

Some notes on the female *ka*-servant in the Old Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The iconographic repertoire of the Old Kingdom tombs seems to show that the funerary cult during this period was developed by an important number of people that were able to hold a wide variety of titles. Among those, there is one that looms as particularly frequent: the *hm-k3*. Usually known as the *ka*-servant or *ka*-priest, this title is almost omnipresent in Old Kingdom tombs. His main function was to satisfy the necessities of his deceased lord by providing his funerary cult with all kinds of offerings. However, in order to ensure the proper functioning of the cult and its supply, they also developed functions in the management of the properties allotted to its finance. The service of the *ka* was considered by ancient Egyptians as a communitarian system composed of several members, including women also. This circumstance makes the *hmt-k3* one of the few female ritualists in the Old Kingdom. In this paper, I have aimed to shed light upon the position of the female *ka*-servants in relation to their male counterparts. By using both iconographic and textual sources, the paper aims at understanding what women's means of access to the *ka*-servant office were, what responsibilities they held and what rights they enjoyed. The most limited occurrence of the *hmt-k3* in the sources seems to reveal a preference for men above women, and an assistance role for the latter. Despite this situation, we also find evidence of females reaching powerful positions inside the hierarchical structure of the *ka*-service, consequently one can suggest that, once inside the institution, women had similar rights to those of men.

KEYWORDS

ka-servant – funerary cult – female priest – priesthood – Old Kingdom

بعض الملاحظات على خادمة كا خلال الدولة القديمة

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ملخص

يبدو أن المناظر المصورة على جدران مقابر الدولة القديمة تُظهر أن الطقوس الجنائزية خلال تلك الفترة قد تم تطويرها بواسطة عدد من الأشخاص المهمين الذين حملوا مجموعة واسعة ومتنوعة من الألقاب. من بين تلك الألقاب يلوح في الأفق لقب بشكل خاص، وهو لقب *hm-k3*، والذي يُعرف عادةً بـ خادم أو كاهن الكا، وهو موجود تقريباً بجميع مقابر الدولة القديمة. كانت وظيفة حامل هذا اللقب الرئيسية هي تلبية احتياجات سيده المتوفى من خلال تقديم جميع أنواع القرابين المتعلقة بالطقوس الجنائزية. وعلى الرغم من ذلك، ومن أجل ضمان استمرار تلك الطقوس وقرابينها، تم أيضاً تطوير بعض الوظائف الأخرى في إدارة الممتلكات المخصصة لتمويل تلك القرابين. حيث اعتبر المصريين القدماء خدمة الكا نظاماً اجتماعياً يتألف من عدة أعضاء، بما فيهم النساء أيضاً. وهكذا يجعل هذا الأمر *hmt-k3* واحدة من الوظائف الدينية القليلة التي عملت بها النساء في الدولة القديمة. في هذه البحث استهدف إلى تسليط الضوء على وضع حاملات هذا اللقب من النساء ومقارنتهن بنظرائهن من الرجال. ومن خلال الاعتماد على كل من المصادر المصورة والنصية، يهدف البحث إلى فهم وسائل النساء في الوصول إلى وظيفة خادمة الكا ومسؤولياتهن والحقوق التي تمتعن بها. ومن خلال المصادر المتعددة نكتشف أن العدد القليل لنساء حملن لقب *hmt-k3* أساسه هو تفضيل الرجال عن النساء في تلك الوظيفة، حيث عملت النساء كمساعدات للرجال. على الرغم من هذا الوضع نجد أيضاً دليلاً على وصول النساء إلى مناصب قوية داخل الهيكل الهرمي لخدمة الكا، وبالتالي يمكننا اقتراح بأنه بمجرد دخول النساء للعمل في تلك الوظيفة يتمتعن على الفور بحقوق مماثلة لحقوق الرجال.

الكلمات الدالة

خادم الكا – الطقوس الجنائزية – كاهنة – كهنوت – الدولة القديمة

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Fig. 1 Family group of the *ḥm-k3* Impi in tomb QH 25–26 (photo R. Fernández Ruíz, edited by P. Mora)

The funerary cult of the Old Kingdom was mainly developed by the *ka*-servants. This title was generally held by men and also, to a shorter extent, by women. In this paper I intend to analyze the female side of the *ka*-service institution in order to determine the situation of women in relation to their male counterparts. Based on a study of both iconographic and textual sources, it is the aim of this paper to understand what means of access to the *ka*-servant office women had, what responsibilities they held, and what rights they enjoyed.

The *ka*-servant² is one of the most common titles attested in the Old Kingdom.³ Almost all the tombs of the period incorporate this type of officiant among the figures depicted on their walls. Given the absence of iconographic elements that allow for unambiguous identification of the *ka*-servants, the presence of texts is essential to establish, beyond any doubt, the association of an individual with that particular group. Although most of the depictions where one identifies the *ka*-servant are associated with episodes of worship and ritual activities,

there exist also some other scenes that represent its role as a member of the deceased's household. Accordingly, it could be implied that the primary role that the community of *ka*-servants exercised would have been to satisfy the needs of the deceased through cultic performance and the delivery of his offerings. However, they seem to have had far-reaching responsibilities linked to the management of the properties and goods designated for the deceased's cult.⁴

As we will see below, both iconographic and textual sources suggest that the service of the *ka* was considered by ancient Egyptians as a communitarian system composed of several members, including women. It is precisely the female grouping of the institution which is the focus of the present paper. Unlike their male counterpart, the *ḥmt-k3* has a far less common presence in the sources, both in number and in the diversity of activities she could exercise. Despite this factor, the *ḥmt-k3* is extremely interesting since it is one of the few female ritualists attested in the Old Kingdom.⁵

² For attestations of the title, see Jones (2000: 176–179, 292–293, 591–593, 943–945).

³ The title, translated as *ka*-priest, *ka*-servant, and funerary-priest, has been traditionally considered as the officiant of the funerary cult that was regularly performed in the necropolis. Among others, one can see Montet (1925: 384–408); Reisner (1934: 2–12); Kaplony (1965 and 1980); Allam (1985: 1–15); Seyfried (2003: 41–59); Romanova (2007: 117–131); Sánchez Casado (2017: 101–116; 2019a: 137–145; 2019b).

⁴ The participation of the *ka*-servants in scenes of “presenting the scroll” and “rendering accounts” can be interpreted as a testimony to their participation in the management and inspection of the properties allotted to maintaining the funerary cult (see Sánchez Casado 2019b: 171–178).

⁵ The priestly title most frequently associated with females is that of priestess of Hathor, but female members can also be identified/found in the cult of other gods (see Hannig 2003: 813–818). Within the funerary sphere the most frequent feminine title is that of *drt* (see Fischer 1976: 39–50).

First, if one looks at the textual compositions that regulated the Old Kingdom funerary domains,⁶ one might surprisingly notice that in most cases the *ka*-service – as an institution – is understood as a group of male and female officiants. This point can easily be attested, for instance, in the inscription of a certain official of the necropolis of Khaefre, who Hans Goedicke suggested was Kaemneferet (Goedicke 1970: pl. 5), in the funerary disposition of Senuankh (Goedicke 1970: pl. 8), and in the composition of Nebkauhor (Goedicke 1970: pl. 9). In these three cases, the hieroglyphic group D31 (𓄳) is followed by the group A1-B1-Z2 (𓄳𓄳𓄳), identifying it as a combined group of men and women. Even clearer is the inscription on the false door of Tefhai, where the masculine and feminine groups are unmistakably distinguished in two separate words (Goedicke 1970: pl. 17b). By contrast, one can find similar texts where the use of the A1 determinative – repeated three times for plural – is preferred (𓄳𓄳𓄳). For instance, one can refer to the case of Nyankhkhnum and Khnumhotep (Moussa – Altenmüller 1977: fig. 11). Another remarkable case is the so called “disposition of Lisht”, found on an Old Kingdom block reused in a Middle Kingdom structure, now unfortunately lost (Goedicke 1970: pl. 12). In that case, one can observe the contrast between the writing of two titles that showed the hierarchy of the *ka*-service institution, the *shd hmw-k3* and the *imy-ht hmw-k3*, both written with the repetition of A1, and the *hm-k3* itself, written with the A1-B1-Z2 group. It seems that, at least in this case, the female *ka*-servants were intentionally excluded from the hierarchical positions. Regardless, one should understand that the *ka*-servants in the Old Kingdom were seen as a group that might have contained women.

Now, we should ask the question of how a person became a *ka*-servant. It seems clear that in most cases the role of the *ka*-servant was assigned by the owner to trusted people among his circle of relatives and professionals. This election should be understood, then, as a form of reward. A *do ut des* relationship would then be established, with owners who would benefit from the worship services and, at the same time, servants who would acquire the right of usufruct of the properties allotted to sustaining the worship. Accordingly, we cannot disregard, in any case, the possibility that a certain tomb owner decided to designate a female as part of his staff of *ka*-servants.

An alternative to be remarked on was designation by inheritance. At this point we should go back to the texts to find what the regulations said about the inheritance procedures in the office of the *ka*-servant. For instance, in the already mentioned disposition of Senuankh (Goedicke 1970: pl. 8, line 1), one can read: “Regarding these *ka*-servants of the funerary estate together with their descendants and the descendants of their descendants to be born of them eternally, they are

the ones who shall perform the offering service in this tomb of the funerary state”.⁷

One may notice that in this text the determinative that accompanied the *hm-k3* title indicates a combined group of masculine and feminine members. Much more restrictive is the text of Nebkauhor (Goedicke 1970: pl. 9, columns 10–16): “Regarding any *ka*-servant of the funerary state [...], who go to another service [...] and do not come to do for me the service of the month [...], they shall give an excellent son [...] as me myself did, as soon as it happens [...]

If they do not come to make for me the service of the month [...] they shall bring their dependents or their wives...”

In this example, the text indicates that, in the case that a particular *ka*-servant failed in the performance of his tasks, he should provide an excellent son to replace him. This condition introduces a certain preference for the male to the detriment of the female. However, the text also indicates the possibility of offering a dependent or a wife, so here there is also the possibility for women to have access to the *ka*-servant position; this is to say, as substitutes for their husbands. The text of Nikaankh also evidences a similar practice,⁸ indicating that the office should not be given to any other relative but a son (Goedicke 1970: pl. 15, columns 1–2): “I do not allow any man therein to give what I have given to them as deed of transfer (*imyt-pr*) or as a present to any of his relatives, except if a son appears, he will give it to him”.

Although being quite restrictive in the case of his own funerary estate, in another text Nikaankh divides among thirteen people the cultic duties in the temple of Hathor, Lady of Rainet, and the funerary cult of a certain Khenuka (Goedicke 1970: pl. 14). In such a distribution, there are involved twelve males – nine sons of the deceased, and three priests – and also one woman, Nikaankh’s wife, Hedjethekenu. By doing this, Nikaankh provided his sons and wife with a rent proceeding from the temple and funerary domains, presumably for the purpose of ensuring their welfare after his death. The same aim can be observed in another text, the composition of Tjenti, who put his wife in charge of his funerary cult and the one of his mother (Goedicke 1970: pl. 5, columns 1–11): “As for the funerary offering brought for me from the King’s House consisting of grain and clothes, it is my wife, the King’s acquaintance, Tepemneferet, who will do the offering service therein”.

If we make a quick recapitulation of the information given by the funerary dispositions, one can note that female members enjoyed three main ways of accessing the office of *ka*-servant: 1. by designation of the tomb owner; 2. by inheritance, most probably due to the lack of a male heir; and 3. by designation of their husbands or in substitution of them. One can establish, then, that the legal mechanisms for women to obtain the position

⁶ For the legal texts regulating the funerary domains, see Goedicke (1970).

⁷ The translations of the texts have been made by the author (see Sánchez Casado 2019b).

⁸ For the tomb of Nikaankh and its texts, see Thompson (2014) and Willems (2013: 241–262).

| Source | Scene | Dynasty/ origin | Reference |
|---|---|---------------------|----------------------------|
| False door of Nefernesut | Three <i>hmwt-k3</i> bearing baskets on their heads. No other titles. Names included. | V / Giza | Hassan 1936: fig. 94 |
| The two false doors of the tomb of Kapi | Three <i>hmwt-k3</i> holding offerings. No other titles. Names included. | V / Giza | Roth 1995: pl. 164 |
| West wall of the tomb of Djati | Two <i>hmwt-k3</i> : one acting as an offering bearer; the second making bread. The first is also designated as <i>snt.f</i> , no other title for the second. Names included. | V / Giza | Simpson 1980: fig. 41 |
| False door of Ineferet | Two <i>hmwt-k3</i> holding what seems to be a goose. No other titles. Names included. | V-VI / Giza | Schürmann 1983: fig. 18 |
| Fragments of the tomb chapel of Weta | Three <i>hmwt-k3</i> bearing various offerings. No other titles. Names included. | V-VI / Giza | Borchardt 1937: 167 |
| East wall of the tomb chapel of Wehemka | A <i>hmt-k3</i> in a procession of offering bearers. No other titles. Name included. | VI / Giza | Kayser 1964: 37 |
| False door of Kawedja | A <i>hmt-k3</i> depicted on the sides of the central panel of the false door, not performing any cultic activity. She is also designated as <i>z3t.f</i> . Name included. | V / Saqqara | Borchardt 1937: pl. 15 |
| False door of Rahotep | A <i>hmt-k3</i> bearing a basket on her head and a bovid foreleg on her shoulder. No other titles. Names included. | V-VI / Abusir | Verner 1994: fig. 9 |
| Tomb chapel of Ptahhotep | Six <i>hmt-k3</i> in a procession of offering bearers. No other titles. Names included. | V-VI / Saqqara | Mariette 1889: 315 |
| Tomb chapel of Manefet | A procession of offering bearers entirely composed of <i>hmwt-k3</i> . No other titles. Names included. | V-VI / Saqqara | Rosellini 1834: pl. 84 |
| False door of Kanefer | A <i>hmt-k3</i> following a male <i>ka</i> -servant, holding undetermined offerings. No other titles. Name included. | IV / Dahshur | James 1961: pl. 10 |
| West wall of the tomb 13, Nykaankh | Three registers –unfortunately almost lost– where one identifies a <i>hm-k3</i> and a <i>hmt-k3</i> in each of them. No other titles. Names included. | V / Tehneh | Fraser 1902: pl. 5 |
| Tomb chapel of Wenumin | Four registers of offering bearers, with both male and female members. A vertical inscription identifies the action as made by the <i>hmw-k3</i> (<i>in hmw-k3</i>). No names. | VI / El-Hawawish | Kanawati 1982: fig. 26 |
| Tomb chapel of Hezimin | A <i>hmt-k3</i> carrying birds standing behind a male <i>ka</i> -servant that is offering the bovid foreleg in front of the deceased's offering table. She is also designated as <i>dt.f</i> . Remains of a name? | VI / El-Hawawish | Kanawati 1986: pl. 3 |
| Tomb chapel of Pepiankh Heqaib | A <i>hmt-k3</i> holding a tray with a piece of bread and a vase. No other title. Name included. | VI / Qubbet el-Hawa | Edel 2008: pl. 35, scene 4 |
| Tomb chapel of Senenu | A <i>hmt-k3</i> bearing a tray with bread and holding a bird by its wings. No other titles. Name included. | VI / Qubbet el-Hawa | Edel 2008: pl. 69, scene 1 |

Tab. 1 List of the iconographic occurrences of the *hmt-k3*

were similar to the ways for men, but that there was a common preference for male officiants.

If one turns now to analyse the evidence attested in the iconography, one will quickly realize that the sources are far more limited than the ones for their male counterparts.⁹ This is manifest not only in terms of amount, but also in the range of activities shown in the iconographic repertoire. While the *ka*-servants are depicted doing a wide variety of tasks that range from agricultural activities to the cultic performance, the female members seem to appear mostly as offering bearers. The most important examples of the *ḥmt-k3* in the iconographic record are presented in tab. 1.

Most of the listed examples show the *ḥmt-k3* as an offering bearer. Despite this factor, some examples need additional comments, on account of their rarity. It is the case of the procession in the tomb of Wehemka, where one can observe two registers of offerings bearers, one composed of male participants and the second one constituted by female ones. Only one of the depicted individuals bears the title of *ka*-servant, and it is, curiously, one of the female members (Kayser 1964: 37). Another similar example is the tomb of Ptahhotep, where Mariette noted the existence of a procession of offering bearers in which only the female members hold the title of *ka*-servant (Mariette 1889: 315).

The most unusual case was registered by Ippolito Rosellini in the tomb chapel of Manefer (Rosellini 1834: pl. 84). There, one can see a procession of offering bearers entirely composed of *ḥmwt-k3*. This unique case seems to be inspired by the processions of funerary domains, but instead of the caption with *ḥwt* or *niwt* names, the caption includes the title of *ḥmt-k3* for each of the bearers.

Notwithstanding these remarkable examples, the functions that we can assign to the *ḥmt-k3* based on iconography are mostly the carrying or cooking of offerings. Unlike their male counterparts, we do not find the *ḥmt-k3* participating in more relevant tasks like the rituals in front of the altar, the offering of the most significant products, the presentation of the scroll, and taking part in scenes of rendering accounts.

No doubt, the absence of the *ḥmt-k3* in the sources is as interesting as her presence. This circumstance becomes more evident in the necropolis of Qubbet el-Hawa, which presents a very compelling case for the study of the *ka*-servant. Based on the extant evidence, one can reconstruct the families of *ka*-servants that were in charge of the funerary cult of the Old Kingdom officials in the first nome of Upper Egypt. Although many women are depicted on the walls of the tombs in this necropolis, only in the two already noted examples do they hold the title of *ḥmt-k3*. In most cases, the female members follow their husbands or fathers, without bearing a title. By contrast, in some of the cases, their sons or brothers do hold the title, a situation that seems to reveal that the title used to pass from

father to son, excluding women from this process of inheritance. Some cases are particularly relevant, like the scenes in the tomb of Mehu and Sabni (QH 25–26) with Ienkhenet and his family, whose son Mehu holds the title, but not his wife and two daughters (Edel 2008: pl. 2, scene 5). The same can be discerned in the cases of Khuui and Sasef, where one notices a similar situation, with male members bearing the title but not the female ones (Edel 2008: pl. 3, scene 6; pl. 7, scene 13). Even in the case where no male child is depicted, like in the family group of the *ḥm-k3* Impi, the female members do not bear the title of *ḥmt-k3* (fig. 1). Another interesting example comes from the tomb of Sobekhotep (QH 90), where the *imy-r ḥmw-k3* Sobekhotep is depicted together with his wife, three sons and one daughter (Edel 2008: pl. 63, scene 3). Only one of the sons is designated as *ka*-servant; interestingly, due to his position in relation to his brothers, he does not seem to have been the eldest son. This circumstance may indicate that the title was not always given to the eldest son, like the funerary regulations seem to state, and other alternatives may have also existed.

The examples from the tombs of Qubbet el-Hawa recall the phrase that one finds in the funerary regulations, especially in the aforementioned inscription of Nebkauhor (Goedicke 1970: pl. 9), which seems to establish the preference for a male heir. These scenes also demonstrate an assistance role for the families of the *ka*-servants. Probably, all of them worked in the cult and profited from the revenues, but it was only the head of the family who held the title.

One interesting case that can also speak about this assistance role for the female in relation to the *ka*-servant comes from the tomb of Tepemankh II. There, in a market scene, a woman buys an alabaster vase, explicitly stating that it is for the *ka*-servant (Livingstone-Thomas 2011: fig. 10).

It is also worth mentioning that women are not usually depicted in the long rows of anonymous *ka*-servants that decorate the walls of the big mastabas in Saqqara, such as, for example, that of Ty (e.g. Steindorff 1913: pls. 100–104). As one can observe in the attestations shown in tab. 1, the *ḥmt-k3* is usually identified with her name and title. The absence of women in these highly idealized processions of offering bearers can also be evidence of the preference for the male candidate over the female one, even when depicting the archetype of a well provided funerary cult.

Faced with the already quoted examples where women seem to have had a secondary role and to have been excluded from the inheritance process, we also take into account sources that contradict this contention. One can cite, for instance, the case shown at the tomb of Iabetet at Giza, where the *imy-r ḥmw-k3 K3i* is depicted with his sons, who are also designated as *ka*-servants with no distinction between male and female children (Junker 1929: fig. 51). The same circumstance

⁹ The database that the author prepared for his Ph.D. thesis contains 766 entries, of which fewer than 20 contain depictions of *ḥmwt-k3* (see Sánchez Casado 2019b).

arises on the lintel of Ankhtef, with two daughters following their three brothers, all of them designated as *ka*-servants (Hassan 1944: fig. 87). The inscription of the *hmt-k3*, Pepi, is also a convenient example (Goedicke 1970: pl. 11b), since her father, Thenty, was also a *ka*-servant, and it is highly possible that she inherited her position directly from him.

Of central importance for this discussion are the cases of the mother and wife of the *imy-r hmw-k3 mwt nswt*, Akhethotep. Like him, Peseshet, who was most likely his mother, held the title of *imyt-r hmw-k3 mwt nswt*, as well as the one of *imyt-r zwnw pr* 𓆎. Also his wife, Nikauhathor, was a *hmt-k3 mwt nswt* (Hassan 1932: 73–86). The most interesting aspect of this example is that one might put forward the possibility of understanding Akhethotep having inherited his title of *imy-r hmw-k3 mwt nswt* from his mother. This circumstance could indicate that a female *ka*-servant could have had the right of bequeathing her position to a son. The case of the *hmt-k3* Djedunen, in relation to her son Iunka, can also be proof of the same phenomenon (Lepsius – Sethe – Wreszinski 1897: 19).

Another interesting aspect that highlights the case of Peseshet is that she had a high status inside the institution of *ka*-servants, being the *imyt-r hmw-k3* of a royal mother. That case would prove that a female, although infrequently, could also hold management positions within the funerary cult. Another female that held the title of *imyt-r hmw-k3* was Nykauhathor, depicted on the false door of Uta (Borchardt 1937: 167).

In a nutshell, we must conclude that the institution of the *hmw-k3* during the Old Kingdom is composed mostly of men, but also of women, who were able to get access to the office of *hm-k3* by their own right or by inheritance, although there was a solid preference for the male candidate. The iconographic repertoire from the tombs of the major Old Kingdom necropoleis seems to show that they fulfilled accessory tasks, but also that, in some cases, they reached powerful positions. Once inside the institution, it seems that they enjoyed the same right to transmit their office to their sons as their male counterparts did.

The study of the few female priestly titles in the Old Kingdom appears as an interesting approach to understand the social role of women, their capacity to access relevant positions inside the government, cultic and economic structure, and their right to bequeath their positions to their sons. There also exist other interesting aspects that need to be further examined, such as the level of literacy among these female officiants and how the rules for maintaining ritual purity would affect women. These and other aspects reveal interesting ways of research for understanding the role played by women in the Old Kingdom society.

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