An Unusual Representation of Tomb Owner’s Wife

(Deir el Gebrawi Tomb No 67)

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The decoration of the private tombs of the Old Kingdom included a number of subjects often understood as representation of real events from the life of the tomb owner. Such are for example the scenes showing the tomb owner either sitting in the carrying-chair or being engaged in fishing/fowling, or taking part in a banquet and being entertained by musicians – to mention but a few. On the other hand the growing number of studies puts forward the opinion that the scenes are of symbolic meaning and they base upon the ideas of afterlife. In some cases, the meaning is indicated by the text accompanying the scene, in others the connection between the visual representation and religious text has been established through comparative analysis. The interpretations demonstrate that the subject of the scenes was in harmony with the overall function of the tomb and they thus represent the kind of approach that has to be considered in the future studies in decoration of private tombs.

Though none of the mentioned scenes is an obligatory part of tomb decoration, their quantity as well as the consistency of their iconography point to the possibility that they express some religious notions. But, on the other hand, if the scenes are unique or differ considerably from the usual patterns, the initial question in dealing with them is: do they illustrate a real event from the life of an individual or do they relate some religious ideas? The critical number of examples considered appropriate to assign a scene to a category of “rare, exceptional” or “usual” depends on personal estimation.

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on criteria chosen by the researcher. R. van Walsem, applying statistic for measuring the importance of individual scenes, argues that the small percentage by which some scene is represented in the iconographic program in Old Kingdom tombs is a sign of the dispensability of the scene. Taking the fish-harpooning scene as example, van Walsem singles out the individual inclination of the tomb owner to the particular “profane or secular game of ‘leisure’” as a decisive factor for occurrence of the scene in the tomb decoration, and denies the possibility that these scenes could have had religious meaning. It is disputable whether statistics, though a valuable tool in analyzing some issues related to tomb decoration, can in this way contribute to reveal the meaning of the scenes. The classification of the function of a scene should be the result of an analysis of its elements, context and other relevant data, irrespective of the statistical data on frequency of the scene in the iconographic program. Though the taste of the tomb owner could influence to some extent the choice of the subjects for the decoration this does not necessarily mean that the selection reflects worldly life. The tomb decoration being a functional part of the complex equipment for afterlife, all its details, and especially representations of the main figures, should be treated accordingly. Therefore, I will present here an analysis and propose interpretation of an unusual scene from Deir el Gabrawi.

The middle section of the northern wall in the tomb of Henqu: Ii..f at Deir el Gabrawi (No 67) is decorated with several different scenes dominated by the one depicting the tomb owner spearing fish. To the left of the tomb owner’s boat is a smaller boat carrying a woman – the motif that will be discussed here (fig. 1) – and above it a small scene of bed making.

In the fishing and fowling scenes the tomb owner’s boat is occasionally accompanied by boats carrying minor figures, usually fishing. The tomb motif from the tomb of Henqu: Ii..f differs from them. A squatting female figure with one knee raised is shown on the front bow of a small papyrus boat. With her left hand she pulls a plant stem; though partly damaged, the flower is undoubtedly that of a lotus. The woman’s right arm is raised above the head brandishing a short and narrow object held in the hand. The part of the representation being damaged and a reliable

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3 Davies, Deir El Gebrawi II, Pl. XXIII.

identification of the object not being possible, the conclusion that the object was relatively short is drawn from small dimensions of the space available for the depiction. Behind the woman, a pile of equipment seems to be depicted.

N. de G. Davies describes the representation in the following way: “…Khentika sits, herself also, as it seems, wielding a weapon in her right hand, though in her left she holds only a stem of lotus. The arrangement of provisions etc. behind her is difficult to comprehend.”

Fig. 1. After Davies, Deir el Gebrawi II, Pl. XXIII.

Y. Harpur refers to this motif as exemplifying the active participation of female family members in a scene, identifying the action itself as a throwstick. If the interpretation of the motif as that of fowling were accepted, this would be the only one of the kind with the protagonist squatting instead of standing. Also, it would be the only extant representation of a woman performing that or similar activity: although a scene of spear fishing in the tomb of Idut has been inferred from the relief fragments, no traces of a figure have been preserved to establish whether Idut herself was depicted in the act of spearing fish.

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5 Davies, Deir el Gebrawi II, 29.
7 See commentary by Harpur, Decoration, 365, n. 31; for the description, see: Decker und Herb, Bildatlas zum Sport im Alten Egypten, 391 (K2.25).
W. Decker and M. Herb focus their attention on the gesture of Khentika's left hand and interpret the entire motif from the tomb of Henqu as lotus plucking.\(^8\) Two Old Kingdom scenes depicting lotus plucking are mentioned by L. Klebs and Y. Harpur.\(^9\) Both scenes show a few minor figures standing in the water and picking lotuses,\(^10\) while in the third scene of the kind, in the tomb of Niankhknum and Khnukhoteb, it is a single naked man that plucks the flower, also standing in the water.\(^11\) Those three scenes however differ from the one at Henqu's tomb both in iconography and in the status of the protagonists. N. de G. Davies, J. Vandier and Y. Harpur agree that a person depicted in Henqu's tomb is his wife Khentika, nicknamed Iy\(^12\), i.e. a person of higher rank than the lotus gatherers from other tombs.

As for the object in the woman's right hand, J. Vandier says it might be a harpoon, lotus or some other flower, remarking that the scene does not seem to represent the zśś w3ḏ ritual.\(^13\)

The identification of the subject of the whole motif by Y. Harpur, as well as by W. Decker and M. Herb, appears to be based on only one of Khentika's actions. J. Vandier seems, however, to regard both activities as being functional parts of a whole. Though his very denial discloses that the motif strongly reminds him of "papyrus pulling", Vandier neither analyses its elements any further, nor expresses an opinion on the possible subject of the scene.

The unique way Khentika was represented is thus up to now differently explained and in some cases only described. It is my intention to offer a re-examination of the iconography of the scene which could lead to a new interpretation.

Some additional remarks on the similarity and differences between the iconography of the representation of Khentika and the zśś w3ḏ scenes are necessary for the analysis.

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\(^8\) Decker und Herb, Bildatlas zum Sport im Alten Egypten, 417.


\(^10\) LD II, 56a bis; Davies, Deir el Gebrawi II, Pl. V.


\(^12\) Davies, Deir el Gebrawi II, 29; Vandier, Manuel IV, 725; Harpur, Decoration, 136, 362.

\(^13\) Vandier, Manuel IV, 725, n. 1. The motif itself is not included either in his list, nor in some other list of examples analysed in the works dealing with the zśś w3ḏ — cf. Vandier, Manuel IV, 738-746; Y. Harpur, zśś w3ḏ scene of the Old Kingdom, GM 38 (1980), 53-61; eadem Decoration, 335ff.; H. Altenmuller, Fragen zur Ikonographie des Grabherrn in der 5 Dynastie des Alten Reiches, in: Kunst des Alten Reiches, SDAIK 28, Mainz 1995, 21-23.
In her article on the $z\dot{s}\dot{s}$ $w\vec{q}d$ scenes, Y. Harpur points to the difference between the actions of male and female performers of the ritual.\textsuperscript{14} The “female” variant of the scene depicts a gesture of pulling the plant as the protagonist’s only activity. In the “male” version, one hand of the protagonist grasps a papyrus stem, and it is the gesture of brandishing a plucked papyrus stem held in another, raised hand is characteristic of this version of the scene. Although the gestures of Khentika at first seem similar to those shown in the “male” version, the differences, including the gender of the protagonist, should not be overlooked, and the scene from Henqui’s tomb can be seen as a combination of the gestures characteristic of both versions: pulling the plant with one hand (“female” version) and brandishing an object in other (“male” version). The fact that the right arm of Khentika is not raised high behind her head but partially hides it, might be explained either as resulting from the limited space or as a deliberate choice of a (restrained) gesture considered appropriate to the protagonist’s sex and her squatting posture.

The gesture Khentika is making with her left hand, the curve of plant stem and position of the flower itself all confirm that plucking, not smelling, of lotus has been represented. It is highly unlikely, that the scene in which papyrus was omitted and lotus became the focus of the action could still have the value a $z\dot{s}\dot{s}$ $w\vec{q}d$-representation had for the afterlife. The scene would have been ambiguous and its effectiveness for the deceased uncertain.

As for the object being brandished, in some identified as $z\dot{s}\dot{s}$ $w\vec{q}d$, a throwstick\textsuperscript{15} instead of a papyrus stem seems to be depicted. The short and narrow object Khentika is holding in her right hand can be likewise identified as one such weapon.

A considerable deviation from the scheme usually applied to the depiction of the $z\dot{s}\dot{s}$ $w\vec{q}d$ is the woman’s squatting posture, all the other known scenes showing a standing protagonist. Female family members are often represented squatting at the tomb owner’s feet, quite frequently holding a lotus in hand. Scenes of spear fishing and fowling usually show them in the same boat with tomb owner, almost always as passive observers.\textsuperscript{16} If kneeling, it is usually with both knees on the ground. In the scene analysed here, the raised knee is in accordance with the woman’s movements because “[i]t was a better way to illustrate potential movement, and therefore ideally

\textsuperscript{14} On “male” and “female” version see: Harpur, in: GM 38 (1980), 53, 56-57.

\textsuperscript{15} Harpur, in: GM 38 (1980), 54, 55-56; Decoration, 140.

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Harpur, Decoration, 136f.
suit for the depiction of female figures attempting to lean forward, to steady themselves, to hold a heavy instrument, or even engage in some sport.17 Accordingly, such a posture can be considered a suitable replacement of the standing one, which, due to a small height of the space, was impossible to use without substantially affecting the relative size of the figure.

The rank of Khentika should be also considered. Namely, instead of the “male” and “female” variant, H. Altenmuller distinguishes between the “private” and “royal” version of the zšš w3d ritual, pointing to the fact that all the women represented performing the zšš w3d were queens – Mersyankh III and her mother Hetepheres II, Nebet and Khenut.18 Such interpretation can be applied to the other female protagonists being of the royal decent. One of them is Watetkhether, the wife of Mereruka.19 The other is Iufi, the wife of Kakhenet of El-Hammamiyeh (A2), which is also depicted in the ritual act of papyrus pulling20. Whereas Y. Harpur, taking account of the presence of a smaller male figure brandishing a split papyrus stem, classifies this El-Hammamiyeh scene as an example of linking both zšš w3d versions in a single scene, it is only the “male”, i.e. “private” version that H. Altenmuller registers in Kakhenet’s tomb.21 Still, in corroboration of a “royal” version being probably even more important than the “private” one in this scene, stands not only the emphasis on Iufi expressed by the size of her figure but also her titles. In several places in the tomb, Iufi’s name is associated with the titles of z3t nsfw and z3t nsfw n3 ḫtf,22 indicating her high rank, even if she were merely a titular princess.

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17 Harpur, Decoration, 139.
20 A. El-Khouli and N. Kanawati, The Old Kingdom Tombs of El-Hammamiyeh, ACE 2, Sidney 1990, 35, Pls. 35, 36. As for the identity of the woman, the name Iufi is preserved in the right section of the register, in front of the sailing boat carrying her husband.
22 El-Khouli and N. Kanawati, The Old Kingdom Tombs of El-Hammamiyeh, 27, Pls. 43, 46, 48, 51. The discussion about the titles of Iufi: ibid., 18. The prominent position given to Iufi in the decoration of the tomb (presence in almost all the scenes; except when at the offering table on the false doors, her seat is of the type closely resembling that used by kings and members of royal family: V. Vandier, Manuel IV, 82; boating scenes of the west and east chapel walls; all three double statues show the women to the man’s right) confirms her importance while the very fact of her being depicted as performer of the zšš w3d ritual speaks additionally in favour of a royal descent, as would an early date of the tomb (its dating ranging from early V Dynasty to its end, cf. El-Khouli and N. Kanawati, El-Hammamiyeh, 11-16) in respect to Iufi’s royal titles. On the other hand, her title “royal acquaintance” speaks against direct blood relationship with a king (cf. B. Schmitz, Untersuchungen zum Titel śš-nṣw “Konigsohn”, 11ff., 129ff.).
The title *rh.t nswt*\(^{23}\) of Henqui’s wife Khentika does not indicate a royal descent and this supports the opinion that this scene cannot be a variety of the *zšš w3d* ritual. And yet, a possibly lower status of the person does not automatically exclude the use of a modified motif. At that time, towards the end of the Old Kingdom, the number of officials enjoying once exclusively royal privileges is larger than in previous periods. This also evident in the fact that some subjects, hitherto reserved for the members of royal family and highest officials, came to be used in the decoration of the tombs whose owners were of the lower rank\(^{24}\). Such motifs underwent certain modification, adaptation in order to be used in non-royal context.

In short, the depiction of Khentika resembles the iconographic model of *zšš w3d* in the gestures of the protagonist and in the setting for the action. Yet, because the papyrus is missing and Khentika wasn’t of the rank that would qualify her for the participation in the ritual, it has to be concluded that the scene is indeed not to be considered a *zšš w3d*.

Up to the point, the already published opinions on the scene have been discussed and as a result it could be established what the scene is *not* representing. Still, the possibility that the scene had some symbolic meaning for the depicted woman is not excluded. Several points speak in favour of it and will be therefore (re-) addressed:

a) An emphasis was given to Khentika by depicting her in the separate boat, and it was probably aimed at calling attention to her activity.

b) “Squatting” didn’t have to be imposed by a limited space (cf. above), it could have been a deliberate and appropriate choice for a representation of plucking the low growing lotus flowers from the boat.

c) Lotus has a great symbolic value of rebirth, of resurrection.\(^{25}\) Lotus can also be an offering to gods, the oldest such example being the scene of offering lotuses to goddess Hathor\(^{26}\), to the very goddess with whom the *zšš w3d* ritual was

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\(^{23}\) Davies, *Deir el Gebrawi II*, Pl. XXVI.


\(^{26}\) The relief of Mentuhotep II from Dendera: L. Habachi, King Nebhepetre Mentuhotep: His Monuments, Place in History, Deification and Unusual Representation in the Form of Gods, *MDAIK* 19 (1963), 25, 27f., Pl. VI, fig. 7.
connected in the Old Kingdom\textsuperscript{27}. The choice of lotus for the Khentika’s scene could have had roots in local preferences for the symbol. It is probably more that a mere coincidence, that lotus occupies an unusual and prominent place in yet another Deir el Gebrawi tomb, dated to the same period as Henqu’s. In the tomb of Hemra Izi (No 72)\textsuperscript{28}, a dance classified by E. Brunner-Traut as a variety of the $jb3$-dance is depicted\textsuperscript{29}. This scene has a peculiar trait: each dancer is separated from the other by lotus plants of the approximately same height as human figures. The connection of music and dance, including the $jb3$-dance, with the role Hathor played in the cult of the dead\textsuperscript{30} points to a probable explanation of the occurrence of lotus, a symbol of rebirth, in this context. The lotuses, as papyrus would, define the scene setting as marsh, the domain of Hathor and stress the connection of the dence to the aimed resurrection so that their prominent position within the scene is certainly not merely decorative in purpose.

d) The context of the scene should be considered:

d.1) Khentika’s husband is performing one of the tomb owner’s activities in the marsh (including the $zss$ $w3d$), the fishing. The representations of those activities have been brought into relation with CT 62, the spell meant to restore the ability of the deceased to move and enable them to reenter this world and to come back from it, to be included into the world of gods.\textsuperscript{31}

d.2) The bad making, as a representation of the ritual securing the rebirth in the next world,\textsuperscript{32} was an appropriate subject to fill the remaining space above Khentika. References to the possible connection of the bad making to Hathor and


\textsuperscript{28}Possibly a brother of Henqu/\textit{li...f}: N. Kanawati, \textit{The Egyptian Administration in the Old Kingdom}, Warmister 1971, 51; Harpur, \textit{Decoration}, 298.


to the close connection of the fishing and fowling scenes with the ritual of mumification are also made.\textsuperscript{33}

All this taken in account, one point remains to be added: although the scene of Khenti\textka seems to be an unique pictorial combination of fowling and lotus plucking, it has its textual counterpart in CT 62 (I, 269), where both actions are closely connected. In the text, lotus plucking and papyrus pulling are referred to side by side, in the same context, and are followed by a reference to fowling with a throwstick: "...may you find the valleys full of water for your washing in your cool water, may you pluck papyrus-plants, rushes, lotuses and lotus-buds. There shall come to you waterfowl in thousands, lying on your path; you cast your throwstick at them, and it means that a thousand are fallen at the sound of its wind..."\textsuperscript{34}

Thus, the same text related to other scenes showing the tomb owner's activities in the marsh, has inspired the depiction of Khenti\textka. A brief examination shows that this scene is not the only one differing from the prevailing representational schemes based on CT 62. The scenes from the tombs of Chunes (PM IV, 134f.) and Werimi (PM IV, 188f.), that were classified on grounds of a number of elements as examples of (the private version of) \textit{zšš \textit{w3d}}-scenes, showing the protagonist brandishing a throwstich\textsuperscript{35}, are in fact combination of papyrus pulling and fowling, i.e. their composition is ruled by the same principles as those underlying the representation of Khenti\textka\textsuperscript{36}. The intention was to condense several scenes in one, visually and by meaning, and to replace them with it: none of two tombs has other scene(s) representing tomb owner fishing or fowling\textsuperscript{37}. Turning back to Khenti\textka, it should be noted that her husband Henqu is represented only fishing. In that way, the depiction of Khenti\textka not only makes a visual balance to the representation of her husband, but also complements its content: he is represented fishing, she fowling and plucking lotus, so their actions add up to the well illustrated CT 62 (269). The scene

\textsuperscript{33} H. Altenmuller, Zum Ursprung von Isis und Nephthys, SAK 27 (1999), 14, 25f. The last conclusion offers an explanation for placing the bed preparing scene "inside" the fishing scene in the tomb of Hequ, as well as beside the fowling scene in the tomb of Khenti at Thebes (PM I, 445.4).


\textsuperscript{35} Harpur, in: \textit{GM} 38 (1980), 56.

\textsuperscript{36} Cf. with the commentary of Y. Harpur on the representation of Werimi (in: \textit{GM} 38 (1980), 54).

\textsuperscript{37} Preliminary examination of the decoration of the tombs whose owners were male (list: Harpur, in \textit{GM} 38, 1980, 53-54) show that the presence of \textit{zšš \textit{w3d}} scene is usually coupled with the absence of fishing or fowling scene(s); exceptions: (5) Kaimanch. (10) Mereruka, (13) Hemra. Though it may seem that the \textit{zšš \textit{w3d}} scene makes the representation of fishing or fowling superfluous, the statement of the king would be premature without further research.
and the other mentioned examples, illustrate the possibilities the ancient Egyptian artist had at hand in varying and combining iconographic details of one subject. Further examinations could establish whether the combinations result from the lack of space in decoration of the tombs, or is there some other reason for it.

The most unusual fact about the motif from the tomb of Henqu thus remains that the protagonist is a woman. The favourable circumstances for creating a scene such as the one of Khentika, may be the date of the tomb and its decoration, but growing importance of the ritual and funeral scenes and, possibly, the declining influence of the Memphite workshops on the provincial artisans. The choice of iconographic means, though maybe influenced and limited by Khentika’s rank and gender, was well suited to illustrate the wish expressed by the spell CT 62 (I, 269). The depiction of Khentika is thus not a redundant part of the fishing scene – it has its own independent function for Khentika, and at the same time it complements visually and by its meaning the representation of her husband fishing, building together with it one complex illustration of the Spell 62. As a representation a woman simultaneously fowling and lotus plucking, the scene is unique, but the underlying principle of merging several scenes in one is not such.

38 There are also other examples of adaptation of the iconography to the specific demands or needs. Such are the exceptional representation of the male non-royal protagonist, the dwarf Seneb, performing a female/royal version of the ritual (cf. Harpur, in GM 38 (1980), 57; Altenmuller, in: Kunst des Alten Reiches, 22f, 27, n. 19), or the same scale used for the figures of tomb owner and for subsidiary figures (V. Vasiljevici, Uber die relative Grosse der Darstellungen des Grabherrn im Alten Reich, SAK 25 (1998), 341-351).


41 H. Kees, Studien zur aegyptischen Provinzialkunst, Leipzig 1921, 15; W. S. Smith, HESPOK, 218, includes Deir el Gabrawi among the Upper Egyptian cemeteries that carried on “the old traditions in Dyn. VI, with certain enrichment of detail of their own invention...” as does Vandier, Manuel IV, 48.

42 Cf. with the (partially different) conclusion by A. M. Roth, The Absent Spouse: Patterns and Taboos in Egyptian Tomb Decoration, JARSE 36 (1999), 51, drawn on the grounds of the analysis of the decoration of the Old Kingdom tombs in the Memphite cemeteries.