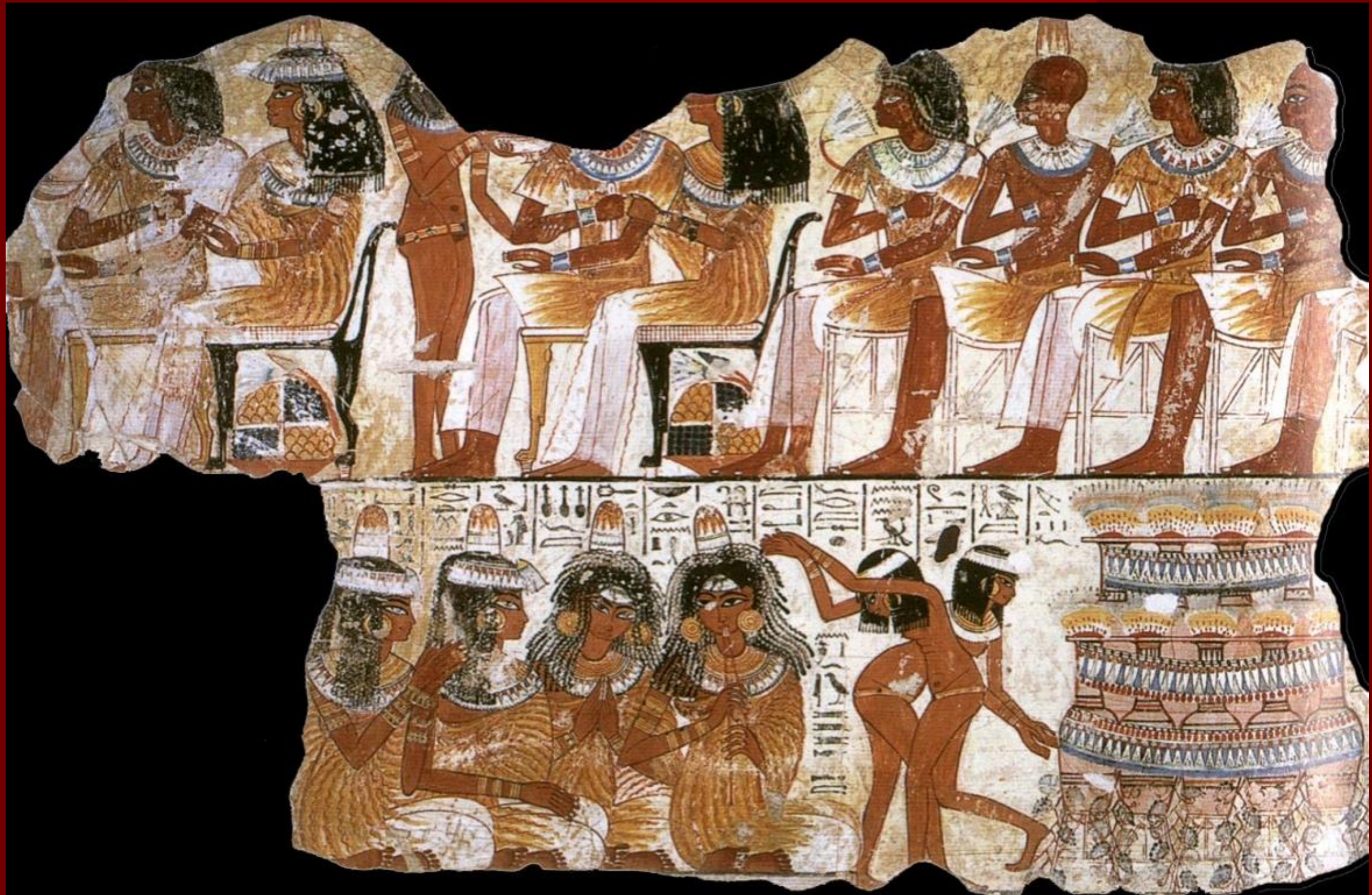
What do you see?



FEMININITY

- ❑ behaviour, actions, quality, appearance associated with being a woman
- ❑ Traits that are considered feminine can be categorized into
 - Physical (such as breasts, wider hips in relation to body size, softer facial features without facial hair, etc.)
 - Psychological (manifested in such things as a concern for relationships (sympathy, sensitivity, high language skills, receptivity)
 - Aesthetics (decoration and ornamentation of home and person)

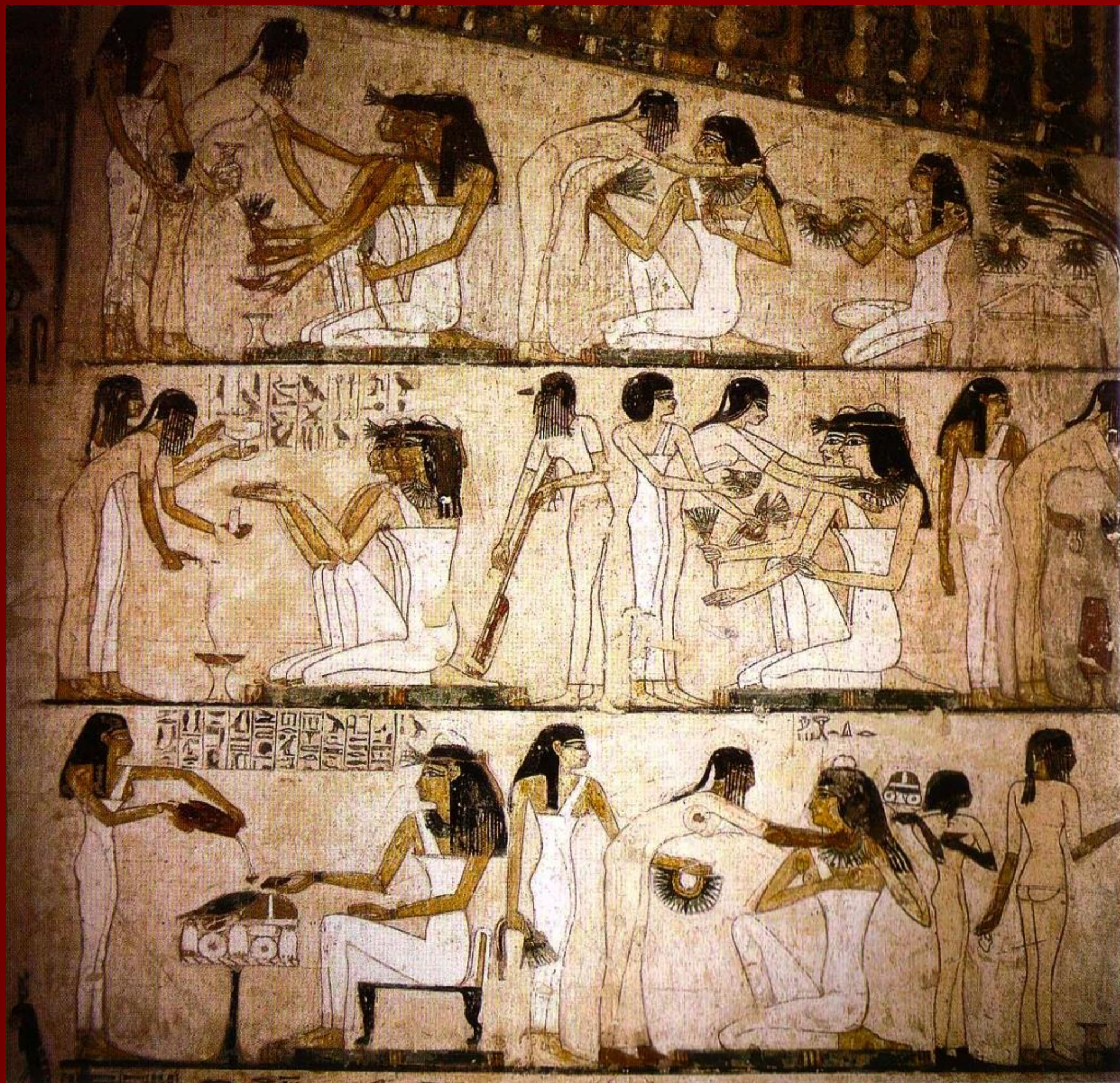
Tomb Chapel of Nebamun – BM EA37981





FEMININITY

- ❑ Distinctly feminine attributes are hard to pin down, as are the masculine, because each attribute (dress, makeup, jewellery, holding implements, position in scene) can be manifested in either sex
- ❑ attempt to categorize traits into strict categories of masculine and feminine = subject of philosophy, sociology, psychology and science for centuries
- ❑ unlikely to be resolved satisfactorily → diverse views, clues, and subsequent conclusions about the matter



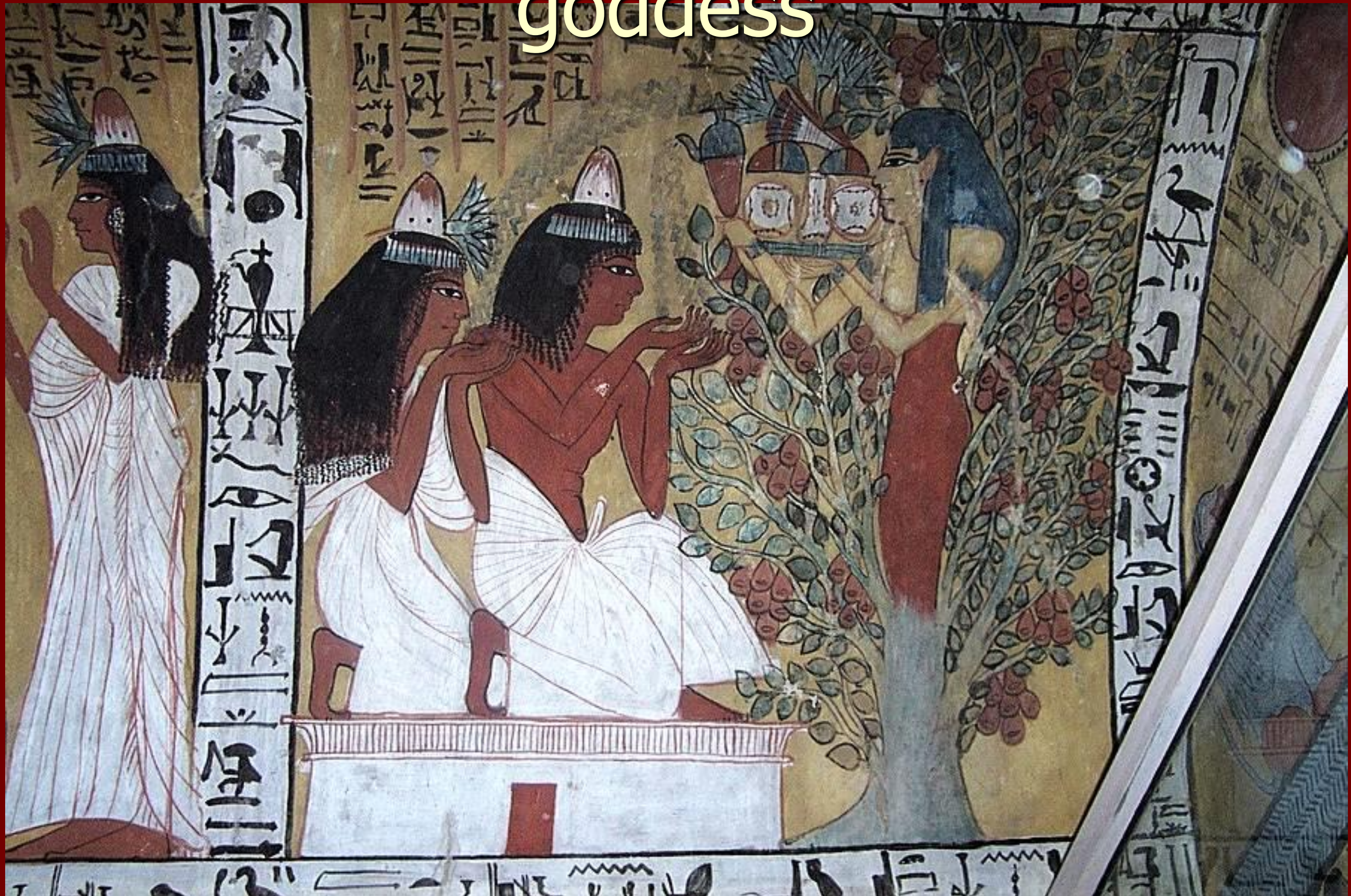
Decorum – depictions of women

- Temple: women may sing and dance for cult of gods/goddesses, but not recorded making offerings (except highest ritual positions) → men do not appear in offerings until 13th dyn. either
- Family chapel: women generally secondary to a man (husband or son) → except chapels of king's daughters at Gizeh

Characteristics of images of women in general

- ❑ not shown with rolls of fat (which indicate bureaucracy)
- ❑ generally lighter in colour (if upper class) and shape
- ❑ physical strength not emphasised
- ❑ costume clingy emphasising “erogenous” zones (though also to be seen as non-erogenous, but highlighting fertility – in regard to individual and ancestral line)

TT1 Sennedjem – couple before tree goddess



TT96 Sennefer ("Tomb of the Vines")

Notice as many iconographic details as possible

(DECODE!)



Women and religion - goddesses

- More than 2000 gods
 - some important, included in cosmogonies and cosmologies, state level
 - Some importance on local level
 - Some not much more than demons and genies, or living creatures chosen by ordinary Egyptians to be their personal gods

Representation

- ❑ animal parts = attributes/aspects
- ❑ Lioness = rage, destruction
- ❑ Cat = pacified, gentleness
- ❑ NOT worship of animals



Shared Iconography: queens and goddesses



Triads: Osiris, Isis, Horus (Louvre)

- Divine families!
- =grouping gods by 3: triad consists of a god, his spouse and one child
- most popular: Osiris, Isis and their son Horus
- Not always a son: triad of Elephantine – Khnum, Satet, Anuket.



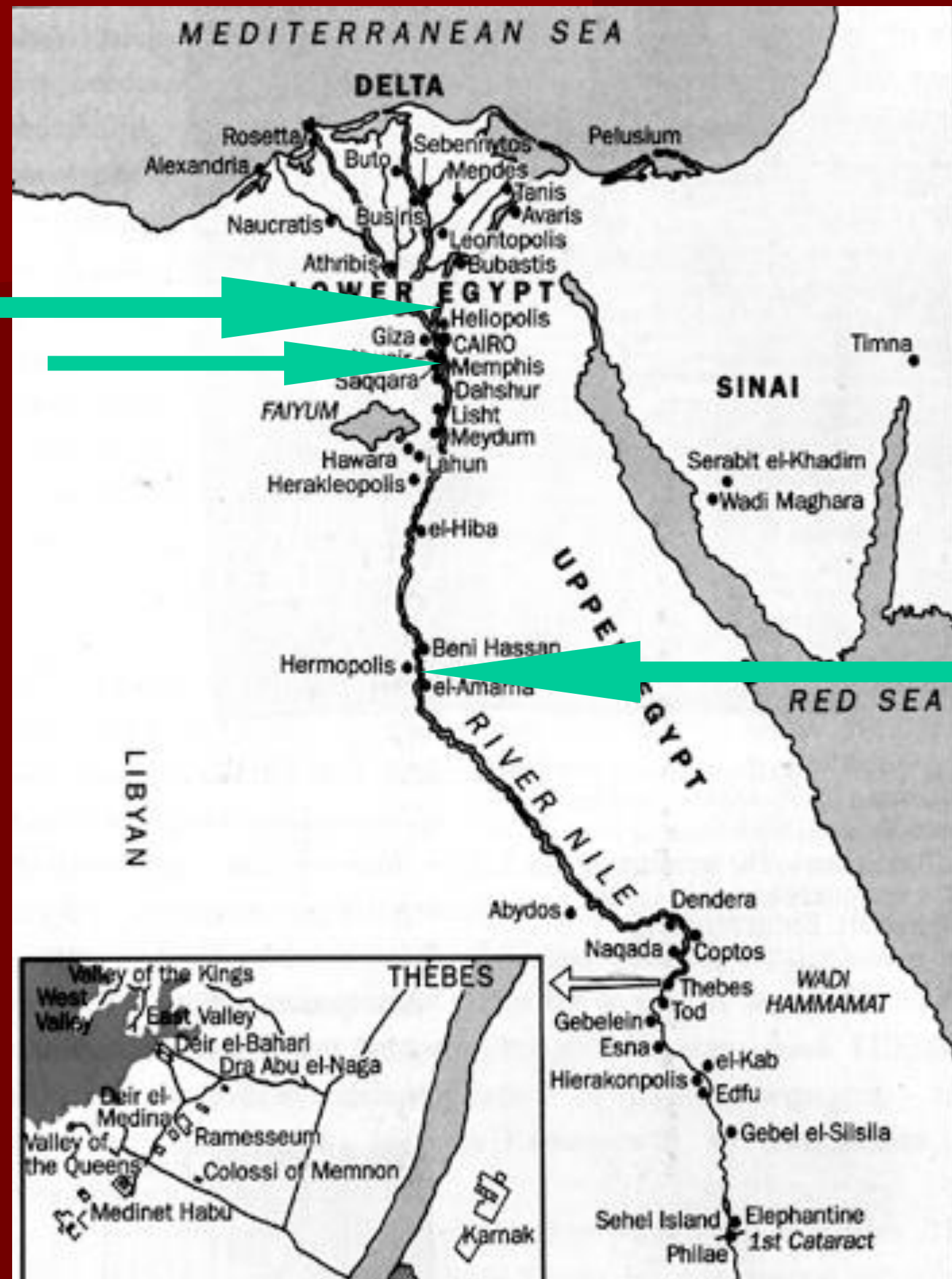
Cosmogonies

- Creation myths
- Pyramid Texts
 - Not narrative
- No birth of mankind myth
- Begin with Nun
 - Watery
 - Undifferentiated mass (darkness)
 - Source of creation

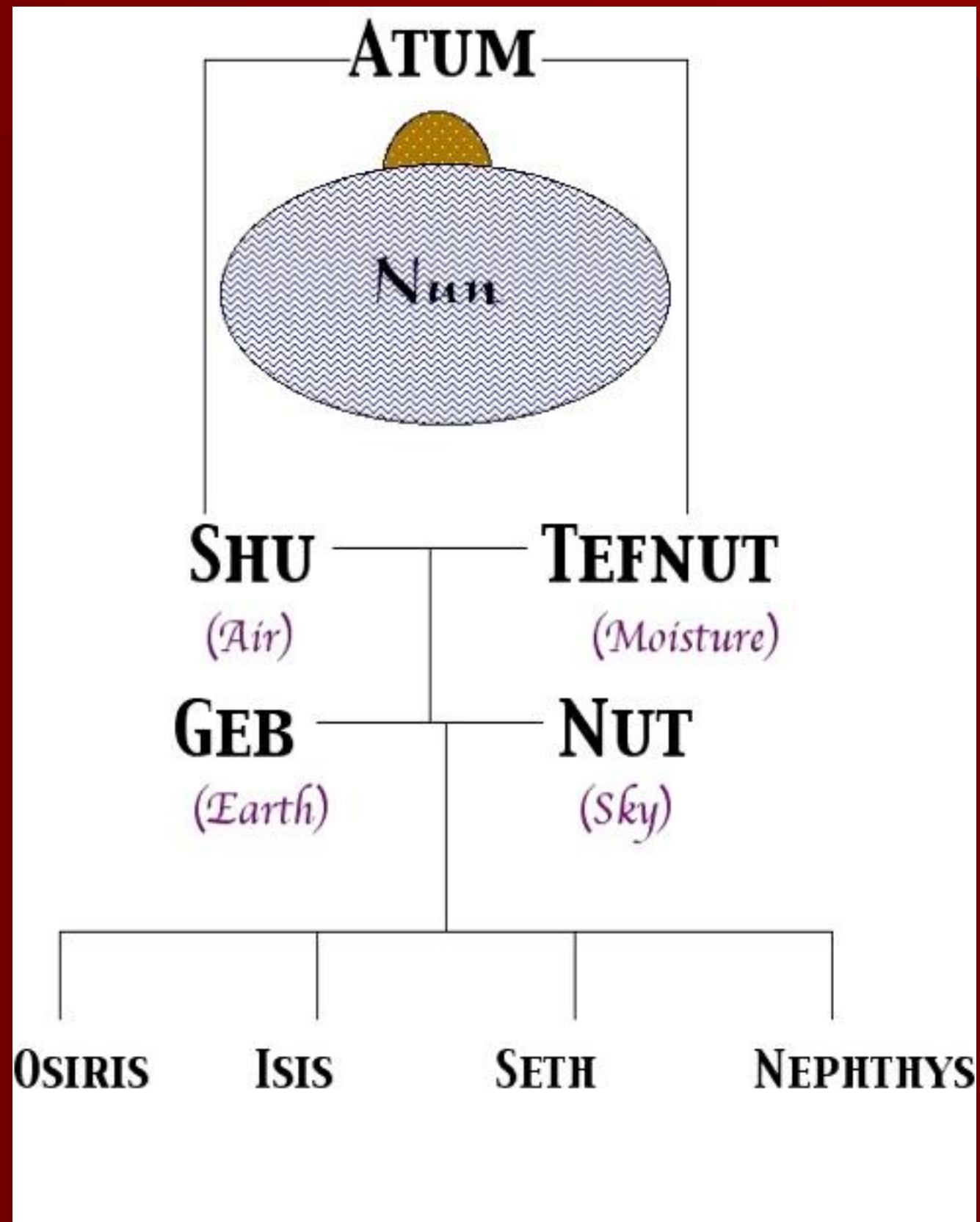


Main Centres

- Heliopolis (Ennead)
- Hermopolis (Ogdoad)
- Memphis



Ennead



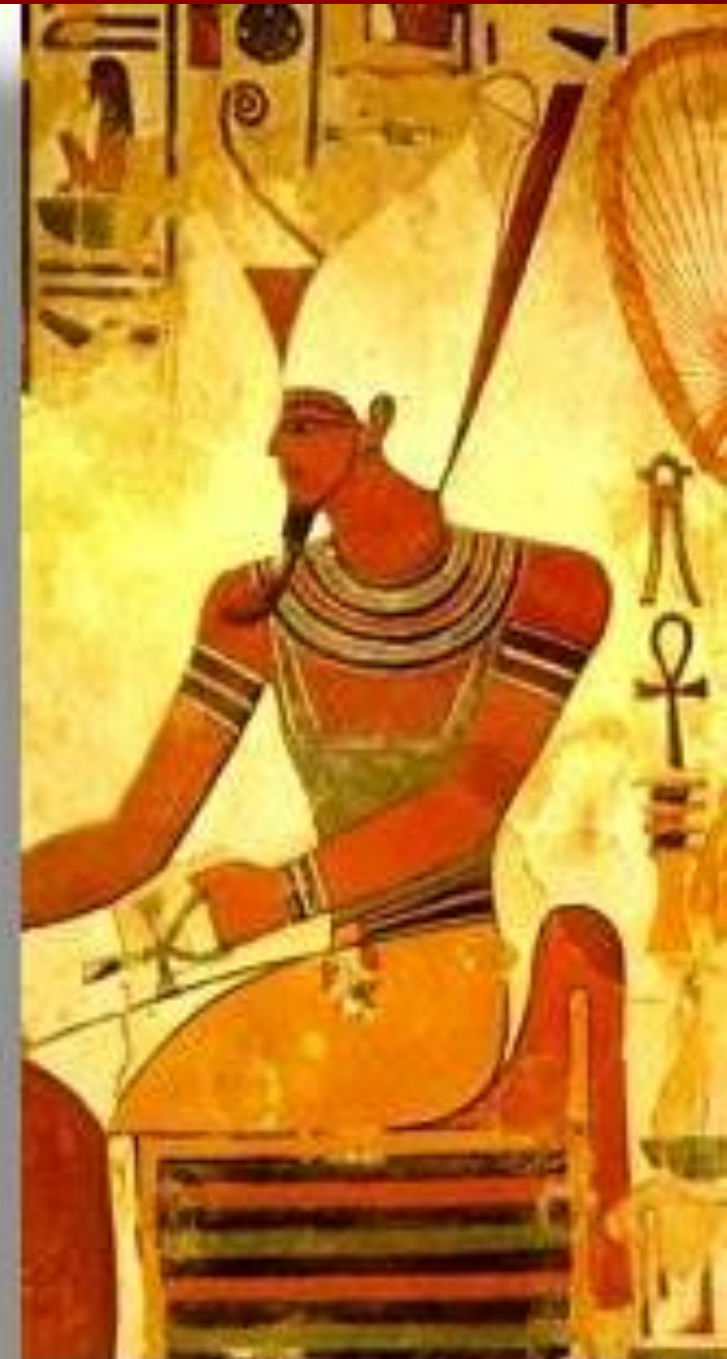


Creation – Iunu (Heliopolis)

- ❑ from the primeval waters represented by Nun mound appeared with self-begotten deity Atum
- ❑ Bored and alone, Atum spat or masturbated, producing Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture)
- ❑ Shu and Tefnut mated: Geb (earth) and Nut (sky)
- ❑ Geb and Nut engaged in continuous copulation until Shu separated them: lifting Nut into her place in the sky
- ❑ children of Geb and Nut: Osiris and Set, Isis and Nephthys, which in turn formed couples.

Atum

- 'tm' =
 - Everything, completion, perfection
 - Nothingness
- Form
 - Human
 - Ram



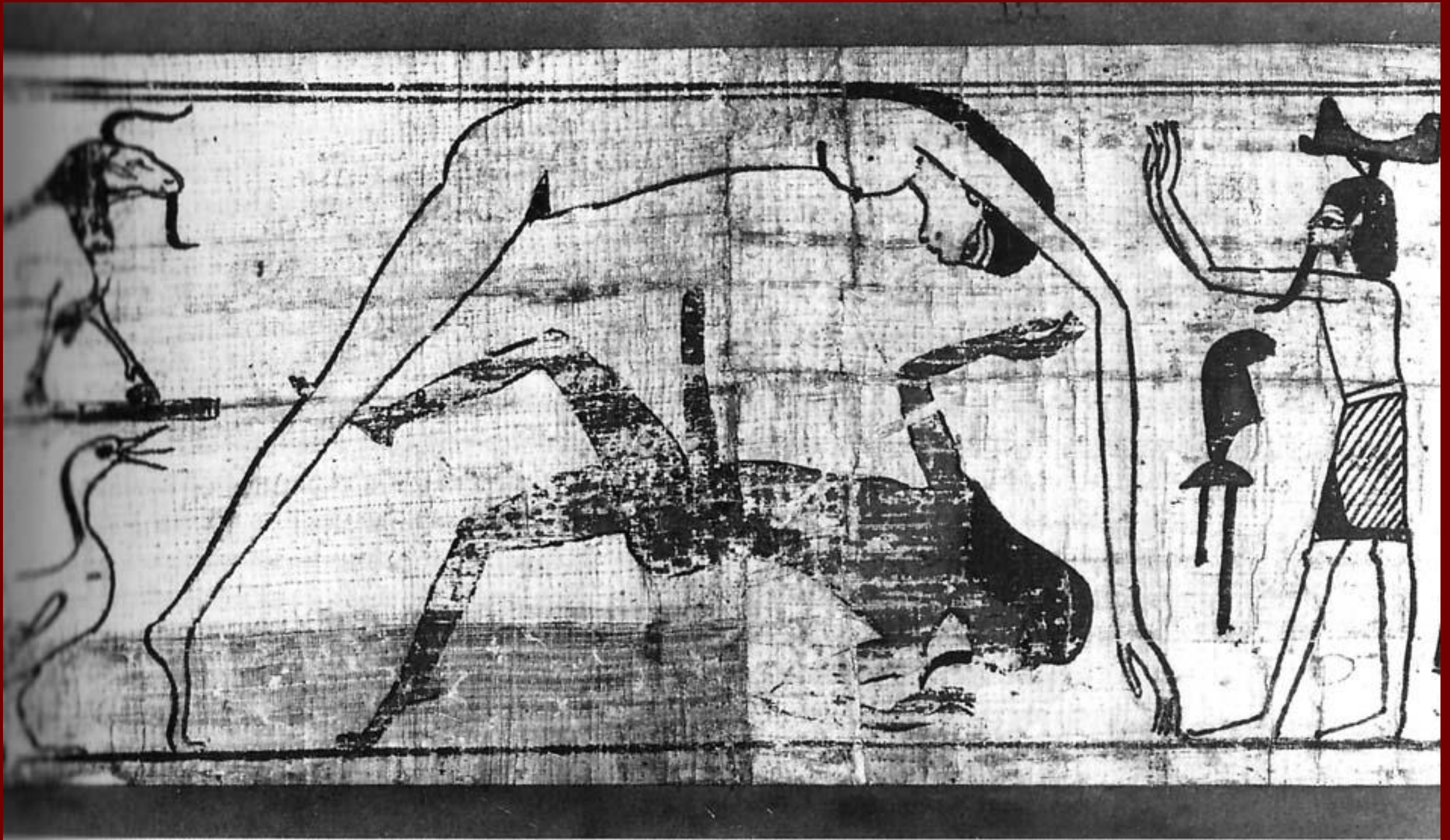
Shu (air)



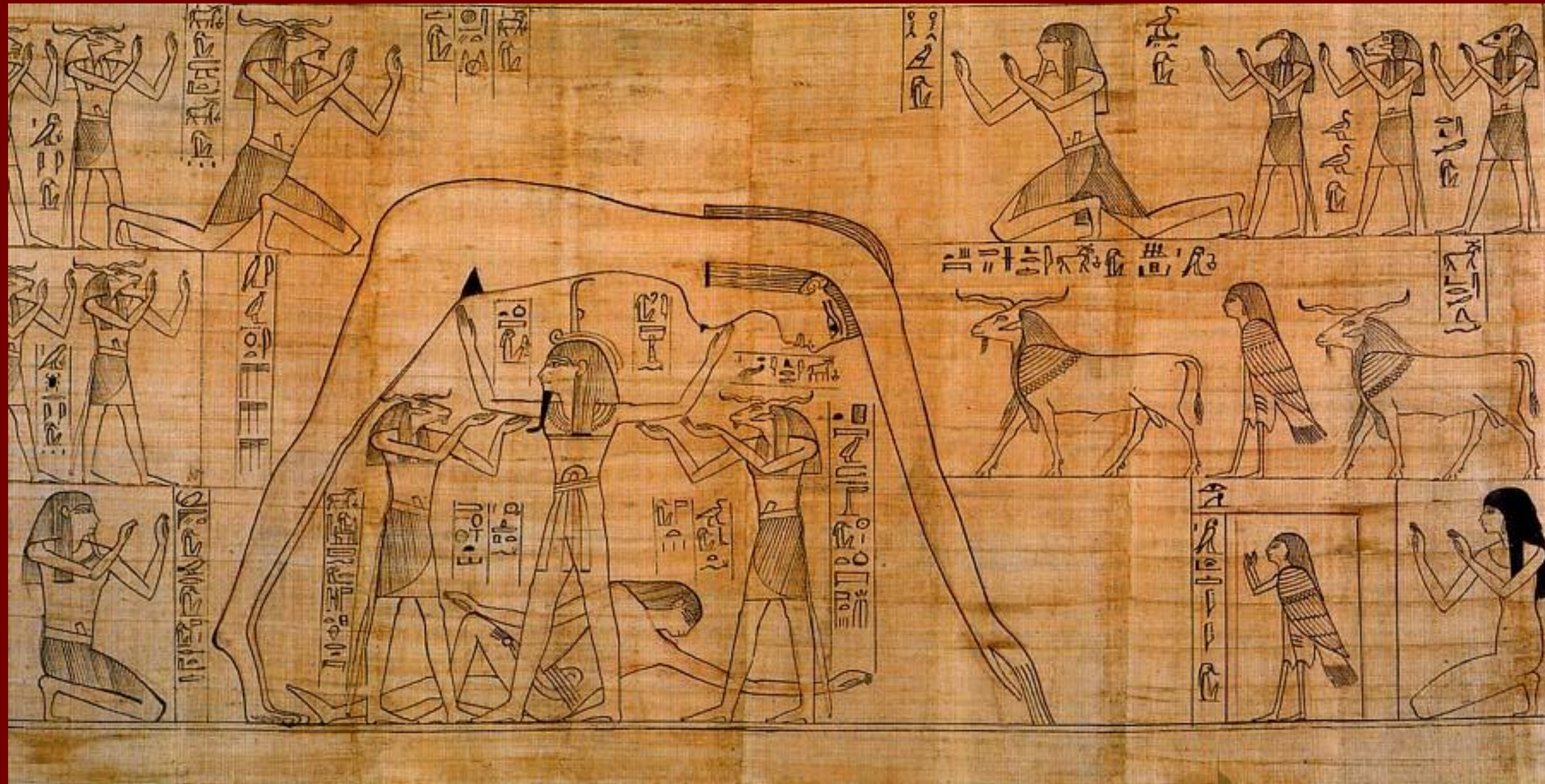
Tefnut (moisture)



Geb (earth) & Nut (sky)



Geb, Nut, & Shu - 'Book of the Dead' of Nestanebtasheru BM EA10554,87

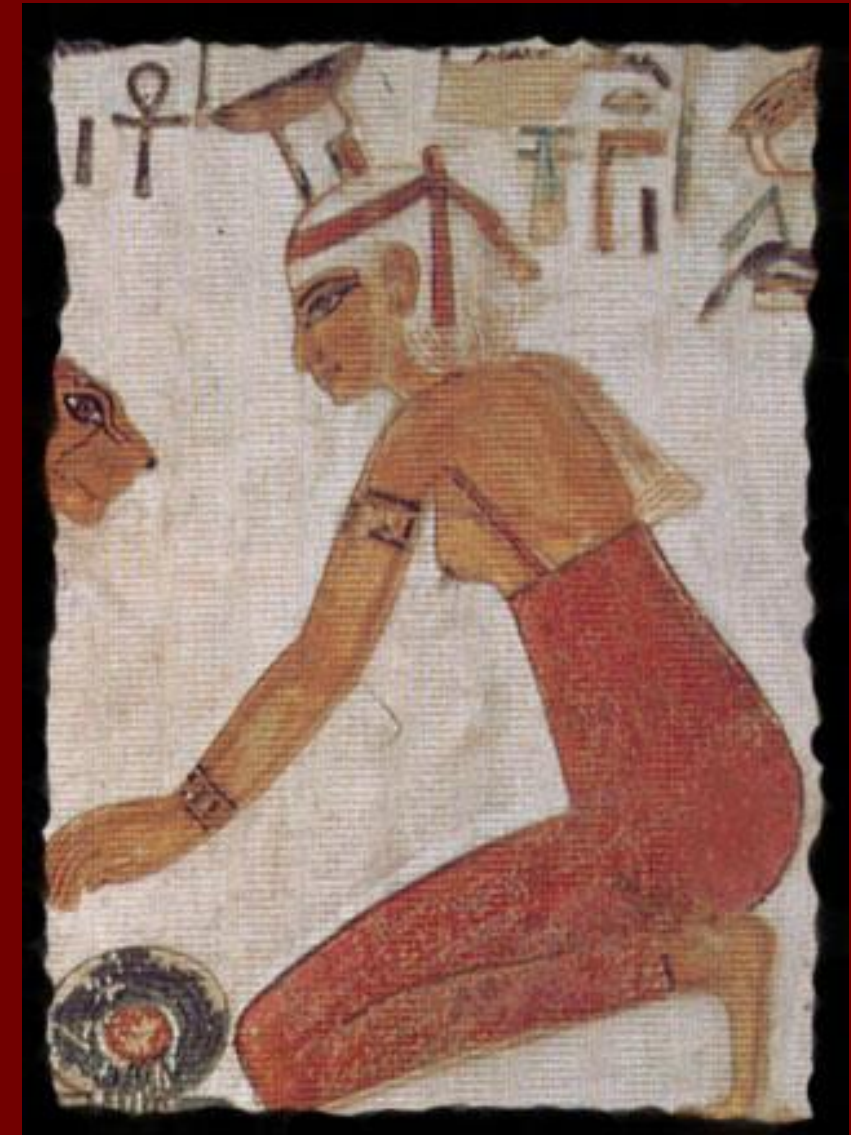


Osiris

- member of the Great Ennead
- god and chief judge of the Underworld
- god of resurrection, the Inundation and vegetation
- Represented mummified (Osiris myth)



Isis and Nephtys



Isis

- ❑ one of the great goddesses, most popular member of the Egyptian pantheon: magical powers, devotion to her husband, Osiris, and to their son, Horus
- ❑ Isis and sister, Nephthys, acted as divine mourners of the dead
- ❑ together with Neith and Selket: protected coffins and Canopic jars (Isis protecting the jar containing liver)
- ❑ Late Period: chief cult centre - Philae, but universally revered
- ❑ cult of this divine mother: eventually superseded only by that of the Virgin Mary

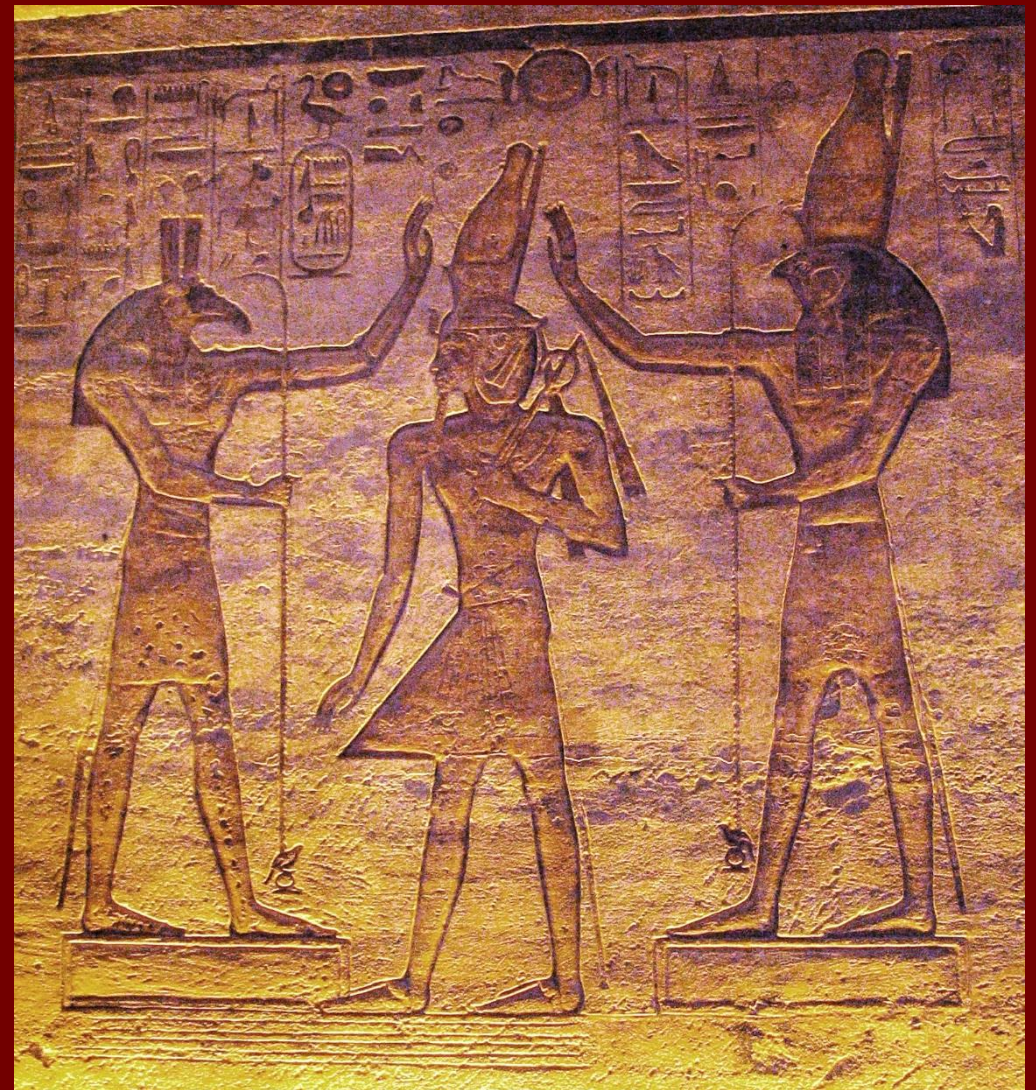
Isis, Nephthys, Osiris (deceased)



Seth



- Contendings of Horus and Seth:
- mythological story (20th dyn), Pap. Chester Beatty: battles between Horus and Seth to determine who will succeed Osiris as king
 - Fought as sexual encounter



Ptah: God of Craftsmen, Rebirth and Creation

Cairo JdE 60739



Ptah within Mennefer
(Memphis) Triad (Ptah,
Sekhmet, Nefertem)



Meret-Neith stela connection goddess- royalty



Hathor



votives to Hathor



votives to
Hathor (NK
temple)



Isis - Ptolemaic & Roman



WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Additional readings

- ❑ Robins: Women in Ancient Egypt 142-156.
- ❑ Fantechi, S.E. and A.P. Zingarelli (2002) 'Singers and Musicians in New Kingdom Egypt', GM 186: 27-35.
- ❑ Lesko, B. S. (2008) 'Household and Domestic Religion in Ancient Egypt', in Household and Family Religion in Antiquity. (eds., Bodel, J. and Olyan, S.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 197-209.
- ❑ Quirke, S. (1999) 'Women in Ancient Egypt: Temple titles and funerary papyri', in Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honour of H.S. Smith. (eds., Leahy, A. and J. Tait), London: EES. 227-235.
- ❑ Stevens, A. (2009). Domestic religious practices. in UCLA Encyclopaedia of Egyptology. <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/7s07628w>
- ❑ Darnell, J. C. (1995) 'Hathor Returns to Medamûd', SAK 22: 47-94.
- ❑ Sweeney, D. (2001) 'Walking alone forever, following you: Gender and mourner's laments from Ancient Egypt', NIN 2: 27-48.

Festivals as public events – Deir el-Medina and the local festival of Amenhotep I

- image of god placed in portable shrine, carried out of sanctuary – offerings, processions, sacred dramas, singing of hymns, other rites / ceremonies stretch sometimes over 14 days, with lavish distribution of food (and drink!) to population



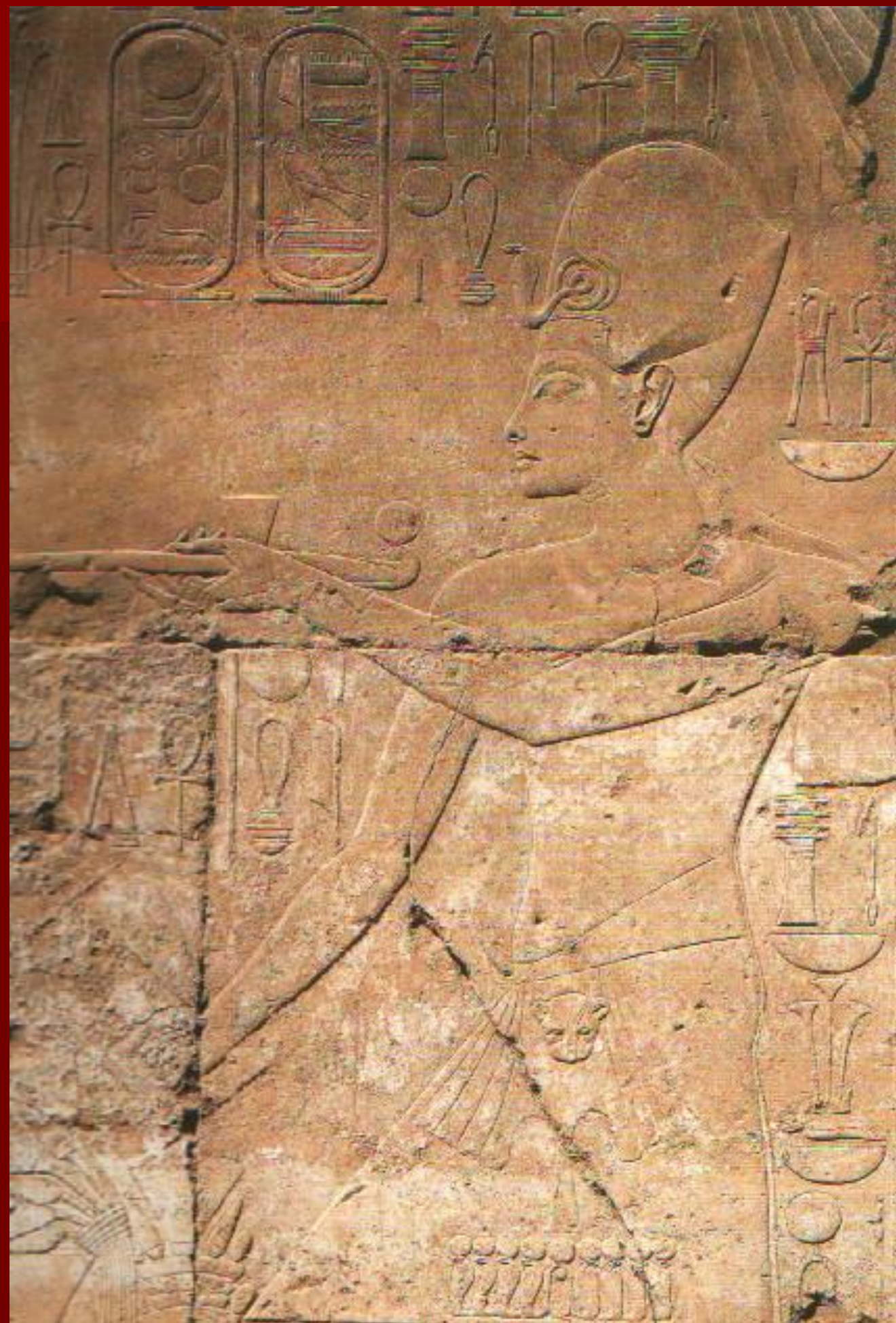
- *Year 7, third month of winter, day 29. The Great Festival of King Amenophis, l.p.h., the Lord of the Village was being held. The gang rejoiced before him for four solid days of drinking together with their children and their wives. There were sixty of inside (the village) and sixty of outside.*

- Cairo 25234. Cerny, *BIFAO* 27, (1927), 183-4; KRIVI. 370.

Priests

- Servant of god – hem netjer
- Worked full- (NEW from NK onwards), part-time or as lay person in temple
- Were not always well versed in religious doctrine, most priests did not come into contact with cult image of god or goddess
- In theory: only king had privilege to attend god (as high priest)
- In praxis: kings authority was delegated to chief priest (First Prophet) of each temple: Delegation of Royal Power → had therefore significant power and even influence in secular matters
- **‘No woman holds priestly office, either in the service of gods or god; only men are priests in both cases’. (Herodotus)**

Opet festival: Tutankhamun



Priest of Hapy

This bronze statuette represents the priest of Hapy, the god of the annual Nile inundation. This work probably belonged to the temple of Hapy in Aswan. Dynasty 20, (1200-1085 BC).



Medinat Habu:

The details of the Sokar and Min festivals are supplemented by information on the exterior of the south wall in a list of festivals



Priests/priestesses

- **Servants of God**
- Female title of *Hmt-nTr* only OK & MK
- Priestess of Hathor (sometimes Neith): title on statues → elite role - high on social scale - though functions unclear → mostly shown with sistrum & menat
- *Kheneru*
 - entertainment troops
 - upper class women performing in temples & in banquet scenes of their fathers (image)

Wab-priests

- ❑ Perform lesser tasks requisite to maintaining temples and rituals, taking part in processions
- ❑ Leader: Great Wab – handles instruments and cultic objects
- ❑ → therefore they had to be pure – wab
- ❑ Not allowed to enter sanctuary or feed themselves in offering hall, had rations in tertiary sacred zone between enclosure wall and temple proper
- ❑ Could be promoted to hem-netjer (from NK onwards)
- ❑ Few wabet known (MK), but OK already women known who “performed the wab service for Hathor”

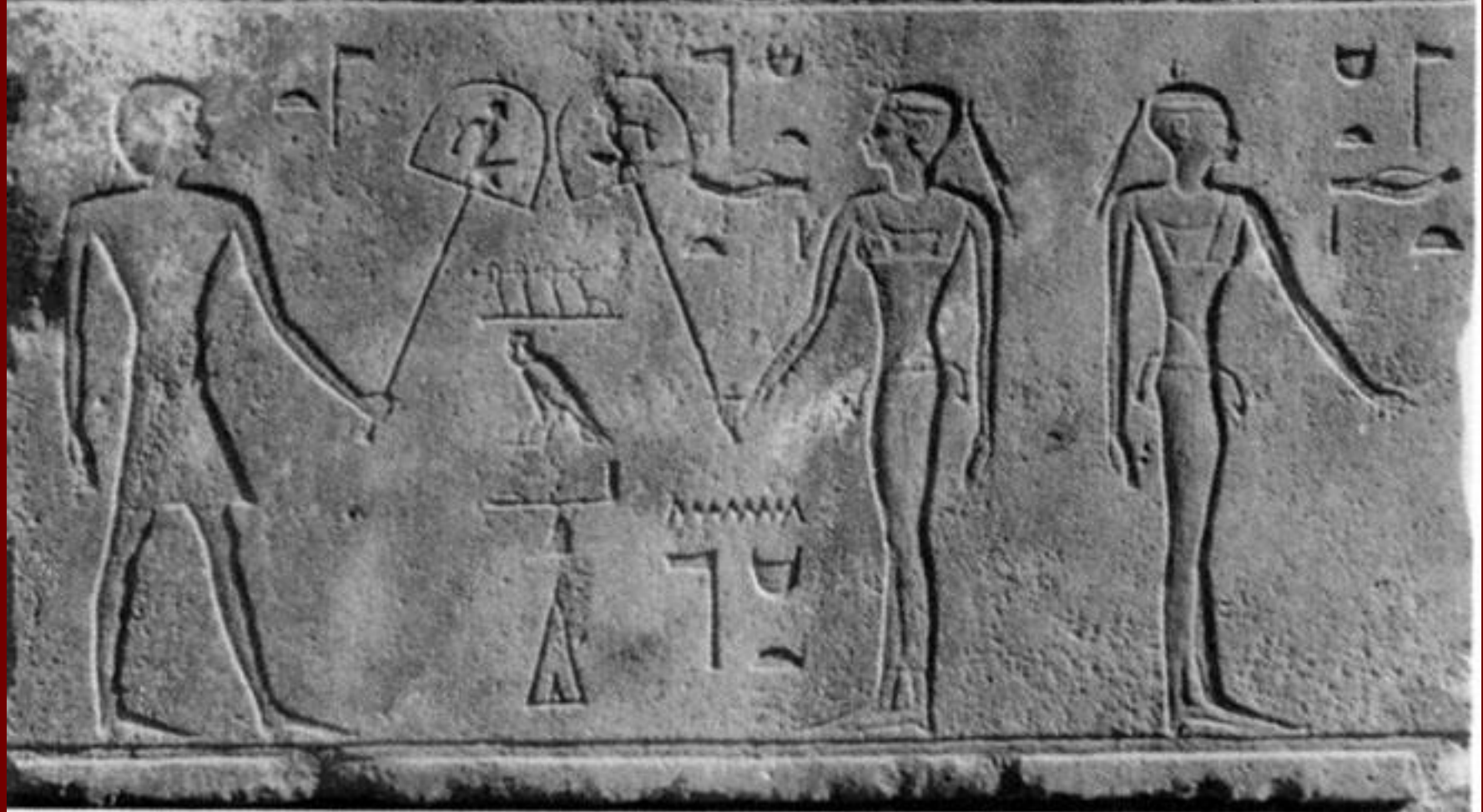
Red Chapel, Karnak:

Upper register: Female acrobats perform and harpists play for Maat-Ka-Re.

Lower register: Male dancers(?) pay homage and women play sistra for Maat-Ka-Re.







TT100: Rekhmire: offering servant (as priestly rank – funerary priestess – henutet, men = henuty)



Priests/priestesses

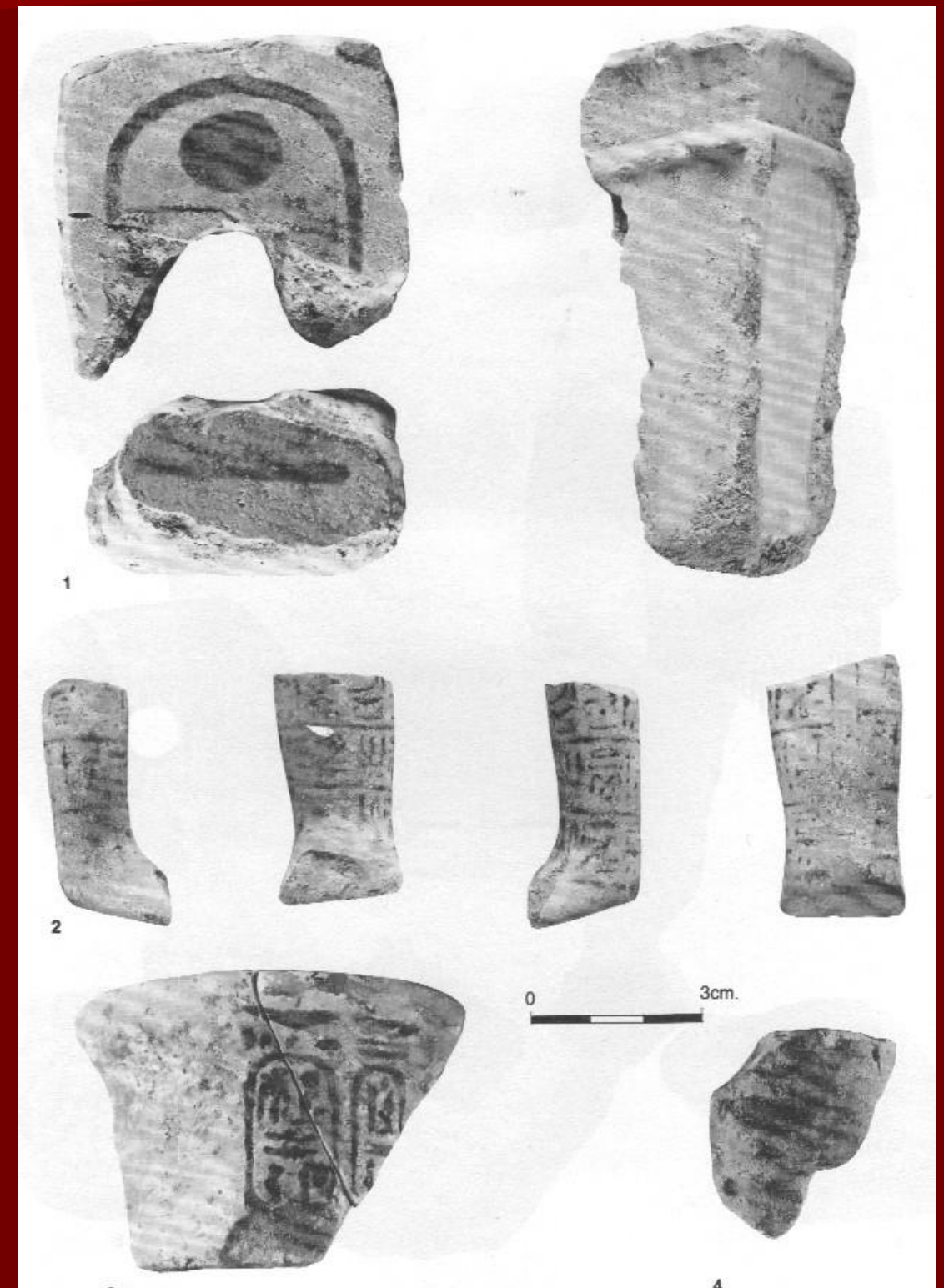
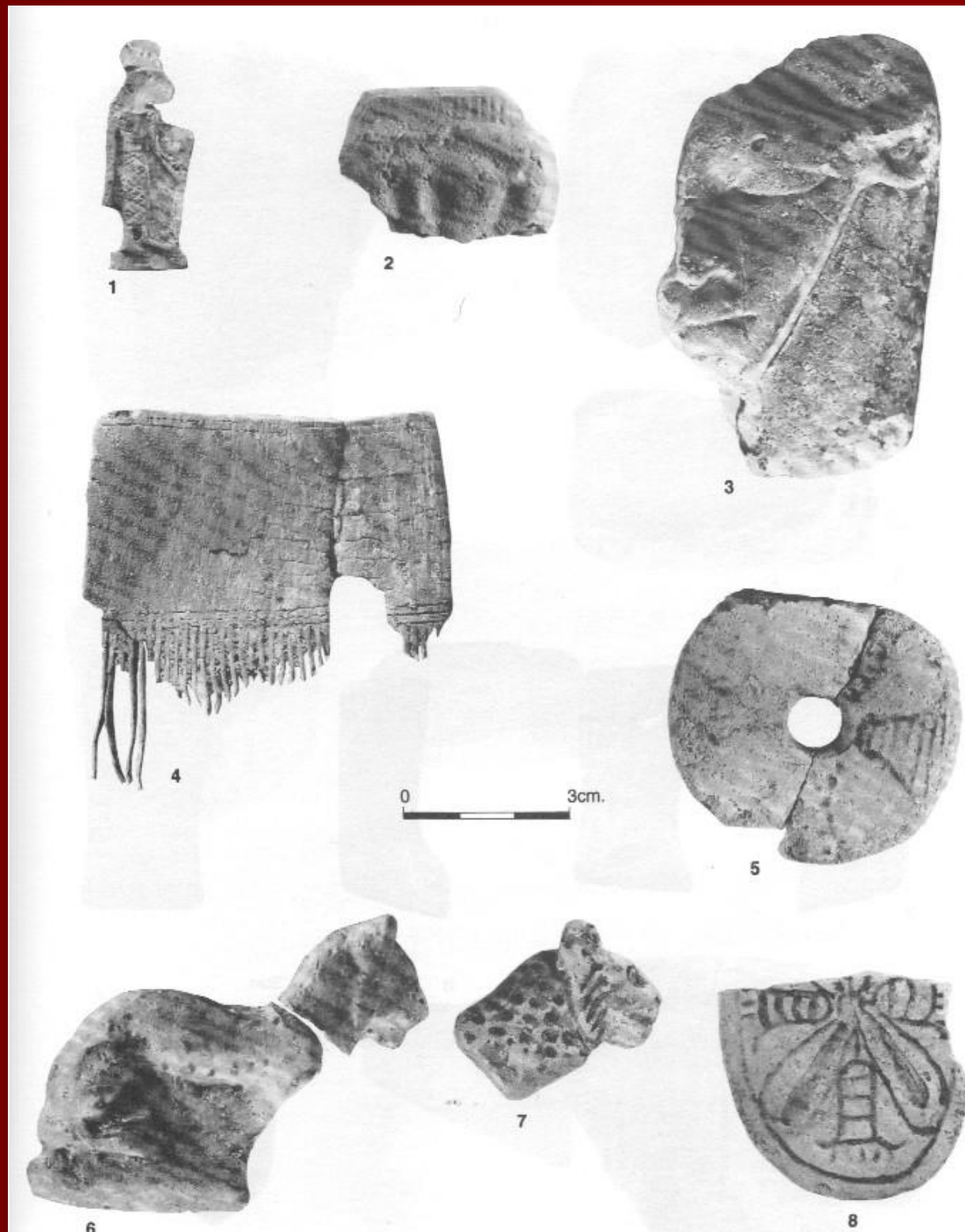
- *kheneru* (when related to Hathor *khenywt*)
could subsume singers
- Titles important (found in admin & legal docs), chiefs often very high status, wives of high priest, princesses

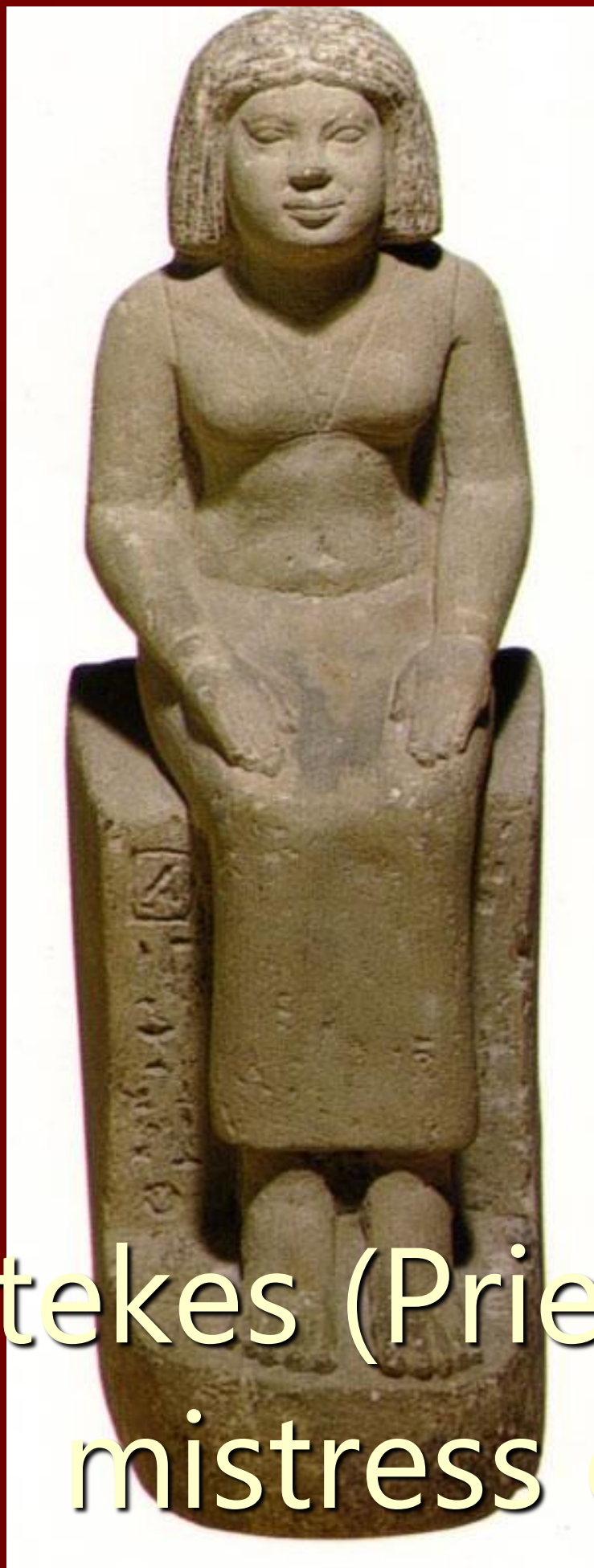
Hathor

- Symbol of continuity of belief between all levels of society
 - Pivotal position between popular and state religion
 - Fertility aspect = important folk religion
 - Goddess “who listen to prayers” → focus of personal piety
 - Prominent deity in state cult
 - Major role in royal and private funerary religion



Egyptian finds in personal piety (?) shrines (faience, bone, wood)





Intekes (Priestess of Hathor-
mistress of the house)

Amenemhat (TT82 D18): Khenru singer and dancer of Hathor







35800

Priests/priestesses - singers

- *shemayit*
- Amun, Hathor, others as well (both male & female) → upper class, officials, wives of DeM workmen
- aside from *nbt-pr* most popular title in Theban tombs
- chief could be royal woman *wrt xnr*
- had own funerary equipment, named stele, funerary papyri

Priests/priestesses - singers

- *Hesyt (Hathor)*
- possibly referred to people with musical education?
- became an increasingly important title in from mid 18th dynasty
- upper class
- Menat





Women Doing Men's Jobs

- ❑ Women had little economic independence, barred from positions of authority / administrative responsibility
- ❑ BUT: women show confidence to substitute their husband's / father's work in their absence
- ❑ particularly good example: letter to the scribe of the Theban Necropolis Nesy-su-Amen-em-ope → absent collecting grain for the gang's rations
- ❑ written by his wife, keeps him informed of events at home (supervised the receipt of grain he sent, discovered a shortfall, passes on gossip, received instructions directly from the vizier).

Women Doing Men's Jobs

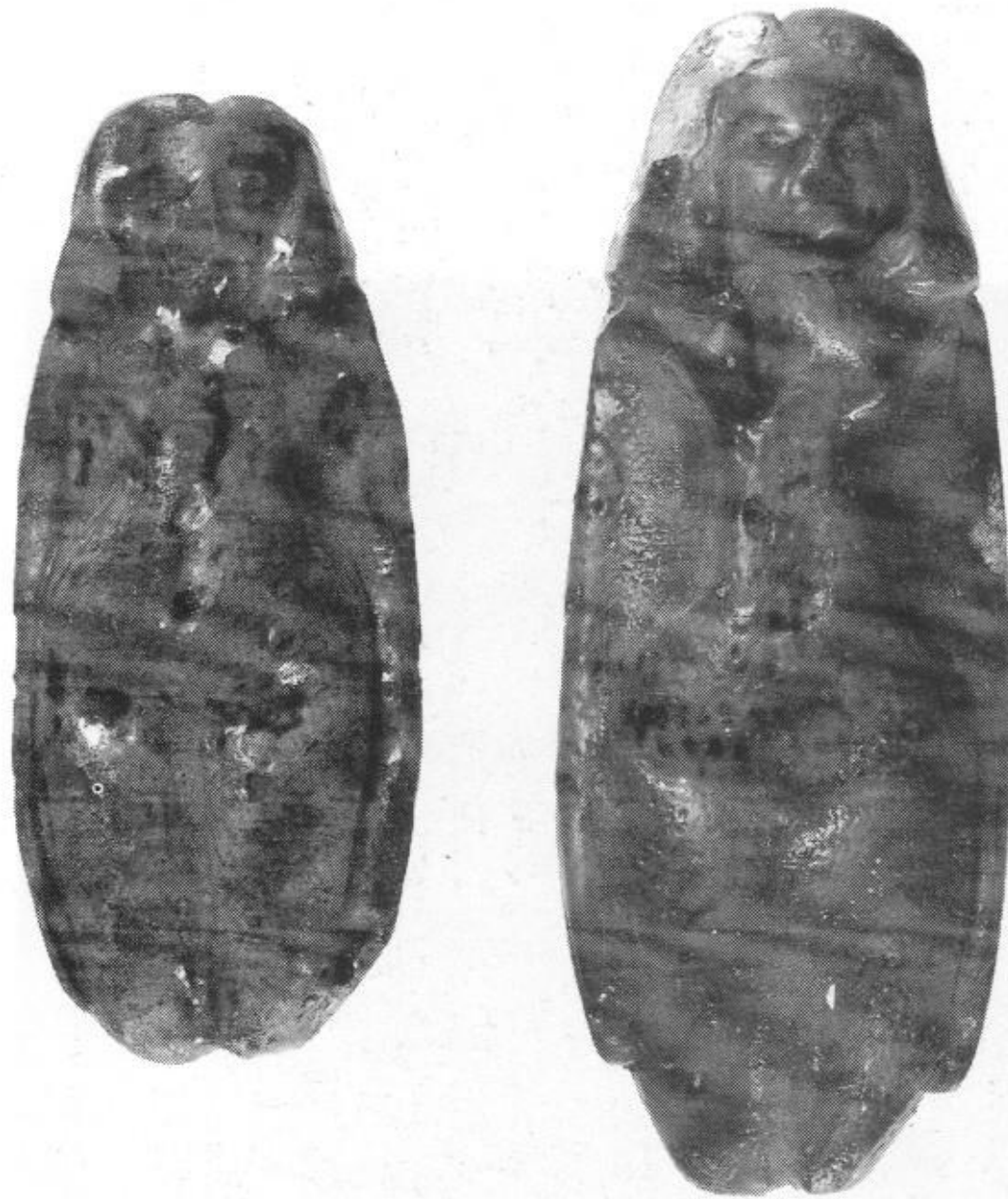
- The chantress of Amen-Re, king of gods, Henut-tawy to the scribe Nesy-su-Amen-(em)-ope of the Necropolis; in life, prosperity and health, in the praise of Amen-Re, king of gods. I tell Amen-Re Horakhty when he rises and sets, to Mut, Khonsu, and all the gods of Thebes to give you life, prosperity and health, a long life and a great and good old age, and very many favours before Amen-Re, king of gods, your good lord, who looks after you every single day....
- You wrote to me, 'Receive the 80 sacks of grain from this ship of the fisherman It-nefer,' so you said in writing. I went to receive them, and I found he had 72 ½ sacks. And I said to him, 'What is this 72 ½ sacks of grain?' so I said to him, 'although his letter says 80 sacks?' And the men said, 'What we measured for ourselves was three complete measures of 2 ½ sacks each, leaving 72 ½ sacks of grain,' so they said. I kept my silence at that moment, saying 'By the time you come, Amen-United-with-Eternity will have done every bad thing with me.'

...

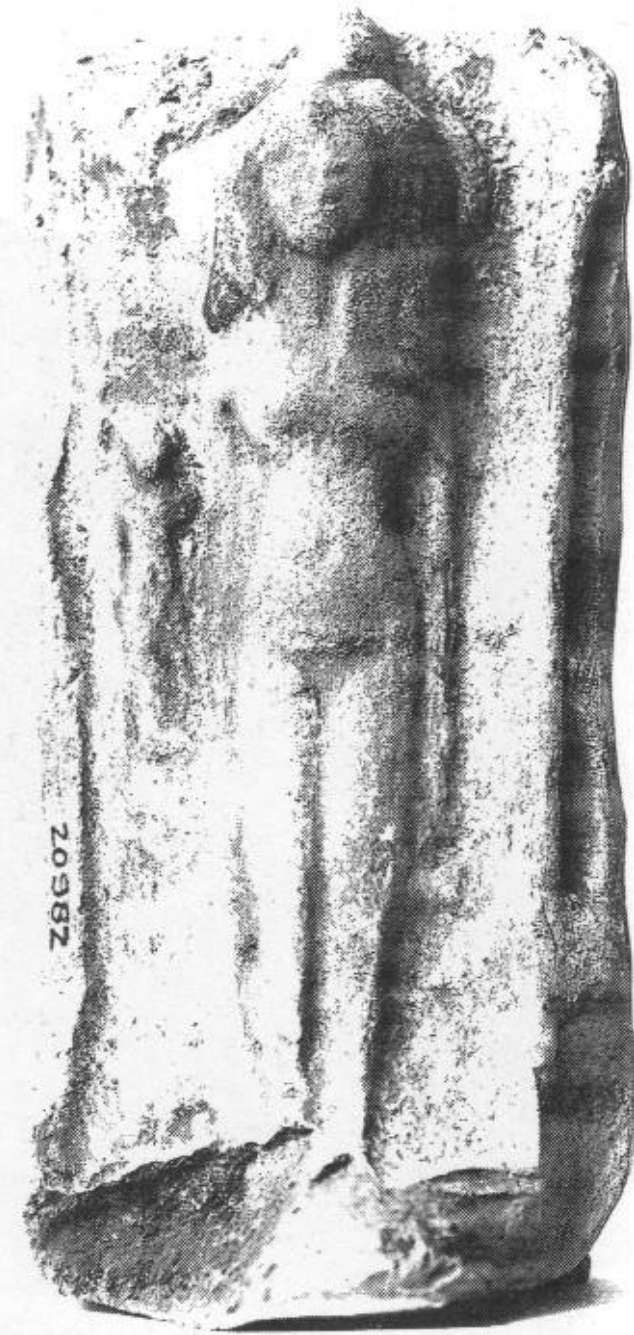
Women Doing Men's Jobs

- Now, the general of the army of The Place Beloved of Thoth was sent, so they say, to take men to the Temple of Millions of Years (Medinet Habu) under the authority of the *setem-priest* and the major-domo, in order to give [...], so they say. Now One (the Pharaoh) has given the office of prophet of the goddess Nebet to the god's father Nesy-Amen-(em)-ope, whom Pharaoh, l.p.h., clothed with a tunic as is fitting, so they say.
- When my letter reaches the place where you are, you should [...] Amen [...], and let someone come to me very quickly. Indeed, the vizier has written to me saying, Let [...] bread to them. And they went [...] send your letter [...]
- Pap. Geneva D 191 = Cerny, LRL 57-60 (no. 37). Translation in Wente, Letters, 174-5 (no. 290).

Fertility Figurines



A) Type 1 faience fertility figurines from Kahun, London UC 16723-4



B) Type 6c pottery fertility figurine, London BM 20982

Phalli



) Wooden phallus from Deir el-Bahri, Oxford Ash. 1926.401

An 'Able Spirit of Re' Stela

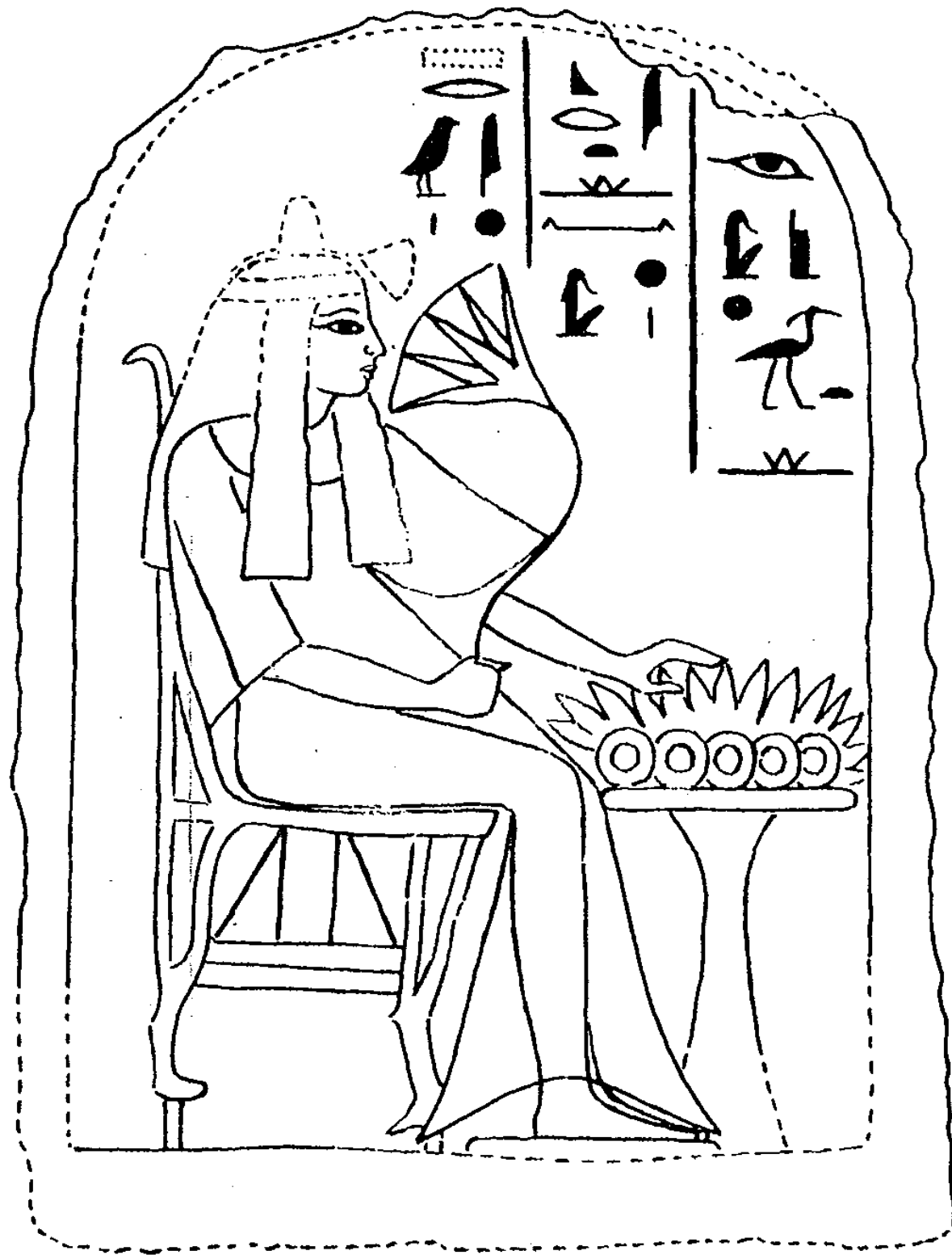


Fig. 16. Stela dedicated to 'the Osiris, the able spirit of Re, Sheri-Re', discovered in one of the houses of the village. Sheri-Re holds a lotus flower in her right hand and stretches out her left towards an altar with offerings of loaves and vegetables. (Reproduced with kind permission of R. J. Demarée from R. J. Demarée, *The 3h ikr n R'-Stelae*. Egyptologische Uitgaven 3 (Leiden, 1983), pl. xi.)

Ancestor busts





16550



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16552



Chantress of Aten

