
By ANN MACY ROTH

In archaeological and textual evidence alike, the psš-kf-knife consistently occurs as part of the same collection of objects. In the Pyramid Texts, these objects are presented in a sequence that is the earliest attested form of the ‘opening of the mouth’ ceremony. The speeches accompanying the presentations suggest that the psš-kf and the objects associated with it were the equipment for a ritual mimicking birth and childhood, and that the role of the psš-kf in this process was to cut the umbilical cord of a newborn baby. Further archaeological, textual, and iconographic evidence is adduced to support this interpretation.

One of the more enigmatic types of artifact to survive from ancient Egypt is the psš-kf-knife, a flake of flint, usually between 10 and 20 cm in length, that broadens to a fork at one end. Sometimes also called ‘fish-tail knives’, ‘forked lances’, or ‘fish-tail lance heads’, they are best attested in assemblages of the Predynastic period. Although flint psš-kf-knives are rare after the beginning of the First Dynasty, models of the implement, often made of other types of stone, are known from Old Kingdom tombs and continue to occur occasionally as late as the Eighteenth Dynasty.

The psš-kf is best known for its role in the ‘opening of the mouth’ ritual, a sequence of speeches and actions that allowed a mummy or a cult statue to partake of offerings. Some sources even identify the psš-kf as an instrument used in the principal act, although that interpretation is based upon New Kingdom versions, where the psš-kf seems to have been confused with other implements used in the same ritual. In the earliest redaction of the ritual, that preserved in the Pyramid Texts, the psš-kf is offered to the deceased in the spell immediately before the spell for the opening of the mouth.

The interpretation proposed here emerged from catalogue entries I wrote for S. D’Auria et al., Mummies and Magic: The Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt (Boston, 1988), 81, 224–5. I am grateful to Ms Sue D’Auria, for preliminary bibliography, and Mr Stephen P. Harvey, for bringing to my attention two previously unnoticed psš-kf amulets in the storage collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. I have benefited from audience comments on presentations of earlier versions of this paper at the 1988 ARCE meetings in Chicago, at the Fall 1989 meeting of a study group on ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University. Dr James P. Allen was kind enough to correct my interpretation of some of the Pyramid Texts, and to offer me many useful criticisms and additional references. I am very grateful to Dr Rene van Walsem for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, which clarified my understanding of his own article on the topic and raised useful questions. Dr Arnold Cohen, director of the Division of Maternal Fetal Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, has kindly answered several questions about the technical processes of modern childbirth for me. Two anonymous reviewers for the JEA also offered useful suggestions. Any remaining errors are, like the conclusions, all my own responsibility.

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2 Only one flint example has been dated after the Sixth Dynasty, according to R. van Walsem, OMRO 59 (1978), 231, table 7.

3 Ibid. 224–5.

4 See E. Otto, Das ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual (Wiesbaden, 1960), passim.

5 Notably, Wb. 1, 555-2.

6 The texts preserved in the first register of the offering ritual in the pyramid of Unas, spells 16–40, are recorded photographically in A. Piankoff, The Pyramid of Unas (Princeton, 1968), pls. 58–62.
is comparable to that of the god Seth, who stands at the prow of the sun bark and attacks the Apophis snake every morning so that the sun can rise (be born). Seth’s role as a divider of the undifferentiated (and hence uncreated and chaotic) snake, Apophis, into two different (and therefore extant) parts may be reflected by his forked tail. The fork of the psš-kf thus acquires still another explanation: a forked stick is used to attack snakes, and the umbilical cord represents a snake, the primeval snake of chaos, which must be divided in order for creation (birth) to occur. Like the psš-kf, the forked stick is not only the divider, but is itself divided, as a symbolic representation of its function.

Although Seth is usually seen as a force inimical to childbirth, because of his role as an opener of the womb and instigator of abortion and hemorrhage, the opening of the womb can also be a good thing that is necessary for the purpose of impregnation and birth.\textsuperscript{129} His undeniable presence as a beneficent force at the daily rebirth of the sun god demonstrates that a positive role in childbirth is, at least, not out of the question.

**Dance troupes and the sign \(\xi\)**

An implement resembling the psš-kf is used as a determinative sign in the word for dance troupe \((hnrt).\textsuperscript{130} The use of the forked sign in this word is still problematic.\textsuperscript{131} There is some evidence, however, that the female dancers who composed these troupes often took on the role of midwife. The psš-kf, as an implement used in facilitating a birth, might be connected with them for that reason and be used in the writing of their name.

The sign that is most commonly used to determine the word \(hnrt\) is a long fork with two angled prongs, also used in the words for baker, for the \(rth\)-bread that occurs in offering lists (as has been discussed above), and for words connected with restraint, such as prison. In his sign list, Gardiner suggests that this sign was an implement used in baking, and he notes that the form used in the Third and Fourth Dynasties was curved rather than angled at the ends.\textsuperscript{132} This early form of the sign (which occurs only in connection with bread, since the word \(hnrt\) does not survive in monumental texts from this early period) very closely resembles a psš-kf. (See fig. 9 for a Third Dynasty example.)

\textsuperscript{129} R. Ritner, \textit{JNES} 43 (1984) 214–21, although in the later evidence with which Ritner is mostly concerned, the god Khnum is generally responsible for opening the womb when such an opening is desirable. Seth does preside in at least one instance (ibid. 217), however, and it does not seem unlikely that in earlier periods, when the reputation of Seth was more balanced, he played a positive role in childbirth.


\textsuperscript{131} B. Bryan, \textit{BES} 4 (1982) 49–50, has suggested that the sign derives from the two curved sticks used as clappers. The occurrences of the sign with a double handle, suggesting crossed clapping sticks, tend to be later provincial examples, suggesting that this was a reinterpretation rather than the original explanation for the use of the sign. The principal association of the implements seems to have been with the dancers rather than their accompanists, the clapping women. These women were in some cases separately designated, by the word \(mḥwt\): \textit{Wh} ii. 30, 14; and W. Wreszinski, \textit{Atlas zur altägyptischen Kulturgeschichte}, ii (Leipzig, 1936), pl. 29 (upper left). This word is never, to my knowledge, given the sign in question as a determinative.

\textsuperscript{132} Gardiner, \textit{Egyptian Grammar}\textsuperscript{3}, 519 (U31), especially n.1, as cited above in connection with an offering of bread written with this sign, which perhaps served as a metaphor for the role of the psš-kf.
The dancers of the hnrt are clearly connected with childbirth in a scene in the Sixth Dynasty Saqqara tomb chapel of Princess Watetkhethor.\textsuperscript{133} (See fig. 10.) In the five surviving registers, female dancers perform before the mistress of the tomb, accompanied by a song that makes several references, explicit and implied, to childbirth. The second register from the bottom begins ‘But see, the secret of birth! Oh pull!’ The register above continues with related phrases:

See the pot, remove what is in it!
See, the secret of the hnrt,
Oh Four!\textsuperscript{134} Come! Pull!
It is today!\textsuperscript{135} hurry! hurry!
See,...\textsuperscript{136} is the abomination of birth.

\textsuperscript{133} Wreszinski, \textit{Atlas}, iii, pl. 29. The drawing of this wall that appears in fig. 8 is adapted from a facsimile made in 1986 as part of an epigraphic and iconographic study of this chapel supported by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities supported by the American Research Center in Egypt.

\textsuperscript{134} The four bricks of the birthing stool.

\textsuperscript{135} The word used here, \textit{myn}, may be related to the enigmatic term \textit{znyn}, discussed in connection with the Pyramid Texts sequence above.

\textsuperscript{136} The word seems to have originally been carved \textit{jkjkh} and changed to \textit{hkkj} in paint. I can suggest no meaning for either spelling, unless the consistent doubled \textit{k} is related to \textit{kkw}, ‘darkness’.
The dancers in the chapel of Watetkhethor, north wall of room B3 of the chapel of Mereruka. Detail of second and third registers from the bottom. Copied by the author and collated by R. Ritner.

Inset: entire wall.
Although the figure of Watetkhethor is only preserved below the knees, it is clear that she is watching this dance by herself; her son, who is present in all the other scenes of daily life in the tomb, is absent here. Such dances, referring as they did to purely feminine concerns, were thus probably done for women only. Both modern dancers and anthropologists have suggested that there is a connection between the physical movements of modern Middle Eastern dancing and childbirth;\textsuperscript{137} if the connection exists, this scene from the tomb of Watetkhethor demonstrates that it has a long history.

A further reference to a connection between dancers and childbirth can be found in the fictional account of the birth of the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty preserved in P. Westcar.\textsuperscript{138} Dating from the Second Intermediate Period, this papyrus contains the most extensive description of childbirth that has survived from ancient Egypt. The birth is supervised by the god Khnum\textsuperscript{139} and four goddesses, Isis, Nephthys, Heqat and Meskhenet, who disguise themselves as members of a dance troupe in order to gain admission to the expectant mother. When they assure her husband, ‘we understand childbirth’, they are immediately invited to assist. This story can be used to argue that the women of a dancing troupe were often experienced midwives, not only because the distraught husband admits them without question (for he is clearly desperate), but because it is this disguise that the goddesses chose as the most likely to inspire his confidence. The geographical range of a travelling dance troupe and the many associations of such dancers could have given these women a reputation for being especially knowledgeable about the problems of childbirth. Moreover, the movements of their dance, as seen in the chapel of Watetkhethor, may have been used to encourage women in labour, although the goddesses in the papyrus Westcar story did not resort to this expedient.

If assisting at births was a role of the \textit{hnrt}, and the \textit{ps\u0160-kf} was a principal tool in that profession, the occurrence of this sign in the word \textit{hnrt} becomes clear. The angled ends in all surviving occurrences of the word would be explained by the circumstances that when the form of the baking tool changed in the later Fourth Dynasty, the \textit{ps\u0160-kf} was viewed as a purely mortuary implement. In other contexts, its form may have been puzzling, at least to male scribes. Its similarity to the baking tool may have caused the sign in \textit{hnrt} and related words to be changed along with examples in the words connected with baking.

Another possible explanation is suggested by some of the latest type of amulets discussed above, which are angled like the \textit{hnrt} determinative. The sign may simply have changed to correspond to a change in the form of the implement in practical use for the

\textsuperscript{137} Most notably by a late nineteenth-century dancer in her memoirs, who describes belly dancing as ‘a poem of the mystery and pain of motherhood’: Armen Ohanian, \textit{The Dancer of Shamahka}, trans. R. W. Lane (New York, 1923), 261, as cited in L. Wood, \textit{Arabesque} 5 no. 5 (Jan.-Feb. 1979), 12. Wood dismissed this statement as an apologetic ‘attempt to give her art some meaning beyond the obvious’. She argued that it had been overstressed by feminist historians of dance in attempts to find evidence for a ritual of motherhood. Nonetheless, such a statement by an indigenous practitioner of the dance should perhaps not be so lightly dismissed, in view of the Watetkhethor scene. (I am grateful to Ms Barbara Siegel for locating these references for me.)

\textsuperscript{138} P. Westcar 9.27–11.4.

\textsuperscript{139} H. Goedicke, \textit{Varia Aegyptiaca} 1 (1985) 23–6, has suggested that Khnum waited outside with the husband of the mother.
cutting of the umbilical cord. The implement used in mortuary rituals, in keeping with the conservatism of religious contexts, would have remained the same.

The occurrence of the sign as a determinative in words for restraint might be explained by the homonymic relationship between the words for ‘dance troupe’ and ‘prison’ (both hnr) and between the words ‘baker’ and ‘restrain’ (rtht) and rth, respectively). It is clear, however, from the account in P. Westcar\(^{140}\) that a fourteen-day period of purification restricted the movements of a woman after giving birth; and one is reminded of the use of the word ‘confinement’ as a euphemism for the period of childbirth until comparatively recent times.\(^{141}\) The connection between the words may be closer than an accidental occurrence of the same consonants.

A final illuminating context where the sign \(\uparrow\) appears is a late writing of the word mw.t, ‘mother’, in epithets of goddesses and female priestly titles.\(^{142}\) Enigmatic writings of the Ptolemaic and later periods often contain references to arcane associations from the earliest periods of Egyptian history. It has been suggested\(^{143}\) that this writing is a ‘debased’ version of the sign \(\downarrow\),\(^{144}\) representing the bicornate bovine uterus, whose shape may also be related to the shape of the psś-kf. Nevertheless, since this writing is used exclusively in connection with female divinities, it is more likely to be a reference to an archaic tool of childbirth, thought to be appropriate to such primeval beings, rather than an anatomical reference common to females of all species.\(^{145}\)

### Meskhenet

A final confirmation of the connection of the psś-kf with birth is provided by the headdress shown on the goddess Meskhenet, the patroness of childbirth, who is depicted as part of the ‘divine birth’ scenes at the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari (see fig. 11).\(^{146}\) The emblem has been identified as the uterus and uterine horns of a cow.\(^{147}\) However, the hieroglyphic form of bovine uterus usually has a rather more undulating vertical and a deeper central notch than is shown in the Deir el-Bahari headdress.\(^{148}\) Furthermore, although this sign is used to indicate the sex of various animals, it is not usually applied to female human beings.\(^{149}\) The sign Meskhenet wears is probably a psś-

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140 P. Westcar 11,18–19.
141 The Oxford English Dictionary (Compact Edition, Oxford, 1971), 806, gives as its fourth definition of ‘confinement’: ‘being in child-bed; child-birth, delivery, accouchment (the ordinary term for this in colloquial use)’, citing examples from the 1770s through the 1870s.
142 Wb. ii, 54,1–17. The Belegstellungen gives this writing for mw.t in mw.t nfr, an epithet of Hathor (Dendera, Mar. IV 27b); in mw.t nfr nt Wn-nfr, an epithet of Nut (Edfu I 157); and perhaps also in a title of a priestess (Edfu I 330).
143 F. Ll. Griffith, PSBA 21 (1899), 277.
144 Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, 466, sign F45.
145 The same sign is a standard writing of the phoneme \(m\) in the Ptolemaic period, as Griffith has noted (PSBA 21, 277). This equation cannot explain its appearance as the word mw.t, since that usage is limited to religious contexts. However, as Griffith also suggests, the connection with the word mw.t may be an explanation for the broader application of the sign.
146 Naville, Deir el-Bahari, ii, pl. 51. The figure is my own drawing, based on a photograph.
147 See H. Frankfort, JNES 3 (1944), 200, for a discussion of the theories about this headdress, and for the suggestion of a possible connection with the Mesopotamian goddess Ninghursag.
148 Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, 466 (F45), is a simplification; more paleographically correct versions are shown in Wb. iii, 76,1, and G. Möller, Hieratische Paleographie, 1 (Leipzig, 1909), 17 no. 182.
149 Wb. iv, 76,1–14, gives the words for ‘female’ when applied to animals (hmt), in which the sign occurs frequently as a determinative. In the following words, dealing with women (hmt), ibid. 76,16–78,15, the sign never occurs. (It does occur in the specific word ‘uterus’ in medical texts, however.)
Fig. 11. The goddess Meskhenet from the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari. From a photograph by the author.

 kf, which is well attested in offering lists of the early Eighteenth Dynasty. The psš-kf, as the divider that definitively separates the mother and child, is a more appropriate emblem for the goddess of birth than a bovine uterus that simply indicates femaleness.

 The goddess Meskhenet is, at least in the Middle Kingdom, a personification of the four birthing bricks (mshnt, literally ‘place of causing to alight’), upon which the mother squats to give birth, and on which the newborn baby is placed after it has been washed and its umbilical cord cut. Meskhenet is present in P. Westcar as one of the disguised goddesses helping with the birth. She is entirely passive during the birth (possibly because she is the bricks on which the mother is squatting); but after the newborn child has been cleaned, and its umbilical cord cut, and been placed on the bricks, she comes forward to pronounce his future kingship. Meskhenet’s role as a goddess of fate is well

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150 Van Walsem, OMRO 59, 209, nos. 43–9.
151 Interestingly, Meskhenet is later divided into four separated goddesses, each identified with one of the goddesses of the Heliopolitan Ennead: Meskhenet-weret (Tefnut), Meskhenet-aat (Nut), Meskhenet-neferet (Isis) and Meskhenet-menkhet (Nephthys) (M.-Th. Derchain-Urtel, LA iv, 107.) These identifications with goddesses whose functions are so closely connected with mortuary rites again reinforces the associations of birth with those same rites.
152 I would here take jfd m jdbt as ‘four bricks’, referring to the well-known four bricks of birth.
153 In the last repetition of the procedure, P. Westcar 10,22–11,3, she appears earlier, immediately after the description of the newborn child, and before the cleaning.
known; in this role she is frequently associated with the harvest goddess Renenutet. The \textit{psš-kf} on her head is also appropriate to her role as a determiner of fate, since it is only when the umbilical cord is cut that the child’s fate diverges from that of its mother.

The pronouncement made by Meskhenet in the papyrus Westcar story is strikingly similar to the speech she makes at the birth of Hatshepsut in the scenes recorded at Deir el-Bahari. Hatshepsut demonstrably consulted earlier prototypes for her temple’s architecture, the language and orthography of its inscriptions, and its iconography. The ‘divine birth scenes’ themselves, though they have no surviving Old Kingdom prototype, have the same underlying religious premise as papyrus Westcar and presumably the same underlying political purpose: to legitimize an irregular succession, the monarch is said to be the physical child of a divinity. The roots of the story must lie in the Fifth Dynasty, since such propaganda would have been purposeless in later periods, and Hatshepsut may have adapted her ‘divine birth’ scenes from lost scenes dating to that period. Supporting this assumption is the fact that Meskhenet is depicted with a headdress similar to that in the Deir el-Bahari scene in a passage in the Pyramid Texts (Pyr. 1183–5).\textsuperscript{154} There, the word \textit{mshnt} is determined with the signs \text{\textcircled{\textasteriskcentered}}, \text{\textasteriskcentered}, and \text{\textasteriskcentered} in the pyramids of Pepi I, Mernere, and Pepi II, respectively. That the latest version substitutes two ostrich feathers for the earlier headdress confirms that this headdress is the \textit{psš-kf}, which is known from other sources to have metamorphosed into two feathers, and not the cow’s uterus, which is not known to have done so.\textsuperscript{155} The hypothetical source of Hatshepsut’s scenes must then predate the metamorphosis.

The word \textit{mshnt} is not determined with a brick or bricks until the Middle Kingdom.\textsuperscript{156} It has been suggested that \textit{mshnt} in these early examples can refer not only to the place of birth but to birth itself.\textsuperscript{157} Like the \textit{psš-kf} in the Pyramid Text offering ritual, however, it seems to follow birth, and could perhaps be applied to a related transition: the separation from the mother by the cutting of the umbilical cord and the birth of the placenta. Meskhenet’s later character as a brick may be connected with the clay out of which the child and its \textit{kt} are formed by Khnum. It is interesting that a potter occurs in the obscure spell (Pyr. 1183–5) cited above.

**Conclusions**

The ‘opening of the mouth’ ceremony seems to have derived from a ritual sequence of actions and spells ensuring the ability of a newborn and developing child to partake of nourishment. By analogy, the same ritual would have allowed the newly-born deceased person to eat the real and symbolic food that Egyptian mortuary customs went to such great lengths to provide. This ritual could also be extended to a newly-carved cult statue, since the verb for making such a statue is \textit{ms}, ‘to give birth’. The statue-like characteristics of the Old Kingdom mummy, and even more the anthropoid coffin before

\textsuperscript{154} These spells are not included in the pyramid of Unas, so the forms of the signs are taken from Seth, \textit{Die altägyptische Pyramidentexte}, which was based on squeezes.

\textsuperscript{155} M. Derchain-Urteil, \textit{Synkretismus in ägyptischer Ikonographie: Die Göttin Tjenenet} (Wiesbaden, 1979), 6–12, discusses the occurrence of the same headdress in the late New Kingdom and later periods on the goddess Tjenenet, the consort of Montu, who is also connected with childbirth. It is difficult to determine whether this headdress is a continuation of that worn by Meskhenet or an interpretation of it.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Wb.} II, 148.9.

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Wb.} II, 148.14.
which the New Kingdom rite was performed, would have favoured the reinterpretation of many of these spells as statue spells, and thus led to the prominence of the adze in the New Kingdom ritual. This later prominence, and the mistaken assumption that the statue ritual held an analogous place in the Old Kingdom ritual, has led scholars to dismiss too quickly the evidence for earlier mouth-opening implements of a different type. When the Pyramid Text spells are examined without reference to later developments, their associations with birth and childhood are indisputable. These associations can then be found in the later ritual as well.

That the psś-\(k\)f played an important role in the earlier versions of the ‘opening of the mouth’ ritual is clear from its position between the coming forth of the reborn person from the womb and his beginning to take nourishment. If that role was the cutting of the umbilical cord, both its connection with rebirth and its name would be explained. The most problematic aspect of this interpretation, the connection of the psś-\(k\)f with the jaw, can be explained as a reinterpretation of a ritual gesture. The brandishing of the blood-stained psś-\(k\)f, perhaps wrapped in the umbilical cord itself, in front of a baby’s face to demonstrate that he had been separated from his mother and needed to eat to survive, was reinterpreted as a ritual that ensured his ability to do so by giving his jaw the firmness required for nursing. The distinctive shape of the psś-\(k\)f may be connected with the shape of the bovine womb, with the hieroglyph used in the word \(hnrt\), with the headdress of Meskhenet, the goddess of childbirth, with the curls of Hathor, with the forked sticks used to attack the serpent Apophis, and with the tail of Seth. All of these associations reinforce its meaning and suggest the richness of the symbolism relating to childbirth and rebirth.

The implements used for the actual ‘opening of the mouth’ in the earliest version of this ritual, the ntr\(t\)j-blades, must also be reconciled with this interpretation. I will argue in a future article that the central ritual of the ‘opening of the mouth’ represents a metaphorical enactment of the midwives’ clearing of the child’s mouth with their little fingers, and that the ntr\(t\)j-blades are ritual substitutes for these fingers.\(^{158}\) Another interesting consequence of this interpretation of the ‘opening of the mouth’ ritual is the support it gives the suggested equation of the \(kr\) with the placenta. The nature and duration of this equation also clearly require more research.

The ancient Egyptians saw birth and rebirth after death as closely related events, both of which were regarded as dangerous transitions. Given their importance, we should not be surprised by the variety and complications of the rituals, symbols, and implements used to ensure their successful completion. The fact that this fundamental metaphor for rebirth is referred to exclusively by allusion and indirectness is puzzling, and can only be attributed to a conscious reticence regarding the messy operation of earthly childbirth. The connection of childbirth with women, sex, and blood is viewed with alarm in many societies, and discussion and depiction of the process is avoided for the same reasons that it is considered powerful and mysterious. The extent of such taboos in ancient Egypt itself deserves further study, as does the general question of the Egyptian connection of resurrection with birth.

\(^{158}\) This argument was presented in a preliminary form at the Sixth International Congress of Egyptology at Turin in September 1991, and is outlined in the abstracts of that congress. Although I had initially planned to present these arguments as a part of the present paper, considerations of space and the necessity for further work on the question favoured a separate presentation.