



MOHAMED MEGAHED, HANA VYMAZALOVÁ

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ROYAL CIRCUMCISION FROM THE PYRAMID COMPLEX OF DJEDKARE

ABSTRACT: Male circumcision in ancient Egypt is well documented in representative scenes in tombs, as well as in physical remains of Egyptian people from various periods. Scenes showing the operation of circumcision are however very rare and only a few examples have been preserved from the millennia of Egyptian history. This paper presents another example of such a scene, which was found on a relief fragment discovered in the pyramid complex of the Fifth Dynasty king Djedkare. At the moment, it is the oldest preserved depiction of this operation known so far, and it probably played a ritual function within the king's pyramid complex decoration program.

KEY WORDS: Ancient Egypt – Djedkare – Relief – Circumcision

INTRODUCTION

As well as the other Old Kingdom pyramid complexes, Djedkare's pyramid complex was badly damaged over time, and as a result of the reuse of its building materials throughout succeeding generations. Modern excavation of the monuments have however begun to reveal the architectural plan of the sites and have brought to light fragments of decoration programs of the individual complexes; these provide us with partial information about the kings and their reigns. For instance, the outstanding state of preservation of the fragments of relief decoration of king Sahure's pyramid complex in Abusir allow us to learn a good deal about that king's time, some of his deeds, and also have provided us with details about his family and officials (Borchardt 1910–1913, El Awady 2009). On the other hand, only a little is known about Khufu, the builder of the Great Pyramid in Giza, because not many fragments of reliefs survived from his badly damaged pyramid complex (see, e.g., Lehner 1997: 108–119, Verner 2001: 189–216, for fragments of reliefs see, e.g., Goedicke 1971, Flentye 2011).

Numerous fragments of reliefs have been found in the late Fifth Dynasty pyramid complex of Djedkare in South Saqqara (*Figure 1*) by the Egyptian archaeological missions between the 1940s and 1980s, when limited and unsystematic excavations were carried out in the funerary temple under the direction of Abdel Salam Mohamed Hussain, Ahmed Fakhry, and Mahmoud Abdel Razek. Results of this work were never fully published and the fragments of relief decoration have not been available for the scientific public (see Fakhry 1959: 10, 30, Leclant 1982: 67[q]).

Recent research on the relief fragments by the present author revealed that the fragments include parts of scenes typical for the royal funerary temple, showing for instance the king with gods, celebration of certain festivals, divine shrines, funerary estates, officials, offering bearers, etc. (Megahed 2011, Megahed in preparation), themes known from other pyramid complexes of the time (see for instance Čwiek 2003, Stockfisch 2003).

One fragment, however, seems to contain part of a quite extraordinary scene and, so far, no comparable example is known from the pyramid complexes of kings from the



FIGURE 1. Pyramid complex of Djedkare in south Saqqara, Fifth Dynasty. Photo M. Megahed.

entire Old Kingdom period. It appears to be the oldest attested scene of circumcision, comparable only to one similar example a thousand years younger.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SCENE FROM DJEDKARE'S FUNERARY TEMPLE

This fragment from the funerary temple of Djedkare was found by Fakhry; it is 11×15 cm and bears excav. no. 426. It shows part of a scene carved in low relief, with the remains of pigments (*Figure 2*). Four figures can be recognised in the scene, two small children in the centre, and one larger figure on each side of the fragment. The small figures facing right (→) are two boys, depicted naked and standing behind each other. The boys' heads and shoulders are lost, while parts of their bodies and their legs have survived on the fragment. The left hand of the first (right) boy is most probably reaching up to his mouth because his arm is bending towards his head, and we can also presume that the second boy (left) was depicted with the same gesture of sucking his finger, a gesture typical for the depiction of Egyptian children in ancient times. The boys' right arms hang alongside their bodies and it is worth noting that the first boy's arm is longer than the second boy's arm. This may indicate that the first boy was taller or older than the other one.

The left side of the fragment shows part of a female figure (→), bearing the remains of yellow ochre pigment. She is shown kneeling or sitting behind the boys and she stretches her arms to touch and/or hold them with her hands in a tender calming way. Her right arm reaches to the second boy's knees while her left arm is shown behind the boys.

The fourth figure on the right side of the fragment is facing left (←), directly facing the three previously mentioned figures. Even though not much is preserved

of this figure, it seems to be a male, sitting or kneeling opposite the boys. His hands are reaching out to the first boy, the left hand holding the boy's little penis while his right hand holds a long tool. The tool is narrower at one end and slightly thicker in the end touching the boy. The male is apparently shown at the moment of the operation of circumcision.

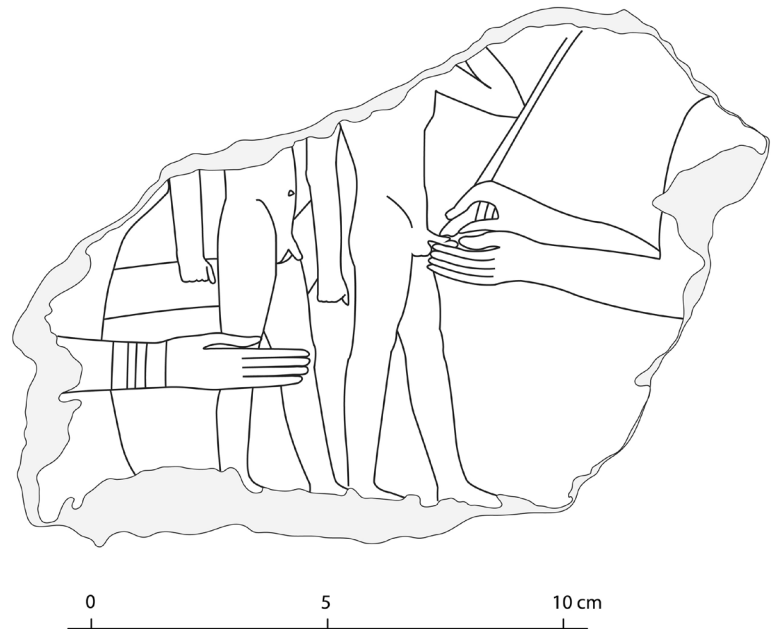
This scene, even though preserved only in a small fragment, provokes many questions. Only a few ancient Egyptian "circumcision scenes" have been preserved, none of them associated with a royal funerary monument. Therefore, both the meaning of this scene, and its ritual context within the pyramid complex of Djedkare call for some discussion.

CIRCUMCISION IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Even though male circumcision was practised in Egypt from the predynastic times, very little direct evidence about the operation itself is available from the millennia of Egyptian history. The reliefs and statues showing both noble and lower classes of the society circumcised, and physical mummified remains from all periods of the Egyptian history indicate that circumcision was generally practiced among the Egyptian population (Bailey 1996, de Wit 1972, Feucht 1995: 245–255, Spiegelman 1997: 91).

Discussions have taken place however concerning the age of the circumcised boys. According to generally accepted opinion the operation was performed at puberty in the Old Kingdom, but starting from the New Kingdom, infant circumcision is also attested (Bailey 1996: 24–25, 26). It is presumed that the practice could have changed over time, and the ages at which the operation was performed had a relatively wide range (Bailey 1996: 25). It is worth mentioning that, in modern Egypt today, the

FIGURE 2. Fragment of relief discovered by Fakhry in the funerary temple of Djedkare. Photo and drawing M. Megahed.



operation is performed (by both Muslims and Christians) at a very young age, in most cases during the first week after birth.

The operation of circumcision is not mentioned in the ancient Egyptian medical papyri (Nunn 1996: 169–171), even though a few medical cases have been discussed as relating to complications after circumcision (e.g., Bailey 1996: 19, Spiegelman 1997: 92). It cannot be excluded that the operation itself was not in the hands of physicians, but rather the priesthood (Bailey 1996: 25).

The origin of the practice of circumcision in ancient Egypt is not known, but various medical reasons can be suggested as an advantage for the operation (Feucht

1995, Spiegelman 1997: 96–98). Herodotus refers to the hygienic advantage of male circumcision, writing about the Egyptians: "*They are religious to excess, far beyond any other race of men, and use the following ceremonies: They drink out of brazen cups, which they scour every day: there is no exception to this practice. They wear linen garments, which they are especially careful to have always fresh washed. They practice circumcision for the sake of cleanliness, considering it better to be cleanly than comely. The priests shave their whole body every other day, that no lice or other impure thing may adhere to them when they are engaged in the service of the gods...*" (*Histories II*, §37). From Egypt, this practice seems to have spread to

other nations too (Herodotus, *Histories II*, §104), including, as is well known, among the Jews through Abraham's covenant (*Genesis* 17:10–14), and probably also Islam where circumcision is recommended (Bukhari, Book 72, *Hadith* 779) for ritual cleanliness.

The relationship between circumcision and the Egyptians being religious, mentioned by Herodotus, indicates that circumcision could possibly have a specific religious connotation (see also de Wit 1972: 41–42). This would correspond quite well to the magical-religious framework of the ancient Egyptian culture in general, where most of the traditions (as well as all other aspects of life) were closely associated with religious belief.

It has been suggested before that circumcision in ancient Egypt might be related to the idea that each creature contains both a male and female soul, as the Egyptian gods incorporated both motherly and fatherly side (for references see Feucht 2003: 82, see also Vachala 2007: 660). This concept is, however, not known from the Egyptian sources (Feucht 2003: 82). On the other hand, a possible reference to circumcision of one of the most important Egyptian gods can be found in the New Kingdom Book of the Dead: according to Spell 17, the solar god Re gave birth to two other gods, Hu and Sia, from drops of blood from his phallus in an act of (self-)circumcision: "... *It means the blood, which fell from the phallus of Re when he took to cutting himself. Then there came into being the gods who are in the presence of Re, who are Hu and Sia, while I followed after my father Atum daily*" (spell 17,

transl. based on Faulkner 1972: 45, see also de Wit 1972: 42). The gods Hu and Sia were closely associated with the Creator (Re, Atum, and later also other gods) and they personified the concepts of Powerful Words and Thought as the prerequisites for the act of creation. For this reason, they also accompanied the solar god in his daily journey, as the daily sunrise was understood as repetition of the act of Creation. Similarly, Creation was also repeated at the moment of re-birth of the deceased in the other world, and therefore Hu and Sia appear in funerary texts and funerary scenes (Janák 2005: 88, 157). Circumcision of Re in this context therefore appears to be quite an important event for the ancient Egyptians.

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SCENES OF CIRCUMCISION

Even though depictions of circumcised men are quite common in Egyptian reliefs, paintings and statuary, scenes of the act of circumcision are rather rare. A few scenes have been so far interpreted as "circumcision scenes", a few of them are of Old Kingdom date, while the others come from the New Kingdom. The scenes differ from each other but all seem to be relevant for comparison with and interpretation of our relief fragment.

For a long time, the non-royal scene from the tomb of Ankhmahor in Saqqara (see, e.g., Badawy 1978: 42, Figure 60, Kanawati, Hassan 1997: 49–50, Pls. 19, 55b) of the



FIGURE 3. Ritual purification depicted in the tomb of Ankhmahor in Saqqara, Sixth Dynasty. After Badawy 1978, Figures 27–28.

Sixth Dynasty was considered the oldest depiction of the circumcision operation, close in date to our relief fragment. The meaning of this depiction was the subject of debate (see, e.g., Grunert 2002, Müller 1906: 60–62, Nunn 1996: 169–171, Roth 1991: 62–72, Spiegelman 1997, Vachala 2007, Westendorf 1999: 467–469, Wiedemann, 1907: 375–376). However, the long-accepted interpretation of the relief as a "circumcision scene" needs to be re-considered. Stefan Grunert in his detailed study of both the depictions and the texts in the scene (Grunert 2002) showed that the scene actually belonged to a larger decoration motif showing ritual purification of a funerary priest. This motif (Figure 3) includes the depiction of a manicure and pedicure, body shaving, and pubic shaving, the last of which was previously interpreted as circumcision. The pubic shaving was done in two steps: the first step involves two men, one touching the other's pubic area with a knife. The other part shows three men, one touching the other's pubic area with a round object, the third man holding the latter strongly, indicating that this part of the scene was painful. The former scene seems to depict shaving while the latter scene shows the "aftershave" application.

It has been suggested that the round tool from the latter scene could represent an anaesthetic applied before the circumcision, and Alexander Badawy suggested that it could be the "stone of Memphis", or a carbonate of lime, known to Dioscorides and Pliny (Badawy 1978: 19). In a shaving scene however, we can interpret this object as alum, called *al-shaba* in Arabic. This chemical compound, which can be found in the Egypt's western desert (Picon *et al.* 2005: 43–58), was widely used in ancient Egyptian medicine for its astringent quality, and it was (and still is

today) widely used as a soothing agent after shaving. The application of the alum on freshly shaved skin is rather painful, and this could correspond to the scene from Ankhmahor's tomb.

Besides Ankhmahor's relief, similar depiction of body and pubic shaving can be found in other Old Kingdom tombs (Grunert 2002: 141), in the tomb of Khentika (James 1953: Pl. 11) and in the tomb of Niankhkhnum, where a shorter version of the manicure-pedicure-shaving scene is given and a razor of a different shape is used to shave the pubic area (Grunert 2002: 141–142, Figure 2, Moussa, Altenmüller 1977: Figure 10, Roth 1991: 68–70, Figure 4.3, also for instance Nunn 1996: 171) (Figure 4).

It is clear that even though the scene from the Sixth Dynasty tomb of Ankhmahor is close in date to our fragment and it shows general similarities, it cannot be used as a parallel to our scene.

Some texts of a Middle Kingdom date seem to have referred to the act of circumcision (Bailey 1996, Roth 1991, 71) but there is only one scene preserved among Egyptian reliefs, which shows a clear parallel to our fragment. In addition to that, some other scenes seem to be relevant for its interpretation. The former, known from the temple ascribed to Khonsu the Child, north-east of the temple of Mut at Karnak (Pillet 1952), is visually similar to our scene. The latter examples on the other hand, found in the Luxor Temple and in the temple at Deir el-Bahri (Brunner 1964: 162–166), provide us with a better understanding of the context from which such a scene might have come. All these scenes are much later in date than our example, but they show remarkable features and they seem to refer to either a king's or a god's life.

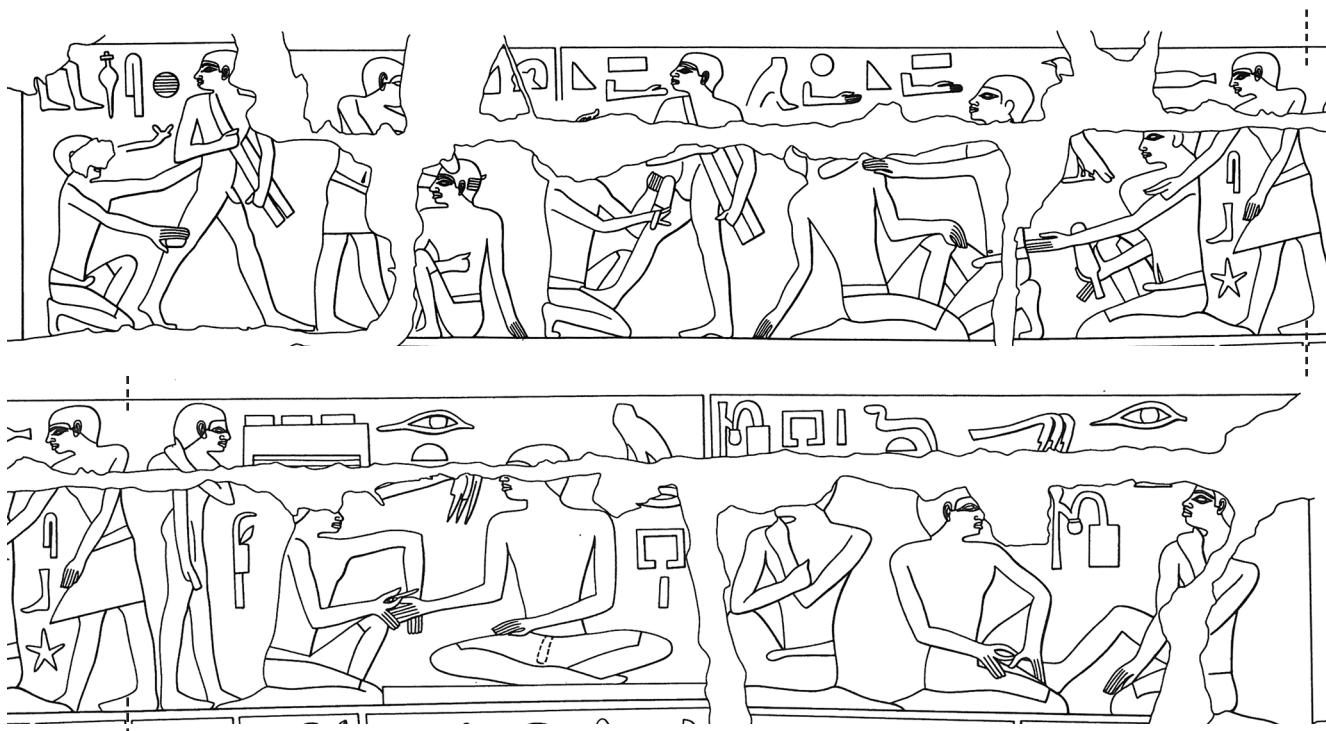


FIGURE 4. Ritual purification depicted in the tomb of Niankhkhnum in Saqqara, Fifth Dynasty. After Moussa, Altenmüller 1977, Figure 10.

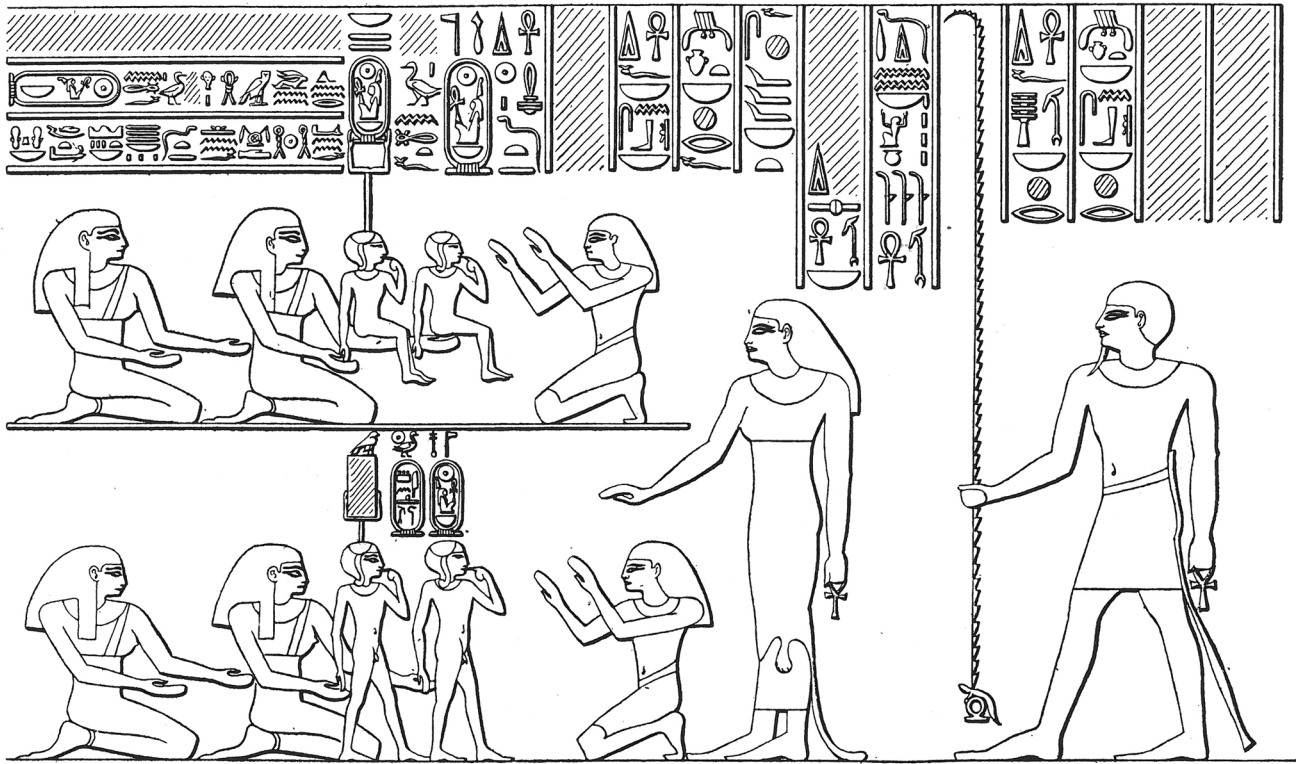


FIGURE 5. Part of the myth of the king's birth in the Luxor temple, with the "circumcision of the king and his ka". After Gayet 1894, Figure 196.

The Eighteenth Dynasty scenes in the Deir el-Bahri temple of Hatshepsut and its variant in the Amenhotep III reliefs in the Luxor temple (Figure 5), constituted part of the myth of the divine birth of a king (Gayet 1894: Pls. LXII–LXVII, Naville 1896: Pls. XLVI–LV). In later times, similar scenes of the divine birth of a god were themes within the mammisis (the birth-chapels), the subsidiary buildings in divine temples of the Late Period, Ptolemaic, and Roman times (Arnold 1996: 39, Daumas 1958, Kockelmann 2011,

Wilkinson 2000: 73). The sequence of events recorded in the relevant part of the temples at Deir el-Bahri and Luxor built by Hatshepsut and Amenhotep III, culminated in Amun's physical union with the queen mother and the king's birth with the assistance of various divinities, above all Khnum, who created the baby's limbs (Brunner 1964). According to scholars, the last scenes of the sequence where the gods and goddesses bestow upon the king and his ka many years of reign and life, included the process

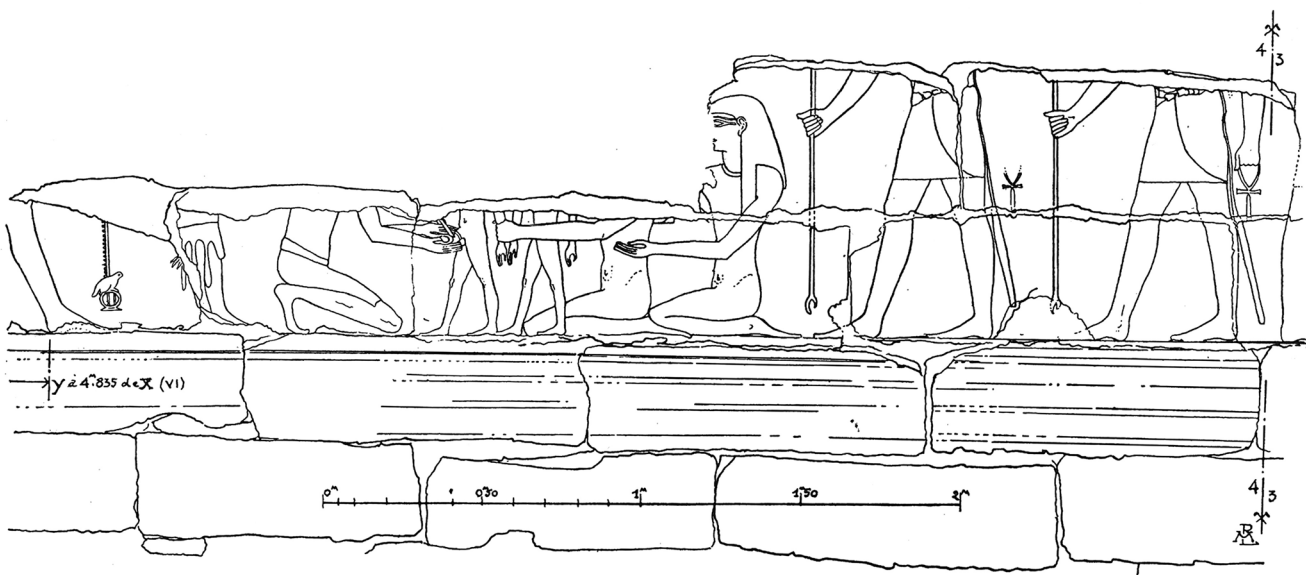


FIGURE 6. Circumcision scene from the temple of Khonsu the Child in Karnak. After Pillet 1952, Figure 5.

of circumcision, however, this is not depicted explicitly (Brunner 1964: 162–166, 191–193, also Nagel 1952). The circumcision undoubtedly appears in this context as part of the king's ritual transition associated with birth.

The scene from Karnak, from the Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasty (Pillet 1952: 104, see also Gaballa 1967), is much more damaged, and only a handful of the steps of the birth-myth can be recognised (Pillet 1952: 78–81). The myth probably referred to the birth of a king, or of a god-child (Bailey 1996: 20) that can be compared to the above-mentioned Eighteenth Dynasty scenes (also Brunner 1964). The part of this myth that shows the circumcision scene (*Figure 6*) is over 4 metres long and shows two boys, naked and facing left. Two female figures, most probably goddesses, kneel behind them, the front one holding the boys' arms. Two male gods follow behind the women on the right-hand part of the scene, both holding a *was*-sceptre and an *ankh*-sign. Facing the boys, a male figure is shown kneeling, holding a long tool in one hand while the fingers of the other hand grasp the piece of skin that is being removed by means of the long tool (detail of the scene in Pillet 1952: 103, *Figure 12*). Two more standing figures are depicted in the scene, of which only their legs survived. This scene from Karnak is remarkably similar to our Saqqara fragment, including the position of the figures, the two little boys accompanied by a female, and the long tool used by the male for the circumcision.

SCENE OF CIRCUMCISION IN THE FUNERARY TEMPLE OF DJEDKARE

The similarity of the scene from Karnak to the scene from the Djedkare's funerary temple leaves no doubt that the latter depicts circumcision, and we can only regret that it was not better preserved. The arrangement of both scenes

is the same, as well as the gestures of the persons involved, and the tool used for the operation.

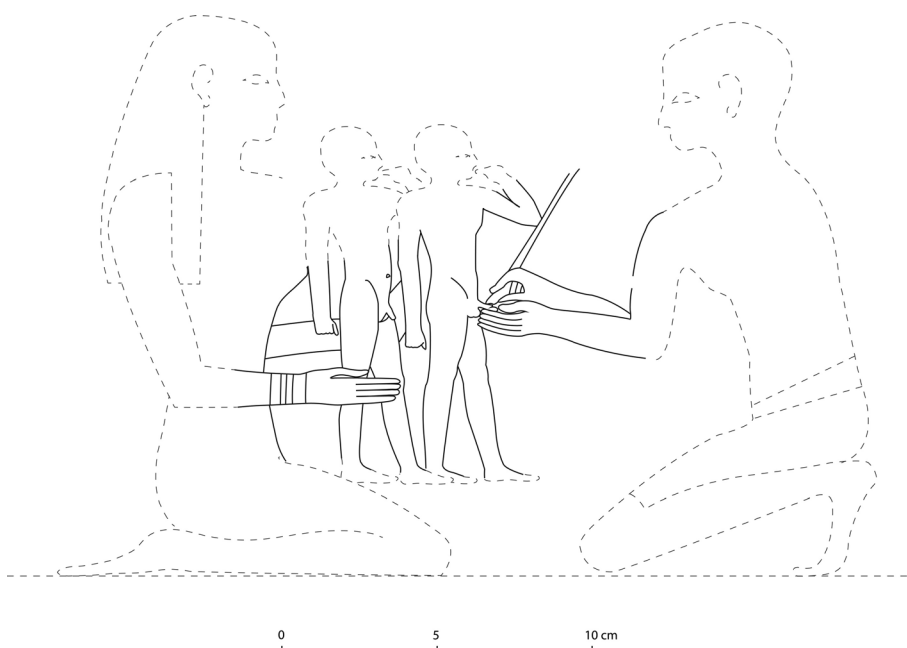
A flint knife had previously been considered the tool used for circumcision but the two true circumcision scenes show another type of instrument. The character of the tool cannot be precisely recognised, it is a "poorly-defined instrument" (Bailey 1996: 25) of a long and narrow shape, with one end thicker, shown on the Djedkare's fragment. We can presume that it was a kind of a sharp knife.

In the Deir el-Bahri, Luxor and Karkak scenes, circumcision is clearly associated with birth rituals, and therefore seems to have been performed on young children. Circumcision, described as "losing foreskin", performed on infants (*sedjet*) seems to be attested also from the Middle Kingdom in an inscription from Khnumhotep's tomb in Beni Hasan (Bailey 1996: 20, Newberry 1893: 65; for other terms associated with circumcision see for instance Bailey 1996: 18–23, Feucht 2003, Roth 1991: 68 and passim, Westendorf 2005). The fragment from the Djedkare's funerary temple shows that the same procedure was also practised in the Old Kingdom. The small fragment of relief therefore seems to cast doubt on the previously accepted view that circumcision was performed on boys in adolescence (e.g., Bailey 1996: 19, 21, Nunn 1996: 171, Strouhal 1992: 28–29).

It is doubtless, then, that the re-discovered scene from the pyramid complex of Djedkare shows a circumcision performed on young boy(s). Because Fakhry's excavation records are not available, the place of discovery of the fragment within the funerary temple is not known; we therefore cannot be sure from which part of the temple the scene originated. In addition, we also do not know which other scenes were associated with the circumcision scene and what was the context of this scene within the pyramid complex decoration program.

The fragment preserved in the Djedkare's funerary temple is a much more modest sized scene than the later

FIGURE 7. Reconstruction of the circumcision scene from Djedkare's funerary temple. Drawing M. Megahed, H. Vymazalová.



New Kingdom examples. The reconstruction (*Figure 7*) is only approximate, and many details remain unknown, such as, for instance, the posture of the male and female (kneeling or sitting) close to the children, nor do we know the possible nature of the support placed under the children's feet. We do however notice the size of the figures: the boys were ca. 11.5 cm tall while both the male and the female figures were ca. 18 cm tall if kneeling, and even more if sitting. The small dimensions of the scene indicate that it was probably part of a larger theme shown on one of the walls of the king's funerary temple.

In addition to the unknown context, the identity of those depicted in the scene is also not known – but two possible interpretations of the scene come to mind:

- i) it might concern the circumcision of royal children as part of the life of king's family, or
- ii) it might refer to the circumcision of the baby king and his *ka*, in company of a goddess (or a mother), and the operator.

The former possibility might be indicated by the slightly different size of the children, the first of them probably being taller than the second one. Such a scene could be part of the royal family depictions, showing important stages in the family's life. However, no parallel to such scenes are known from any other royal monuments. On the other hand, the slight difference in size of the boys could be due to the hand of the artist. The latter possibility seems more probable at the moment.

The fragment from the Djedkare's pyramid complex seems to be a clear parallel to the Karnak scene, which formed part of a divine-birth myth. According to Brunner (1964: 198), the divine birth of kings (including the circumcision as shown above) as documented in the New Kingdom temples belonged to the canonic temple motifs and there are some indications that the divine birth of a king could be found since the Old Kingdom (Brunner 1964: 196, also Montet 1902: 49, Sayce 1903: 250).

An important piece of evidence, namely fragments of the king's birth scene, were recently discovered in the Middle Kingdom pyramid complex of Senusret III in Dahshur (Oppenheim 2011). Even though the "circumcision scene" has not been attested among the preserved fragments from that monument, there is no doubt that the depictions of a king's birth belong among motifs shown in royal decoration programs many centuries before the Deir el-Bahri and Luxor temples were built. Moreover, in Dahshur, the scene is attested in a royal pyramid complex. It is very probable that, as in the case of other important scenes, the motif of the king's birth also appeared in earlier monuments (Oppenheim 2011: 188).

For the above-mentioned reasons, we might assume that the scene of circumcision found in Djedkare's funerary temple could be part of a larger theme, showing the king's birth and his acceptance by the gods, similar to the scenes of Senusret III, Hatshepsut, and Amenhotep III. The similarity to the scene in Karnak is startling and, as in many other cases, the copying of old motifs by later kings might be

the explanation here. This practice is well known from many New Kingdom monuments, and reliefs from the Old Kingdom pyramid complexes often served as models for such scenes. At the moment, no other parts of the king's birth scene known from Dahshur, Karnak and Luxor have been identified among the fragments from Djedkare's pyramid complex, however work on this site is still in progress (Megahed 2011).

Even though there is a lengthy time gap between each of the reliefs under discussion, and the social and religious development over the centuries must not be underestimated nor overlooked, a clear continuity in tradition between the Old Kingdom and later periods can be observed in various fields (e.g., Bialostocka 2010, Janák *et al.* 2011, Vymazalová, Coppens 2011, in press). Most significantly, for our present purpose, it is the ancient Egyptian concept of renewal and rejuvenation that has particular relevance here: it was particularly strong in all periods and constituted the basis of many rituals, including the funerary rituals, daily temple rituals, etc. (e.g., Coppens 2007). Among others, the motif of a king's divine birth relates closely to renewal and rejuvenation. It is worth noting that Daumas (1958: 499) thought that scenes of divine birth and even the story of p. Westcar, describing the birth of three future kings, refer to ancient mystery plays celebrated probably every year as part of the renewal and rejuvenation rituals – not only of individuals but also of the kingship (e.g., Bell 1985).

Djedkare's pyramid complex was the place of the king's burial, resurrection and cult, and therefore the motif of renewal and rejuvenation played a very important role in its decoration. Among other scenes with this meaning (e.g., the *sed*-festival), the scene of royal circumcision and its association with Creation (through the gods Hu and Sia) seems to merit a place in the royal decoration program of the pyramid complex. It is therefore very likely that the decoration program covering the walls of the king's funerary temple included scenes of the king's birth and re-birth, referring to both this and the next life. The scene might also relate to certain renewal rituals.

Taking into consideration the high level of damage inflicted upon the Old Kingdom pyramid complexes – including the complex of Djedkare himself – we cannot say if such a scene was a common motif in the Old Kingdom pyramid complexes and other royal monuments. It is possible that no other examples survived (or have been found until now), but we cannot exclude either that the scene indicated some specific circumstances of Djedkare's reign.

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Mohamed Megahed
Hana Vymazalová
Czech Institute of Egyptology
Faculty of Arts
Charles University in Prague
Celetná 20
110 00 Prague 1
Czech Republic
E-mail: mohamed.megahed@ff.cuni.cz
E-mail: hana.vymazalova@ff.cuni.cz