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The *šm y.t*-priestesses of Isis in Akhmim during the New Kingdom

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Abstract: The *šm y.t* or chantress was one of the musical titles of ancient Egyptian temples held by women. In Akhmim, a number of women from the New Kingdom held this position in the cult of the goddess Isis. This paper aims at examining these individuals from a prosopographical perspective in order to determine their social background and connections.

Keywords: Akhmim; New Kingdom; *šm y.t*; chantress; Isis.

الشمعيت - كاهنات إيزيس في أخميم خلال عصر الدولة الحديثة

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المخلص: كانت الشمعيت أو المنشدة أحد الألقاب الموسيقية التي كانت تحملها النساء في المعابد المصرية القديمة، وشغلت عدد من نساء الدولة الحديثة هذا المنصب في عبادة المعبودة إيزيس بأخميم، وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص هؤلاء الكاهنات من منظور سير حياتهم، وذلك من أجل تحديد علاقتهم وخلفيتهم الاجتماعية.

الكلمات الدالة: أخميم - الدولة الحديثة - الشمعيت - المنشدة - إيزيس.

Introduction

The *šm ʿy.t* or chantress was one of the musical titles of ancient Egyptian temples held by women¹. In Akhmim, a number of women from the New Kingdom held this position in the cult of the goddess Isis. This paper aims at examining these individuals from a prosopographical perspective in order to determine their social background and connections and compare them to the results obtained by S. Onstine, who mostly focused on the Theban area. Was the organisation of the cults similar in the city of Amun and in smaller temples? Did the cultic personnel come from similar backgrounds or not? Beyond the better-known male members of the elite, who were the women officiating in Akhmim?

Study of the documentation

The title *šm ʿy.t* is attested, to our current knowledge, on six documents connected to the city of Akhmim, all in relation to the cult of Isis. Each will be dealt with in turn.

- Statuette Paris Louvre E 10655

Datation: 18th dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III².

Acquisition: bought by the Louvre museum in 1895 from Félix Feuardent, previously in the collection of the Pagnon family.

Provenance: unknown – the date of 1895 is compatible with a provenance from Akhmim (the necropolis there was discovered and excavated between 1884 and 1888 mainly³), but Abydos or the Theban area could also be possible.

Bibliography: Selected references. A fuller bibliography is available on the Louvre website and in Bertha Porter and Rosalind L.B. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings, 1.2, The Theban Necropolis. Royal Tombs and Smaller Cemeteries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 792–3.

Christophe Barbotin and Didier Devauchelle, *La voix des hiéroglyphes : promenade au département des antiquités égyptiennes du musée du Louvre* (Paris: Louvre éditions ; éditions Khéops, 2022), 174–5, n° 90.

Sylvie Weens, “Albert Ferdinand Pagnon (1847-1909) : L’Ami des égyptologues à Louqsor”, *Memnonia* 29 (2018): 146–8, pl. 25.

¹ Suzanne Lynn Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress (Šm ʿyt) in Ancient Egypt*, British Archaeological Reports - International Series 1401 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005), 1, 25.

² Amr el-Tiebi, ‘Non-Royal Women’s Hairstyles in the Statuary of the New Kingdom’, in *Guardian of Ancient Egypt. Studies in Honor of Zahi Hawass*, ed. Janice Kamrin et al., vol. 3 (Prague: Charles University, Faculty of Arts, 2020), 1570-72; Roland Tefnin, “La date de la statuette de la dame Touy au Louvre”, *Chronique d’Égypte* 46, no. 91 (1971): 35–49.

³ Marion Claude, “La Redécouverte des Nécropoles d’Akhmîm”, *Égypte, Afrique et Orient*, no. 96 (2019): 43–52.

Annie Forgeau, “Prêtres isiaques: essai d’anthropologie religieuse”, *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 84 (1984): 178, doc. 15.

Roland Tefnin, “La date de la statuette de la dame Touy au Louvre”, *Chronique d’Égypte* 46, no. 91 (1971): 35–49.

Jacques Vandier, *Manuel d’archéologie égyptienne, 3, Les grandes époques. La statuaire* (Paris: A. et J. Picard, 1958), 445, 491, 500, 527, 674, pl. CXLI, 1.

Gaston Maspero, “La Dame Touï du Louvre et la sculpture industrielle sur bois en Égypte”, in *Essais sur l’art égyptien* (Paris: Librairie orientale et américaine E. Guilmoto, 1912), 233–40.

Emmanuel de Rougé, *Description sommaire des salles du Musée égyptien, Musée Impérial du Louvre* (Paris: Librairies-imprimeries réunies, 1895), 84–5.

Georges Bénédite, “La statuette de la dame Toui, Musée du Louvre”, in *Monuments et Mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot*, vol. 1, *Monuments et Mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot* 2 (Paris, 1895), 29–38.

Georges Bénédite, “La statuette de la prêtresse Toui”, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 12 (1894): 251–57.

Prosopographical content:

Tuy

wr.t ḥnr.wt n Mnw, “head of the performers of Min”

šms.t ʒs.t wr.t, “follower of Isis the great”

šm ḳt n ʒs.t, “chantress of Isis”

Analysis: The proskynema on the back pillar of the statuette, citing “Isis the divine mother and lady of the necropolis” may hint at a provenance from Akhmim, which is coherent with the titles of the deceased. Of course, titles in the clergy of Min and Isis could also indicate Coptos as a city of origin, but nothing is known for Coptos at this period, while this statuette fits nicely into the dossier of 18th dynasty Akhmim and its connection to the royal family¹.

The quality of the sculpture indeed attests to the high status of the lady depicted, just as much as the titles she held. The holders of the *wr.t ḥnr.wt* title often were the wives of high priests and higher officials². Tuy probably belonged to an elite family of Akhmim, and may even have been related to Yuya and Tuyu³, Tiya’s parents and among the rare

¹ Christine Herrera, “De la KV 46 aux Nécropoles d’Akhmîm. A la Recherche de l’élite “Akhmîmy” du Nouvel Empire”, *Égypte, Afrique et Orient*, no. 50 (2008): 37–46.

² Dana Bělohoubková, “Royal Women as *wr.t ḥnr* in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasty: Continuity in Discontinuity”, *Prague Egyptological Studies*, no. 29 (2022): 29–42.

³ Tefnin, “La Statuette,” 49.

individuals from Akhmim to be known from the reign of Amenhotep III – with the high priest of Min of the time, Sen-nefer¹.

- Statue Cairo EMC JE 36526

Datation: 18th dynasty, reign of Ay.

Acquisition: Bought from Hağğ 'Alī 'Abd al-Hağğ al-Badāwy in Giza in 1898.

Provenance: unknown.

Bibliography:

Marc Gabolde, *Toutankhamon* (Paris: Pygmalion, 2015), 236, 467.

Aidan Dodson, "Crown Prince Djhutmose and the Royal Sons of the Eighteenth Dynasty," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, no. 76 (1990): 95–6.

Forgeau, "Prêtres isiaques," 179, doc. 29.

Wolfgang Helck, *Urkunden Der 18. Dynastie: Inschriften von Zeitgenossen Amenophis' III. [IV,1776-1954]*, vol. 21, *Urkunden Des Ägyptischen Altertums, IV* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958), 1908–10, n°704.

Wilhelm Spiegelberg, "Varia," *Recueil de Travaux Relatifs à La Philologie et à l'archéologie Égyptiennes et Assyriennes*, no. 28 (1906): 177–8.

Prosopographical content:

Nakhtmin

sš nsw.t, "royal scribe"

mr mš' wr, "great general"

Iuy, mother of Nakhtmin

dwꜣ.t n Mnw, "adorer of Min"

šm 'y.t n ꜣs.t, "chantress of Isis"

Analysis: This Nakhtmin, not to be mistaken for the high priest of Akhmim, was a general and high official under the reign of Ay². For some specialists, he may even have been the king's son³. His mother was named Iuy and held positions in both the cults of Min and Isis. Since Ay originated from Akhmim, where the two deities were worshipped, it is no great leap to suppose that Iuy also came from this city and

¹ Günther Roeder, *Ägyptische Inschriften aus den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung, 1924), 398; Ivan Guermeur, *Les cultes d'Amon hors de Thèbes. Recherches de géographie religieuse*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales 123 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 11; Kirsten Konrad, "Der persönliche Kosmos des Sennefer. Zum Sistrophor Berlin 21595", in *Pharaos Staat. Festschrift für Rolf Gundlach zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Dirk Bröckelmann and Andrea Klug (Wiesbaden, 2006), 127–42.

² Herrera, "De la KV 46", 41.

³ Dodson, "Crown Prince," 95–6.

officiated in the local temples. Since no chantress of Isis is known from Coptos¹, it is quite probable that she held her positions in Akhmim. Considering that her son reached the peak of his career during the reigns of Tutankhamun and mostly Ay, she probably became chantress of Isis during the reign of Amenhotep III. If Nakhtmin was indeed Ay's son, she was a wife of Ay. The couple would therefore belong to the same generation as Amenhotep III and Tiye, placing her period of activity possibly as early as this reign.

- Statue London British Museum EA 1222

Datation: 18th dynasty, post-amarnian, reign of Tutankhamun?

Acquisition: in 1897 through R.J. Moss & co.

Provenance: unknown

Bibliography:

Marion Claude, 'Nakhtmin, High Priest of Min and Isis in Akhmim and Overseer of Works for Ay. His Career, His Tomb and Ay's Memorial Temple,' *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 76/77 (2022): 63–82.

Prosopographical content:

Nakhtmin

sš, "scribe"

w'b n ḥ3.t 3s.t, "wab-priest at the front of Isis"

ḥ3t(y)-, "count"

Muttuy, wife of Nakhtmin

nb.t-pr, "lady of the house"

šm 'y.t n 3s.t, "chantress of Isis"

Children of Nakhtmin

Kay, *sš*, "scribe"

Tuy, *sš*, "scribe"

Minmes

Aset

Tiy

3 girls, names lost

Analysis: This stelophorous statue of the high priest Nakhtmin – not to be confused with his homonym the general – depicts him and his family before he was promoted to

¹ At least none is accounted for in Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress*.

such a position by king Ay¹, but probably after the reign of Akhenaten since the proskynema and titles name deities other than Aten. This dates the statue to the time of Tutankhamun or the early years of Ay's reign. Despite the absence of a precise provenance of the object, the mention of the goddess Aperet-set² in one of the texts clearly attests that the family was connected to Akhmim. Though Nakhtmin was not (yet) high priest of Min and Isis, he already held an important position in the cult of Isis, since he was in charge of leading the goddess' processional bark. He and Muttuy therefore enjoyed a privileged position in the cults of Akhmim, which was only to improve later on.

- Tomb relief sold by Spink&Son

Datation: 18th dynasty, reign of Ay?

Acquisition: advertised for sale by Spink & son in 1963

Provenance: unknown

Bibliography:

Claude, 'Nakhtmin,' 70–1.

The Connoisseur. An Illustrated Magazine for Collectors, vol. 615, 153 (New York, 1963), pl. 88.

Prosopographical content:

Nakhtmin

rp 't, “nobleman”

h3t(y)-', “count”

mr hm.w-ntr n nb.w Jpw, “overseer of the priests of the lords of Ipu”

Takhâ, wife of Nakhtmin

nb.t-pr, “lady of the house”

šm 'y.t n 3s.t, “chantress of Isis”

Analysis: The Nakhtmin mentioned in this slab is most certainly identical to the high priest of Akhmim known from other documents³, including in this paper the statue British Museum EA 1222. Takhâ must therefore be his second wife, after Muttuy. By that time, he had raised to the highest level in the temple hierarchy of Akhmim. That both his wives held the same position in the cult of Isis seem to indicate that the title

¹ Claude, “Nakhtmin,” 65–7.

² About this goddess, see Marion Claude, *Akhmîm et la 9e Province de Haute-Égypte. Étude de Géographie Religieuse*, *Studien Zur Spätägyptischen Religion* 41 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, in print), §4.1.4.

³ See Claude, “Nakhtmin,” 63–82.

meant a certain status for its bearer – whether she was a suitable partner because she held it, or she obtained it through marriage.

- Papyrus cover Paris Louvre X16

Datation: end of 18th dynasty or early 19th dynasty.

Acquisition: unknown. Before 1872, when it was already in the Louvre and mentioned by Devéria.

Provenance: unknown.

Bibliography:

Théodule Devéria, *Catalogue Des Manuscrits Égyptiens Écrits Sur Papyrus, Toile, Tablettes et Ostraca En Caractères Hiéroglyphiques, Hiératiques, Démotiques, Grecs, Coptes, Arabes et Latins Qui Sont Conservés Au Musée Égyptien Du Louvre* (Paris: Ch. de Mourgues frères, 1872), 166, VI, 6.

Prosopographical content:

Djehutyemheb

sš htp-ntr n ntr.w nb.w rsy mhy, “scribe of the divine offerings of all the gods of the South and the North”

Aset, wife of Djehutyemheb

nb.t-pr, “lady of the house”

šm y.t n ʒs.t nb.t Jpw, “chantress of Isis lady of Ipu”

Analysis: Though nothing is known about the provenance of the papyrus or about its owners, the epithet of the goddess Isis clearly states that Aset played a role in the temple of Isis in Akhmim. The mention of Ipu/Akhmim may hint at the fact that the papyrus was produced in another place, therefore requiring more precision to illuminate Aset’s title. This is consistent with the fact that the papyrus was already in the Louvre in 1872, ten years before the rediscovery of the necropolis of Akhmim. It may therefore have stemmed from Abydos or Thebes.

While Djehutyemheb’s title is of a lesser status than the other husbands’ so far, the single line of text written on the papyrus sheet shows a rather learned context of production. Beyond the fact that the owner could afford to use three blank sheets of papyrus joined together as a protection for another object – probably a funerary papyrus –, the writing itself shows signs of sophistication that remain uncommon at the time¹. For example, the genitive *n* in the expression *hsy ʒ n ntr nfr* is written with the red

¹Andrés Diego Espinel, ‘In Tombs, Temples and on Scribal Palettes: Contexts and Functions of Private Cryptography during the Mid-Late Eighteenth Dynasty’, in *Enigmatic Writing in the Egyptian New Kingdom. Revealing, Transforming, and Display in Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, ed. David Klotz and Andrés Stauder, vol. 1, *Zeitschrift Für Ägyptische Sprache Und Altertumskunde - Beihefte 12* (Berlin - Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 101–40.

crown; more surprisingly, the sign of the bovid is used to write the adjective *nb*¹ in *ntr.w nb.w*, instead of the usual basket. This underlines the fact that the owners probably came from a learned background and enjoyed an important enough position. It is worth mentioning that one of the daughters of Nakhtmin and Muttuy was named Aset, though it remains impossible to prove any connection between the two individuals.

- Statue Cairo EMC CG 622

Datation: early 19th dynasty.

Provenance: Abydos, northern necropolis, eastern part.

Bibliography:

Forgeau, 'Prêtres isiaques,' 177, doc. 6.

Ludwig Borchardt, *Statuen und Statuetten von Königen und Privatleuten im Museum zu Kairo*, vol. 2 (Berlin: CGC, 1925), 167–9.

Auguste Mariette, *Catalogue général des monuments d'Abydos découverts pendant les fouilles de cette ville* (Paris, 1880), 41, n°374.

Prosopographical content:

Nakhtmin

sš, "scribe"

Tiy, wife of Nakhtmin

šm 'y.t n ʒs.t, "chantress of Isis"

Analysis: As with the previous monument, it can be noted that the *šm 'y.t* bears the same name as one of the daughters of Nakhtmin and Muttuy, again with no proof of a connection. The statue was found in Abydos, a city where the high priest Nakhtmin also possessed a tomb, like other inhabitants of Akhmim². Yet, nothing in the statue beyond the names of its owners makes it certain that Tiy held her position in Akhmim: she may also have belonged to the clergy of Isis of Abydos³. Nakhtmin's title of *sš*, scribe, is quite nondescript and gives very little evidence as to the origin and social position of the couple.

Discussion:

To sum up, there are six women holding the title of "chantress of Isis" attested in Akhmim during the second half of the 18th dynasty and early 19th:

¹ For the use of this hieroglyph with such a value in the New Kingdom, see Joshua Aaron Roberson, *Enigmatic Writing in the Egyptian New Kingdom. A Lexicon of Ancient Egyptian Cryptography of the New Kingdom*, vol. 2, *Zeitschrift Für Ägyptische Sprache Und Altertumskunde - Beihefte 12* (Berlin - Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 67, s.v. E1. The two attestations listed both stem from the early 19th dynasty and from a royal context (temple of Ramesses II in Abydos and the tomb of Nefertari).

² Claude, *Akhmîm*, §5.3.2.

³ For other chantresses of Isis in Abydos, see Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress*, 82–3.

- Tuy (Amenhotep III)
- Iuy, mother of the general Nakhtmin (Ay and earlier, maybe up to Amenhotep III)
- Muttuy, first wife of the high priest Nakhtmin (Tutankhamun)¹
- Takhâ, second wife of the high priest Nakhtmin (Ay)
- Aset, wife of the scribe Djehutyemheb (late 18th dynasty)
- Tiy, wife of the scribe Nakhtmin (early Ramesside)²

In most cases, these women belonged to the elite. They were related to the royal family of the end of the 18th dynasty, who was closely connected to the city of Akhmim: Tiyi, the wife of Amenhotep III, came from this city, and so did king Ay³. Though nothing is known about Tuy, the first attested holder of the title, the quality of her statue as well as her other titles in the clergy of Akhmim suggest a very prominent social position. Some have even suggested she was identical with, or a close relative of Tuyu, the wife of Yuya and mother of Tiyi⁴; yet, though both shared the title of *wr.t hnr.wt n Mnw*, Tuyu is never said to be *šm y.t n ʒs.t* or connected in any way to the cult of Isis. The identification is therefore quite doubtful, all the more so as the writing of the name Tuy is not attested among the variants of Tuyu's name. As for Iuy, the mother of general Nakhtmin, who reached the peak of his career in the times of Tutankhamun and Ay and was possibly the son of the latter, she may therefore have been Ay's wife (before, or concomitantly with Tey). In any case, her son reached very high offices and she may have started her career during the reign of Amenhotep III, either before or after Tuy. The date of her death is unknown, and her depiction in a funerary group statue next to her son does not imply that she was still alive at the time the statue was carved. Both Tuy and Iuy also held the position in addition to other titles in the clergy of Min, while their successors in office only held the title of *šm y.t*.

After Iuy, the position is attested in the family of another Nakhtmin, this time the high priest of Min and Isis in Akhmim. His wife, Muttuy, held the title, but her connection to Iuy is unknown. Did she inherit it from Iuy, or did she get the position as the wife of the highest religious official in Akhmim? It is impossible to say for sure at the moment, though she seems to have held the title before her husband was appointed as high priest – yet his previous title was already quite important. What is more certain, though, is that, at her death, the title was also held by Nakhtmin's second wife, Takhâ. The two subsequent holders of the title, Aset and Tiy, were the wives of “mere” scribes, that is, men with lesser positions in society, which differs from the previous ones. Yet, it is interesting to note that the two known daughters of Nakhtmin and Muttuy were called Aset and Tiy. No proof exists that the daughters of Muttuy and the two last known *šm y.t n ʒs.t* of Akhmim are the same, but the hypothesis is certainly tempting. If so, they would have inherited the title from their mother, with their mother-in-law Takhâ

¹ Number 695 in the database of Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress*.

² Number 561 in the database of Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress*.

³ Herrera, “De la KV 46”, 37–40.

⁴ Tefnin, “La Statuette,” 49.

carrying out the interim when they were still too young to do so (they were probably born during the reign of Tutankhamun). Whether they subsequently transmitted the title to other women related to them or not is not known. The title disappears from the sources after the early Ramesside period.

The emergence of the title *šm'y.t n 3s.t* in the sources during the reign of Amenhotep III, when the so-called Akhmimic connection started to gain importance at court through the marriage of Tiyi to the king, further hints at the sudden rise of Akhmimic noble families. Its subsequent disappearance at the end of the 18th dynasty or early Ramesside period also corresponds to the end of the privileged relationship between the local elite and the royal family. This timeframe also corresponds to the period when most of the New Kingdom material concerning Akhmim is known: earlier evidence is scarce to non-existent, and later evidence is quite rare. Whether *šm'y.wt* existed in Akhmim before the reign of Amenhotep III is impossible to say at the moment, all the more so as the first evidence of a cult of Isis in Akhmim is given by this very title¹. As for later, the scarcity of documentation for the Ramesside period prevents us from reaching any conclusion about the permanence of the title. What is sure, though, is that it had disappeared by the time of the Third Intermediate Period, when more monuments about the inhabitants of Akhmim, including women, were known. By the Late Period, the title *jhb.t n Mnw*, “dancer of Min” was the new prized-upon title for women of the wealthier families.

The title of *šm'y.t n 3s.t* therefore seems to be closely connected to wealthy females from noble families during a fastuous period for the Akhmimic elite families. The question remains whether it is indeed the case or if the other bearers of the titles did not leave their mark because they had lower status and little access to inscribed funerary goods. A hint as to the answer may lay in the fact that there is no evidence that the title could be held by two persons at the same time; indeed, the distribution of the title holders is rather even during the period, with only an unsurprising lapse during the reign of Akhenaten. It therefore seems that, in Akhmim, the title of chantress of Isis was held by wealthy women related to important men. It was also maybe transmitted among the same (extended?) family or a few select families in the city. This is quite possible from the reign of Ay onwards, though more uncertain for the earlier period. As family relationships at this time are not very well known, and even less so when it comes to women, the mechanisms of title transmission remain obscure, though it may seem that it was transmitted from woman to woman, maybe from mother to daughter(s), and not given to a woman only because of her husband’s position.

Having examined the specific evidence for Akhmim, it is now time to compare the results of this study with S. Onstine’s work, which was more focused on the Theban area, though it also encompassed other places. Since her database only includes two of the six women here under study (Muttuy and Tiy), the comparison is likely to add a new light to the question. Concerning the social position of these women and their husbands, the constations are the same in Akhmim as in S. Onstine’s work: during the

¹ Claude, *Akhmîm*, §4.1.2.1.

18th dynasty, the husbands all held privileged titles, more often than not outside of the realm of religion, with an erosion of status occurring in the Ramesside period¹. What is particularly interesting is that no evidence of mother-daughter transmission of the title could be clearly evidenced as a rule from the data gathered by S. Onstine²; in Thebes, it also appears that many women could hold the title of *šm 'y.t n Jmn* at the same time³ – which might be explained by the importance of the cult of Amun in Thebes and its use for a large number of priests and attendants. In Akhmim, the situation might have been different not so much because different rules applied, but because the scale of the city was much lesser: only a few families had status enough to either hold the position or have it recorded on written documents, and the cult of Isis might have been small enough to only require one *šm 'y.t* or two at a time. Therefore, far from questioning S. Onstine's results, this study rather exemplifies that different situations can produce seemingly different outcomes and that the comparison between large cult centers and smaller, provincial ones is needed to shed light on the various levels of organisation inside the ancient Egyptian society.

¹ Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress*, 36.

² Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress*, 34–5.

³ Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress*, 34.

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