



RESEARCH ARTICLE

'His bodily son'

Embodiment and relatedness in ancient Egypt

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Published: 19th December 2025

Abstract

A dichotomy between nature and nurture has long been at the heart of definitions of kinship in the humanities and the social sciences. While an oscillation between biological and socio-cultural constructions of relatedness may feel superseded in favour of a more integrative approach, it is still implicit in works that take a relationship mediated by the body as the basis of kinship. For example, the expression *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* is often translated as 'his bodily son' and understood as indicating a legitimate heir. The implication here is that a biological relation, conveyed through bodily connections, is somehow more real than one that is not labelled as such. This reading comfortably maps onto (mainly Western) expectations about the expression of kinship through a biological body. However, this interpretation disregards the fact that there are different ways of understanding the articulation between embodiment and relatedness in modern and ancient cultures. In this article, I take *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* as a case study to explore ancient Egyptian 'body worlds' and to challenge some of the assumptions regarding relatedness often found in Egyptological scholarship.

Keywords: relatedness, body worlds, Old Kingdom, *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*

الابن الجسدي: مفهوم التجسيد وصلات القرابة في مصر القديمة

الملخص

لطالما شكّلت الثنائية بين الطبيعة والتنشئة محوراً أساسياً في تعريفات القرابة ضمن العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية. ورغم أن التناقض بين التفسيرات البيولوجية والبناءات الاجتماعية والثقافية للقرابة يبدو أنه أفسح المجال لنهج أكثر شمولية وتكاملاً، إلا أن هذا التباين لا يزال يظهر ضمنياً في الدراسات التي تعتبر الجسد وسيطاً أساسياً في تكوين علاقات القرابة. على سبيل المثال، يُترجم التعبير *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* عادةً إلى "ابنه الجسدي"، ويُفهم على أنه يشير إلى وريث شرعي. ينطوي هذا التفسير على افتراض أن العلاقة البيولوجية، التي تُعبّر عنها من خلال الروابط الجسدية، تحمل نوعاً من الواقعية أو الأصالة أكثر من العلاقات التي تفتقر إلى هذا الوصف. يتماشى هذا الطرح مع التوقعات (التي غالباً ما تكون غربية) التي تربط مفهوم القرابة بالجسد البيولوجي. ومع ذلك، يغفل هذا التفسير عن حقيقة وجود طرق متعددة لفهم العلاقة بين الجسد والقرابة في الثقافات القديمة والحديثة على حد سواء. في هذه الدراسة، أُستعرض تعبير *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* كدراسة حالة تحليلية لاستكشاف "عوالم الجسد" في مصر القديمة، ولإعادة النظر في بعض الافتراضات التقليدية المتعلقة بالقرابة، والتي لا تزال تسود الدراسات المصرية حتى اليوم.

الكلمات الدالة: صلة القرابة، عوالم الجسد، الدولة القديمة، *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*.

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1 Introduction: relations and body worlds

A dichotomy between nature and nurture has long been at the heart of definitions of kinship in the humanities and the social sciences. While an oscillation between biological and socio-cultural constructions of relatedness may feel superseded in favour of a more integrative approach, it is still implicit in works that take a relationship mediated by the body as the basis of kinship. In such works, the body is understood as a proxy for genealogical connections, and social interpretations of kinship are overlaid on top of a biological approach. The body, however, does not only have a biological dimension. The idea that the ‘true’ body is our ‘natural’ body in opposition to a supposedly ‘less true’ sociocultural body is known since at least the 17th century, but, as **HARRIS** and **ROBB** (2013: 2, 16) note, there is very little that is ‘natural’ about this interpretation. In fact, it should be understood as a representation of a particular body world. In their work, **HARRIS** and **ROBB** (2013: 3) use ‘body world’ as an analytical category to refer to the ‘totality of bodily experiences, practices, and representations in a specific place and time’. Hence, the body is a historical agent, and the role it plays in the definition of relations needs to be contextualised. Expressions of relatedness can be a fascinating way of approaching different body worlds.

Relations were perceived as essential to the identity and constitution of a person or a group in ancient Egypt. References to relatedness abound as part of one’s self-presentation in monumental inscriptions. Together with an individual’s name and titles, their connections to other people are often displayed as part of their identity. Elsewhere I have explored some Egyptian idioms of kinship relations, particularly those we refer to as kinship terms (**OLABARRIA**, 2020: 63–74), but the ways in which relations are conveyed in writing go beyond the mention of individual terms. Sometimes we may find additional phrases that are used to characterise the social relations that exist between two persons or groups of people. For example, the expression *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*, often found in monumental inscriptions of the Old Kingdom,¹ is a unique yet complex case study to explore a purported relationship between kinship and the body. While it has traditionally been translated as ‘his bodily son’ and assumed to denote a ‘real’—as opposed to a symbolic—filial relationship (e.g. **JUNKER**, 1931), other authors have remarked that this expression may not be indicative of any kind of genealogical link (e.g. **SCHMITZ**, 1976). As such, it provides an opportunity to focus on the effect that ideas of the body had on the definition and delineation of kinship in written formulations in ancient Egypt as well as on modern scholarly interpretations of such formulations.

In this article, I present a brief overview of the use of *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*—and its variants—in the primary sources, with a focus on its connection with royal filiation. The different components of this genitival construction are analysed individually in order to attain a more nuanced understanding of this self-presentation device. The ways in which this expression has been studied and interpreted provide an eloquent example of how our own personal experience shapes our approach to ancient Egyptian body worlds. In particular, I argue that the translation ‘bodily son’ reflects our own concerns with biology as the basis for kinship, obscuring other possible meanings that may have been associated with an individual’s insertion within a coetaneous social group.

2 The expression *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*: variants and usage

The phrase *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* is relatively common in self-presentation inscriptions, especially in a funerary context. The early Dynasty 5 chapel of Kaninisut, found *in situ* in his mastaba in Giza’s western cemetery (G 2155) and currently kept in Vienna (KHM Vienna ÄS 8006), features an excellent example of its use (**JUNKER**, 1931; **HÖLZL**, 2005).

¹In this article I follow the standardised Leiden Unified Transliteration system developed in 2023.

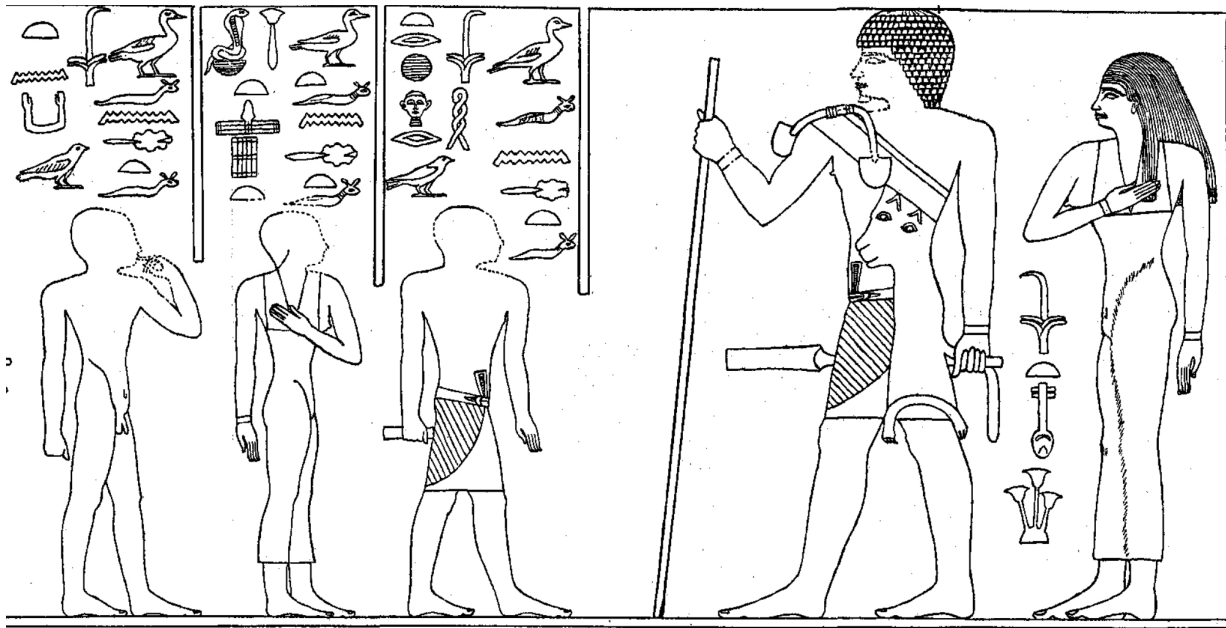


Fig. 1: Line drawing of the relief between false doors, west wall of chapel of Kaninisut, Giza. Line drawing following [JUNKER](#) (1934: pl. 18). Image cropped and used with permission.

In Figure 1² we see the mastaba owner Kaninisut standing on the right, with his wife Neferhanisut behind him. Opposite them are three people depicted at a smaller scale and captioned as his ‘bodily’ children. The first one is *z3:f n ht3:frh-nswt hr-wr*, ‘his bodily son the royal acquaintance Horwer’, who is followed by *z3:t3:f n(t) ht3:f w3:dt-htp*, ‘his bodily daughter Wadjethetep’, and *z3:f n ht3:f k3:-nswt šri* ‘his bodily son Kaninisut the younger’. This inscription is illustrative of the most common usage of this expression, namely as a caption identifying one or more filial relations within a larger scene. We see also that one individual could be said to have more than one ‘bodily’ child, and that the phrase is not only reserved for sons, but it can also be applied to daughters. Indeed, other attestations confirm that *n ht3:f* could also accompany a more encompassing term denoting filiation such as *msw*. For example, an inscription on the west wall of the interior chamber of the mastaba of Seshemnefer in Giza (G4940) reads *msw3:f n ht3:f sšm-nfr šri pḥw-n-ptḥ 3:b*, ‘his bodily children Seshemnefer the younger, Pehuentah, and Ab’ ([KANAWATI](#), 2001: pls. 22, 42, 47).³

The examples above demonstrate the most common and basic use of the expression, but occasionally it can be complemented with additional qualifiers. For instance, the Dynasty 6 mastaba of Mereruka at Saqqara features the following inscription in the false door on the west wall of room C3 (i.e. the tomb of his son Meryteti): *iri-pt mry z3:f n ht3:f smsw mry3:f im3:ḥw hr inpw tpi d3:w3:f mry-tti*, ‘the *iri-pt* Mery, his eldest bodily son whom he loves, revered one before Anubis who is upon his mountain Meryteti’ ([DUELL](#), 1938: pl. 62).⁴ Interestingly, in this inscription Meryteti is said to be a ‘bodily son’ of Mereruka, but in other instances in the tomb he claims to be a ‘bodily son’ of the king, an idea to which I return below. Both qualifiers, namely *smsw* and *mry3:f*, tend to appear together, although there are a number of instances where *smsw* is not followed by *mry3:f*.⁵ so one should not assume that they always co-occur.

² A photograph of the relief seen in Figure 1 can be found in the online collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (KHM Vienna ÄS 8006), available here [↗](#) (accessed 28 March 2023).

³ See also <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/ancientpeople/1870/full/> (accessed 29 March 2023).

⁴ The title *iri-pt* is a high honorific title in Old Kingdom sources often translated as ‘count’ or ‘prince’. On this title, its connection with the vizirate, and changes in its use during Dynasty 5, see [STRUDWICK](#) (1985: 307–312, 338–340) and [BAUD](#) (1999: 257–259).

⁵ For example, from the mastaba of Djaty in Giza (G 2337 X), door-jamb MFA 27.445 features a relief where a son is identified as an ‘eldest bodily son’, with no reference to him being a beloved one ([SIMPSON](#), 1980: pl. liv.c)

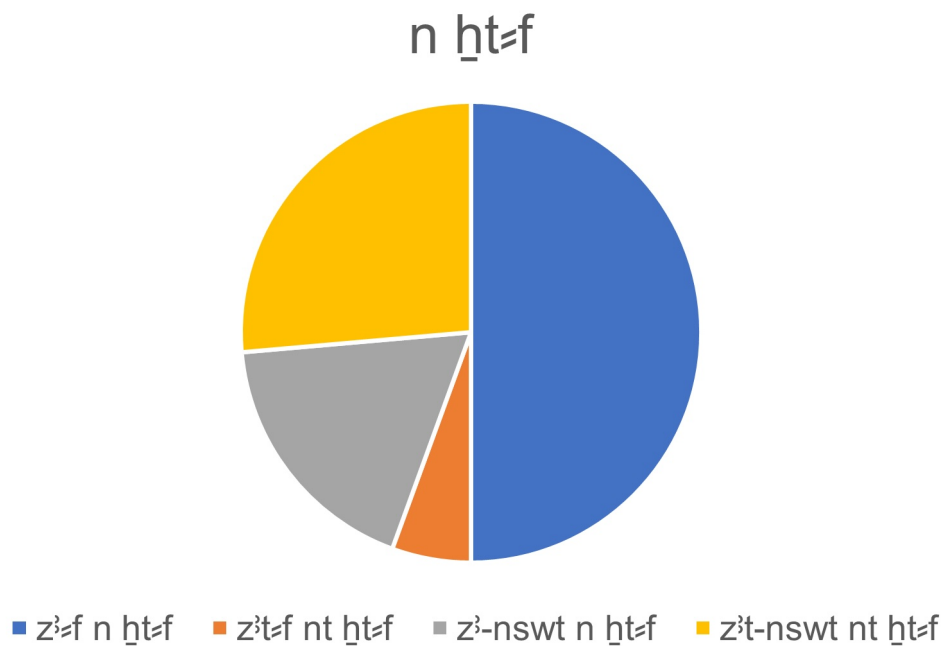


Fig. 2: Survey of attestations according to data from *TLA*.

Focusing on the genitival construction itself (i.e. expression of filiation followed by *n ḥt* and suffix pronoun), the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (*TLA*) lists 144 attestations of this phrase.⁶ Although the scope of the *TLA* is naturally limited because the selection of textual sources included in this digital corpus cannot be comprehensive, it is very useful as a starting point for an approximate idea of the frequency and distribution of *zꜣꜣf n ḥtꜣf* and its variants. As can be seen from Figure 2, the expression *zꜣꜣf n ḥtꜣf* makes up half of the attestations, with 72 cases recorded. Its female counterpart *zꜣꜣf nt ḥtꜣf* includes 8 attestations. The rest of the sample, namely 64 cases, include a reference to the king, comprising 26 cases for ‘son of the king’ and 38 cases for ‘daughter of the king’. The sample may be admittedly skewed, as the vast majority of examples referring to the daughter of the king come from the well-documented mastabas of Meresankh or Idut, while the attestations for ‘son of the king’ appear in a variety of different tombs. This overview, however, is useful in demonstrating that *n ḥtꜣf* is employed in relation to royals almost as often as in the classification of apparently non-royal kinship. In addition, the reference to daughters seems to be mainly restricted to the royal sphere.

In terms of provenance, most attestations of this expression date back to the Old Kingdom, specifically in elite contexts in the cemeteries of Giza and Saqqara, with a site distribution as shown in Figure 3. It is hardly surprising that these two sites accumulate the majority of examples from the Old Kingdom; what is interesting is that the number of attestations decreases dramatically during Dynasty 6 until disappearing almost completely after the reign of Pepi II. Post-Dynasty 6 examples are mainly related to the divine sphere; for instance, there are some New Kingdom references to the king being the ‘bodily son of Ra’,⁷ and the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*, a New Kingdom source that I discuss in further detail below, features the expression in relation to deities.

Despite a few attestations, its frequency is almost negligible after the Old Kingdom. This could suggest either that after the Old Kingdom it was no longer considered important to display this sort of relationship,

⁶On the basis of searches of combined occurrences of lemma 122080 (*ḥt*) with the following lemmata: *zꜣꜣ* (125510), *zꜣꜣt* (125630), *zꜣꜣ-nswt* (450223) and *zꜣꜣ-ntswt* (400447). Qualifiers that occur between *zꜣꜣ* and *ḥt* have been disregarded for the purposes of this survey.

⁷For example, in the battle reliefs of Seti I at Karnak, where Amun-Ra refers to him as his bodily son and his beloved (**THE EPI-GRAPHIC SURVEY**, 1986: pl. 8).

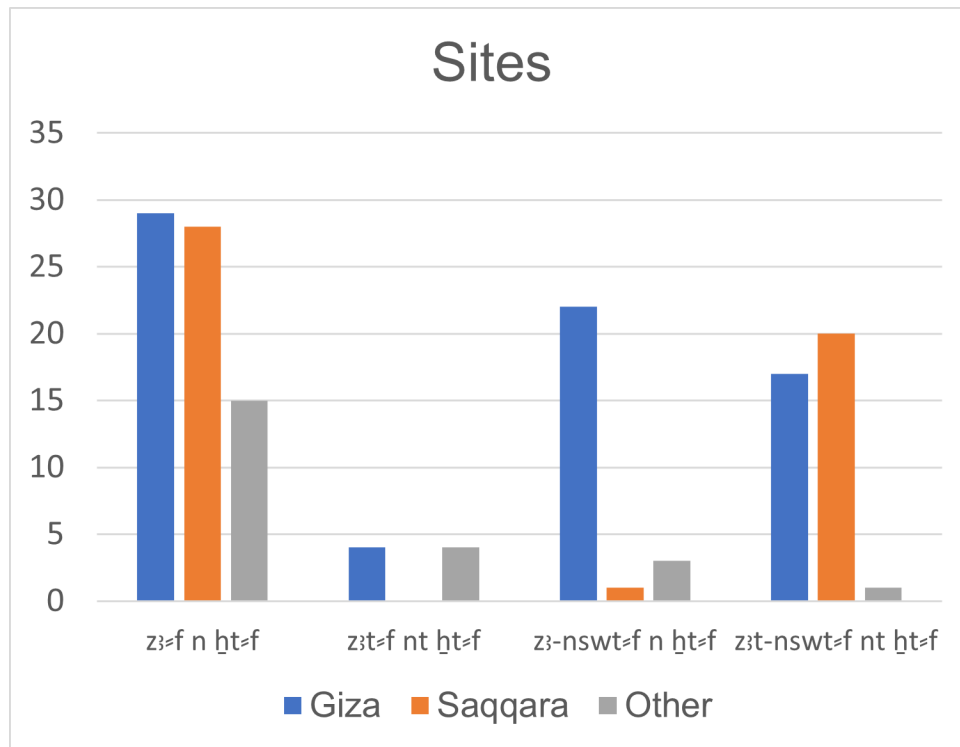


Fig. 3: Distribution of attestations according to data from TLA.

or that other terms were preferred to highlight an alleged ‘bodily’ connection. Expressions of relatedness and their range of meanings can change over time, and this may be indicative of new perceptions of contemporary body worlds and their connection to kinship. An examination of the specific usage of ‘bodily’ in connection with the king’s son illustrates some of the issues that we encounter when we use the body as a proxy for ‘biological’ relations.

3 Kingship or kinship? Body, biology, and inheritance

From the data above, it seems noteworthy that just under half of the known attestations do not refer simply to *z3/z3t*, but instead to *z3-nswt* or its female counterpart *z3t-nswt*, which are traditionally translated as ‘king’s son’ and ‘king’s daughter’ respectively. The mastaba of Meresankh III, for example, features several instances of both examples. In the main room of the chapel of mastaba G 7530 (room A, north wall of pillar leading to room C), there is a relief of Meresankh standing with a diminutive representation of a man by her side with the caption *z3-nswt n ht=f dw3-rw*, ‘the bodily son of the king Duare’ (DUNHAM & SIMPSON, 1974: 13, pl. vi, fig. 6).⁸ This man is probably the owner of mastaba G 5110, where he is identified by a number of high ranking titles (STRUDWICK, 1985: 162–163; BAUD, 1999: 606–607, dossier 248). Meresankh III was a granddaughter of Khufu, and wife of another king of the Dynasty 4 (unclear whether Khafra or Menkaura), and she herself was also captioned as a *z3t-nswt* in her tomb (DUNHAM & SIMPSON, 1974: 13–15, pl. vii, fig. 7).

The use of the term in this and other tombs sparked a heated debate in scholarship regarding what it may tell us about royal lines. If *n ht=f* is understood as an expression of a direct biological relationship, as proposed by Junker, then its usage may have implications in the construction and demarcation of royal genealogies of the Old Kingdom. However, prosopographic analysis of the elites of the time seems to indicate that a *z3-nswt*

⁸ DUNHAM and SIMPSON (1974: 13) note that this figure and its caption are not carved in relief, so they may have been a later insertion. See also <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/ancientpeople/560/full/> (accessed 28 March 2023).

n htꜣf is not necessarily a biological son of the king.

The example of Meryteti, introduced above, is illustrative, as he is captioned as both son of Mereruka and king’s son in the chapel. On the south wall of room C3, an inscription reads *iri-pt mry zꜣf smsw n htꜣf mryꜣ imꜣhw hr ntr ꜣ shꜣ hmw-ntr mn-nfr-ppi zꜣ-nswt htꜣtiꜣ mry-tti*, ‘the *iri-pt* Mery, his eldest bodily son whom he loves, revered one before the great god, inspector of priests at ‘the perfection of Pepi endures’, king’s son, *htꜣtiꜣ* Meryteti’ (DUELL, 1938: 5, pl. 88)⁹ where *n htꜣf* refers back to Mereruka, who was a non-royal married to a daughter of king Teti (BAUD, 1999: 467, dossier 83).

An even more eloquent case may be that of Seshathetep Heti, an official from early Dynasty 5 whose career progression can be traced along different monumental inscriptions during his life (KANAWATI, 2002: 11–30; GREEN, 2022). Even though there is no evidence that he or his wife were related to the king, he was first presented as a *rh-nswt*, then as a *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* and chief of royal works, and finally as a *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf smsw* and vizier (SCHMITZ, 1976: 73–75; BAUD, 1999: 576–577, dossier 219). This example seems to confirm that *n htꜣf* should not be taken as an expression of biological kinship, and that it should instead be interpreted as a title denoting rank and hierarchy.

In her aforementioned study of the role of ‘king’s sons’, Bettina SCHMITZ (1976: 65–79) remarks on the length to which other authors, such as Junker, need to go to make their understanding of ‘king’s son’ as a biological son of the king fit with the evidence. Instead, she argues that there is reason to believe that ‘king’s son’ did not denote a genealogical son at all. First, she points out that not all the children of the king receive the title, as shown by the example of Ankhesenmeryre and her sister, one of whom is designated as *zꜣt-nswt* while the other is not (SCHMITZ, 1976: 137–138; BAUD, 1999: 141–148, 426–429, dossiers 37 and 38). Second, there are cases in which non-biological children also receive this denomination. An example of this may be that of Meresankh III, who is the daughter of a woman who then married a king, yet Meresankh is said to be *zꜣt-nswt nt htꜣf* (BAUD, 1999: 461–463, dossier 76). In this case, what is essentially an adoptive relation is presented as a ‘bodily’ one. Third, a number of individuals referred to as *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* do not appear to have been members of the royal family, as shown by the case of Seshemnefer (III), owner of mastaba G 5170, who received the title *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* when he was promoted to vizier (STRUDWICK, 1985: 139–140; BAUD, 1999: 577–578, dossier 220). SCHMITZ (1976: 168) concludes, on the basis of evidence such as Seshathetep’s inscriptions mentioned above, that *zꜣ-nswt* is a title expressing hierarchy and, more specifically, that *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* should be understood in relation to expeditions and construction works, while *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf smsw* may be linked to tasks related to the vizier.¹⁰ These individuals would not be ‘real’ princes, but ‘titular’ princes.

Detlef FRANKE (1983: 308) also provided a brief discussion on the title *zꜣ-nswt*, noting that its use for non-royal individuals is well-known since the Old Kingdom, although it became more evident from the Middle Kingdom onwards. In this context, Franke suggested that the title was originally reserved for biological children of the king (‘leiblichen Söhnen des Königs’), going on to denote a close relationship of dependency and subordination with the king through kinship terminology.

Michel BAUD (1999: 162–189) reassessed the titles *zꜣ-nswt* and *zꜣt-nswt* in his prosopographic approach to Old Kingdom royal families. He (1999: 182–185) admitted that there is evidence to support that a *zꜣ-nswt* was not simply a son of the king, but probably a title related to career advancement. In addition, BAUD (1999: 159–160) observed that *n htꜣf* is rarely featured in private statements of kinship, which could confirm that its main usage is related to administration. Along these lines, it would make sense to understand *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* as a title with no bearing on family connections. However, he also noted that Schmitz’s clear-cut rejection of a genealogical understanding of *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* needs to be nuanced, because it is impossible to separate office, hierarchy, and kinship in these sources. In a recent article, Gemma GREEN (2022: 105) argues that there is no

⁹As with *iri-pt* (see fn. 4 above), *htꜣtiꜣ* is a high-ranking title often translated as ‘prince’ in the Old Kingdom and connected with the royal entourage. On this title in the Old Kingdom, see STRUDWICK (1985: 307–312) and BAUD (1999: 257–259). See also WILLEMS (2013: 360–381) for a discussion on the interpretation of this title as ‘nomarch’, or ‘mayor’ in later sources.

¹⁰See also table summarising Schmitz’s ideas in BAUD (1999: 166, table 10).

compelling evidence that individuals unrelated to the royal family held these titles in the Old Kingdom, and that the expression $z\text{:}nswt\ n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ should be construed as ‘descendant of the king’. This is certainly a possibility in line with the more encompassing meaning of $z\text{:}$ as ‘lineal descendant’ (see below). Be that as it may, the nature of the relationship here is less important than the way in which it is perceived. For example, **BAUD** (1999: 184) argues that the relationship, even if it is not that of a ‘real’ father-son, is modelled on father-son relations. This phrasing illustrates some of the problems that we often encounter in scholarship when analysing relatedness, namely the assumption that some relationships are more ‘real’ than others, which, in practical terms, translates into biological approaches to kinship.

Indeed, Schmitz, Franke, and Baud all used the body as a proxy for biology—and hence ‘real’ kinship—in the context of their work. For example, **SCHMITZ** (1976: 44) claimed that it is impossible to separate a ‘son’ from a ‘bodily son’ because they are the same thing, suggesting that only a biological son is a ‘real’ son. **FRANKE** (1983: 308) proposed that the title denoted a biological son of the king before its meaning was extended to non-royals. For his part, **BAUD** (1999: 188) stated that $n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ is simply a ‘lien du sang’, transposing to ancient Egypt a correlation between blood and kinship that is essentially Eurocentric (**OLABARRIA**, 2018). The implication here is that a biological relation, conveyed through bodily connections, is somehow more real than one that is not labelled as such.¹¹ It is a moot point, however, to try and determine whether someone was ‘really’ someone else’s child, especially if we favour a performative approach to kinship: the rights and duties ascribed to a given title, in this case $z\text{:}nswt\ n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$, may have existed irrespective of any supposed biological relationship, and those duties may be as ‘real’ as supposed ‘blood links’. Rather than assuming that kinship was a pre-requisite to a function, it may be that performing that function contributed to constructions of relatedness.¹² In this sense, the obsession with biology—and the interpretation of $n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ as marking a biological descendant—denotes more about our own biases and body worlds than about how the Egyptians perceived relatedness.

Arguably the main reason why this aspect is such a constant concern in modern scholarship is that we tend to interpret those ‘bodily’ connections as a means to determine legitimacy. Here we may recall one of the most salient examples of the use of $n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ post-Old Kingdom. In the literary text *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, a transmission of offices is being discussed and presented along the following lines: $i\text{:}r\text{:}tw\ dt\ t\text{:}i\text{:}wt\ n\ sn\ n\ mwt\ iw\ z\text{:}n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$, ‘is it to the mother’s brother that the office should be given when a bodily son stands?’ (P. Chester Beatty I, 4,6–4,7, **GARDINER**, 1931: pls iv–iv.a). Although $z\text{:}n\ h\text{t}$ has been interpreted here as ‘legitimate heir’ (**BROZE**, 1996: 45–46), it is clear that it is being contrasted with the other possible successor to the throne of Osiris, hence recognising that other options apart from a $z\text{:}n\ h\text{t}$ were conceivable. This passage is foregrounding the positionality of Horus as a son in this game of succession; all things being equal, someone who occupies a position of son may be preferable, but the passage does not claim a bodily connection as the only possible means of legitimation (**PEHAL**, 2018: 152–157). Instead, there are other complementary ways in which (Osirian) succession can be actualised; for example, in terms of a violent competition for power that overrides any considerations of genealogical rights (**BAQUÉ-MANZANO**, 2017: 27–30). While it is true that an individual was a nominated heir and that this was often an eldest son (**ASSMANN**, 1976; **ALLAM**, 2010), there is no evidence to assume that a position in succession was conceptualised exclusively on the basis of a biological conception of the body.

Overall, through the example of $z\text{:}nswt\ n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$, I have argued that an understanding of $z\text{:}f\ n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ as a ‘biological son’ and hence a ‘legitimate heir’ illustrates some of the problems encountered when we study relatedness in ancient societies. First, it reproduces interpretations of kinship associated with modern notions

¹¹Another example is provided in the work of Lisa **SABBAHY** (2021: 64–65), who claims that $n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ could be added in royal titles in Dynasty 4 to indicate belonging to ‘the royal bloodline’ and to stress ‘the actual son or daughter relationship’ (my emphasis).

¹²This performative approach to kinship can also be seen, for example, in relation to inheritance. Focusing on New Kingdom sources, Reinert **SKUMSNE** (2022: esp. 227–230) demonstrates that different people could act as the ‘eldest son’ and be made heir in place of the biological eldest son. Their right to inheritance was determined through their satisfactory fulfilment of duties, such as ensuring proper burial or supporting their relatives in old age.

of biological relations based on the notion of ‘blood’, which are transposed onto conceptualisations of the ‘body’. Second, it also assumes that legitimacy must be established on a biological basis. Such interpretations lead to a reductionistic reading of what it meant to be related and says more about our own practices of kinship than about those of the Egyptians.

4 The term *z3* and the pitfalls of paterno-filial relations

The contexts of use of *z3fn ht3f* in the Old Kingdom and the case study in reference to king’s sons show that we should not take its meaning for granted: neither is it used exclusively for sons and daughters nor is it clear that it refers to a rightful heir. So if a ‘bodily son’ is not a ‘biological son’—and hence a legitimate heir—what is it? In her work, Marilyn STRATHERN (2020) highlights the history of construction of meaning of certain terms, arguing that an epistemic approach to social classifications can help elucidate the implications of their main uses. A similar perspective can be applied to this interpretation of ancient Egyptian expressions of relatedness: in this case, by inferring epistemic connections between terms, it may be possible to unpack the meaning of phrases such as *z3fn ht3f*. In the following sections I propose to examine its components in turn in order to attain a more nuanced understanding of the expression within its cultural setting. Following Bruno LATOUR (1987), we are looking into the ‘black box’ of *z3fn ht3f* to determine what it may have meant from an emic perspective.¹³

The first element to be analysed is the term *z3* and its female counterpart *z3t*, which are conventionally translated as ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ respectively. This rendering, however, is an oversimplification of a more complex concept: in anthropological terms, *z3* refers to lineal descendants, such as children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren (OLABARRIA, 2020: 63–67). Above I have alluded to GREEN’s (2022) discussion of how a *z3-nswt* could potentially be a grandchild of the king, hence providing a neat explanation for apparently anomalous examples such as that of Nefermaat, who received the title *z3-nswt n ht3f* even though he was the son of a daughter of king Snefru (STRUDWICK, 1985: 110) This reading, however, confirms an interest in framing this relationship in terms of ‘real’ versus ‘fictitious’ kinship, but I suggest there may be other ways of understanding the role of *z3* if we use a performative approach.

Kin terms in ancient Egyptian have been argued to display metaphorical extensions that stretch the role of kin types to other social relations outside the nuclear family (FRANKE, 1983: 302–311; WILLEMS, 1983). Within this interpretive framework, the term *z3* has been understood by some scholars to adopt the meaning ‘subordinate’ as a metaphorical extension of its basic meaning of ‘son’. For example, in a previous section I allude to BAUD’s (1999: 184) argument that a ‘father-son’ relationship should be regarded as the core of this bond, so non-biological instances of *z3-nswt* would be understood as ‘fictitious’ kinship.¹⁴ While this approach recognises the pervasiveness of kin relations, it is problematic in that it assumes that ‘son’ (rather than ‘subordinate’) should be regarded as a primary meaning, arguably because being a son is mediated by biology, and hence ‘real’, while being a subordinate is artificially modelled on paterno-filial relations.

This privileging of father-son relations in the construction and interpretation of relatedness is not unique to Egyptology. STRATHERN (2020: 29) voices her concern that filiation too often becomes exemplary of other kinds of relations, which are weighted against it in an exercise of frontal comparison (CANDEA, 2018: 242–250). In this context, she discusses the incisive work of DE PINA-CABRAL (2017: 172–180), who criticises how Anglo-American philosophers treat all relations as akin to paternal filiation. Recognising the Eurocentric assumptions that this comparison implies, STRATHERN (2020: 28) refers to it as a ‘logical scandal’. Along the same lines, rather than modelling ancient Egyptian kinship on our own paradigm, it may be better to take Egyptian sources seriously and interpret relatedness within its own ancient context.

¹³On multi-scalar historical patterning and the use of black-boxing to assess the concept of body worlds, see HARRIS and ROBB (2013: 28–29 and 222–226).

¹⁴See also e.g. CANNUYER (1993) on fictitious and ‘spiritual’ kinship.

As seen with the example from *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* above, kinship in ancient Egypt is to some extent based on positional hierarchies, which are also reflected on the uses of the terminology. Thus, here the term *z* is not only expressing a paterno-filial relation, but it is also highlighting the hierarchical positioning of two individuals. Whether those individuals’ kinship is ‘real’—understood as biological—matters less than the performative relation of subordination that the term conveys.

5 The body and the torso

The second main element to note is of course the concept *ht*, which is used to qualify the relationship expressed by means of the term *z*. In this context, the hierarchical position of a person as a *z* is mediated by the way in which *ht* is understood. There are mainly two renderings that tend to be used for this term, and they are both slightly inaccurate.

First, the term *ht* is sometimes used in relation to the sky goddess Nut in religious and ritual texts, where the deceased is born from the *ht* of the goddess.¹⁵ For example, the sarcophagus of Teti features the following recitation by the goddess Nut: ‘Teti is my son, whom I caused to be born and who parted my belly’ (Pyr. 1a; trans. ALLEN, 2015: 70). Here the journey of the deceased through the netherworld is likened to the cosmological daily journey of the sun across the sky, with the body (*ht*) of the sky goddess Nut becoming a safe and protective space for the deceased (ASSMANN, 2005: 164–176) These and similar usages of the term *ht* have led some authors to favour ‘womb’ as a possible translation, but this suggestion is highly problematic.

In his discussion on ideas of predestination and fate, Frank MIOSI (1982: 78–79) notes some of the problems associated with rendering *ht* as womb. He argues that the existence of the concept of fate—in the sense of a set of arbitrarily destined actions assigned by a god before birth—is dependent on the understanding of *ht* as womb, and this is often illustrated for the Old Kingdom in reference to some passages from *The Teaching of Ptahhotep*. He demonstrates that, when the term is translated as ‘belly’ instead, those passages no longer support the idea of predestination, hence showing the impact that an assumed translation may have on scholarly interpretations. Translating *ht* as womb also poses problems when it features a masculine possessive pronoun, as in the case of *z:ḥn ht:ḥ*. Arguably even more contentious are those passages in which there is no clear indication of gender, yet a reference to the mother is presumed due to the assumption that the term refers to the womb. For instance, a fragment from *The Teaching of Ptahhotep* (P. Prisse 19,3–19,5: ŽÁBA, 1956: 64) reads as follows:

Behave so that your master may say of you, ‘How well he was brought up by his father by whom he was begotten of his body (*ḥ:w:ḥ*). (Surely) he spoke to him while he was still completely within the womb (*ht*), for what he has accomplished is more than what he was told’ (trans. V. A. Tobin, in SIMPSON, 2003: 148).

In the original text, only the relation from father to son is being discussed,¹⁶ yet the translation of *ht* as ‘womb’ alters the meaning of the section, shifting the focus to the role of the mother. In his translation for the *TLA* ↗, Dils opts for the rendering of *ht* as ‘(Mutter)leib’, literally ‘(mother’s) body’, acknowledging that the reference to the mother is not present, but still assuming that it may be implied.

One could argue that the translation of womb would be contextually correct in some instances, so it should be kept when a text is clearly referring to a woman giving birth to provide a more idiomatic translation. However, this may potentially lead to mistaken assumptions because the rendering ‘womb’ could incorporate gendered differences into our translations that are not present in the original sources. For example, FRANKE (1983: 298) notes how an identification of *ht* and womb has led to a flawed interpretation of *ht* as a matrilineal

¹⁵The deceased may also be said to ‘come forth’ (*pri*) out of Nut’s *ht*; see BILLING (2002: 33–37; 2020).

¹⁶*pr.n:ḥim:ḥnt ḥ:w:ḥ dd.n:ḥn:ḥi:w:ḥm ht r:w*

kinship group in some publications (on *ht* as a group, see section 6 below). Further contexts of use of *ht*—discussed in the next paragraph—reveal a much wider range of meanings than what womb may manifest. In this sense, I agree with James WALKER (1996: 108), who, in his study of ancient Egyptian anatomical terminology, stated that translating *ht* as womb should be avoided because it is ‘erroneous, misleading, and totally superfluous’.

Another common translation that is often found for *ht* in Egyptological scholarship is ‘body’, which has certainly influenced the rendering of *z:f n ht:f* as ‘his bodily son’. At first sight, ‘body’ seems to be a relatively neutral term, and, unlike womb, it would work for all sexes. Despite the apparent convenience of this translation, it presents some ambiguities, as *ht* could strictly speaking mean ‘torso’, ‘abdomen’, or ‘belly’ rather than the whole body as we understand it (for a discussion of different schemata related to *ht*, see NYORD, 2009: 68–86).

The literary text known as the *Contendings between the Body and the Head* provides fascinating insights into this terminological issue. It is a humorous text preserved on a writing board (tTurin CGT 58004) that has been convincingly dated to late Dynasty 20 to early Dynasty 21 on linguistic and palaeographic grounds (DI BIASE-DYSON & STOCK, 2023; DI BIASE-DYSON, 2023). In it, the Body (identified as female) takes the (male) Head to court to determine who has supremacy over the other. The Body argues that she should prevail due to her command over the limbs, listing some body part functions as proof of her authority.¹⁷ In this text, the term *ht* is used for Body, and the translators recognise the uncertainty around this rendering (DI BIASE-DYSON & STOCK, 2023: fn. 16; DI BIASE-DYSON, 2023: fn. 2) but they keep it because in the text the Body clearly presents herself as ruling over the limbs. However, the ‘limbs’ that are mentioned include the eye, mouth, nose, ear, arm, and forehead,¹⁸ some of which we might assume should be part of the Head. It may be that in the bottom half of the text, which is now lost, the Head would argue that it was actually him who held supremacy over those parts, or perhaps the term *ht* was indeed ambiguous in scope, and Egyptians played with that vagueness in this comical account.

Terminological studies based on texts related to healing practices or anatomical lists show a preference for *ht* as referring more specifically to the torso rather than the whole body (WALKER, 1996: 105). Other literary texts also seem to favour the meaning of torso or belly. A common expression to indicate bowing refers to people placing themselves on their *ht*, such as in *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* (e.g. P. Hermitage 1115 67–68: BLACKMAN, 1932: 43, 10; PARKINSON, 1998: 93), which brings attention to the most salient characteristic of this posture (i.e. that the belly touches the ground when one is prostrated). There are also mentions of an empty *ht* to signify hunger or a full belly when one is sated (B1 325: PARKINSON, 2005: 41; PARKINSON, 1998: 72), as well as the need of a good man to ‘fill the belly’ of those he protects (P. Prisse 10,9: ŽÁBA, 1956: 42; PARKINSON, 1998: 257).

All of these examples show that *ht* refers to the middle section of the body, so a translation like ‘belly’ or ‘torso’ may be more anatomically correct. This would mean that a literal rendering of *z:f n ht:f* could be ‘his son of his torso’. This is certainly not an elegant translation, neither am I suggesting that we should take the expression at face value. Instead, it is important to further unpick what the term ‘torso’ meant for the Egyptians in order to determine what role it played in the qualification and characterisation of social relations.

6 A collective *ht*

In the previous section I have argued that, while *ht* is sometimes translated generically as ‘body’, it may refer more specifically to the torso. A magical spell from the New Kingdom gives us an interesting insight into this

¹⁷‘My eye sees into the distance (lit. sees in distancing itself), the nose can breathe and draws breath, the ear is receptive (lit. open) and hears, the mouth articulates (lit. shouts) and makes (lit. finds) its response, and the arms are controlled (lit. clever) and render service’ (trans. DI BIASE-DYSON & STOCK, 2023: 237).

¹⁸Interestingly, neither legs nor feet are mentioned in this context.



Fig. 4: Depiction of Nut at the Temple of Dendera. ©A. G. E. Hood.

term. This spell describes how the practitioner will transform into a fly and enter into a *ht*, from where they will have an advantageous view of the inside of the torso: *iwꜣi (r) ꜥꜥ htꜥk m ꜥꜥꜥ mtwꜣi mꜣꜣ htꜥk m-ḥnwꜥꜥ*, ‘I will enter your belly (*ht*) as a fly and then I will see your belly (*ht*) from its inside’ (oArmytage [= oUppsala, VM Inv. 2364], spell 2, lines 7–8; **BORGHOUTS** (1978: 1–2)). It is clear from this and other fragments that the *ht* is understood as a hollow receptacle.

On the basis of anatomical lists, **WALKER** (1996: 105–106) argues that the organs, including the heart, are meant to be contained inside the *ht*. Excrement is also said to originate from the *ht* (**LANDBORG**, 2021). In his work on conceptions of the body in the *Coffin Texts*, Rune **NYORD** (2009: 68–78) reprises this idea of the *ht* as a container, noting that it could also house more conceptual elements such as power, the *ka*, love, awe, fear, beauty, or even supernatural beings who may be responsible for causing an illness. Overall, there is evidence to confirm that the *ht* was conceptualised as a container.

As seen above, the *ht* can also contain babies—hence the inaccurate translation of ‘womb’—and, symbolically, the sun and the deceased as they traverse Nut on their daily journey, as shown in the depiction of Nut at the Temple of Dendera (Figure 4). In some of Nut’s representations on the ceilings of tombs or temples, as well as coffin lids, her torso is populated with stars, clearly indicative of the sky (**RUSCH**, 1922: 14–22; **BILLING**, 2002: 13–24).¹⁹ Deriving from this context, the term *ht* can also be used metonymically as ‘constellation’. Already since the *Pyramid Texts*, there are examples of *ht* being used to refer to a group of stars that has at times been identified with the gods, particularly the Ennead. For instance, PT 528 includes a reference to how the *ht* of the Ennead is placed on the divine barque onto which the king will mount upon his death (**SETHE**, 1908: 205, 1250e; **ALLEN**, 2015: 169).

¹⁹See also **MORALES** (2016: 155–161) for a discussion of the important role of the decan stars and star-clocks within groups of texts, often inscribed on coffins lids, dealing with the protection of the deceased by the goddess Nut.

The translation of ‘constellation’ is not the only example of how the term *ht*, with its nuance of a receptacle containing an array of elements, can also acquire a collective meaning. The aforementioned literary composition of *The Contendings between the Body and the Head* refers to how the *ht* was seen as an entity that would rule over other limbs, hence implying a collective. In other examples, *ht* clearly assumes the meaning of a group of people.

Some instances of *ht* from the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom seem to designate a group of people living at the same time, possibly a generation.²⁰ For example, the stela of Hetepi from Elkab is a self-presentation text of the First Intermediate Period that relates the owner’s military prowess (GABRA, 1976). A few lines of the inscription are devoted to Hetepi’s kin, with mentions of a paternal grandmother and a maternal grandfather. Line 7 states that his wife gave birth to twelve members of a *ht*, without any further indication about how they related to Hetepi. This notion emphasises the generative aspect of *ht*, also providing a link between ideas of the body and temporality.

The *Teaching for Merikare* supports this rendering, since it states explicitly that one *ht* comes after another among people (P. Moskow 4658, 8.3: HELCK, 1977: 58, xxxv; PARKINSON, 1998: 225). Similar expressions, with almost identical wording, occur in so-called harpists’ songs of the New Kingdom as well. For example, the song on Papyrus Harris 500 emphasises the cyclical nature of the passing of generations (P. British Museum 10060, 6,3: SIMPSON, 2003: 332), something that is arguably also the focus of a passage in the Middle Kingdom literary text of *The Words of Khakheperreseneb* (P. Leiden 344 rto 6: GARDINER, 1909; PARKINSON, 1998: 146). In addition to *ht*, there are other terms that denote social groups with a temporal dimension. For example, *h:w* refers to a collection of elements around an individual, which can acquire temporal, spatial, animated, and materials meanings depending on the context, genre, and period of the source (CHANTRAIN & WINAND, 2018: 6–10). Overall, here we see a combination of two senses of temporality within the notion of *ht*: on the one hand, the idea of succession and generative reproduction; on the other, the focus on one specific moment when a group of people co-exist.

In his detailed study of kinship terminology, Detlef FRANKE (1983: 298) translated *ht* as ‘Körperschaft’ (‘corporation’), in a rendering that itself contains a reference to the body. The examples surveyed do not specify how all the members of a *ht* are related to each other and whether the body effectively plays any part in their relationship, but Franke takes that corporality as evidence of their connection. Perhaps time was as important as embodiment in the constitution of this social group, while the mention of the ‘torso’ was meant to give a material dimension to those relations. In different cultures, ‘blood’ has been used as a metaphor to indicate kinship (OLABARRIA, 2018: 92–93), and many languages contemplate the idea of ‘flesh’ in a similar sense.²¹ STRATHERN (2020: 37–40) notes how these corporeal entities belonging to the physical world are meant to give a tangible aspect to kinship, which is essentially intangible. Perhaps the fact that the term *ht* merges perceptions of ‘body’ and ‘time’ might be a comparable effort that grants a material dimension to an immaterial characterisation of relatedness, but it is worth remembering that ideas of intangibility and materiality will be culturally specific. Be that as it may, this example is a good reminder of how there are different ways of understanding the articulation between embodiment and relatedness in modern and ancient cultures, namely within different body worlds.

In addition to this focus on time, the usage of *ht* in Middle Kingdom literary texts also exhibits a preoccupation for hierarchy. *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* reflects on the futility of a *ht* without a ‘great one’ (B1 220–221; PARKINSON, 2005: 31; PARKINSON, 1998: 67) while *The Loyalist Teaching* highlights how a worthy leader will be trusted by his *ht*, who will tell him all their concerns (CG 20538, l. 3: LICHTHEIM, 1973: 126; LEPROHON, 2009). These examples seem to rely on positional hierarchies, in a similar fashion to what I have argued for *z*: above.

²⁰ An earlier use of *ht* as a collective is known from the *Pyramid Texts*, where *ht tpt* refers to a ‘first generation’ of gods; see FRANKE (1983: 296), BAQUÉ-MANZANO (2017: 27–28, fn. 99).

²¹ STRATHERN (2020: 37–40) describes how blood replaced the medieval concept of flesh as the main agent of a generation.

In summary, it seems that *ht* could refer to a contemporaneous group of people whose head was considered a figure of authority. Going back to *z:f n ht:f*, I would argue that temporality and subordination are essential traits that need to be considered in any analysis of its meaning.

7 Generic relations within *z:f n ht:f*

In the previous sections I have focused on *z:* and *ht*, which are arguably the most prominent elements of this expression. However, there are other components that I have not discussed yet, namely the genitival *n* and the suffix pronouns.

First, the genitival adjective *n* provides a nexus between the two terms explored so far. It can be translated as ‘belonging to’ or simply as ‘of’, and it implies a connection between two nouns, one of which acts as the head noun (*nomen regens*; usually the possessed) and one as the dependent noun (*nomen rectum*; usually the possessor). Through this syntactic construction, a narrow relationship between the two nouns is being conveyed, where the *z:* is qualified by the *ht*. Instead of referring to all their lineal descendants, attention is drawn to those who belong to a group that exists in a given moment in time.

Second, the *f* is a deictic that highlights a relationship: crucially, this suffix pronoun is relating both the *z:* and the *ht* to a third person, hence focusing our attention on him as a protagonist of this expression. In the example of the mastaba of Kaninisut shown above in Figure 1, those individuals captioned as *z:* or *z:t* are also represented in smaller scale to that of the mastaba owner, so that our attention—both linguistically and visually—is drawn to the man on the right, while those people represented around him could be regarded as a measure of his greatness. In this context, perhaps *n ht:f* could be interpreted as a reflexive linguistic device along the lines of *ds:f* (‘himself’). If this is true, *ht* would be qualifying a person’s individuality rather than the nature of the relationship. STRATHERN (2020: 70) identified relations as an ‘in-between’ space that connects persons, while also supporting their individuality. Interestingly, in the case of Egypt that individuality would also be reinforced through relations and expressed through a reference to one’s torso, which draws our attention to different body worlds.

In her analysis of the term ‘relations’, STRATHERN (2014: 13) acknowledges the difficulty inherent in imagining the worlds of the inhabitants of England in the 17th century through a ‘backwards glance’, and the consequences that this has when it comes to assessing terms nowadays regarded as ‘generic’. Strathern argues that some terms had different degrees of explicitness, and some of them could be regarded as generic ‘Goldilocks’ terms—neither too explicit nor too general. But those general terms in their ‘vagueness’ could potentially be more precise than others, because flexibility would convey the meaning of the concept much better. For example, STRATHERN (2014: 10) notes how the term ‘kinsman’ was often used without exact knowledge of how a connection was traced. It may be that the nature of the relationship expressed through *z:f n ht:f* was not immediately evident to Egyptians themselves either, or that it was so multifaceted that it was better rendered through a generic term or expression.

The problem remains how such a generic yet culturally specific, vague yet incredibly nuanced phrase can be translated. When we render *z:f n ht:f* as ‘his bodily son’, we run the risk of conveying ideas about biology and legitimacy because they happen to be relevant to our own body world. In this context, we need to recognise the distinct interpretational frameworks from which these relationships arise. VIVEIROS DE CASTRO (2004) addressed this puzzle through the notion of ‘controlled equivocation’, which is not only a methodological approach but essentially a political stance that requires researchers to take the other seriously by recognising their different ontological perspectives. HOLBRAAD and PEDERSEN (2017: 185) provide an insightful summary: ‘if the economy of anthropological inquiry is constituted by ontological divergences, it is also an economy of misunderstandings. Within the language game that is at issue here, then, “the anthropologist” and “the native” do not so much disagree with each other (...) as constitutively talk past each other’.

Hence, **VIVEIROS DE CASTRO** (2004: esp. 16–20 on the term ‘txai’) uses the idea of ‘controlled equivocation’ as a heuristic tool to understand concepts that are as culturally unique as kinship terms. No translation can ever provide an entirely satisfactory reflection of terms or concepts with all their nuances, which is why his method requires an exercise in comparison that should be ‘in the service of translation and not the opposite’ (**VIVEIROS DE CASTRO**, 2004: 5), which is what I have attempted to do in this article. It may not always be possible to provide extensive descriptions in Egyptological scholarship, but it is essential that we problematise translations like ‘his bodily son’ in order to raise awareness about the conflicting perspectives that we are facing in our academic work. As **CANDEA** (2018: 261–266) nicely articulates, the point is not to provide an adequate translation but ‘to keep the equivocation live by forcing the reader to confront the alterity of a conceptual world’ in which relatedness could be expressed through the body, time, hierarchy, individuality, and the in-between space of interpersonal relations.

8 Conclusion

In this article I have used the expression $z_3:f n \underline{ht}f$ as a case study to explore ideas about kinship and bodily experience, both in ancient Egypt and in Egyptological scholarship. The phrase is used mainly during the Old Kingdom, becoming much rarer in later periods. This may be seen as a terminological fad, or perhaps it may point at a change in the perception of contemporary body worlds.

The kin term z_3 refers to lineal descendants rather than simply to sons and daughters. It also encodes a relational hierarchy that clearly expresses a connection of subordination between two or more individuals. The term \underline{ht} is notably difficult to translate. Although usually rendered as ‘body’, it probably refers more specifically to the torso, conceptualised as a receptacle. By extension, it can acquire a collective meaning, including denoting a group of people, and it can also be used as a means to define one’s identity. Both together, they make up an expression that has been seen in scholarship as a representation of a biological—and hence legitimate—relationship, but that should probably be interpreted more accurately as an embodiment of hierarchy. The use of the suffix pronoun as a possessive indicates the leading role in this asymmetrical relationship, where the primacy of an individual is expressed by means of their positional relatedness.




To say that one was a $z_3:f n \underline{ht}f$ does not imply a biologisation of kinship relations (that is only our bias when reading the text), but rather an identification of a relation between two individuals that encompasses a complex and nuanced understanding of ancient body worlds. Different conceptions, practices, and experiences of the body may coexist at any given time, but we should always avoid projecting our own body worlds inadvertently into the past. As shown, the expression $z_3:f n \underline{ht}f$ goes beyond a reductionistic view of the physical body, and it can be used to highlight individuality through a focus on relatedness that is conveyed through the conceptual vehicles of time and hierarchy.

9 Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback to help me strengthen my argument and improve this article. I am also grateful to my co-editors and to all workshop participants for making *Egyptology in Dialogue* such a thought-provoking event.


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