

## Three unusual embrace representations from Ancient Egyptian private sources

ثلاثة مناظر احتضان نادرة من مصادر الأفراد في مصر القديمة

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### Abstract:

The gesture of embrace is considered one of the highly significant body positions consistently depicted in religious and daily life sources. It conveys various direct and indirect meanings and symbolisms. This gesture is regarded to be the ultimate level of physical contact that Ancient Egyptian artists could portray between two or more people. Therefore, it is illustrated in a wide variety of private sources, such as stelae, tomb walls, and statues to express the affection and family love between family members, including spouses, brothers, or parents and children. In representations of embrace between men and women, it is typical for the man to be the primary character who is represented at the forefront of the depicted persons, being embraced by other family members. Consequently, he becomes the focal point of the group and captures the viewer's attention. This paper presents a descriptive and analytical examination of three unique scenes depicting men embracing women who are positioned in the foreground as the primary characters. These scenes are rare as the embrace is reversed.

**Key words:** Gestures, embrace, private couples, mother, son, daughter.

### ملخص

يعتبر الاحتضان أحد أهم الأوضاع الجسدية التي تكرر تمثيلها بدرجات مختلفة في السياقات الدينية أو الدنيوية ، والتي تحمل في طياتها العديد من المعاني والرمزيات المختلفة سواء بشكل مباشر أو غير مباشر. ظهر هذا الوضع على مختلف مصادر الأفراد كاللوحات وجدان المقابر والتماثيل على نطاق واسع للتعبير عن علاقات أفراد العائلة سواء الأزواج أو الأخوة أو الآباء والأبناء حيث كان خير وسيلة لتمثيل حب الأسرة وترابط أفرادها لأنه يعتبر أقصى درجات الإتصال الجسدي التي مثلها الفنان المصري القديم والتي عبر من خلالها خير تعبير عن العلاقة بين شخصين أو أكثر. كان المعتاد في تمثيلات الإحتضان بين السيدات والرجال أن يكون الرجل هو الشخصية الرئيسية التي يتم إحتضانها من أفراد الأسرة الآخرين والتي يتم تمثيلها في مقدمة الأشخاص المصورين، وبالتالي يتجه لها الاهتمام الأكبر للمشاهد. يقدم هذا البحث دراسة وصفية تحليلية لثلاثة مناظر إحتضان غير تقليدية يظهر فيها الوضع معكوساً حيث يقوم فيها الرجال المصورون باحتضان السيدات المصاحبات لهم، ويتم فيها تمثيل السيدات في المقدمة باعتبارهن الشخصيات الرئيسية في المناظر.

### الكلمات الدالة

الأوضاع، الاحتضان ، الأزواج، الأم، الابن، الابنة

## **I. Introduction**

Gestures, short and expressive movements, were widely used in Ancient Egypt and played a key role as they often accompanied, supported, or replaced textual evidence. The representation of gestures, whether in the position of the entire body or in specific body parts such as fingers, hands, or arms, can be found in both royal and private sources of all periods of Ancient Egyptian history. The specific symbolism of these gestures formed a significant nonverbal vocabulary in a particular context for various cultural aspects of Egyptian life<sup>1</sup>. Properly interpreting and understanding the meaning of a certain gesture is, in fact, complex, as it is very frequently dependent on the context, any association of the scene with the accompanying texts, if present, as well as the clarity and artistic consistency of the representations with the traditions of the Period. The same gestures are occasionally used to signify different meanings based on slight differences in the gesture, which may create a total contrasting effect. However, the accompanying text and/or the general context can clarify this variability. For instance, lifting the arm above shoulder level can indicate both joy/celebration and sorrow, depending on the context.

However, interpreting the movement can be challenging and subjective due to the fact that many gestures are not explicitly defined by the text and/or general context, which can lead to multiple interpretations. Gestures have been documented since the beginnings of ancient Egyptian history and persisted over the centuries, but it increased significantly in the New Kingdom<sup>2</sup>. Among the frequently depicted gestures in Ancient Egyptian art is the embrace, which represents a highly significant body position in both religious and daily life sources. It symbolizes various meanings directly or indirectly, illustrating the highest degree of physical closeness between two or more people. Thus, it is present in a wide variety of private sources, such as stelae, tomb walls, and

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<sup>1</sup>Wilkinson, R.H., Gestures, in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. II, Cairo 2001, 20; Brunner-Traut, E., Gesten, in: *LÄII*, (1977), col.749.

<sup>2</sup>Wilkinson, R.H., Gestures, 20-21.

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statues to express the affection and familial love between family members, particularly spouses. Furthermore, it is frequently utilized to demonstrate the relationship between royal and divine couples, along with the bond between deities and kings.

First, it is significant to distinguish the different forms of embrace which can be divided from more than one perspective as follows<sup>3</sup>:

### A. In terms of iconographic form:

1. Complete embrace: in which the embracing person surrounds the other person's body with both arms and may hold their own arm with the other hand or place it near that hand. So, the body is completely encircled by the arms of the embracing person. The individuals in this type of embrace can be positioned either behind each other or face-to-face<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> غادة سيد عبد المقصود، مفهوم الإحتضان ومظاهر الود في مصر القديمة حتى نهاية الدولة الحديثة، رسالة ماجستير غير منشورة، القاهرة 2012، ص 210-204.

Ghada Sayed Abdel Maksoud Mohamed, Concept of embrace and manifestations of cordiality in Ancient Egypt until the end of the New Kingdom, Unpublished Master Thesis in Egyptology, Cairo 2012, 204-210.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Allen, T.G., The Egyptian Book of the Dead documents in the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago, Chicago 1960, pls. XCI, XLVI; Petrie, W.M.F., Deshasheh, London 1897, pl. XII; Kanawati, N., The Tombs of El-Hagarsa, vol. 3, Sydney 1995, pl.41; Fischer, H., A Scribe of the army in a Saqqara mastaba of the early fifth Dynasty, in: JNES18, (1959), 243, fig. 8; Cherpion, N., Sentiment conjugal et figuration à l'Ancien Empire, in: : Kunst des Alten Reiches, Sonderschriften des DAIK 28 (1995), pls. 6-c, 6-d; Dunham, D., Naga-Ed-Dêr Stelae, London 1937, 94-95, pl. XXIX-1; Allen, T.G., The story of an Egyptian Politician, in: AJSL38 (1921), 55-62; Davies, N. de Garis, The Tomb of Tetaky at Thebes (No. 15)", in: JEA11, (1925), 14-15, pl. III; Hegazy, El Sayed A. and Tosi, M., A Theban Private Tomb: Tomb No.295, AV45, (1983), 14, pl.7; Carnarvon, George Edward Stanhope Molyneux Herbert (The Earl of)/Carter, H., Five Years' Explorations at Thebes: A Record of Work Done 1907-1911, London 1912, pl. VI; Moursi, H., The Family Love in Ancient Egypt, in: The Horizon. Studies in Egyptology in honour of M.A.Nur El-Din, vol. III, Cairo 2009, fig.17; Roehrig, C. H., The Eighteenth Dynasty Titles. Royal Nurse (*mnatnswt*), Royal Tutor (*mnanswt*) and Foster Brother/Sister of the Lord of the Two Lands (*sn/sntmna n nbtAwy*), Unpublished PhD Thesis, Berkeley 1990, 287, pl.15; Dominicus, B., Gesten und Gebärden in Darstellungen des Alten und Mittleren Reiches, SAGA10, (1994), 66, Abb. 15-a, 15-c; Werbrouck, M., Les pleureuses dans l'Égypte ancienne, Bruxelles 1938, 14, fig.1; Van Dijk, J. The Death of Meketaten, in: Brand, P. J./Cooper, L. (eds), Causing His Name to Live. Studies in Egyptian Epigraphy and History in Memory of William J. Murnane. Culture and History of the Ancient Near East, Vol. 37 (Leiden/Boston 2009), fig.1; Handoussa, T., The rebirth of Ramses II in the Hypostyle Hall of Karnak, in: Hommages à Fayza Haikal, Bd'É138, (2003), 111; Larché, F., A Reconstruction of Senwosret I's Portico and Some Structures of Amenhotep I at Karnak", in: Brand, P. J./Cooper, L. (eds), Causing His Name to Live. Studies in Egyptian Epigraphy and History in Memory of William J. Murnane. Culture and History of the Ancient Near East, Vol. 37 (Leiden/Boston 2009), fig.5; Gabolde, L., Le "grand château d'Amon" de Sésostris Ier à Karnak: la décoration du temple d'Amon-Ré au Moyen empire, Paris 1998, pl. XXVIII.

2. Partial embrace: in which the embracing person encircles the person being embraced with one arm, while the other arm is occasionally extended beside his/her body, or placed on the chest or the thigh or holds some kind of symbol such as the Ankh-sign. In some instances, the other arm touches the embraced person's shoulder or arm, or even wraps it around his/her waist. As in the previous variety, the persons in this form can be depicted behind each other or face-to-face<sup>5</sup>.

**B. In terms of individuals' position:**

1. Frontal embrace: This position depicts two standing individuals embracing each other face-to-face. This position is not very common in general and can either be complete or partial<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, there is a very unique composition where the couple are seated and embracing each other face-to-face simultaneously<sup>7</sup>.
2. Rear embrace:The rear embrace depicts mostly the woman embracing the man from behind, and is commonly depicted in divine, royal, and private contexts<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> e.g. Lepsius, R., *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter nach dem Hieroglyphischen Papyrus in Turin*, Osanbrück 1969, Taf. LXX; Refai, H., *Die Göttin des Westens in den Thebanischen Gräbern des neuen Reiches. Darstellung, Bedeutung und Funktion*, ADAIK12, Poland 1996, Taf.8; Cherpion, N., *Sentiment conjugal et figuration à l'Ancien Empire*, pls. 2-a, 2-c, 2-d, 3-a, 3-b, 3-d; Fischer, H., *A Scribe of the army in a Saqqara mastaba of the early fifth Dynasty*, 253, fig.21; Stewart, H. M., *Egyptian Stelae, Reliefs and paintings from the Petrie Collection*, 23 no. 98, pl.23.2; Davies, Norman de Garis, *The Tomb of Nakht at Thebes*, New York 1917, pl. XIII, XXII; Whale, Sh., *The Family in the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt, A Study of the Representation of the Family in Private Tombs*. ACEA1, Sydney 1989, 197, pl. 13.XLI, 9-XXII; Medinet Habu V, pl.295; Moussa, A. M./Altenmüller, H., *The tomb of Nefer and Ka-Hay*, AV5, Mainz 1971, pl. 32; CG *Denkmäler des AltenReiches*, Teil 1, 133-134, pl.32, Nr.1449.

<sup>6</sup> e.g. Moussa, A. M./Altenmüller, H., *The tomb of Nefer and Ka-Hay*, pl. 32; CG *Denkmäler des AltenReiches*, Teil 1, 133-134, pl. 32, Nr. 1449.

<sup>7</sup>Hodjash, S., *The Egyptian Reliefs and Stelae in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts Moscow*, Leningrad 1982, 62-63, fig.24. Cf. with the embrace of Amenemhat and his father on his Stele from Asasif: Saleh, M./Sourouzian, H., *The Egyptian Museum, Cairo: official catalogue*, Mainz 1987, Nr. 79.


<sup>8</sup> e.g. Lepsius, R., *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter nach dem Hieroglyphischen Papyrus in Turin*,Taf. LXX; Refai, H., *Die Göttin des Westens in den Thebanischen Gräbern des neuen Reiches. Darstellung, Bedeutung und Funktion*, Taf. 8; Cherpion,N., *Sentiment conjugal et figuration à l'Ancien Empire*, pls. 2-a, 2-c, 2-d, 3-a, 3-b, 3-d; Fischer, H., *A Scribe of the army in a Saqqara mastaba of the early fifth Dynasty*, 253, fig.21; Stewart, H. M., *Egyptian Stelae, Reliefs and paintings from the Petrie Collection*, 23 no. 98, pl.23.2; Davies, *The Tomb of Nakht at Thebes*, pl. XIII,

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However, there are rare instances where the man is positioned behind the woman and embraces her with his arms. These atypical instances are the focus of the current study.

Side-by-side embrace: This position represents in fact the “rear embrace” in three-dimensional pieces, such as in statues, where two or more individuals are represented sitting next to each other while embracing to varying degrees<sup>9</sup>. This position is very rarely depicted in the scenes on the tomb walls or stelae, in which two persons sit or stand beside each other in a way where only the outer lines of the body are visible. Such uncommon concept of embrace is found in some scenes of Akhenaten and Nefertiti<sup>10</sup>.

#### **C. In terms of Actuality:**

1. Actual embrace: The embrace is actually performed by using one or both arms.
2. Symbolic embrace: There is no physical embrace portrayed, but instead, it is conveyed symbolically. For instance, the arms of the represented individuals take the form of the hieroglyphic sign depicting two embracing arms ()<sup>11</sup>. This form of arms has been widely integrated into many three-dimensional pieces. Such a concept of embracing is frequent in the statues of Isis, as she extends her (winged) arms to embrace her husband, Osiris or her son, Horus, who stands in front of her. Votive statues featuring the deceased standing behind a small figure of a deity, hands placed on the shoulders of this deity carry the same arm posture and the symbolism of embrace as well. Thus, it can


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XXII; Whale, Sh., *The Family in the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt*, 197, pl. 13.XLI, 9-XXII; Medinet Habu V, pl. 295.

<sup>9</sup> e.g. Cherpion, N., *Sentiment conjugal et figuration à l'Ancien Empire*, pl. 2-b; Saleh, M./Sourouzian, H., *The Egyptian Museum, Cairo: official catalogue*, Nr. 39, 50, 51, 140,

<sup>10</sup> Davies, Norman de Garis, *The Rock Tombs of El-Amarna*, vol. II, p.38, pl. XXXVIII; Davies, Norman de Garis, *The Rock Tombs of El-Amarna*, vol. III, pl. XIII.

<sup>11</sup> Wilkinson, R.H., *Reading Egyptian Art*, Slovenia 1992, 51.

be comprehended that these artifacts display a deliberate, conscious utilization of this hieroglyphic sign (  ) and the concept of embrace<sup>12</sup>.

**D. In terms of dynamism:**

1. One-sided embrace: This embrace is performed usually by one person while the other person stands or sits still, without moving or reacting. This is exemplified in the wife's embrace of her husband, as the wife is illustrated mostly, especially in the Ancient and Middle Kingdoms, embracing her spouse, who does not embrace her in return except for a few cases. This type is frequently observed in scenes where kings and deities embrace. The kings stand still while the gods and goddesses usually embrace them. In a few depictions, the king embraces the deity in return, resulting in a mutual embrace.
2. Mutual embrace: in which the embrace is mutual between the people represented. It's frequent in the New Kingdom, as husbands embrace their wives back, what results sometimes rare distinctive embrace representations. The mutual embrace between the royal couple and between kings and deities becomes more prevalent during this period as well.

It is noteworthy that Ancient Egyptian art frequently employed overlapping between depicted figures to convey depth and the relationships between objects and people depicted. It has been used extensively in two-dimensional representations of groups of people, usually lined up one after the other on the ground line in similar and overlapping positions to varying degrees. Although their feet reach the ground line, the overlapping of

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<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, R.H., Reading Egyptian Art, 51.

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their legs and bodies provides the impact of depth in the overall composition. Furthermore, this overlapping has been used to create multiple levels on the surface<sup>13</sup>.

#### **II. The representations of embrace between private spouses**

Family was highly significant to the Ancient Egyptians. Young individuals were constantly encouraged to marry and start families as long as they could. Therefore, Egyptians tended to establish stable families and to have children who could provide social and economic support, as well as continue their family lineage and perform rituals after death. Men frequently desired to be depicted with their spouses, daughters, and sons during daily activities<sup>14</sup>. These scenes are accompanied by their names and titles. The wife typically appears standing or sitting next to her husband, with her height slightly lower than his. She often expresses her affection and love for her husband by embracing his shoulder, waist, arm - which she only sometimes touches - or his leg, as she occasionally kneels next to her husband. On the other hand, the husband is portrayed with a conservative behavior, displaying affection toward his wife only on a limited scale. He is rarely depicted holding her hand as a sign of love and tenderness or embracing her by encircling her waist with his arm, especially before the New Kingdom. Following the New Kingdom, it became more common for husbands to show affection and embrace their wives in return, as evident in both representations and statues. However, it is highly impressive to observe that most evidence of intimate embrace (face-to-face and complete form) between spouses was dated to the Old Kingdom, while in contrast, such scenes become less common during the New Kingdom compared to earlier periods. Although love and embrace are usually demonstrated by the person of higher status towards the person of lesser status, such as in instances of deities embracing kings, the dynamic changes in husband-and-wife scenes where the woman often performs the embrace while






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<sup>13</sup>Robins, G., *Proportion and Style in Ancient Egyptian Art*, London 1994, 8, 11.

<sup>14</sup>Feucht, E., Family, in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. I, Cairo 2001, 501-503; سعاد عبد العال، المجتمع المصرى القديم، القاهرة 2002، ص 17-20.

the man stands or sits next to her without reciprocating the affection. Although embrace can signify passion, desire or even protection, when given in private contexts, it is often interpreted as an expression of love for the recipient<sup>15</sup>.

The family is typically depicted as a single composition centered around the man, who serves as the head of the family. He remains the prominent element that is distinguished from others by his position, size, and prestige. This is underscored even further by the overlapping in embrace scenes, in which the man's body partially obscures the woman's and positions him closer to the viewer, making his figure more prominent and dominant. This dominance is evident in the accompanying texts as well, which typically highlight the man's name, position, and titles, while often referring to the woman only in association with him, such as "his beloved wife," "his mother," or "his daughter". On the other hand, it is less common for the man to be identified by his relationship with the woman portrayed<sup>16</sup>. The Ancient Egyptian language evidently highlighted the distinctive

connection between the spouses through determinatives, such as ( A502) and ( A435). The marital status is also conveyed in the Ancient Egyptian writing implicitly, as in ( A436) and ( A437), or explicitly through the determinative ( A438)<sup>17</sup>.

Only in very rare cases, men follow women and embrace them occasionally as evidenced by the following instances:

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<sup>15</sup> Simpson, W.K.,Simpson, W.K., Amor Dei: nTr mrr rmT m tA wA (Sh.Sai. 147–148) and the Embrace, in: Assmann, J./Feucht, E./Grieshammer, R. (eds), Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur. Studien zum Gedenken an Eberhard Otto Wiesbaden 1977, 496.

<sup>16</sup>Robins, G., Some Principles of Compositional Dominance and Gender Hierarchy in Egyptian Art, in: JARCE 31 (1994),34-35.

<sup>17</sup> عبد الحلیم نورالدين، المرأة في مصر القديمة، ٣٠، (١٧).



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### II.1. The unusual embrace representation of Henut and Hengi (Fist Intermediate Period (?))

This scene is found on a private stele from Akhmim, dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty<sup>18</sup> or the First Intermediate Period (?)<sup>19</sup>, and presently held by the British Museum in London (EA1061)<sup>20</sup>. The primary scene, located below two horizontal lines of inscriptions, portrays Lady Henut, titled “wršt Mnw: *The daily watcher of Min*”, sitting with her beloved son, Hengi, in front of an offering table with bread loaves on it. It is also noteworthy that the title (wršt Mnw) was exclusively for women only and had no counterpart for men. Moreover, evidence of this title has been found exclusively in Akhmim, and so far, the expression (wršt) has not been associated with any other deity other than Min in the Old Kingdom<sup>21</sup>. Interestingly, the bilateral sign (ḥn) in the name "Henut" is inscribed in an unconventional and unusual form. Moreover, the offerings' quantities have been inscribed directly above the offering table in an uncommon way as well<sup>22</sup>. The figure of a mother is depicted wearing a long, form-fitting garment and a wig. She holds the traditional folded cloth in her left hand which rests on her chest, while extending the other hand towards the offering table. Her son is dressed in a short kilt, a collar, and a wig. Unusually, Hengi is positioned behind his mother in the space where women typically portrayed. In addition, he supports his mother's shoulders by wrapping his left arm around her and placing his right hand on her shoulder, also as women typically represented.

This scene is very rare and highly significant, as it represents a woman seated in front of a man before an offering table. Kanawati suggests that the reason for this is that “Henut”

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<sup>18</sup>Kanawati, N., Kanawati, N., *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish: The Cemetery of Akhmim*, vol. VI, 60.

<sup>19</sup>[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y\\_EA1061](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA1061) (accessed 20.06.2023). The stele was dated earlier to the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. cf. Scott-Moncrieff, *Hieroglyphic texts from Egyptian stelae, etc.*, in the British Museum, Part 2, 10, pl. 38.

<sup>20</sup>[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y\\_EA1061](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA1061) (accessed 20.06.2023); Kanawati, N., *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish: The Cemetery of Akhmim*, vol. VI, Sydney 1986 60, pl.14-a, fig. 30-a; Scott-Moncrieff, *Hieroglyphic texts from Egyptian stelae, etc.*, in the British Museum, Part 2, London 1912, pl. 38.

<sup>21</sup>Kanawati, N., *The Watchers/ Dependents of Min of Akhmim in the Old Kingdom*, in: *The Archaeology and Art of Ancient Egypt. Essays in Honor of David B. O’Connor*, CASAE36, vol. II, (2007), 1-2, fig.6.

<sup>22</sup>Kanawati, N., Kanawati, N., *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish: The Cemetery of Akhmim*, vol. VI, 60.

is portrayed with her son and rather than her husband, and as a mother, she rightfully come before children<sup>23</sup>. However, this argument is contested similar scenes in which the wife is shown preceding her husband, who sits behind her and embraces her<sup>24</sup>.

The main reasons for this case are likely to be the position of the mother, which gave it the right and preference to be represented in the foreground, and her likely ownership of the stele. Therefore, her son was attributed to her and designated as (s3 .s mry .s: her son, her beloved). The fact that the mother precedes the son is not entirely unique, as illustrated previously in the Mastaba of Khufu-khaf from the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, where she is depicted holding her son's hand and leading him<sup>25</sup>. However, as she is not the owner of the Mastaba, the text next to her identifies her as: (mwt .f: his mother), while her son is designated as (s3 .s mry .s: her son, her beloved). Indeed, the sequence of the mother and her son in the instance of Henut and Hengi before the offering table in an identical manner as the representations of husbands and wives exceptionally uncommon.

## **II.2. The unusual embrace representation of Ukhhotep from Meir (Middle Kingdom)**

The representation in question come from the tomb of Ukhhotep son of Senbi (B2) in Meir, dated to the reign of Sesostris I<sup>26</sup>. Depicted on the west end in the north wall of the tomb's main chapel is an unfinished scene that still has its squared grids made by the artists in the preliminary drawings (fig. 1)<sup>27</sup>. The scene portrays life-sized figures of the couple standing while observing three rows of incomplete scenes as well depicting wrestlers and servants carrying food offerings<sup>28</sup>. The position of Ukhhotep's body is interesting as he leans upon his long staff and rests one of his hands on its top, while

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<sup>23</sup>Kanawati, N., Kanawati, N., *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish: The Cemetery of Akhmim*, vol. VI, 60.

<sup>24</sup> cf. the stele of Tjembu in the Museum of Florence in this contribution.

<sup>25</sup>Simpson, W. K., *Giza mastabas*, vol. III: *The Mastabas of Kawab, Khafkhufu I and II*. G 7110-20, 7130-40, and 7150, Boston 1978, fig. 26.

<sup>26</sup> PM IV, 250; Blackman, A. M., *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. II: *The Tomb-Chapel of Senbi's Son Ukh-Hotep (B, No. 2) With Two Appendixes on Hieroglyphs and Other Details in B, Nos. 1, 2, 4*, London 1915, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Blackman, A. M., *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. II, pl. II.

<sup>28</sup> PM IV, 250 (10-11); Blackman, A. M., *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. II, 11-12.

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using the other to support it<sup>29</sup>. His wife Djehuty-hotep<sup>30</sup> accompanies her husband, but her figure is unusually depicted in front of her husband's. Moreover, she holds a long papyrus-scepter in her front hand and encircles the Ukhhotp's shoulder with her other arm. Even though the person in the front is the one who is regularly being embraced by the person behind, the artist here emphasizes the act of embracing through the wife, although she stands before the husband. Therefore, her arm wrapped back to surround the husband's shoulders, though he does not reciprocate her affection in any way. Similar arm positions are attested from the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms in both royal<sup>31</sup> and private<sup>32</sup> sources. However, in all these cases, the male figure is always depicted in the front embracing the female figure who follows him and occasionally embraces him in return.

### II.3. The unusual embrace representation of Tjembu (New Kingdom)

The following instance of the man embracing a woman is illustrated on the round-topped stele of Tjembu, dated to the early 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and currently held at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale/Museo Egizio di Firenze (Inv. Nr. 2511)<sup>33</sup>. Positioned under the two Udjat-eyes and the Shen-ring on the lunette of the stele, the couple can be seen seated on a high-back chair with lion legs (fig. 3)<sup>34</sup>. Lady Tjembu<sup>35</sup> is represented in the front in the customary position for men, dressed in a long, tight-fitting robe and a lengthy wig. Moreover, it's distinguished that Tjembu does not reach for the offering table, but

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<sup>29</sup> The same body position of the tomb owner leaning on his long staff is already attested in the Old Kingdom. For instance, see: Weeks, K./Der Manuelian, P. (ed.), *Giza Mastabas*, vol. V: Mastabas of Cemetery G 6000, Boston 1994, figs. 9, 13-14, 31, 40-41, 47-48; Simpson, W. K., *Giza mastabas*, vol. III: The Mastabas of Kawab, Khafkhufu I and II. G 7110-20, 7130-40, and 7150, figs. 11, 34, 43, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Blackman, A. M., *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. II, 5.

<sup>31</sup> cf. Davies, Norman de Garis, *The Rock Tombs of El-Amarna*, vol. II, pl. X ; Medinet Habu VIII, pl. 640; Aldred, C., *Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, New York 1973, 11-12; Naville, E., *The XIth Dynasty Temple at Deir el-Bahari*, vol II, pl. XI, XII, XVIII; Tait, J. (ed.), *Never had the like occurred. Egypt's view of its past*, 73, fig. 4:12.

<sup>32</sup> cf. Moussa, A. M./Altenmüller, H., *Das Grad des Nianchnum und Chnumhotep*, AV21, Mainz 1977, pl. 28; Dominicus, B., *Gesten und Gebärden in Darstellungen des Alten und Mittleren Reiches*, 66, Abb. 15-a; Stewart, H. M., *Egyptian Stelae, Reliefs and paintings from the Petrie Collection*, 21 no. 87, pl.197

<sup>33</sup> Bosticco, S., *Le stele egiziane del nuovo regno* (Museo Archeologico di Firenze), Roma 1965, 19.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/detail.aspx?id=9434> (accessed 20.06.2023); Bosticco, S., *Le stele egiziane del nuovo regno* (Museo Archeologico di Firenze), n. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ranke, H., *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen*, Bd. 1: Verzeichnis der Namen, Glückstadt 1935, 391 (Nr. 4).

instead holds a lotus flower and points it towards her own nose while holding the traditional folded cloth with the other hand. She is followed by Uri<sup>36</sup>, who places his arm around her shoulders while also holding the traditional folded cloth with his other hand. He is wearing a long kilt and a short wig covering his ears. Opposite to the couple there is a female figure of Sennu (can be read Snwj)<sup>37</sup> dressed also in wearing a long, tight-fitting robe and a long wig. She libates and dedicates different offerings including meat, a round loaf of bread, watermelon, an ox heart, and onion on a small table before her to Tjembu and Uri<sup>38</sup>. The two hieroglyphic lines below the scene mention the well-known offering formula (*ḥtp dj nsw*) as follows:

*ḥtp dj nsw Wsir ntr- 3 dj .f prt-ḥrw t ḥnkt k3 3pd šs mnḥt sntr mrḥt ḥt nb.t w<sup>ʿ</sup>b.t n k3 n  
tmbw  
s3.t .s s<sup>ʿ</sup>nḥ rn .s snw.y*

An offering given by the king to Osiris, the great god, he may give an invocation offering (of) bread, beer, oxen, fowl, alabaster, linen, incense, unguent, and every pure thing for the ka of Tjembu. Her daughter, who causes her name to live, Sennu.

Distinctly, the owner of the stele is Tjembu, to whom the daughter is attributed instead of the man in the scene as is typical. Sennu devotes several offerings to her mother and causes her name to live eternally as well.

### **III. Discussion and conclusion:**

Textual and iconographic evidence demonstrate distinctly that the embrace was one of the most significant and widely used gestures in Ancient Egypt, signifying various meanings. Moreover, this gesture is represented in different forms and sources to illustrate the ultimate physical contact between two or more individuals. On the private level, embracing reflects family interaction, closeness, and communication among the

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<sup>36</sup> Ranke, H., *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen*, Bd. 1: Verzeichnis der Namen, 82 (Nr. 21).

<sup>37</sup> Ranke, H., *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen*, Bd. 1: Verzeichnis der Namen, 311 (Nr. 3).

<sup>38</sup> Bosticco, S., *Le stele egiziane del nuovo regno* (Museo Archeologico di Firenze), 19.

### **Three unusual embrace representations from Ancient Egyptian private sources**

family members, especially within a marital relationship. Spouses are frequently depicted in an embracing position (occasionally very intimate) to signify their close bond and social status as well. However, in the majority of cases, the man takes the prominent position and is depicted larger than other family members as he represents the father, husband, and the most significant person in the family. Therefore, he's usually the person being embraced by the other family members, particularly his wife, who wraps one or both arms around his shoulders, arm, waist, and leg or faces and embraces him intimately. The same principle often applies to scenes of mother and son as well, in which the mother usually embraces her son in all kind of sources. While this arrangement is prevalent, there are occasional exceptions in which the woman is positioned in front and the man embraces her from behind. In this contribution, three unconventional scenes from different periods are examined and analyzed.

The above-described instances raise the question: why are women in these cases prominent and why are they represented in the front in the dominant position typically occupied by men?

In case of Ukhhotep, the scenes in his tomb walls demonstrate variation in the depiction of his wife, including her form, size, and position. She is occasionally portrayed as being the same size as her spouse, while in other instances, she is represented in a small size. She may sit or stand behind him, next to his leg or embrace him with one arm, hold his wrist, touch his shoulder, or even not touch him at all<sup>39</sup>. Nevertheless, the positioning of the wife in the scene in question is an exceptional occurrence within the tomb. There is no available evidence indicating that the spouse Djehuty-hotep possessed a particular status (such as being a daughter of a king or a regional nomarch) that would entitle her to take the lead and stand before her husband in an unusual sequence. She bears common titles, such as his wife, his beloved one, his darling in place of his heart and Mistress of the House<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, this portrayal may have been intentionally created to represent

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Blackman, A. M., *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. II, pls III-XV.

<sup>40</sup> Blackman, A. M., *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. II, 5.

her special position in the family and her husband's love for her. However, the artist depicted her embracing her spouse as he was still the central figure in the scene with the attention focused on him through this embrace. The Wadj-scepter held by the wife should also be observed. It is essentially associated with rejuvenation and rebirth in the afterlife and was related to and held by several goddesses, including Hathor, Isis, and Sekhmet. Although the wife doesn't have a title relating her to any of these deities, the tomb owner himself bears the title "Superintendent of the Priests of Hathor" and "Superintendent of the Priests of Mistress-of-All (i.e., Hathor?)"<sup>41</sup>. Hence, holding this particular scepter relates the couple to Hathor, demonstrates their social status and guarantees their resurrection and regeneration after death as well.

The interpretation of the scene of Henut and Hengi is more evident since the mother in Ancient Egypt was undoubtedly greatly appreciated as texts, representations, and sculptures from the beginning of Egyptian history demonstrate. Additionally, Ancient Egyptian instructions urged and emphasized the need for children to show respect, support, and trust towards their mothers as well as to provide her with all her needs and to care for her in old age<sup>42</sup>. Furthermore, it is probable that Henut is the owner of the stele since the offering formula inscribed on it is directed to her benefit. Also, her son seated behind her is attributed to her, and not vice-versa. These factors can elucidate representing the man behind the woman with his arm around her. The third instance is more controversial as the familial relationship between Tjembu, the owner of the stele, in the front and the man sitting behind her and embracing her is not textually stated. Conversely, the filial relationship between Tjembu and the other women, Sennu, is explicitly mentioned. Although the automatic assumption is that he is her husband, the possibilities remain open for Uri to be her husband or her son as the explanatory text is absent. Though commonly assumed to be Tjembu's husband, the text does not provide clarity to the relation between Uri and Tjembu. Hence, the possibilities remain open for

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<sup>41</sup> Blackman, A. M., *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, vol. II, 2-3.

<sup>42</sup>e.g. Teeter, E., *Earthly and Divine Mothers in Ancient Egypt*, in: Cooper, D./Phelan, C. (eds), *Motherhood in Antiquity* (2017), 145–168.

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Uri to be her husband or her son. However, in the event that Uri is her son, it would also be remarkable to observe that he is not the one dedicating offerings to his mother as common. Instead, it is his sister who performs this act for the benefit of her mother and to make her name live. It is also striking that Uri's name is completely absent from the offering formula as well, as only his name is mentioned above his figure on the stele. Similar to the previous scene with Henut and Hengi, the depiction of Tjembu in the foreground may be explained by the mother-son relationship. On the other hand, the portrayal of Sennu devoting the offering to Tjembu and Uri suggests a strong potentiality of the marital relationship between the seated couple who receive the offerings from their daughter. If this assumption proves correct, illustrating Tjembu in the front would reflect her position in the family, her spouse's affection for her, and her ownership of the stele, and thus depicting her as the main person in the scene.

Though very rare, these three instances provide significant iconographic evidence of women's status in Ancient Egyptian society as mothers and wives. They were not only permitted to have their own property, such as stelae in two of these cases, but they also occupied the dominant position among the individuals depicted, including male figures. In addition, their offspring are attributed textually to them, and the benefits of the offering formula are directed at them. As a consequence of all these factors, the aforementioned case studies possess great iconographic and societal significance, illuminating infrequent family depictions in Ancient Egypt.

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**V. List of figures:**

- **Fig. 1:** Limestone stele of Henut and her son, Hengi, First Intermediate Period (?), Thebes.  
(Drawing by the author after:  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y\\_EA1061](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA1061)(accessed 20.06.2023)).
- **Fig. 2:** The representation of Ukhhotep from Meir (Blackman, A. M., The Rock Tombs of Meir, vol. II, pl. II).
- **Fig. 3:** The Stele of Tjembu in Florence (Inv. Nr. 2511)  
(Drawing by the author after: <http://www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/detail.aspx?id=9434>  
(accessed 20.06.2023); Bosticco, S., Le stele egiziane del nuovo regno (Museo Archeologico di Firenze), n. 8).



Fig. 1

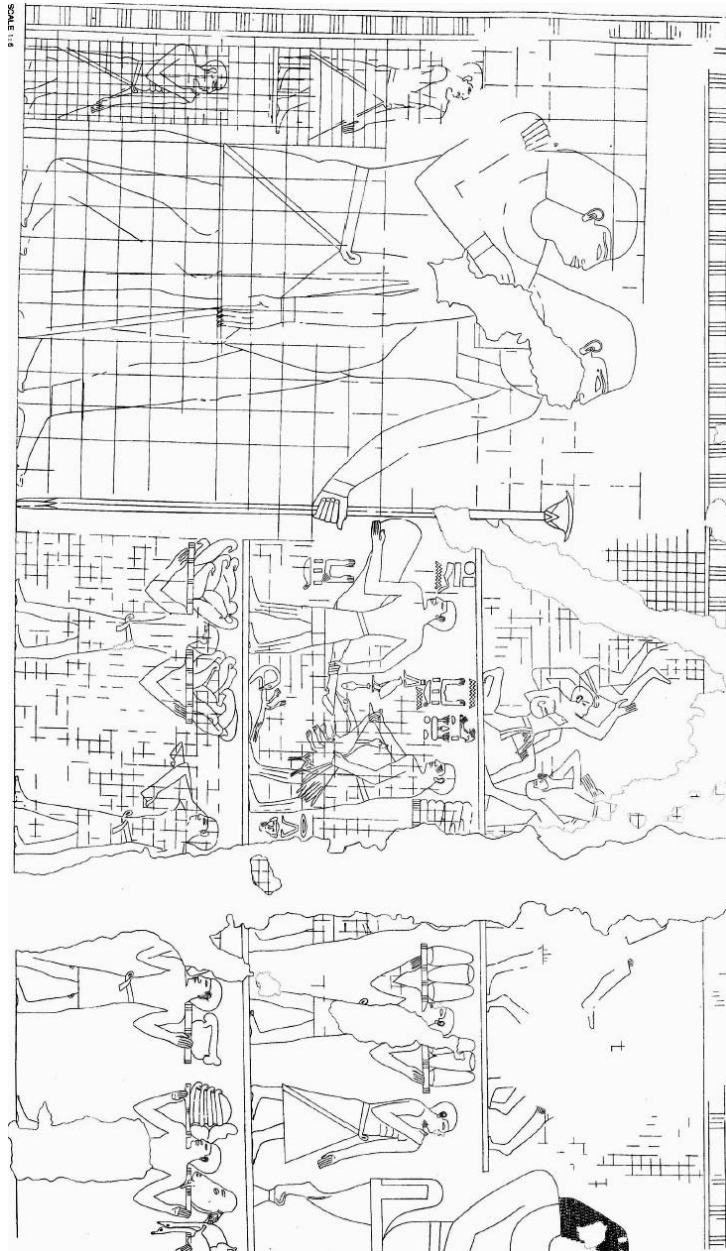


Fig. 2

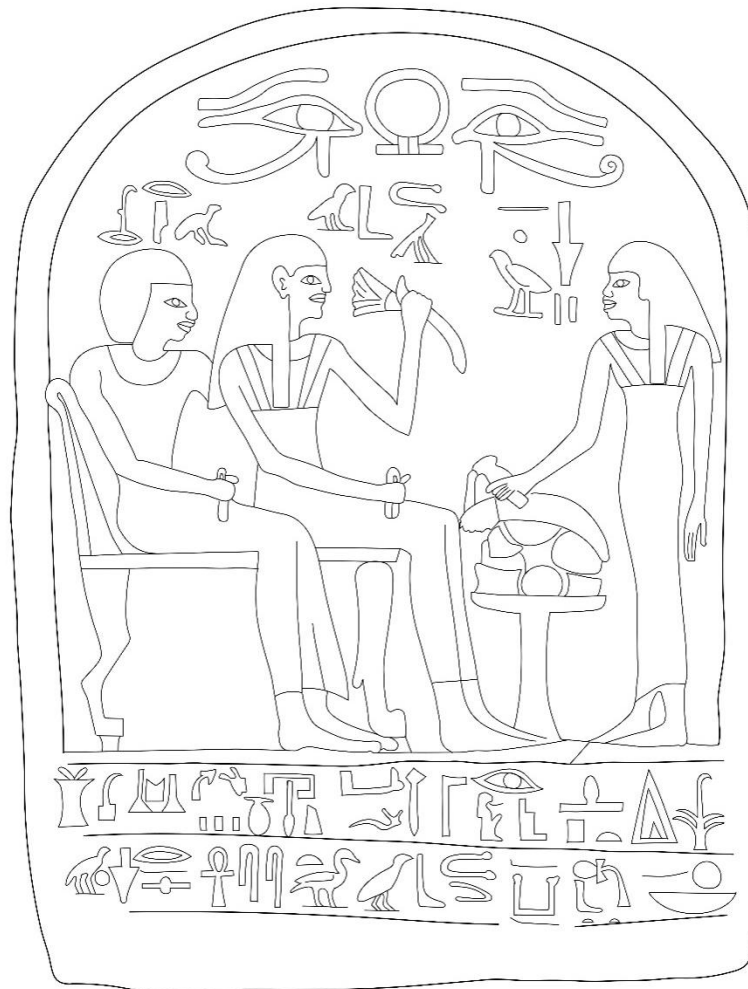


Fig. 3