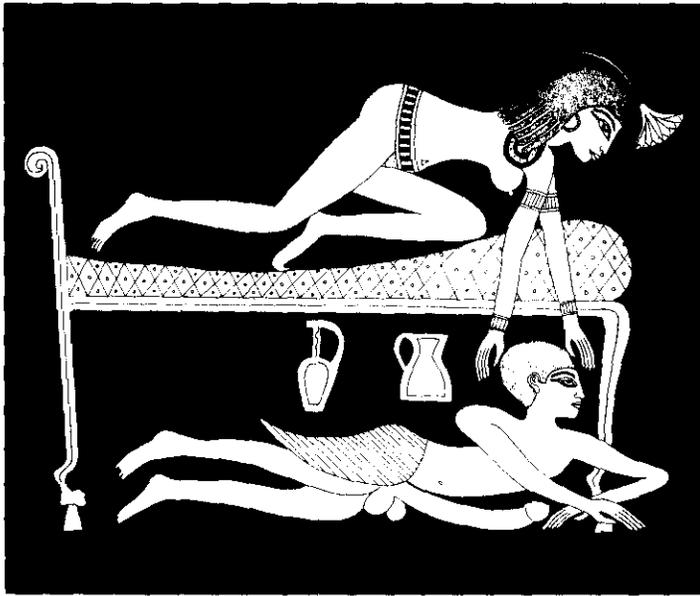


Sacred Sexuality in Ancient Egypt



THE EROTIC
SECRETS
OF THE
FORBIDDEN
PAPYRUS

*A look at the unique role of Hathor,
the goddess of love*

RUTH SCHUMANN ANTELME
AND STÉPHANE ROSSINI

Translated by Jon Graham



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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Erotic Papyrus of Turin

This papyrus is famous within Egyptological circles, but hardly known by other archaeologists and is, naturally, unknown to the public at large, to whom it has not been accessible since 1946. Let's explain. This roll of papyrus entered the collections of the Turin Museum, with a series of other writings, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was already there in 1824 when Champollion wrestled with the problem that the collection of the Turin papyri brought to light. It is not our purpose to "unroll" here the eventful history of this papyrus, as our study only concerns the erotic portion of the scroll and not the so-called satiric scenes that bring animals into play, although it may prove necessary to refer to this portion on an ad hoc basis.

It was obviously the erotic part that prevented the publication of this document in its entirety until 1973.

The papyrus was already in a deplorable state when it fell under the eyes of Champollion, the brilliant decoder of the hieroglyphs, who was shocked by its images. On November 6, 1824, he wrote about it in these terms in a letter to his brother from Turin: "Here a piece of funerary ritual, . . . and the remnants of paintings of a monstrous obscenity that give me a very curious notion of Egyptian solemnity and wisdom."

Indeed, the content is pornographic, in the original sense of the word, as the action

takes place in a brothel, which takes nothing away from its cultural interest. Up to now, this papyrus has remained unique in its genre, but it is not impossible, and it is even probable, that there were others like it, especially if we take into consideration the high number of erotic ostraca, reproducing the same themes and dating principally from the Ramesside era—which is also the date attributed to the Turin Papyrus based on iconographic, literary, philological, and historical criteria.¹

What are these criteria? What was the artistic, social, and cultural motivation for such a work? What is its message? These are a lot of questions, to which it will not always be possible to give a reliable answer.

First, two apparently quite different themes figure on this papyrus, separated simply by the evocation of a plant. The satiric portion seems to have been shorter than the erotic part.

Next, while representations of couples in different poses is not too surprising in popular art (ostraca), their reproduction on papyrus, a costly material, is cause for reflection. Who could the owner, if not the person who ordered its creation, be? And couldn't these ostraca (fig. 4.8) be study sketches for works like the Turin Papyrus? For this papyrus is unquestionably work from the calamus of a single artist—the very personal, spirited, and confident line is evidence of this, and it is perceptible in spite of the mutilations of the material it is drawn upon. But why has this artist given the male characters faces of rare ugliness with features that look hardly Egyptian and inflicted them with such grotesque bodies?² The scathing nature of the drawing has spared the welcoming hostesses, although their faces denote a certain disillusioned vulgarity, unrelieved by any smile. Let's try to respond to these questions and to others, already raised, which also naturally flow from these considerations. The part representing the “dressed-up” animals, a theme of Mesopotamian origin, is a satire aimed at royalty and state hierarchy; this is widely confirmed.³ The erotic part, in our opinion, fits into a similar context; however it is not the king, the court, or the country's administration that are being criticized, but the society, its insufficiencies and hypocrisies, and official religion and morality in relation to reality.⁴ And this reality is depressing. We hold here perhaps a key, a motive explaining the staging of these hideous-faced men with the repugnant bodies who seem only to exist by and for their inordinately large penises, and to these expressionless women, acting in certain sequences like disjointed dolls. Did the ancient artist wish to show that these individuals were only pawns, placed any which way on the social chessboard? That behind the facade of respectability, forces beyond control declared themselves? Whatever the case may be, the two parts of this papyrus form an acerbic satire against the society of the period at the end of the New Kingdom. That said, it is obvious that the artist had a perfect understanding of the inner workings and the principal dogmas, as well as the religious iconography to which he referred for certain scenes; even here the “divine model” is present. But we do not

believe that it is thereby necessary to consider these images as the descriptions of the frolics of a fallen priest with a singer of Amun whose charms are available at a fixed rate.⁵ It must also be admitted that the presentation of the characters contains a drop of humor. Finally, this parade of positions implicitly constitutes an *ars amandi*, a domain in which the ancient Egyptians had the reputation of being connoisseurs. This is the aspect Stéphane Rossini wished to bring out by an esthetic approach conforming to that of Egyptian art in general, and not by reproducing these drawings exactly as they are.

From the archaeological point of view, however, we feel it necessary to give at least a glimpse of the document in its actual state, so that the reader may appreciate the unique air it gives off, but also have an idea about the state of the destruction of the document (which has been restored and completed by illustrators and Egyptologists in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, notably G. Seyffarth, G. Steindorff, and M. Tosi). For this purpose we have included here in vignette form (figs. 7.1 and 7.2) three relatively well-preserved scenes, as well as a sample from the satiric part (fig. 7.3). These drawings faithfully reproduce the state of the document, such as it has been published, with the exception of the color: the papyrus is painted in the conventional colors of Egyptian art, whose significance obeys a code that does not always correspond to reality (G. Seyffarth established a reconstituted and colored copy of the entire papyrus).

The beginning of the satiric section is lost. The erotic part is preserved in its entirety but has deteriorated greatly and is full of gaps.

The erotic section consists of twelve sequences that correspond here to figures 7.4 to 7.15. We will comment on it in detail as we go along.

Texts in very cursory hieratic characters are planted in and between the images. This arrangement indicates that the text was inserted after the drawings, contrary to normal procedure. The symbols were probably drawn by several scribes and are very poorly preserved. These texts provide no coherent indications, but it is clear they were meant to be remarks exchanged between the partners portrayed in the drawings or commentaries upon the scenes.⁶

To conclude this brief study of the erotic section of the Turin Papyrus, let's take a look at a very interesting inscription located on the verso of the document, on the back of the final scene: "Fan bearer to the right of the king (. . .), royal scribe, commander of the soldiers."⁷ The placement of these lines on the verso, corresponding the end of the scenes on the recto, allows one to assume they were readable, once the papyrus was rolled shut. This prompted us to think that it would have been an identifying mark made by its owner. Even if the name is lacking, the inscription allows us to suppose that this exceptional document belonged to an important person's library. This hypothesis throws quite an unusual light on high society of the Ramesside era.



Plate 16. Scene from the Tomb of Ramses depicting a Ramesside pharaoh in ritual attire and crowned with the *atef*, making an offering to Amun-Re. The god is shown ithyphallic as Min-Kamutef, epithet meaning "Bull of his Mother" and referring to the god's self-creating sexual power. The god is assisted by Isis-Hathor. New Kingdom, 20th Dynasty. Valley of the Kings, Thebes-West.



Plate 17. Young woman, doubtless a professional musician, playing a small lute. She is completely nude save for her jewels. Her hair is carefully styled, perfumed, and studded with a lotus flower—other flowers are hanging from her arms. The girl is gracefully seated on a cushion in company of her familiar (very much so!) little monkey. A Bes figure is tattooed on her thigh. The lotus and papyrus bouquets as well as the grape vines create an Osirian atmosphere. This blue faience bowl might have been used during a funerary banquet (see fig. 4.30, p. 117). New Kingdom, 18th/19th Dynasty. Museum of Antiquities, Leyden.

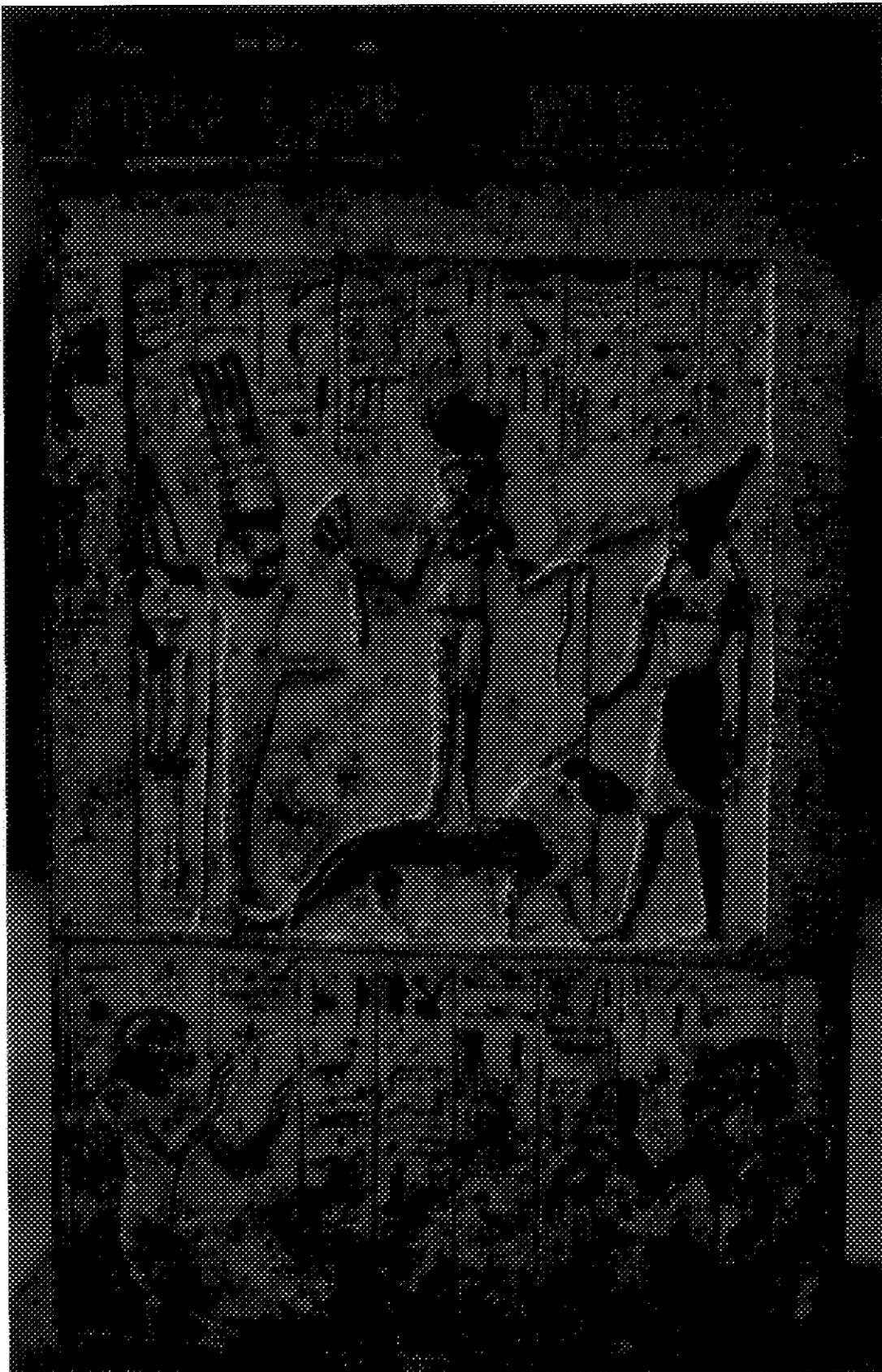


Plate 18. Stela of the goddess Qadesh, the Syrian Hathor, standing on a lion passing between the gods Min-Amun-Re (left) and Seth-Baal (right) On the lower part, the two donors are shown worshipping those divinities. The kneeling man to the right is Djehuty, father of the young man on the left side. New Kingdom, 19th/20th Dynasty. Louvre Museum, Paris (see fig. 4.43, p.128).

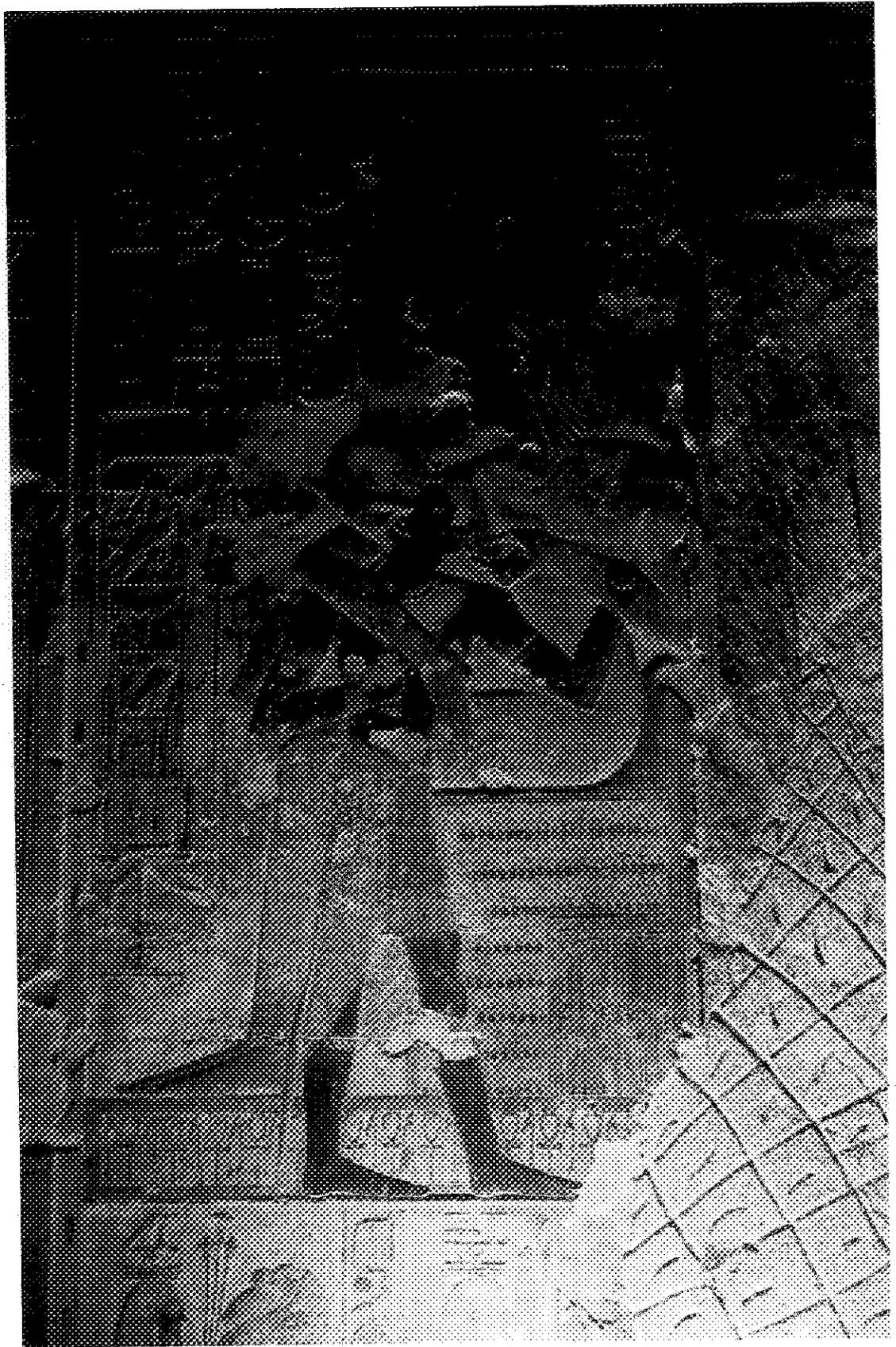


Plate 19. Painted relief from the first hypostyle hall of the Abydos temple of Seti I showing the goddess Mut-Hathor nourishing the king-to-be-born. The divine child is already adorned with the blue khepresh-crown and wearing royal attire. It must be remembered that Pharaoh is the child of all divine powers which he is supposed to unite in his person. The goddess is seated on the cubic, archaic throne, which is decorated with the sema-tawy symbol. 19th Dynasty.

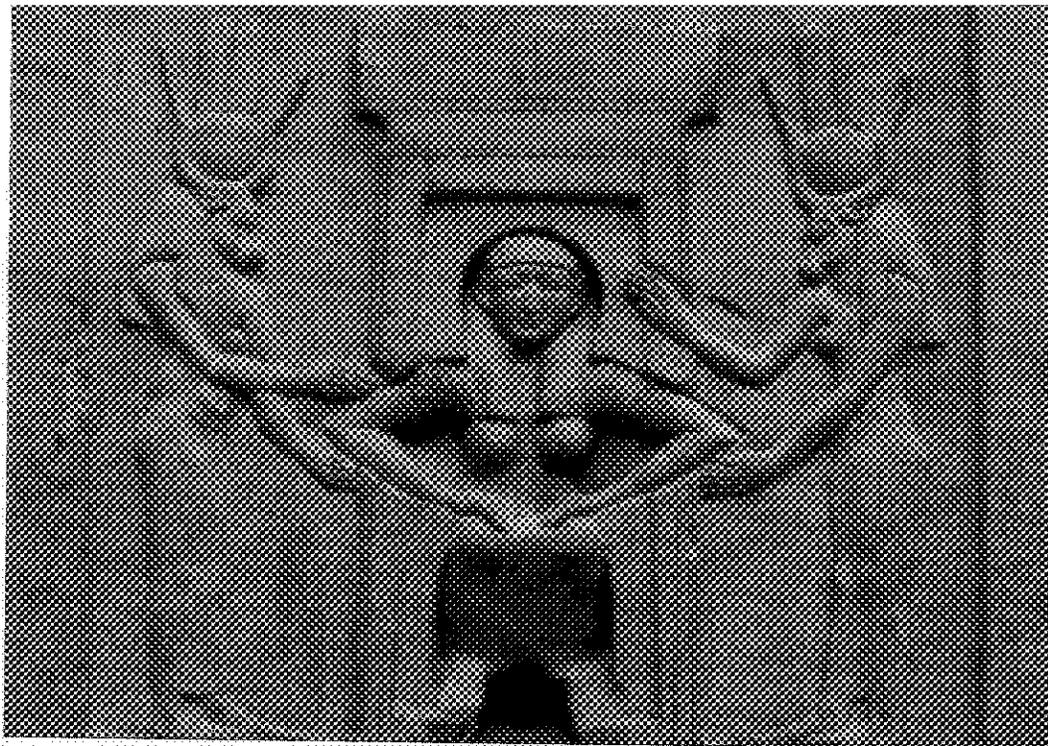


Plate 20. A ptolemaic queen giving birth to the "divine child," her son and future king she is supposed to have conceived by the demiurge. She is assisted by two Hathor goddesses, here in the role of midwives. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.



Plate 21. Detail from the erotic part of the Turin Papyrus. New Kingdom, 19th Dynasty. Werner Forman Archive, Egyptian Museum, Turin. (see also fig. 7.7, p. 156)

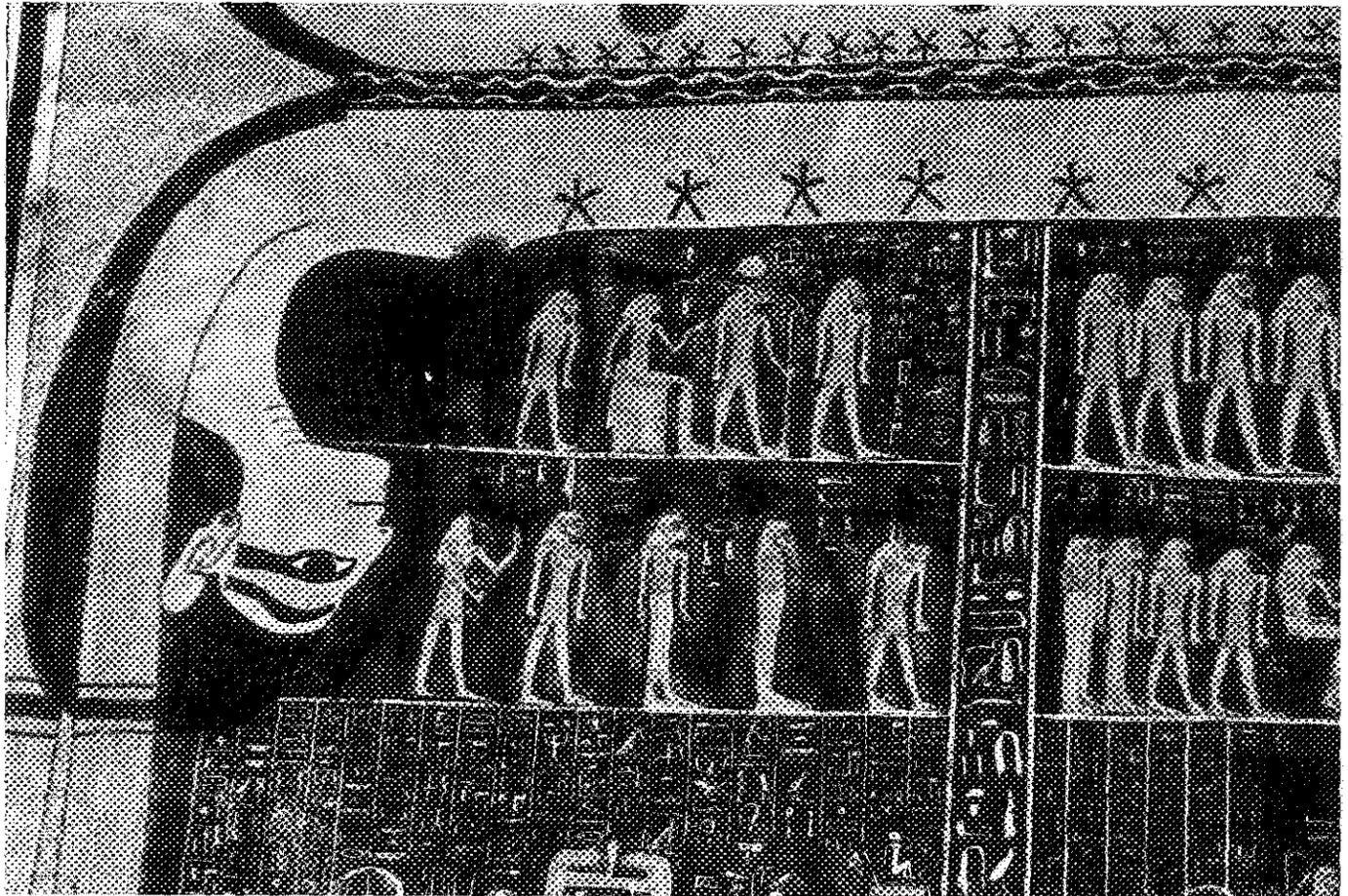


Plate 22. Image from the tomb of Ramses VI showing the sky-goddess Nut swallowing the sun in the evening and giving birth to it again in the morning. The star-spangled divine body is an X-ray vision that shows the progression of the sun inside the mysterious depths of the Universe. Numerous deities representing stars, constellations, decans, and time sections accompany and protect the event. This scene is an image of the cosmic cycle into which every being is integrated. Here it expands the divine magic over the sarcophagus of Ramses VI and guarantees his eternal life. Valley of the Kings, Thebes-West.

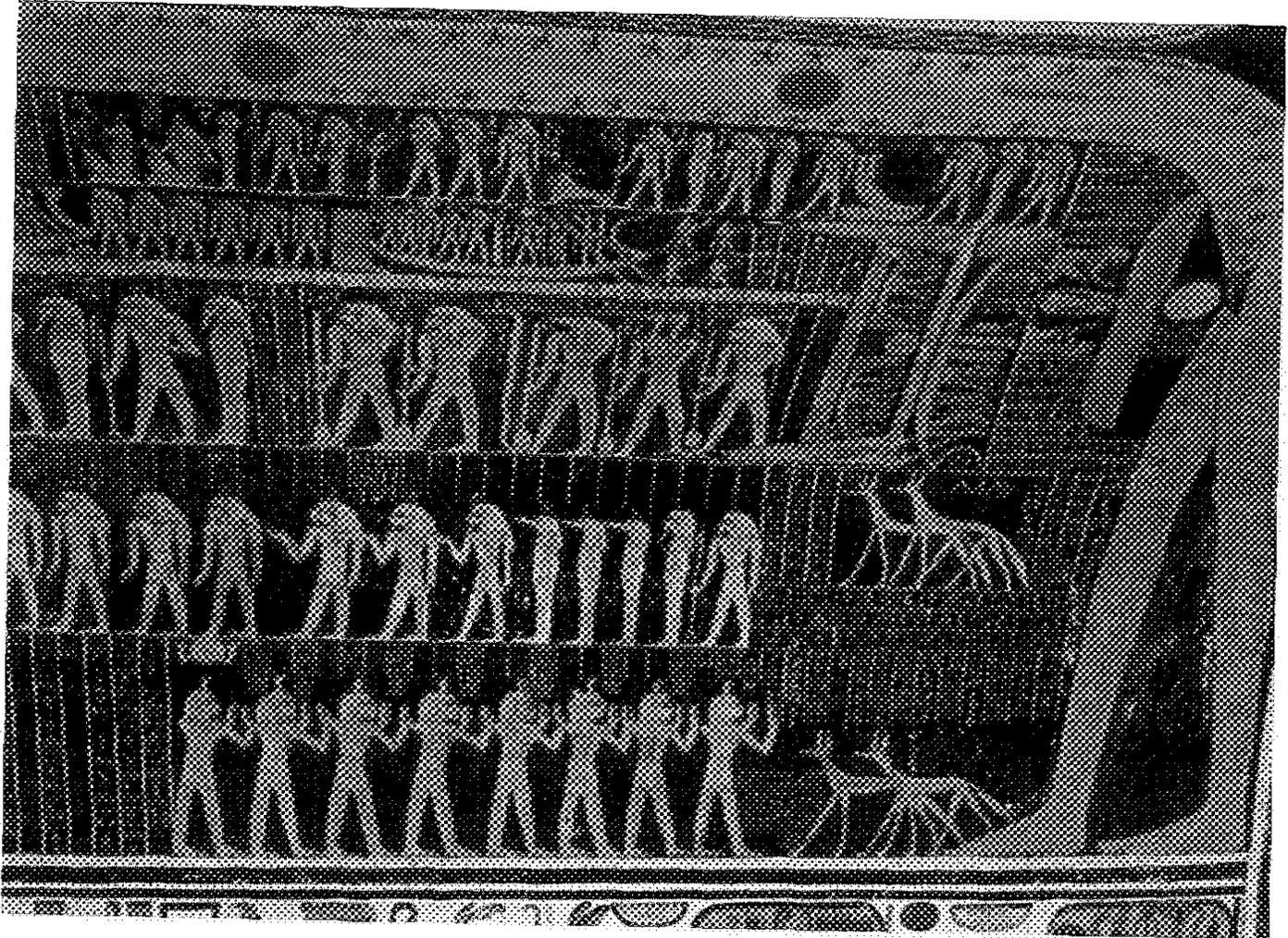




Plate 23. Ritual procession of two Bes and the hippopotamus goddess Taweret. These entities are beneficent genii, driving away all hostile demons and influences with tambourines, menacing roars, and knives. Their carved and gilt figures ornament the side-panels of an armchair found in Tutankhamun's tomb. It was a prophylactic gift from his cousin, princess Set-Amun. New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty. Tutankhamun's treasure, Egyptian Museum, Cairo (See also figs. 4.21, p. 112 and 5.1, p. 133 for other roles of these divinities.)

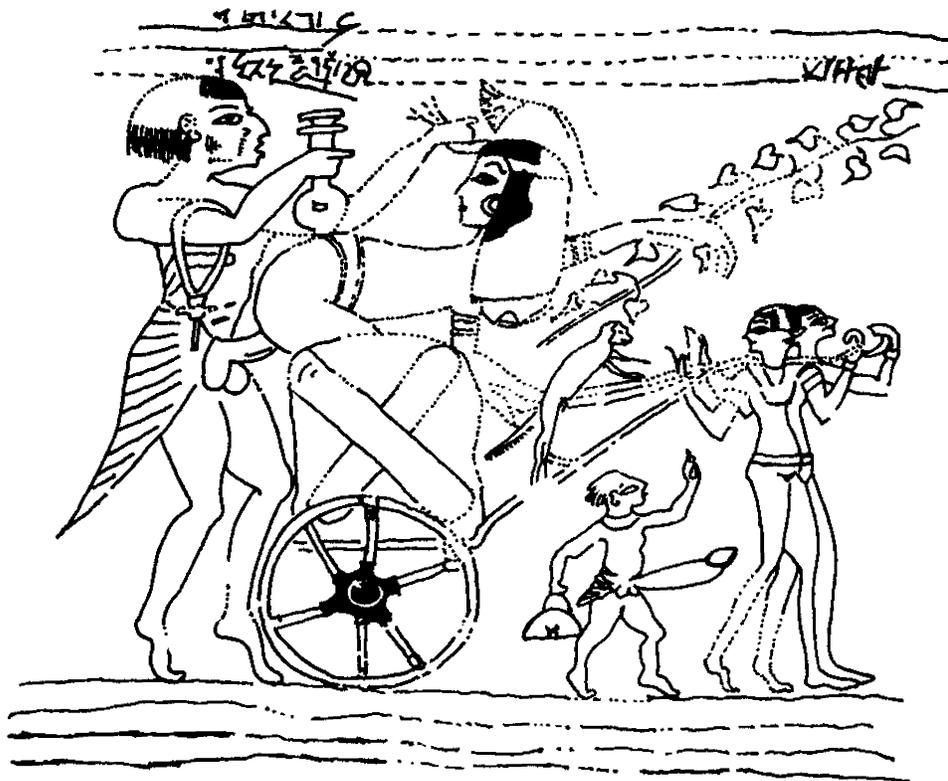


Figure 7.1: This is the second sequence of the erotic part of the papyrus. The dotted lines represent restorations over lines that were still—but barely—visible, during the time when the copy was made. The broken lines indicate the completely destroyed portions. The man is holding a small lute in his right hand while a *sesheshet* sistrum is threaded over his right arm. He is coupling *a tergo* with the woman seated on the edge of the caisson of the chariot (her image is badly damaged) pulled by two young women. The intention of parodying a chariot outing by the royal couple seems obvious here (fig. 2.6).

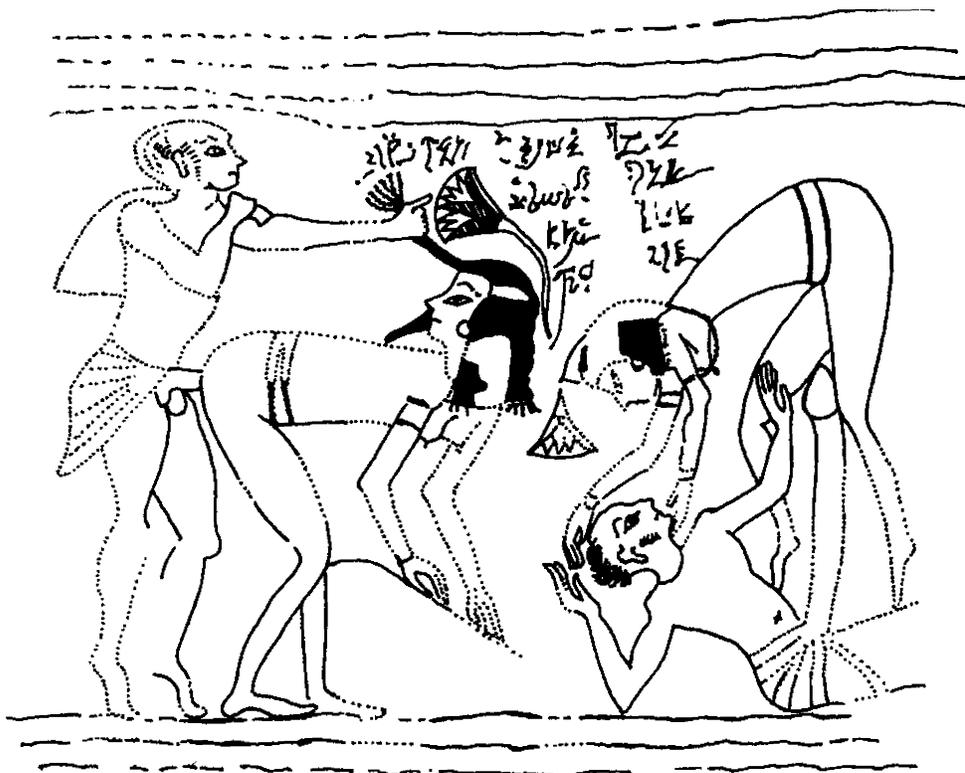


Figure 7.2: The figure represents, going from right to left, sequences 8 and 9 of the document. Sequence 8: The woman is preparing to impale herself on the penis of the man lying down, a position that inevitably recalls the embrace of Nut and Geb (fig. 1.13) in an ironic commentary on the dogma of the creation of the universe by a particularly degrading drawing of the man. Sequence 9: the original is destroyed for the most part. Nevertheless, J. A. Omlin thought it possible to establish the influence of rock drawings from Wadi Hammamat, some of which are quite erotic. The position of the two partners allows one to suppose sodomization; it is the sole example of this in the papyrus. Here the face of the woman is colored very strongly in red, likewise in sequence 7.

Figure 7.3: A scene occurring in the "satiric" part of the papyrus. The lion playing *senet* with a gazelle is a theme that often recurs in the popular drawings of this topsy-turvy world. The allusion to the scene of the harem under Ramses III (fig. 4.3) is obvious. A protome (head and neck) of the dorcas gazelle in gold-work adorns the headdresses of certain royal favorites. Triumph and greed can be read on the face of the lion-king. A cruel mockery.

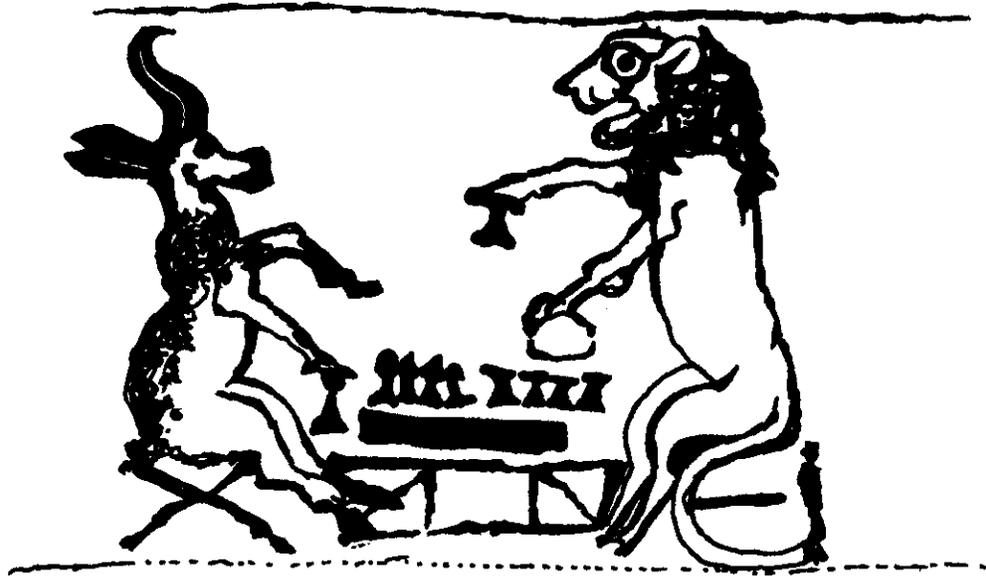


Figure 7.4: Sequence 1 of the erotic part, redrawn by the modern artist on the basis of the original illustration. All twelve erotic sequences have been reworked this way; the texts have not been reproduced, but their translations follow sequence 12 (fig. 7.15). Here the couple is devoting their efforts to achieve a position *a tergo*, the man is standing, but why is he carrying a sack on his shoulder like a *shawabti*? Is he scared he might lose his balance? Or is this an allusion to those servants of eternity who have no free will? We see this detail again in sequence 9 (fig. 7.11). The woman is adopting a position that is as uncomfortable as it is astounding. If she is somewhat "arched like a vault" in imitation of the goddess Nut, her arms and head do not recall the goddess of heaven at all, but rather the attitude of the damned in the mythological depiction of hell (for example, in Seti I's temple in Abydos). Did the actors of this scene consider it this way? By the way, we doubt that such a position could actually have been performed.





Figure 7.5: Sequence 2 has already been analyzed (see fig. 7.1) and we noted there it parodied a chariot outing by the royal couple, who had to be Amarnian. While the royal couple embraced in public, the couple in this sequence clearly goes much further—and in a fairly crude fashion. The little princess who stung the rear ends of the horses with her wand is replaced by the monkey who is annoying the young women, harnessed in the place of the horses, by pulling or their reins. The sovereign's retinue, running breathlessly by the side of the chariot, is evoked by a little man carrying a curious purse reminiscent of those seen in depictions of the harvests of the Old Kingdom. There is no fan bearer, but the plant associated with women, erotic scenes, and the concubines of the dead, describes an elegant curve above the scene. Given that the vehicle is an Egyptian battle chariot, J. A. Omlin sees the woman as a "warrior of Venus."

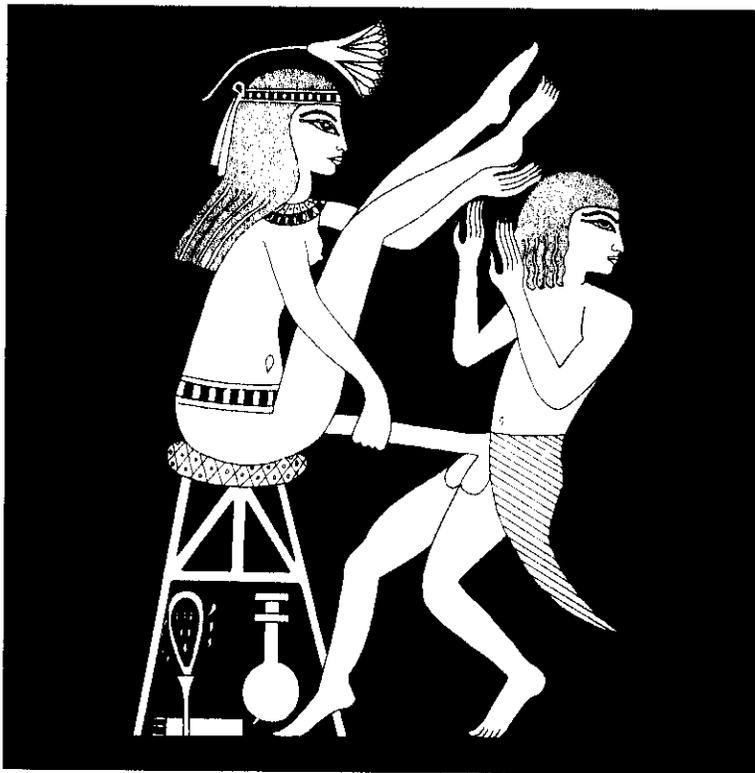


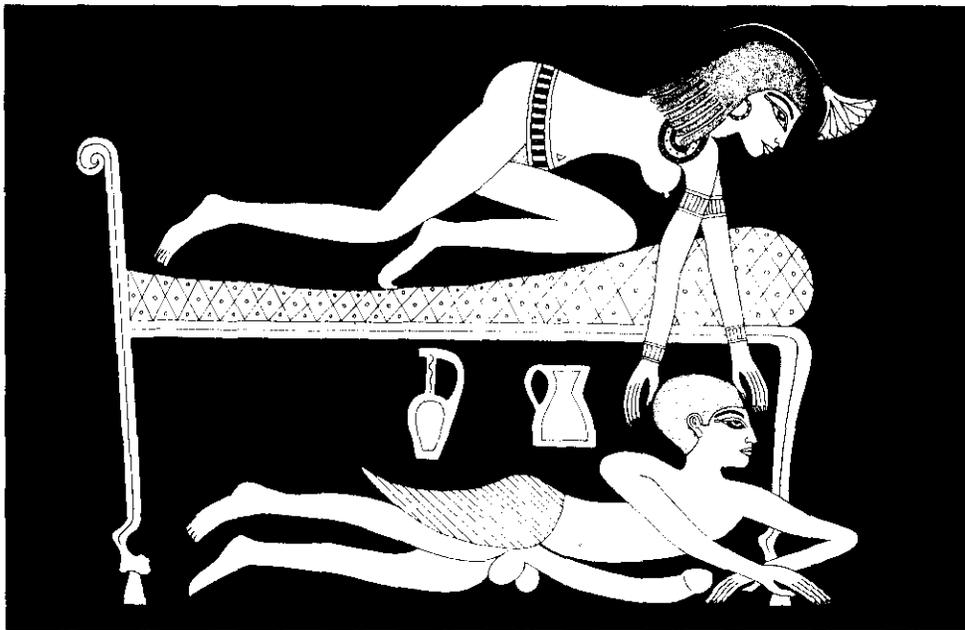
Figure 7.6: The customer seems to be scared of his partner's fantasies. She is perched on a high stool with her legs in the air and seems to be gripping the man's phallus so she will not lose her balance. The *sesheshet* sistrum and lute beneath the stool could indicate that the young woman plied the trade of a musician as well. Is there a possible allusion to Iusaas that can be seen in the woman's gesture?

Figure 7.7: Sequence 4. This is no doubt the best-known image from the papyrus; it has been published often, but it is generally only reproduced showing the prostitute, who is putting on her makeup, from the waist up. Underlining the eyes was a very old custom, but rouge was not put on the lips. The circumcised man is pointing to the sex of the woman who is apparently installed upon a cone of perfumed fat (this is a hypothetical interpretation; it could also be an overturned vase). We see no classic parallel image, but have been able to establish a comparison with a small earthenware figurine from the Greco-Roman era, representing Isis seated in similar fashion upon a sow (see Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974], and A. Piankoff *Mythological Papyri 1* [New York: Bollington Series 40, 1957], p. 3.).⁸



Figure 7.8: Sequence 5. The man is demonstrating his strength by seating his partner on his thighs. She is literally folded in half, with her legs on the shoulders of the man, who is holding her in position by the back and shoulder. In this case it is the man who is overseeing the maneuver. Corresponding evidence for this position can be found throughout the entire Mediterranean basin. The original drawing has been sufficiently preserved to allow one to note that the end of the man's nose has been cut off. We have seen (chapter 2, "Fidelity and Adultery") that the mutilation of the nose was a frequent punishment, especially in the case of transgressions of a sexual nature.





Figures 7.9 and 7.10: Sequences 6 and 7 are connected. We see no direct mythical allusion. On the other hand, to show a man who is impotent or worn out has always been a subject of mockery, which seems to be the case here. The woman on the bed (which resembles a simplified, ritual funeral bed nonetheless) seems to be trying to pick up the man who is lying down, unless she is in the process of ejecting him to make room for another totally exhausted customer, whom her colleague and two young servants are obliged to carry. One may ask if this faltering Priapus has fainted following sexual excesses or if he was drugged—or both at the same time? We have already discussed the use of narcotics for erotic purposes. Whatever the case, they are having a good laugh at his expense—but they are helping him anyway.

Figure 7.11: Sequence 8 has already been analyzed (see fig. 7.2). The intention of a blasphemous mockery is fairly clear: while the man does a fair imitation of Geb, the woman is a friendly caricature of the goddess Nut, with her feet floating in the air instead of being propped on Geb's body. This Nut's hands do not have an hieratic attitude either. A Nut who caresses the chin, mouth, and hair of her cosmic husband is unthinkable.

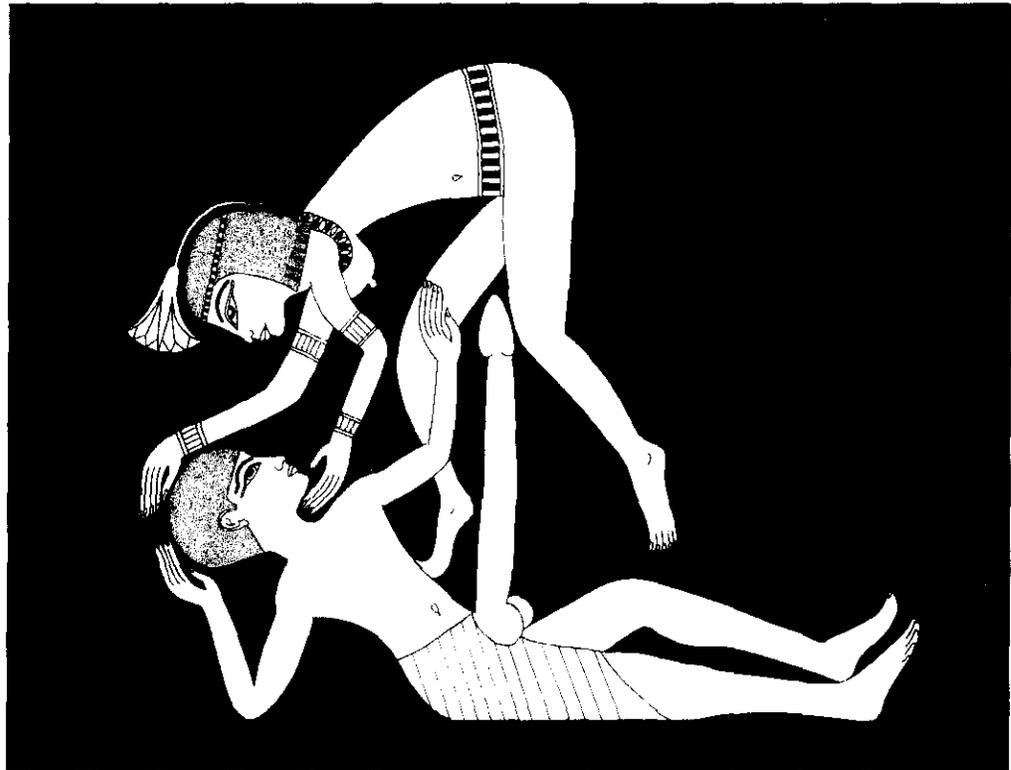


Figure 7.12: Sequence 9 has already been analyzed (see fig. 7.2). The original drawing is poorly preserved, but the junction of the genitals is still clearly visible and it can be safely declared that this is the sole example, in this papyrus, of sodomization. This practice does not seem to have been popular between homosexual partners (fellatio either, by the way—it does not appear in this document). For fans of technical terms let's specify that sodomization is medically defined as a *coitus posterior in situ posteriore*, and intercourse *a tergo* is also called *coitus anterior in situ posterior*. Omlin, *Der Papyrus 55001*, thinks this is not a representation of sodomy, but of *coitus a tergo*.⁹



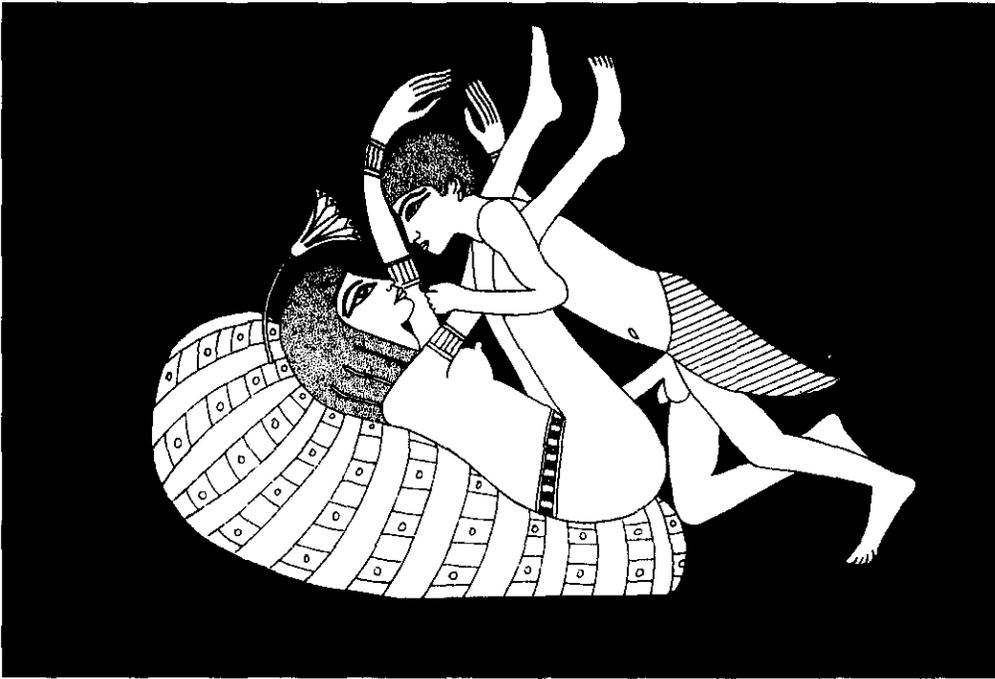


Figure 7.13: Sequence 10. Coitus face-to-face on a comfortable mattress. This is the least sophisticated position in the collection—inserted as a reminder, if one may say so. The original image is terribly damaged; faint traces are all that remain of the woman, but the head, arm, and loincloth of the man are well preserved; in the original he is depicted as atrociously hairy and has obviously not shaved for several days.



Figure 7.14: Sequence 11. A rather sportive invitation to love! The young woman seems to be both a dancer and a musician, and uses her talents to demonstrate the original services she provides. She has made a pirouette while tossing a braid of her hair to her partner; this was a widespread gesture in ancient Egypt by those women seeking to attract a man's attention. The braids and curls of a woman's hair are a metaphor for the nets for hunting and fishing (see the love poems and the duck snared in the net, fig. 3.8). The ritual dancers in Hathor's service were well-trained acrobats. The man approaches the woman with a dance step that is quite appropriate under the circumstances. The lyre the woman is pretending to need for a prop is part of the original illustration, but the drawing is so damaged that the restorations differ and it is not possible to determine with any certitude if the animal heads represent ducks or horses, and at what level they are placed.

Figure 7.15: This scene ends the erotic portion of the document. The man's head, part of his body, his raised arm, and his legs have been nicely preserved. In contrast, the drawing of the woman is almost totally destroyed and it was necessary to refer to older restorations to do this illustration. The woman is lying on an inclined surface, upon which the man is resting one of his knees while getting support for his other leg on the woman's foot. A small figure on the original, perhaps ithyphallic like the man, seems to be hanging from the woman's arm, whose hand is holding a srylet. A stool is overturned beneath the slanted surface. This final scene does not depart from the principle observed by all the other illustrations: the environment is not defined but simply suggested by items of furniture that indicate all these events are taking place within a dwelling.

But how should we interpret the final sequence, presenting an act of *coitus anterior* in an unusual context, if not by seeking to find parallel instances? These can be found in mythology. In the *Book of Wabt is in the Dat*, the twelfth hour ends with the awakening of Osiris, who is depicted sometimes sleeping on an inclined surface, sometimes on a slightly flattened mound, but always in a slanted position. The twelfth sequence is presumably related to this twelfth hour.¹⁰ The emergence of Atum (fig. 1.5) uses a similar arrangement in another mythical context, but one related to sexuality as well, this time with regard to the creation of the universe.

What is the meaning of the little figure hanging from the arm of this beauty? We have not figured out just what significance to give it. The artist of the current work feels—no doubt out of professional solidarity—that it may be the figurative signature of his long-ago colleague, similar to the way that, keeping the respective difference in mind, Michelangelo signed his painting of the Sistine Chapel. In his edition of the Turin Papyrus, J. A. Omlin subdivided the fragmentary inscriptions into nineteen groups, which he translated and arranged without assigning specific locations, as these texts are inserted between, above, and beneath the figures, wherever the scribes could find a place to jot down their later annotations to the drawings. Here is the list he came up with:

1. (. . .) the wrappings that you give.
2. So Thoth (. . .) Your
3. (. . .)
4. Sun! You have sought the heart of the (. . .) because of your movements (shudders),
I am making the task pleasant (soft).
5. Do not be scared. What [could] I do to you?
6. The day (. . .)
7. The drummer (. . .)
8. He who retreats (. . .)
9. (. . .) see, come at me from behind with your love [the phallus]
10. Your phallus is with me, see! You will not bring me [my good reputation?]
11. [forms part of 10.]
12. O my brigand!
13. (. . .)
14. My bed is abandoned and me (. . .)
15. My huge phallus that is sick inside (. . .) [Would this be an STD?]
16. (. . .)
17. (. . .)
18. (. . .) Representing and I esteem myself [praise myself?]
19. Singer of Hathor.

These remarks, although full of gaps and disconnected, complete the atmosphere of these—Hathorian—encounters.

