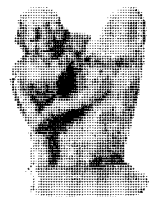


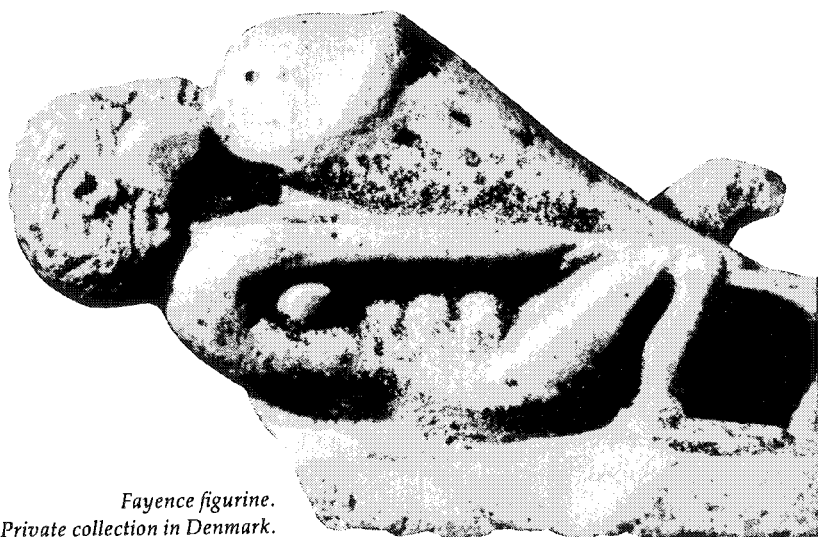
Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt



Lise Manniche

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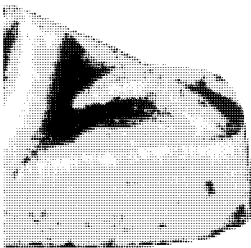




*Fayence figurine.
Private collection in Denmark.*

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Introduction

Judging from the books available on erotic life in the Ancient World, the Greeks and Romans would appear to be pioneers in the field of describing and, especially, depicting this aspect of human behaviour. This may be so in some respects, but others had prepared the ground. Along the banks of the Nile erotic life flourished at all levels of society and, contrary to what is generally thought, it was recorded in words and pictures.

Evidence on any subject concerned with ancient Egypt is almost always fragmentary, but information about the intimate life of the inhabitants is particularly scarce. What is known about life in those distant days has been gathered mainly from tombs and temples and is therefore, to a large extent, of a funerary or religious nature. Few urban settlements have survived but it is, in fact, remains of such agglomerations of buildings which have yielded the most interesting vestiges of the intimate life of the people who lived there.

When attempting to piece together a picture of the sexual behaviour of the Egyptians during the 3000 years or so before Christ one is further hampered by the fact that whenever 'erotic' drawings and figurines have had the good fortune to survive the millennia, they frequently ended up in private collections or in inaccessible drawers in museums.

The sources include representations in the round, reliefs, paintings and, above all, sketches of erotic scenes. Texts vividly describe the passions and desires of gods and men. The belief in a life in the Hereafter was all important to the Egyptians and it was emphasized in the tangible concept of the act of procreation preceding it. In the same way as the union of male and female was a necessity for the creation of a new being, this underlying erotic force also enabled a person who had departed from this life to go on existing in the Hereafter. The sexual power of the mummy had to be maintained and stimulated. This is always visualized as pertaining to the mummy of a man, never that of a woman. In Egyptian art the idea is expressed in a symbolic way which is quite straightforward once the coded language is understood; it can be seen to permeate scenes and subjects which are generally taken at their face value only.

The literary sources are fairly uncomplicated. There are tales of the conflicts of gods and the adventures of men, and love poems written in a simple language but with numerous *double entendres* and play on words. Wisdom books advise how to behave towards fellow human beings and to women in particular; calendars suggest activities to be abstained from on certain days of the year; dream books give the solution to the subconscious adventures of men and women; and magic formulas make everything come true.

When reading these ancient writings and perceiving how the Egyptians attempted to make their erotic visions last by putting pen to paper or chisel to stone, one is hardly aware of the gap in time and cultural tradition which is otherwise most acutely felt when trying to understand how the Egyptian mind worked.

The Attitude of the Egyptians to Sex

Herodotus, the Greek historian and traveller to Egypt in the 5th century BC, was the first foreigner to try to bridge this gap in understanding by telling the world about the Egyptians of his time and, insofar as possible, of their ancestors. He collected extensive information about this strange people. He was concerned with almost any kind of information and he passed on whatever he heard, leaving it to the reader to believe it or not. We are still wondering how much of it was actually true.

Among the more intimate details concerning the Egyptians he obtained the following piece of information, apparently a mixture of what he had himself observed and what he had been told.

The women urinate in a standing position, whereas the men sit down. They relieve themselves indoors and eat in the street, and they give as reason for this the fact that things unseemly should be performed in private, but things not unseemly should be done in the open. The Egyptians and those who have learnt it from them are the only ones to perform circumcision. Every man has two garments, every woman just one. They are particularly careful always to wear clean linen. They circumcise for reasons of cleanliness more than seemliness. Their priests shave their bodies every second day, so that no lice nor any other pollution should contaminate them in the service of the god. . . . They wash with cold water twice during the day and twice during the night. (II. 35-7)¹

On this occasion Herodotus had nothing more to say about anything remotely connected with sexual matters (but he refers to them later, cf. below). One may perhaps take it however, that erotic activities were among those which took place indoors (or he would



1. Circumcision. Tomb of Ankhmahor, Saqqara. Early 6th dyn.

have noticed and not omitted commenting on it) and therefore considered by the Egyptians to be, if not 'unseemly', at least fairly private.

Introduction

The Egyptians appreciated personal cleanliness both in daily life and in ritual circumstances, as Herodotus had observed. About the question of sexual matters being considered impure he adds: 'The Egyptians were the first to make it a matter of religious observance not to have intercourse with women in temples nor to enter a temple without washing after being with a woman.' (II. 64) This is the only suggestion that intimate relations with women were considered unclean as compared with the ritually pure condition required of a person entering a holy place, a concept which is by no means alien to the present-day descendants of the ancient Egyptians now devoted to Islam. Long before Herodotus intercourse in temples was thought best to avoid. In *The Book of the Dead*, which most wealthy Egyptians arranged to have placed in their tombs close to the mummy, there is a list of actions which the deceased was supposed to swear not to have committed. In order to be allowed to dwell in the kingdom of Osiris, his conscience should permit him to stand up and declare: 'I have not committed adultery in the sacred places of my city god.' (P. Nu, ch. 125, Introd., 12)²

Some women had a special part to play in the presence of the god and aggressive sexual behaviour was even encouraged for they had to stimulate the virility of the god. Diodorus, the historian who visited Egypt in 60–57 BC, describes what happened after the funeral of the sacred Apis bull when the new bull was to be installed:

. . . Putting it on a state barge fitted out with a gilded cabin, they conduct it as a god to the sanctuary of Hephaestus at Memphis. During . . . forty days only women may look at it; these stand facing it, and pulling up their garments show their genitals, but henceforth they are forever prevented from coming into the presence of this god. (I. 85)³

According to Herodotus a similar display took place during the festival of the cat-goddess Bastet:

When the people are on their way to Bubastis [to worship Artemis, i.e., Bastet] they go by river, men and women together, a great number of each in every boat. Some of the women make a noise with *krotala* (rattles), others play *auloi* (pipes) all the way, while the rest of the women, and the men, sing and clap their hands. As they journey by river to Bubastis, whenever they come near any town they bring their boat near the bank; then some of the women do as I have said, while some shout mocking of the women of the town, others dance, and others stand up and expose their persons. This they do whenever they come beside any riverside town. But when they have reached Bubastis, they make a festival with great sacrifices, and more wine is drunk at this feast than in the whole year beside. (II. 60)



2. *Terracotta figurine of man showing his private parts. British Museum.*

Introduction

This aggressive behaviour of the women, reflected in numerous Graeco-Roman terracotta figurines, is probably the feminine equivalent of the cases in which men use their virility to gain power over another person, as we shall see later on.

Another aspect of the concept of the physical needs of the god was the offering of phallic votive gifts which, eventually, were to benefit the supplicant himself. The Egyptians placed phallic objects in the temple of Hathor, goddess of love, or figurines of Bes, the dwarf god, with a disproportionately large member. Herodotus relates what happened at the feast of Dionysos:

The . . . festival of Dionysos is ordered by the Egyptians much as it is by the Greeks, except for the dances; but in place of the phallus they have invented the use of puppets a cubit long moved by strings, which are carried about the villages by women, the male member moving and nearly as big as the rest of the body; a pipe-player goes before, the women follow after, singing of Dionysos. There is a sacred legend which gives the reason for the appearance and motions of these puppets. (II. 48)

The legend to which Herodotus makes reference is probably the legend of Isis and Osiris. Osiris was once king of the living, but his brother Seth killed him, cut his body into pieces and scattered them over Egypt. Isis, the wife of Osiris, patiently collected them, but

the only part of Osiris which Isis did not find was his male member; for no sooner had it been thrown into the river than it was swallowed by the *lepidotus*, the *phagrus* and the *oxyrrhyncus* fish . . . In its place Isis shaped a dummy and consecrated the phallus to whose honour the Egyptians celebrate a feast to this day.⁴

This version of the well-known legend was written by Plutarch about AD 120. According to another tradition the missing part was found after all. The Egyptians never worshipped the phallus as such, but the existence of numerous figurines, particularly of Graeco-Roman date, is evidently inspired by this tradition.

Prostitution

In various places in the Middle East, in Greece and in India there was a particular arrangement intended for the pleasure of gods and men: temple prostitution. It is difficult to determine the extent to which this had a place in Egypt. There were priestesses of different rank in the temples, some even bearing the title of 'god's wife', or, referring to one of the creation legends, 'hand of the god', but this does not necessarily mean that they had sexual intercourse with the gods or with the priests in their place. Herodotus says explicitly: