Week 6 Group Annotation: Sex and Sexuality in Ancient Crete and Egypt

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Sexuality in Ancient Egypt and Crete was a relatively fluid construct. It was embedded in everyday life, including religion, rituals, domesticity, cosmology, and social hierarchies. In many ways this view relates to Butler’s theory of sexuality, which states that “views of gender focus on the social mechanisms through which gender is produced, performed, and regulated in a society, rather than departing from assumed natural and universal gendered categories or roles” (Perry and Joyce 2002:64). This is an interesting choice from Perry and Joyce's article because it is quite confusing due to the wording. I think what they actually mean is “rather than starting from assumed natural and universal gendered categories or roles”.

Aspects of sexuality were often incorporated into Egyptian/Cretan rites of passage, such as funeral ceremonies and coming-of-age traditions. Some references to the general dates or periods you are discussing would be helpful. For example, Egyptian funeral ceremonies frequently involved dance performances with erotic undertones, which were believed to sexually rejuvenate the dead in the afterlife (Meskell 2000:256). In addition, sexually charged images of women were often portrayed in Egyptian tombs, supposedly to revive the male occupant in his next life (Meskell 2000:255).

Another rite of passage in which sexuality played a role was the acceptance of young Cretan men into adulthood. In this ritual, an older man would select a young man for courtship. He would then take the boy into the wilderness to hunt and feast for two months. At the end of these two months a feast was held, during which the boy would determine his satisfaction with the adult lover (Koehl 1997: 9). Some scholars believe that the intimate male bonds formed during this rite of passage may have been the grounds for Greek homosexuality (Koehl 1997: 11). These ideas about Crete are based on much more complete documentation for Greece. You should indicate that in here somehow since some question the idea for Crete.

Sexuality was also prevalent in Egyptian ideas of rebirth. Eroticism was often present in funerals and tombs with the goal of stimulating the deceased into rebirth in the afterlife, and symbolism of such ideas appeared in imagery in tombs and burial sites. For instance, gods and goddesses that embodied sexuality where commonly found, such as Beslo, the male deity of women, or Hathor, a goddess who represented fertility and eroticism (Robins 1996: 28). It was thought that deities like Bes and Hathor would help protect the dead during rebirth, similar to the way they protected women during childbirth. The lotus flower was another popular symbol at burial sites, as it was a recognized symbol of fertility, reproduction, and rebirth, since it is "reborn" every morning as it opens with the rising sun (Robins 1996: 31).

Figure 1: The Egyptian god, Bes. [Link to image]
Sexuality played an important role in Ancient Egyptian and Cretan artwork. Yet even in artwork it maintained its social stratifications, portraying sexuality amongst the elite and the lower classes in very different ways. Elite women portrayed in art, for instance, are almost always clothed, as it was seen as a lower-class action to be nude (Robins 1996: 34) perhaps say "as nudity was associated with lower social class". Artists managed to sexualize elite women (while respecting them at the same time) simply by portraying them in skin-tight, transparent clothing. Elite men, on the other hand, were sexualized by portrayals of large, erect penises, the potency of which represented their power in society. Depictions of people in lower classes were often more blatantly sexualized. Women were illustrated without clothing on, and men of low status had small, flaccid penises. Children were often typically shown naked, their lack of clothing is thought to symbolize their lack of status in society (Robins 1996: 34).

Yet while children and men were depicted in ancient artwork, the focus of sexuality lay primarily on the women. This is likely because men were often the artisans, whereas most women were illiterate and did not create artwork (Meskell 2000:254). Where women are portrayed in art, the focus is normally on the body and the exterior as ideal icons of society, rather than examining the social construction behind sexuality (Meskell 2000:254). It is possible that this preoccupation with the female figure was an attempt to stimulate male sex drives, encourage reproduction and promote the growth of families.

Cretan boys were often depicted with locks on their foreheads and otherwise shaved heads. In the transition from boyhood to adolescence, boys sheared their bangs and grew out the hair on their scalp. By the time they reached manhood, they would grow their hair out to their waists. This pattern is seen on the Chieftain Cup, a Cretan artifact, depicting a younger boy, identified by shorter stature and hair style, and an older man who has a masculine build and a hair style typical of adult Cretan men (Koehl 1986: 101). Koehl uses this cup as a cup that was received during the courting ritual between a young boy and man. Expanding on this, he states that this object being found in a villa site in Crete was not a coincidence. Rather, this was very possible the living quarters of the man who was courting a boy. Power relations between Cretan young boys and men, the younger as inferior or equal sentence fragment and comma splice. Based on Greek? historical evidence, boys were treated well during while being courted by their older lover. If they were treated poorly, the boys had the opportunity to reject the man if they received poor or forcible treatment, underscoring that these relationships were not entirely exploitative (Koehl 1997: 13). You must make the Greek source of these interpretations clearer. We don't know that much about the Minoans as their written language is not deciphered so a lot of analogies to Greece, Egypt and the Mesopotamia are used by archaeologists and classicists.
There is a great deal of discussion about incestuous relationships in Egyptian culture and whether they actually had such a large presence or if scholars have blown their existence way out of proportion. This may be due to the presence of incest in Egyptian mythology. In the myth of Osiris, he was married to Isis. Both Osiris and Isis were the children of Geb and Nut (Robins 1996:36). Scholars may have thought incestuous relationships were much more present in Egyptian society than they actually were due to their presence in the mythology. As we discussed in class, Westerners have tended to sexualize the Egyptians more than the Greeks, so it is understandable that we would emphasize these incestuous relationships seen in Egyptian mythology but not in Greek mythology.

One well-known piece of art which deals with sexuality is the Turin Papyrus, which is thought to have originated at a domestic site from Deir el Medina. The Papyrus portrays men with enlarged genitalia engaging in sexual activities with young, beautiful women. Yet while the images of the women are consistent with the ideal representation of the female figure, the men are “scruffy, balding, short, and paunchy” (Meskell 2000:254). This is unlike other formal Egyptian artwork because it does not portray the societal ideal of masculinity. The Turin Papyrus is further sexualized by its depictions of lotus flowers, hathoric imagery, and monkeys, which are also believed to have carried sexual connotations (Meskell 2000:254). It is possible that this work of art was meant to be satirical, or even possible that it was an interpretation of an ancient brothel.

Because the Egyptians viewed sexuality as a fluid construct, there were not any words in their language for homosexuality or heterosexuality (Meskell 2000:253). The word “nk” was used to refer to penetrative sex, but it carried neither a positive or negative connotation; the word “nkw” described an abusive form of sex that involved a passive role (Meskell 2000:255). However, “these words relate to the practices, rather than to categories of individuals,” suggesting that there was an aversion to the actual act of anal intercourse and not necessarily to male-male intimacy and affection (Meskell 2000:255).

The Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep is one of the only archaeological aspects of Ancient Egypt that could be interpreted to have homosexual overtones. The shared tomb belongs to two men who were servants to the king, and the nature of their relationship is largely unknown. However, imagery found in the tomb suggests that the men shared an intimate bond, one that is perhaps similar to that of a heterosexual, married Egyptian couple in the same time period (Reeder 2000:196).

One of the first images found in the tomb is located on the Eastern wall of the entrance hall, and it displays Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep sitting and accepting offerings to their tomb (Reeder 2000:197). This image can be compared with an image from the tomb of Hamre and Tjeset. In this portrayal, Hamre and Tjeset sit just as Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep do, with similar body language (Reeder 2000:197). Relative to this picture, Niankhkhnum sits in the same position of Hamre, supposedly accepting the “dominant” role in his relationship with Khnumhotep (Reeder 2000:197).
Another loaded image is the banquet scene, which shows Niankhkhnum seated at the left end of the table and Khnumhotep on the right. In such a scene wives would have normally been included, but here neither are: space for Khnumhotep’s wife was not even included, and Niankhkhnum’s wife—though originally included—was plastered over, leaving nothing but the outline of her hand and a shadow of her fingers on Niankhkhnum’s shoulder behind (Reeder 2000:201). Further suggestive meaning can be derived from the presence of a lotus flower: although the image of a man smelling a lotus is extremely rare, here Khnumhotep is depicting sniffing the flower (Reeder 2000:201). Further down are musicians and dancers, both of which carry sexual undertones, as well as hieroglyphics which reveal the band is playing a song called “the Two Divine Brothers,” a song in which two men have sex following a banquet (Reeder 2000:202). Furthermore, such banquets—when held for a heterosexual, married couple—were often intended to be loaded with sexual undertones and erotic elements (Reeder 2000:202).

The images become increasingly affection and intimate as they get closer to the offering chamber of the tomb. The entrance to the offering chamber features Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep facing one another, their faces mere inches apart. Niankhkhnum’s left arm reaches across the front of Khnumhotep, grasping his wrist in what is likely a display of dominance or power (Reeder 2000:203). They are surrounded by their children, although their wives are absent. This image closely parallels an image from the tomb of Kai at Giza, where “the wife embraces her husband, and the children are depicted on either side of the couple” (Reeder 2000:203). But perhaps the most intimate scene is discovered in the interior of the offering chamber, in which Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are alone together. Once again they stand in an embrace, face-to-face, with barely any space between their heads (Reeder 2000:206).
Although there are many unknowns in the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, many scholars originally approached this imagery with a bias towards heteronormativity (Reeder 2000:195-196). The topic of homosexuality was carefully avoided, as scholars proposed the men were brothers, twins, alter egos, and even “dual anomalies” (Reeder 2000:195). While today “same-sex desire and sentiment must be considered as a probable explanation” for the imagery found in the tomb, it is also important to not force the imagery into any pre-conceived notions of homosexuality, and to simply view the artwork for what it is and nothing more (Reeder 2000:207). I’m not sure your last phrase is reasonable, or I’m not sure what you mean. We always interpret ancient art. I think you mean that ultimately we never be sure what it means and, as you indicate in the first part of the sentence, we need to look at it in its cultural context, not ours. The phrase needs more thought and should be more clearly stated or deleted.

The same advice can be applied not only to the consideration of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep's tomb, but to the entire study of sexuality in Ancient Egypt and Crete as well.

This is a reasonable summary of the readings for the week, but I'd have liked to have seen it better integrated thematically. It reads sort of like a group of annotations.

References Cited

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