The tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep is located in the Necropolis of Saqqara in Egypt and dates back to roughly 2,400 B.C., or the Fifth Dynasty (Reeder 2000:193). Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were both manicurists to the King of Egypt, although their exact relation to one another remains unknown.

Comparisons have been made between the imagery of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep presented in the tombs and imagery of heterosexual, married couples derived from Egyptian tombs of the same time period. From this assessment many similarities have been drawn between the couples, lending to speculation that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were a homosexual couple (Reeder 2000:196).

One of the most noticeable similarities between imagery of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep and heterosexual couples is the body language. In artwork from the same contexts, husband-and-wife imagery portrays intimate scenes in which couples stand face-to-face, their heads almost touching; scenes in which husbands assert dominance over wives by grasping their arms or hands, and scenes in which couples embrace, surrounded by children (Reeder 2000:196-205). Many of this same body language is reflected in the depictions of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, with Niankhkhnum always assuming the “dominant” position that the husband would typically adopt (Reeder 2000:196-205).

Another aspect of the tomb’s artwork which is similar to that of heterosexual couples’ is the sexual symbolism. For instance, in one piece Khnumhotep is pictured smelling a lotus flower, which is a somewhat sexualized symbol of rebirth: “the lotus…was regarded as a symbol of rebirth because it opens in the morning with the rising sun” (Robins 1996:31). Erotic undertones could also be found in the presence of music and dancing in the banquet scene: in Ancient Egypt, “love and music always belonged together” (Manniche 1987:51). Hieroglyphics accompanying the picture of the musicians also reveals that the nature of their song, “The Two Divine Brothers,” was homosexual – it recounted two men, Horus and Seth, who engaged in sexual relations following a banquet (Reeder 2000:202). Also significant is the general absence of Niankhkhnum’s and Khnumhotep’s wives. The women appear only infrequently throughout the images; as a result, “Khnumhotep then was repeatedly treated more like Niankhkhnum’s spouse” (Reeder 2000:202).

Many interpretations of Niankhkhnum’s and Khnumhotep’s relationship have been put forth by scholars. It was originally approached with a heteronormative view, as history is often “interpreted in a strictly heterosexual manner” (Dowson 2000:162). The men were classified as brothers, twins, alters, and dual anomalies (Reeder 2000:195). Perhaps scholars were afraid to suggest a homosexual relationship because of a history of intolerance in archaeology; for instance, an unrelated suggestion outside of Egyptology the suggestion that certain artifacts found in Classic Maya art represented homosexuality had “literally created a backlash among some scholars” (Joyce 2009:106).

Regardless, Reeder cautions that scholars need to view the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep objectively (Reeder 2000:207). Whether researchers have a heterosexual or homosexual bias, they need to view the burial site simply as it is: a unique and unprecedented display of an intimate, affectionate male-male relationship in Ancient Egypt. Nicely done with a good use of other sources and images.
Figure 1: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep accepting offerings (Reeder 2000:Fig 1).
Figure 2: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep entering tomb (Reeder 2000:Plate 3).
Figure 3: The Banquet Scene (Reeder 2000:Fig 3).

Figure 4: Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in the offering chamber (Reeder 2000:Plate 7).