

SEX AND GENDER IN ANCIENT EGYPT

'Don your wig for a joyful hour'

Editor

Carolyn Graves-Brown

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Carolyn Graves-Brown

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QUEER EGYPTOLOGIES OF NIANKHKHNUM AND KHNUMHOTEP

Greg Keeler

Shortly after the discovery of the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep by Ahmed Moussa in 1964, questions arose about the meaning of its unique iconography and what it might indicate about the two men and their relationship to each other. An early visit by Mounir Basta, chief antiquities inspector of Lower Egypt, is illustrative of the perceptual problems involved. Basta was impressed by the scenes he saw of the two men portrayed in intimate embrace, something he remarked he had never seen before in all the tombs in Saqqara. His questions about the meaning of what he saw remain today: 'Were they two brothers? Were they the 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?' Their identical titles and similar names only added to the questions: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep 'Manicurist of the King and the inspector of manicurists of the Palace'. The tomb was restored with additional blocks found in the causeway of Unas and published by Ahmed Moussa and Hartwig Altenmüller of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in 1977.²

With the publication of the tomb, Moussa and Altenmüller first suggested the possibility that the two men were twins.³ John Baines followed in 1985 with his seminal article on 'Egyptian Twins' which set out to give a general theory of the nature of twinning in ancient Egypt.⁴ Although nothing was known about twins in the Old Kingdom, Baines based his model on the 'certain twinning' of Suty and Hor, two men depicted on a New Kingdom stela now in the British Museum (BM 826). Baines wrote:

On the stela of Suty and Hor of the reign of Amenhotep III there is what appears to be the only unambiguous reference to twin or multiple birth from dynastic Egypt.⁵ The unusual language on their stela appears at first to support this idea of their 'certain twinning' for they are identified as *sww* ('brothers') and Hor states: 'He came forth with me from the womb on the same day.'

Baines acknowledged the exceptional language used and admitted that their twinship 'could have been expressed in more obvious terms'.⁶ The language used by Suty and Hor on their shared stela is ambiguous and no certain biological brotherhood or twinship is explicit in it. Even the word *sn* often translated as 'brother' is open to interpretation as we learn from the work of Jean Revez:

The kinship term *sn* 'brother' may metaphorically convey a wide range of meaning including 'friend', 'lover', 'husband', 'colleague', and 'confre'. In such cases, *sn* refers to an alter ego, a person who is on an equal footing with someone else, because both share the same values or hold similar power. The relationship which binds a *sn* 'brother' to another, is therefore one of complementarity.⁷

Suty's and Hor's declaration that they 'came forth from the womb on the same day' puts emphasis on their equality both being born on the same day. They also held similar power for both were Overseers of the Works of Amun.

Steven Blake Shubert has now called into question the 'certain twinship' of Suty and Hor, reading in their biographical statements much innuendo and suggestion:

The passage indicating that Hor and Suty were both born on the same day does not say that they were born of the same mother; it indicates that they came forth from the womb on this day...the text does not require that Hor and Suty be twins; their relationship is only defined by the term *sn*...Since the word *sn* can be used in the New Kingdom, both in the sense of husband and lover, the possibility arises that the term could very well be used to define the relationship between a same-sex male couple.

...Whatever the strictures within which they had to operate, the result is a monument full of innuendo and suggestion of the obviously close relationship between the two men, reminiscent of a much earlier funerary monument by another pair of men holding the same titles, the 5th Dynasty tomb at Saqqara of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, overseers of the manicurists in the palace of King Neuserre.⁸

Baines stated, in connection with the fact that Suty and Hor were named after two gods: 'Seth and Horus are never said to be twins, and are indeed as often uncle and nephew as brothers... This implies that the category of twins is not acknowledged or is being avoided'.⁹ He goes further in creating his model of ancient Egyptian twinship:

It is thus best to assume that there was a taboo on twins, whether expressed in a suppression of the fact that they were twins or of the twins themselves, which could be circumvented occasionally by treating the pair as far as possible as a single social person; it is impossible to know why the particular pairs we have were singled out. They are required to exhibit an exaggerated reciprocity and

affection, in keeping with the general idealization of social forms on Egyptian monuments.¹⁰

Baines, therefore, came to the conclusion that there was a taboo against twins and that this taboo was expressed (or not expressed?) by suppressing the fact that they were twins. This of course is helpful in dealing with the dearth of evidence from the tomb itself identifying Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep as twins or even brothers. Baines sees their 'exaggerated reciprocity and affection' as another indication of their twinship and further notes '...their probable kinship does render the homosexual interpretation rather extreme'.¹¹

A little-noted article by Nadine Cherpion published the year following the article by John Baines offered some additional insight into this exaggerated affection displayed by the two men.

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.¹²

The most astonishing image is that of the two tomb owners embracing one another; indeed, nowhere else in Egyptian art do we find an example in which affection between two males is thus affirmed. Such affection is only attested between a man and his wife, or between a mother and her son or daughter, and only in the rarest of cases. Nor, except with married couples, do faces ever touch one another, as is the case here.

It has been my position that what is needed in this debate is to look to the iconography of the tomb itself and place it in context with other depictions of the time which may offer insight into what is and what is not being displayed. To that end I have found useful another article by Nadine Cherpion, 'Sentiment conjugal et figuration à l'Ancien Empire'.¹³ The work amounts to a catalogue depicting representations of conjugal sentiment between husbands and wives of the 4th, 5th and 6th Dynasties. Though Cherpion's purpose was to aid in the dating of tombs and statuary of those dynasties on stylistic grounds, her bringing together in one place so many examples of 'conjugal sentiment' has additionally helped place the intimate scenes of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in their proper context. I propose a tour of the tomb, drawing attention to some scenes and comparing them, when possible, to the iconography of conjugal sentiment delineated by Cherpion.

Starting at the entrance to the tomb we find their names and titles on both sides, Niankhkhnum on the right and Khnumhotep on the left. Both have identical titles that include 'Chief Manicurist', 'King's Acquaintance', 'Royal Confidant' and 'Overseer of the Manicurists in the Palace'.¹⁴ Just inside the entrance, past the names and titles of the two manicurists, is an example of the fowling and fish-spearing motif. On the right and western side of the doorway, Niankhkhnum, in the presence of his wife and children, is shown fowling while his wife smells a lotus.¹⁵ Khnumhotep, on the eastern side of the door, also in the presence of his wife and children is shown spearing two fish. His wife smells a lotus.¹⁶ Past this marsh hunting scene, on the jambs of the doorway opening into the tomb, are scenes of the transport of the statues of the deceased. Here can be seen a double statue of the two men holding hands.¹⁷ This may be compared to another hand-holding double statue of 'Nikaoukhnum' and wife holding hands now in Leipzig [3155].¹⁸ Just inside the doorway, on the eastern wall of the entrance hall, sit the two men in an interlocking embrace greeting the offering bearers to their tomb.¹⁹ Here though, as throughout the tomb, Niankhkhnum is positioned on the right and in front of his companion Khnumhotep, the latter depicted in a position usually taken by the female in scenes of different-gender couples. An example of similar (if not identical) coupling can be seen in the statue of 'Imapepi' and his wife.²⁰ In front of the two men is an endowment text specifying the responsibilities of the priests of the dead in maintaining the tomb and offerings. It indicates that their wives, children and anyone else should not interfere and that the offerings shall be for the two men together with the fathers and mothers who are in the necropolis.²¹

Turning around and going into the tomb, on the southern wall of this entrance hall we find a representation of the two men holding hands and walking on a tour of inspection.²² Niankhkhnum leads Khnumhotep by the hand into the inner spaces of their tomb. This is similar to a scene of husband and wife Meretuka and Watekhetor holding hands with Meretuka leading his wife into the tomb and into the conjugal bed.²³

At the entrance to the inner rock-cut chamber the two men appear above the doorway on opposite sides, with offerings piled up between them.²⁴ Niankhkhnum sits to the right. Khnumhotep sits on the left smelling a lotus. Lotus-smelling by the man is a rare occurrence in the 5th Dynasty. It became much more prevalent in later dynasties. It is mostly women who are shown smelling lotus at this time in the Old Kingdom. A statement by Yvonne Harpur in her *Decoration in Egyptian Tombs of the Old Kingdom* is worth quoting here concerning the role of women and the act of smelling the lotus.

For most of the Old Kingdom the lotus is characteristic of women rather than men, and apart from three examples cited...male figures with the flower

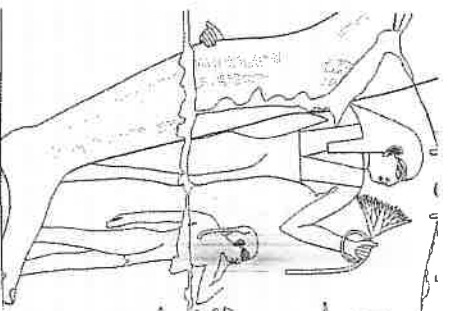


Fig. 1. The wife of Khnumhotep smelling a lotus. Permission: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.

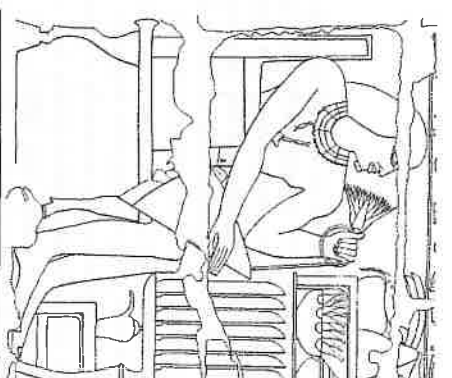


Fig. 2. Khnumhotep smelling a lotus. Permission: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.

to their nose are attested only in late Dynasty VI, on the panels of a few false doors. The beauty and delicacy of the lotus may explain why it associated with women...²⁵

In all of the 5th Dynasty Khnumhotep is one of only three men shown smelling a lotus.²⁶ It is worth noting that only the women and Khnumhotep are shown smelling a lotus in this tomb. Why is this so? I can only speculate that the designers of this tomb recognized that Khnumhotep was in some special way occupying the space normally reserved for the wife.

Above the doorway the names of the owners are carved in one line visually making them one joined name.²⁷ Their names, inscribed together as they are, above the entrance to the rock-cut chamber, may be a design element referring to the closeness of the two and their desire to remain together in this life and the next. It brings their names together at the point where the tomb is carved out of the living rock of the hillside introducing the more intimate reaches of the rock-cut chamber.

We can now enter the doorway that was sealed up by Unas' workmen when he had the mastaba dismantled and built his causeway over the site. A banquet scene is on the far southern wall, and the entrance to the offering chamber is just to the right of the banquet scene. But before we get to the banquet let us look at the eastern or left side of this chamber. Nearest to our

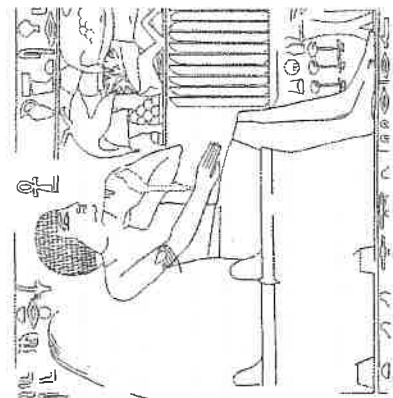


Fig. 3. The wife of Niankhkhnum, Khentikaus erased from sitting at the banquet. Permission: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.

place de leurs fils aînés fréquemment figurés dans la tombe. Disons plutôt: que psychologiquement, il n'y avait pas de place pour elles dans la tombe, surtout sur des images comme celles où N. et Khn. se donnent l'accolade.³²

It is otherwise quite likely that the inseparable character of N. and Khn. accounts for the near total absence of their wives on the walls of the tomb. In a manner that is in fact singular, they only appear three and four times, respectively, while their husbands are each represented about thirty times. The reason for this 'neglect' is evidently neither animosity towards them nor a lack of space on the wall; they could easily have been represented on a reduced scale in front of their husbands, as is often done – or, if need be, instead of their older sons, who are frequently depicted in the tomb. Let us say rather that, psychologically, there was no room for them in the tomb, especially in images such as those in which N. and Khn. embrace one another.

The first extremely intimate portrait of the two companions appears at the entrance to their offering chapel just to the west of the Banquet Scene.³³ They stand with Niankhkhnum in front of and supporting Khnumhotep's forearm while the latter embraces his companion with his arm placed behind his friend's back, grasping his shoulder. Khnumhotep embraces Niankhkhnum supports. Their many children surround them, but the wives are not included.

This type of face-to-face embrace even by husband and wife is very rare. The wife of Kaaper embraces with her two arms wrapped around his waist³⁴ and Abou Bakr's Mastaba C at Giza has husband and wife embracing each other with arms entwined and face to face.³⁵ This embrace by Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep stands at the entrance to the innermost chamber which is divided into two parts as is the composition of the false doors. Khnumhotep's

view is a picture of Khnumhotep watching the harvest.³⁶ He is wearing the ceremonial beard. On the far end of this scene stands Niankhkhnum without his beard.³⁷ Moussa and Altenmüller state that certain scenes where Khnumhotep wears a ceremonial beard, and where in the corresponding scene Niankhkhnum is shown without a beard, may indicate that Khnumhotep was the one who died first. In places, Khnumhotep is described as honored by the 'great god' while again in the corresponding scene Niankhkhnum has only official and honorary titles. They also point out that Khnumhotep was buried in the western part of the sarcophagus chamber while Niankhkhnum was in the eastern part. They add that, since *Khnumhotep was probably the one who died first*, that may explain the dominant position of Niankhkhnum as he would have been primarily responsible for the decoration of the tomb.³⁸ Of course, it must be said that if Khnumhotep died first and Niankhkhnum went ahead and finished the decoration of the tomb, the possibility of them having been conjoined twins becomes at least problematical as the surviving twin would need to survive a surgical separation.

At the far southern end of the rock-cut chamber is an elaborate banquet scene.³⁹ Niankhkhnum is on the eastern side and Khnumhotep on the western side. The banquet scene is not only noteworthy for its fine renderings of musicians, dancers and singers but also for details which were purposely altered by the ancient craftsmen. Just behind Niankhkhnum was positioned a carving of his wife Khentikaus originally shown only slightly smaller than her husband. This would have been the only place in the tomb where a wife was portrayed almost equal in height to her husband and originally shown embracing her husband. Her image, however, was removed by the designers of the tomb, leaving only suggestive remnants of the wife of Niankhkhnum. Her fingers still may be seen grasping his shoulder while her other hand holds his arm. For some reason it was decided to change the design of this banquet scene by removing Khentikaus from her place of honor at this table, thereby making the two companions the only honored guests at their banquet. It is interesting that at the opposite end no room was planned for a wife to sit behind Khnumhotep as his back is up against the wall where he sits holding a lotus.

Cherpion made note of the relative neglect of wives in this tomb:

Il est par ailleurs très probable que le caractère inséparable de N. et Khn. rende compte de l'absence quasi-totale de leurs épouses sur les murs de la tombe. De façon singulière en effet, elles n'apparaissent l'une et l'autre que trois et quatre fois, tandis que leurs maris sont chacun représentés une trentaine de fois. La raison de cet « oubli » ne serait ni de l'agressivité à leur égard ni un manque de place sur la paroi: on aurait pu aisément les représenter en formant réduit devant leurs époux, comme cela se fait souvent – et, le cas échéant, à la

Fig. 4. Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at the entrance to the offering chamber. Photograph by Greg Reeder.

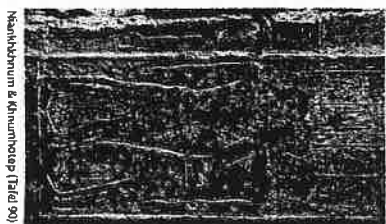


Fig. 5. Details of false Door of Kha-Hay and Meret-Yeses (from Mousa 1971, Plate 32) compared to False Door of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep (Mousa 1977 Tafel 90). Permission: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.



Fig. 6. Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep the most intimate. Photograph by Greg Reeder.

false door is to the north and Niankhkhnum's to the south.³⁶ Niankhkhnum's false door was almost completely destroyed by ancient grave robbers but enough of it remains to see its composition. Between the false doors the two manicurists are united in an intimate embrace. Niankhkhnum is supporting the embracing Khnumhotep. Though face-to-face, they are not as intimate as in the embrace at the entrance. This entire composition could very well have been copied from the only slightly earlier tomb of Nefer and Kha-Hay³⁷ located in the same part of the cemetery by the causeway of Uhas, where the composition and iconographic vocabulary of the false doors is almost identical to our tomb of the manicurists. The parallels are amazing. Kha-Hay stands facing his wife Meret-Yeses. He is depicted considerably larger than she is. Their own false doors flank the scene, his on the left, hers on the right. Khnumhotep stands in the same pose as Meret-Yeses and in the same position on the right of the scene. As she clasps her husband's shoulder Khnumhotep clasps the shoulder of Niankhkhnum, but as Kha-Hay stands rigid there is a difference in that Niankhkhnum actively reaches forward to take the arm of Khnumhotep much as Kha-Hay holds onto his staff. The entry in the publication of the tomb is worth noting: "The space between the false doors of Ka-Hay and Meret-Yeses depicts the couple in an affectionate face to face position. The wife passes her right arm behind her husband's back, the hand clasping his right shoulder."³⁸

Opposite the false doors and just on the reverse side of the entrance pilaster where we saw the two men embracing surrounded by their children, is the most intimate embrace of all for the two men.³⁹ Here they stand alone, Niankhkhnum still on the south and Khnumhotep on the north. This time they are much more intimate than husband and wife in the tomb of Kha-Hay. They are so close together here that not only are they face-to-face and nose-to-nose, but so close that the knots on their belts are touching linking their lower torsos. It is not unreasonable to assume that the two men are shown kissing each other as the Old Kingdom word for kissing (*sn*) shows two noses coming together.⁴⁰ It is, therefore, my understanding that this scene is showing the two men locked in an imitate embrace with a kiss meant to last for eternity.

Before we leave the tomb of the two manicurists, I would like to highlight evidence that may help refute the charge that the two men needed always to be shown together because they were twins who were in need of symbolic correction, or because they were conjoined twins who by physical necessity were together.

Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are depicted elsewhere outside of their tomb, specifically in the tomb of the Vizier Ptahshepses at Abusir. This tomb has undergone an extensive study by Miroslav Verner and the Czechoslovak

Institute of Egyptology (Verner 1977). In Room 4 Register 3 a representation is found of both Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep together and in typical manner as in their own tomb Niankhkhnum leads, and they both share the same titles: Royal Manicurist and Inspector of Ka Priests.⁴¹ In the same room, in Register 2, we find Khnumhotep leading a line of men without his partner Niankhkhnum. That the man behind him is not Niankhkhnum is shown by the basket hieroglyph (Gard.V31 'K') remaining in that person's name. This fact, that they could be shown separately, gives evidence that they were not thought of as one social person. There is also one more interesting depiction worth noting here. Verner argues that the tomb of Ptahshepes was built in stages, indicating that the higher numbered rooms are the older parts of the tomb. There is evidence of the manicurists in rooms 3 and 4, both newer parts of the tomb. In room 10, a much older part of the tomb complex, there are two depictions of one man named the 'Barber of the Great House and Ka-servant Khnumhotep'.⁴² Is this the same Khnumhotep before he was a manicurist? Is it possible that we have here, in an older part of the tomb of Ptahshepes, a depiction of Khnumhotep with no connection to Niankhkhnum before both became royal manicurists?

Not having the physical remains of the two manicurists hampers us in our quest to know whether or not they were biologically related. If only we had their mortal remains to analyze and compare we could perhaps determine the extent of their biological relationship.

At the Swansea conference David O'Connor has put forward the new theory that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were conjoined twins, and he uses as a model the nineteenth-century 'Siamese twins' Eng and Chang who are even further removed than Baines' Sury and Hor. Even though an argument can be made that Eng and Chang *might* have been successfully separated by nineteenth-century surgeons Eng did in fact die within several hours of Chang from loss of blood.

The autopsy did show the livers of the two twins to be connected by a very narrow neck in the ligament between them. There was also a tongue of peritoneum, as well as hypogastric artery and vein. ... The vascular connection between the two may not have been very large, but we know that Eng's heart was still beating after Chang's had stopped, and the connection was sufficient to let Eng's blood drain away over the two to four hours it took him to die. It seems clear: Eng died of blood loss.⁴³

Statistically 77% of conjoined twins are girls and conjoined twins are not joined simply at the arm, wrist or hand but are ... 'joined at their heads, thoraxes, abdomens or hips; they may be oriented belly to belly, side to side, or back to back...' ⁴⁴

We have learned that there is evidence in the tomb to indicate that Niankhkhnum outlived Khnumhotep long enough to complete the decoration of their tomb. Any speculation that the two manicurists were surgically separated before or upon the death of Khnumhotep goes well beyond the evidence of their history. We do not have the physical remains of the two royal manicurists to absolutely ascertain their biological relationship to each other. We do have the pictorial record carved upon their now celebrated tomb which, I have argued, compares most directly with conjugal sentiment of the 5th Dynasty indicating at the very least a deep affection and same-sex bonding. In light of the evidence presented here, explanations must include the possibility that same-sex desire existed just behind the facade currently constructed by dominant heteronormative Egyptologies.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- ¹ Basta 1979, 47.
- ² Mousa and Altenmüller 1977.
- ³ Mousa and Altenmüller 1977, 22.
- ⁴ Baines 1985.
- ⁵ Baines 1985, 461.
- ⁶ Baines 1985, 462.
- ⁷ Revez 2003, 127.
- ⁸ Shubert 2004, 159–60, 164–5.
- ⁹ Baines 1985, 463.
- ¹⁰ Baines 1985, 479.
- ¹¹ Baines 1985, 467 n. 27.
- ¹² Cherpion 1986, 66.
- ¹³ Cherpion 1995.
- ¹⁴ Mousa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 1.
- ¹⁵ Mousa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 4.3.2.
- ¹⁶ Mousa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 4.3.1.
- ¹⁷ Mousa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 6.3.
- ¹⁸ Cherpion 1995, Pl. 4c.
- ¹⁹ Mousa 1977, Sz. 12.1.
- ²⁰ Cherpion 1995, Pl. 7a.
- ²¹ Mousa and Altenmüller 1977, 21.
- ²² Mousa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 15a.
- ²³ Ducloux 1938, Pl. 14.

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- ²⁴ Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 24.1.
- ²⁵ Harpur 1987, 134.
- ²⁶ Harpur 1987 Table 6.11 (p. 331).
- ²⁷ Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 25.
- ²⁸ Moussa and Altenmüller 1997, Sz. 29a.
- ²⁹ Moussa and Altenmüller 1997, Sz. 30b.
- ³⁰ Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, 22 and n.66.
- ³¹ Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 31.
- ³² Cherpin 1986, 67.
- ³³ Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 32.3.
- ³⁴ Cherpin 1995, Fig. 6 p. 43.
- ³⁵ Cherpin 1995, Fig. 1 p. 38.
- ³⁶ Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 42.
- ³⁷ Moussa and Altenmüller 1971, Pl. 32.
- ³⁸ Moussa and Altenmüller 1971, 36.
- ³⁹ Moussa and Altenmüller 1977, Sz. 39.1.
- ⁴⁰ Hannig 2003, 1155.
- ⁴¹ Verner 1977, 68.
- ⁴² Verner 1977, inscription 138 p. 96.
- ⁴³ Eben 2001, 67.
- ⁴⁴ Leroi 2003, 34–5.

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