


REMARKS ON THE FOUR RENENUTETS IN THE TEMPLES OF EDFU AND DENDARA

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During the Greco-Roman period, a transformation of the old goddess Renenutet is observed in Egyptian temples, consisting of her multiplication into four distinct, though very similar deities. The ancestral function of Renenutet, as a variant of the uræus cobra, is as a keeper of divine linen and other precious artifacts, a provider of food and abundance, and a fierce guardian of households. As such, her presence in the temples of other deities is not surprising as the very well-informed and refined theologians of the Greco-Roman period trusted her with the temple's wealth and prosperity. However, multiplication of Renenutet into four deities is significant, and is the focus of this paper.

As a note, this paper uses the name Renenutet, though in many cases the Ptolemaic spelling  could or even should be understood as Renenet, the personification of good fortune¹. Since the end of the Late Period, these two once distinct goddesses have progressively merged their functions and the spellings of their names. As a result, it is sometimes impossible to distinguish them in the inscriptions of the Greco-Roman period (Quaegebeur 1975: 152-153; Collombert 2007: 22). But in most cases the goddesses discussed herein are more closely related to the ancient “Lady of food” than with the abstract idea of fortune, though of course the two are intricately linked.

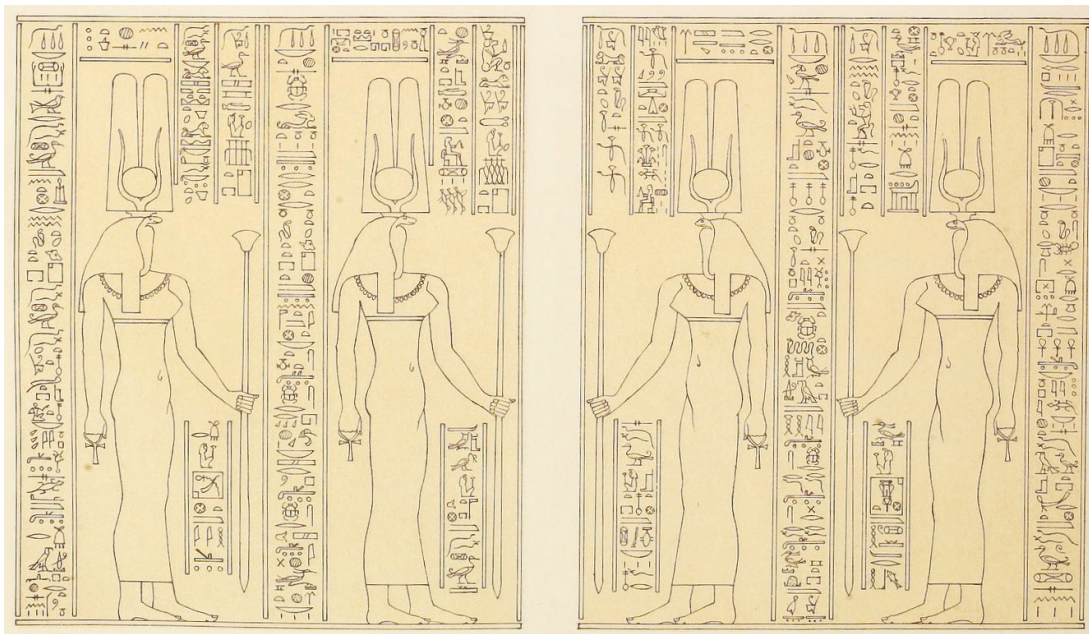



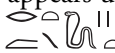
Figure 1. Dendara, West crypt No. 2: the four Renenutets on the west (left) and east (right) walls of the passage.

A late multiplication

Prior to the Greco-Roman period, Renenutet already served as a multiple deity, making her multiplication possible. Several landmarks and buildings host their own Renenutet, slightly different from the next one since she is specifically appointed to the welfare of one delimited area (Yoyotte 1961: 203-204). Yet very few texts explicitly acknowledge the existence of multiple Renenutets. Examples of such texts include a Ramesside magical papyrus invoking “all the Renenutets of the city-dwellers [*Rnnwt nbt nt njwtyw*]” (papyrus Leiden 347, X,3; Quaegebeur 1975: 164; *LÄGG* IV: 690), and the Mammisi of Edfu, in which Ptolemy VIII says: “the Renenutets (are)

1 In the same way, we transliterated *Rnn(wt)t*.

behind me, carrying their food [*Rnnwtwt m-htzj hr k3w=sn*]” and “the Curled Ones (are) at my back, carrying their provisions [*mhnwt hr-szj hr df3w=sn*]” (E Mammisi: 7,8 and 11,1-2, pl. XIV). In these two texts, three strokes behind the name of the goddesses imply plurality. And in the Mammisi, the number needs no precision since four cobras are depicted behind the king, as two pairs in two symmetrical scenes.

A clearly defined group of four Renenutets is not firmly attested before the Ptolemaic period. The first occurrence of the four Renenutets may be in the London Medical Papyrus, written under the reign of Amenhotep III (14th century B.C.), in which four characters called  (*t3 4 Rnwt*) are said to come carrying clothes or garments (Leitz 1999: 53, pl. 26, l. 5). It is possible that this text could refer to the four Renenutets since the goddess has been a provider of linen since the Old Kingdom (Mougenot 2014: 145-152). But the only unquestionable mention of the four Renenutets as a group appears under the reign of Ptolemy XIII (51-47 BC), in the southern crypts of Dendara, where  “the four Renenutets [*Rnnwtwt 4*]” bring divine fabrics (Daumas 1951: 388, 391 n. 4). The similarity of the situations may argue in favor of the similarity of the characters. Still the spelling of the name in the London papyrus would be quite unique for Renenutet under the 18th dynasty (Collombert 2007: 26). This argument and the very broad chronological gap between the two mentions make this identification very uncertain.

A tale of two temples

The four Renenutets are mostly, if not exclusively observed in the Ptolemaic and Roman reliefs and inscriptions of Edfu and Dendara². Although Renenutet is often mentioned in many sites of the Greco-Roman period (*LÄGG* IV: 686-692), these temples seem to share all the recorded occurrences of the group of four. This commonality is not surprising, since these two sanctuaries and their theologies share a strong link based on the intimate relationship between their primary deities, Horus of Edfu and Hathor of Dendara (Cauville 1990: 12-13). This close bond has repercussions on the cults and the decoration of the two temples.

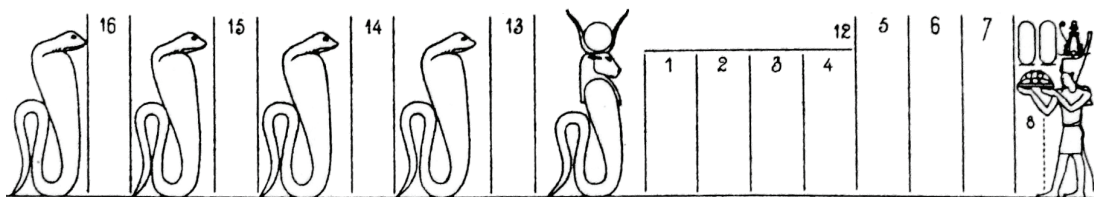


Figure 2. Dendara, lintel of the gate of the Treasury: the four Renenutets as cobras behind a cobra-bodied Hathor

In many cases the four Renenutets appear in similar places inside the two temples, mostly where their action as food providers and wardens of treasures is most needed: the Treasury [1, 2], the Chamber of garments [7, 8], and the New Year Festival court before the *wabet* [3, 4]. These three spaces are liturgically connected and this explains the recurrence of the four Renenutets in their decoration (Baum 2007: 181, 186-187), as in the western underground crypts of Dendara [5] where liturgical implements were probably stored in connection with the New Year court (Cauville 1990: 55). The four Renenutet also appear in the Mammisis or birth-houses of the two temples [12, 13]. While the exact depictions of the goddesses and the scenes in which they appear are not exactly the same between the two temples (figs. 2 and 3), they are part of the meaningful iconographic program of those annexes.

For instance, the similarities are remarkable in the New Year Festival court of the two temples. In Dendara, two Renenutets are depicted on either doorjamb of the gate, each standing in front of

2 Given the limited amount of cases, we have added a list of occurrences with dates, iconographies, names and bibliographical references (see below). In the following, bold numbers into brackets refer to this list.

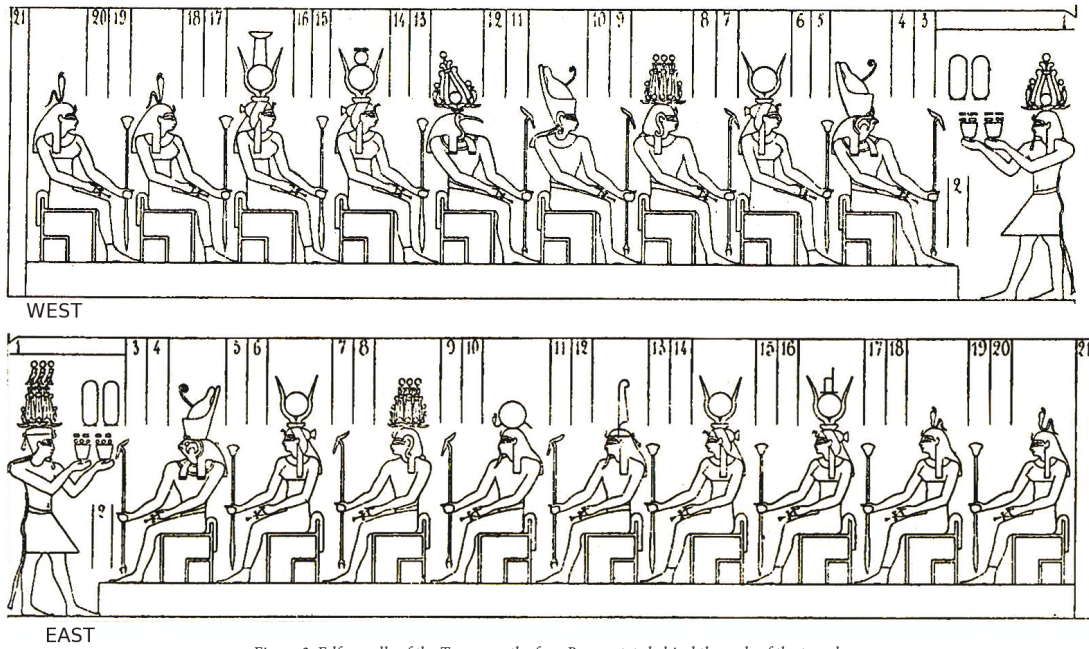


Figure 3. Edfu, walls of the Treasury: the four Renenutets behind the gods of the temple.

the masters of the sanctuary (Hathor, Isis, the sun...), offering them food and precious stones and minerals [4]. In Edfu, the four Renenutets hold a slightly different and less prominent position in a row behind the king, who is making offerings to Horus and Hathor, on the lintel of the door between the New Year court and its southern annex (fig. 4) [3]. More precisely, they are depicted on the inside of this annex, where libations, incense and ointments were prepared (Baum 2007: 183), which is in the path of the officiant entering the court – as on the gate in Dendara. It should be noticed here that in both temples, the goddesses are not receiving any offerings but are bringing them to the primary deities, along with or instead of the pharaoh. Their presence make a lot of sense on the entering gateway to the New Year court. Indeed many offerings and precious instruments were brought there to celebrate the New Year with the masters of the temple (Cauville 1990: 60-61; Baum 2007: 181-183). In such circumstances and on this point of entry, the endorsement of the four Renenutets, keepers and providers of goods, is of great importance. This concept is certainly not new under the Ptolemaic rulers. It was previously manifested in a relief of Karnak from the reign of Tutankhamun, showing the “Lady of provisions” and Hapy on the outer wall of the Cachette court, where offerings coming from the storerooms and workshops near the Sacred Lake entered the holy precinct of the proper sanctuary (Barguet 1962: 273-274; Le Saout 1982: 244-245; Hovestreydt 1997: 192, 203).

If the presence of Renenutet in such rooms and scenes is simply justified by her role within the economy of the temple, her multiplication in the same contexts in the two sites may hint at

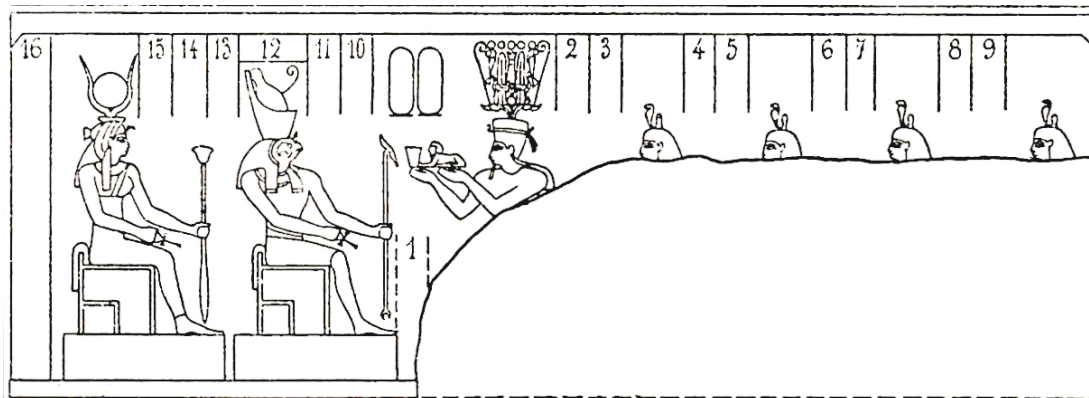


Figure 4. Edfu, lintel of the annex to the New Year court: the four Renenutets behind the king.

a common pattern or source for the decorators' work, whether drawing models or theological considerations. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that when the four Renenutets appear in the same rooms in Dendara and Edfu, the composition of the group is not always identical [1-2, 3-4, 7-8, 12-13]. Thus, even if the model were the same for the two temples, these variations demonstrate specific needs and maybe evolution due to time from one site to the other.

Group pictures³

The four Renenutets appear in ritual scenes and divine processions as four lined up figures (figs. 2, 4, 6) or, for symmetry sake, two pairs of characters distributed on parallel walls or doorjambs (figs. 1, 3, 5).

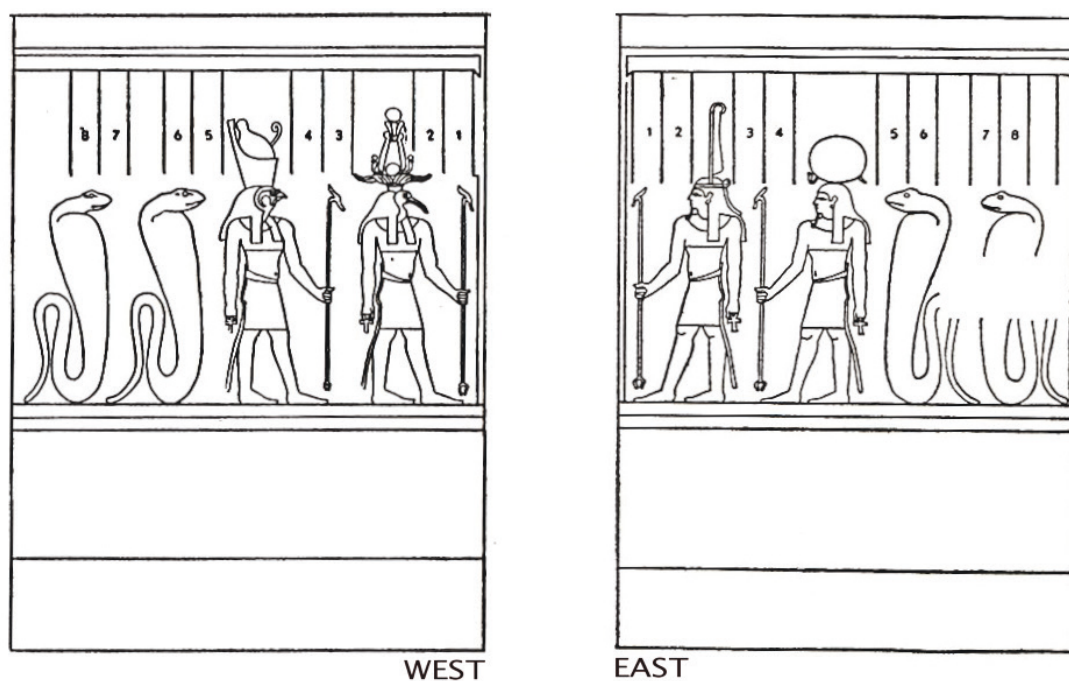


Figure 5. Dendara, West crypt No. 1: the four Renenutets grouped by pairs on each wall of the passage.

They can be depicted as four reared cobras (figs. 2 and 5), the ancestral guise of Renenutet (Broekhuis 1971: 11-32; Lacau 1970: 45), possibly with a human head, an iconography developed since the New Kingdom. Then they don't usually wear any headdress, whereas such practice was common during the New Kingdom. In other cases, the four Renenutets take the shape of cobra-headed women (figs. 1 and 6), a traditional appearance of the goddess since the 12th dynasty. On fewer occasions, they are depicted as fully anthropomorphic figures, a rare iconography first attested in the Middle Kingdom (Broekhuis 1971: 191; Reisner 1967: pl. LXXXIX). When human-bodied, they can wear the usual headdress of Renenutet, consisting of a combination of sun-disk, cow-horns and tall feathers (figs. 1 and 6). In the Treasury and on the gate to the New Year Festival court at Edfu, the goddesses are depicted as four women with a reared cobra at the top of their heads (figs. 3 and 4). This snake is here as an attribute, a reminder of the ophidian, dangerous nature of Renenutet, and not as the usual uræus snake shared by all the gods. This depiction may already have an early predecessor in the Middle Kingdom, on a relief from the temple of Senusret I at Lisht, where a long cobra is outstretched on the head and rises above the forehead of a totally anthropomorphic Renenutet (Metropolitan Museum, Inv. 09.180.40: Broekhuis 1971: 191). Thus nothing is new in the presentation of these four Renenutets, except for their multiplication.

³ See the iconographies in the list of occurrences in annex.

In the group of four, each Renenutet is depicted the same way as the others, making a row of four or two duos of cobras or women. Only details may vary, for unknown reasons. For example, in the passageway between two rooms of the western crypts in Dendara [6], the necklaces of the two Renenutets on the eastern wall and the braided hair of Renenutet-Serket are more detailed than those of their counterparts on the opposite wall (D VI, pl. DLX and DLXI). Yet the general similarity of shape and attributes show that the four Renenutets are only four versions of the same deity, whose individual personalities and specific purposes are expressed through their names, epithets and speeches.

Four goddesses, one name, many epithets

Beside their uniform appearance, the four goddesses share the same first name Renenutet. But while there is only a limited number of known variations, the four Renenutets are not always the same: the identities of one or two of the group members often differ from one occurrence to the next, to fit the ritual specificities of the rooms and the religious message of the scenes in which they are depicted.

— The Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of goods, *Rnnwt hntt hwt-ht* (12 occurrences⁴)

We know very little about that Mansion of the goods (*hwt-ht*) where one of the Renenutets holds a prominent position. The polysemy of the word *ht* does not clarify specific items, food or other materials and all that is used in rituals (Baum 2007: 184), and so the generic translation “goods” is assumed. Through her other epithets and spoken words, this Renenutet is presented as a provider of precious metals and riches [4, 6], seeds and cereals [6], and “all that exists [*wntt nbt*]” [5, 6] – which can be induced by *ht* without being specific to her.

What is more specific is that the expression *hntt hwt-ht* may derive from a very old epithet of Renenutet: *hntt h3t-ht*, which can be understood as “foremost in the finest goods”. The goddess wears this epithet under the 4th dynasty, in the title of one of her priests who is also a director of the Treasury in charge of the management of garments, food and fine products, and on a stela of the Middle Kingdom (Mougnot 2014: 154-155). Much later it is also applied to Nenu, a Heliopolitan version of Renenutet, on a monument of Nectanebo II (Yoyotte 1995: 664) before it is applied again to one of the four Renenutets in Edfu, under the reign of Ptolemy IV [14]. There, in a list of gods in the frieze around the sanctuary, the Renenutet foremost in the finest goods (*hntt h3t-ht*) is followed by the Renenutet foremost in the finest provisions (*hntt h3t-df3w*). In the same way, in many other scenes, the Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of goods (*hntt hwt-ht*) is followed by the Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of provisions (*hntt hwt-df3w*) [2, 4, 5, 6, 12]. This suggests a late fusion or shift between *h3t-ht* and *hwt-ht*, eased by the phonetic proximity of the two expressions.

— The Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of provisions, *Rnnwt hntt hwt-df3w* (11 occurrences⁵)

The Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of provisions doesn't seem to show any fundamental difference with her consort the Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of goods. Like her, she provides food [4, 9], cereals [6, 7], precious minerals [4, 6] and goods called *špsw* [1], *ht* [5, 7] or *df3w* [4, 9]. Given her specific domain of expertise, the *hwt-df3w*, her speech and epithets make a more significant use of the stem *df3*. For instance, in the western crypts of Dendara, she is the one “who endows [*sd3t*] her place with all things” [5], “the lady of food who increases the provisions [*df3w*]” and “the good provider [*df3t*] of the director of the storeroom” [6].

4 One should keep in mind that many figures and inscriptions are too damaged to identify the goddess and that some figures can have more than one epithet, which may alter these modest statistics.

5 Actually probably 12 occurrences – see [15]

Like the *hwt-ht*, the *hwt-df3w* seems to be an invention of the Ptolemaic period. On a relief from the funerary temple of Senusret I mentioned above, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Inv. 09.180.40), an old restoration had rebuilt the expression *hnntt [hwt-df3w]* behind Renenutet (Broekhuis 1971: 191). Still the remainders of the signs from which the words *hwt-df3w* were reconstructed are very scarce and the archives of the Museum provide no reason why the restorers made this choice⁶. Today the restoration has been removed. It is likely that the original expression was *hnntt h3t-ht*, the only epithet of Renenutet starting with *hnntt* known by the reign of Senusret I (see above), or maybe *hnntt h3t-df3w*. The title of “sealer of the finest provisions of the king of Lower Egypt [*hntmw h3t-df3w bjty*]” is attested for a director of the Treasury under the 4th dynasty (Hassan 1944: 142). Perhaps the expression *h3t-df3w* led to the invention of a *hwt-df3w* presided by one Renenutet in the later periods, as we have suggested above for *h3t-ht / hwt-ht*. Additionally, another director of the Treasury under the 4th dynasty, a priest of the Renenutet “foremost in the finest goods [*hnntt h3t-ht*]”, is also director of “the places of provisions [*swt-df3w*]” (Petrie, Murray 1952: pl. XIV; Strudwick 1985: 166, 283).

The expressions *hwt-ht* and *hwt-df3w* may refer to several parts of the temple in Edfu (and probably in Dendara): the Treasury and its vestibule, the Hall of offerings between the hypostyle hall and the vestibule of the sanctuary, the whole sanctuary or the New Year festival court (Baum 2007: 184-185). In any case, they are places where offerings are prepared or sanctified.

The Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of provisions and the one presiding over the Mansion of goods apparently form a duo. They appear together in most of the occurrences of the group [1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 (?), 9 (?), 11, 12, 13, 14], always as a pair, whether on opposite walls but in the same (second) position, or one behind another. Then the mistress of the Mansion of goods always comes first. And when the four Renenutets are lined up, those two are the last ones, always in the same order. On the gate of Isis in Dendara, the duo appeared on the gateway, even if the words *hwt-df3w* are missing now, with one goddess on each side [15]. Exceptionally, they are not accompanied by their two counterparts, and it seems then that they could have an independent role outside of the group – unless the two other Renenutets were depicted on a parallel, still unidentified monument.

— **The Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of garments, *Rnnwtt hnntt hwt-mnh3t***

(2 occurrences)

Contrary to the Mansion of goods (*hwt-ht*) and the Mansion of provisions (*hwt-df3w*), the Mansion of garments (*hwt-mnh3t*) has clearly been located within the temples and identified as the Chamber of garments, where the fabrics and clothes used in ceremonies were stored and blessed by the gods (Cauville 1990: 44; Baum 2007: 145-191).

It is only inside this room that the group of four Renenutets includes the one called “foremost in the Mansion of garments [*hnntt hwt-mnh3t*]” [7, 8]. At the same time, it seems one Renenutet is considered to be dwelling there permanently independently from the rest of the group. Indeed, in Edfu, a “Renenutet in / of the Mansion of garments [*Rnnwtt m / n hwt-mnh3t*]” is listed alone among the “gods of the Mansion of garments [*ntrw nw hwt-mnh3t*]” (E II: 25; see also D IX: 139E II, p. 25; see also D IX, p. 139). It is not surprising then that she should be one of the four Renenutets inside the very Mansion where she usually dwells, even if she has to replace or be assimilated to another, more frequent Renenutet. In Edfu, she takes the place of the flourishing Renenutet, who is otherwise the only member of the group to be always present (see below). And in Dendara, it is Renenutet-Serket who presides over the Mansion of garments.

⁶ We owe this information to Mrs. Adela Oppenheim, whom we would like to thank warmly for it.

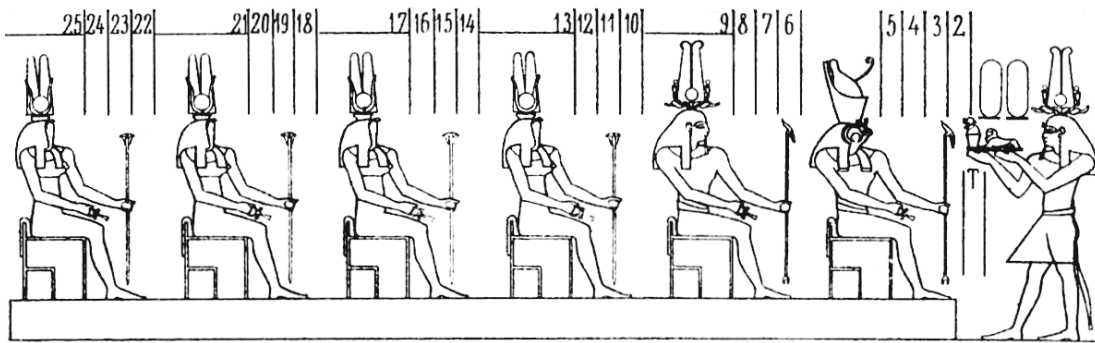


Figure 6. Edfu: the four Renenutets in the Chamber of garments.

— **Renenutet-Serket, *Rnnwtt-Srkt***

(6 occurrences)

Renenutet-Serket is a member of the group in only six cases, but her name must be eroded in several places where it would be expected [9, 10, 12]. She appears as a syncretic deity combining the “Lady of food” and the scorpion-goddess. As Erik Hornung (1982: 91-92) established, neither Renenutet nor Serket are dissolved in this new entity: in the frame of limited scenes and to the benefit of specific ritual needs, the scorpion-goddess enhances Renenutet’s attributions with her own powers and orients her action to her own area of competence.

The proximity between these two goddesses dates back at least to the Middle Kingdom, if not earlier. Together with Neith and Senedjet, they act as guardians of the deceased’s organs on canopic chests from El-Bersheh (Cairo, CG 4977 and CG 4980: Reisner 1967: 382, 383-384, pl. LXXXVII and LXXXIX). Later, an inscription from the reign of Sethy I in Abydos mentions a “Serket in the Temple of Renenutet [*Srkt m hut-Rnnwtt*]” (Mariette 1869: pl. 44, col. 27). More interestingly, a hymn from the Fayum, dating to the Middle Kingdom or the Second Intermediate Period, calls the uræus-goddess successively Renenutet, Wadjyt, “the One who holds her head up with a broad throat [*ḫt tp wsht ḫtyt*]”, Serket and “Seshenet rolled around the papyrus [*Sšnt snḫ.tw w3ḏt*]” (Barucq, Daumas 1980: 61-63). Thus Serket can be identified with the cobra-goddesses, which increases her innate power over snakes and dangerous animals (Spieser 2006: 93-95), a power transferred to the “charmners of Serket”, who are in charge of repelling poisonous creatures (von Känel 1984; Goyon 2012).

The only inscription giving some specifics about Renenutet-Serket’s action, (beside providing precious products and food [6]) reveals the exact same role. She is “the one who repels the reptiles and stops their movements toward the domain of the Noble Lady” of Dendara [5]. This is a usual function of Renenutet, “who locks up the reptiles within the limits of her domain [*’nbt ḏḏft m šn prs*]” (E VII: 269, 12-13) and who’s installed in the foundations of the temple to defend it from malevolent snakes (E III: 106, 8-10; Goyon 1985: 124-127). This role seems to be the same for other snake-genii until modern times (Sayce 1893: 529). Thus, adding the powers of Renenutet and Serket to create a combined deity is probably a way to double the defense of the sacred building against evil forces embodied by all dangerous and especially poisonous animals.

— **The flourishing Renenutet, *Rnnwtt w3ḏt***

(13 occurrences)

At first, it seems that *Rnnwtt w3ḏt* is a syncretic form of Renenutet and Wadjyt, the cobra-goddess mistress of Lower Egypt. But in all the inscriptions the word *w3ḏt* has no determinative, whereas the name of Renenutet always ends, as expected, with a reared cobra. In the expression “Renenutet *w3ḏt* foremost in the Domain of Wadjyt [*Rnnwtt w3ḏt ḫntt Pr-W3ḏyt*]” [4], the names of the two goddesses have a determinative pointing to female deities, and maybe more precisely uræus-deities, whereas *w3ḏt* does not. It is also the case when *Rnnwtt w3ḏt* appears outside of the group of four Renenutets and even outside of Edfu and Dendara (Sauneron 1968: 136, no. 251,25 and 240, no. 317,6).

became more significant. But it is less a specific epithet, like *hntt hwt-ht* or *wzdt* that refer to one specialized and localized aspect of Renenutet, than a quality of the goddess in general that is here underlined. It seems any Renenutet can be called *nfrt* [1, 6, 15], provided she shows the benefic attitude that characterizes the goddess of prosperity and the concept of good chance. The adjective insists on her benevolent aspect and summons the pacified version of the irritable cobra-goddess. A stela from Deir el-Medina, made by the sculptor Ken, clarifies this idea by invoking “the good Renenutet, the appeased one [*Rnmwtt nfrt htpyt*]” and calling for her mercy (Clère 1975: 73, 76). In all the cases where this “good Renenutet” is named, she is considered a provider of food and abundance, and it is the case in the Ptolemaic and Roman temples, especially when she is one of the four Renenutets. For example, she is “the one who floods the Place-of-the-Two-Gods with her goods [*b' hwt St-nrwy m htz*]” [3] and “who endows the temples of Upper and Lower Egypt [*sdjzwt jrtty*]” [7]. She herself states to Hathor: “(I) endow your place with food and provisions as well, and all good things are for you every day [*sdjz(z) stz m hw hn' djzwt ht nbt nfrt nzt r' nb*]” [11]. In the same vein, the scribes have made several variations on the stem *nfr*. She is “the good [*nfrt*] Renenutet who embellishes [*snfrwt*] Mesen (Edfu)” [3], or “who embellishes [*snfrwt*] the storeroom [*st-nfrt*]” [6].

Thus Renenutet can be compared with other “good” characters, like a good fairy favoring the temple, or a good genius (*agathos daimon* in Greek), a benevolent snake protecting the precinct and its riches. This is why we chose to translate *nfrt* by “good” rather than “beautiful” or “perfect”, to recall the idea of good fortune that Renenutet / Renenet tends to embrace during the Greco-Roman period, together with Shay / Agathos Daimon, another snake-genius (Dunand 1969; Quaegebeur 1975: 152-153 and 170-176). And indeed “the good Renenutet”, in many temples since the New Kingdom, acts side by side with other snake-deities⁹ as a provider of riches and a warden of prosperity.

All of the four Renenutets share that same function. In the texts, several of them are explicitly connected with a place called “the beautiful place” (*st-nfrt*) [1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10], a part of the temple where riches were stored (Wilson 1997: 949; Baum 2007: 184, 545, n.13), possibly the Treasury (traditionally called *pr-hd*). In the Treasury of Dendara, the Renenutet foremost in the Mansion of provisions is said to be “within the storeroom [*m-hnt st-nfrt*]” [2]. Maybe because of a meaningful assonance, the good Renenutet is often said to be a resident of that storeroom, an omen of abundance and wealth. In Dendara, one of the four Renenutets on the gate of the New Year court is “the good Renenutet foremost in the storeroom [*Rnnwtt nfrt hntt st-nfrt*]” [4]. In Edfu, Hathor promises the king “I give you arable lands until your granaries are full and the good Renenutet is in your storeroom [*rdjzj nzk zht r mh snwwtzk Rnnwtt nfrt m st-nfrtzk*]” (E VII: 251,6-7). And in the Chamber of garments, the good Renenutet announces “I enter your house, I settle in your storeroom, and I flood your Treasury with tributes [*kzj przk hmszj m st-nfrtzk b' hzj pr-hdzk m jnw*]” [7]. This sentence may evoke the attitude of a cobra who chooses the quiet, food-filled storeroom as its dwelling, where it is considered as the good genius of the building – a traditional role of Renenutet.

Four is efficiency

The four Renenutets have inherited the same traditional functions from the original Renenutet, who keeps existing on her own in the temples decoration and rituals. Their specificity is to gather several versions of the same preexistent deity. This is not a unique nor even a new phenomenon in the Ptolemaic Period. Other gods have undergone the same process (without even taking into account the duplication of some divine beings in the frame of the kingship of Upper and Lower Egypt): the seven Hathors are known since the 19th dynasty (Spieser 2011: 73-85), while the later

9 Especially the “good ‘h’-snake”, Weded, Saq-ha and Iri-denden (Habachi 1957: 105, pl. XL; E I: 287, 354; E VII: 30, pl. CLXIII-CLXIX), and of course the four Renenutets.

periods develop two Seshats (Budde 2000: 214-222), four Shays (Quaegebeur 1975: 151), four Meskhenets (Spieser 2011: 71-73), four Shepsets (Quaegebeur 1975: 158-159) and several others. At the same time the *quadrifrons* deities (Derchain 1972) and the theology of the four *bau* of gods like Banebdjedet (Renolds 2010: 124-128) know an unprecedented vigor.

The importance and significance of the number four in the Egyptian civilization is well known and has surely something to do with these multiplications. Four elements, often put in relation to the cardinal points, are frequently involved in the protection and the regeneration of gods, buildings or the deceased. Among many others, one can mention here the ritual of the four clay balls (Étienne 2000: 36-39), the four chests for linen used in ceremonies (Baum 2007: 148-149), the four bricks in the walls of the tomb and the four birth bricks (Roth and Roehrig 2002; Taylor 2010: 119-121), and four goddesses recurrently cited and pictured as protectors of the king, the deceased or the sleeper (Assmann 1972: 53 and 63 n. 31; El-Sayed 1982: 132-135; Szpakowska 2003: 212-222). The repetition of those characters multiplies their efficiency by four, especially by applying their action to every side of a thing and orienting it to the four cardinal directions, which symbolize the whole universe. Thus there is no lack of coverage in the protection of a building or of a person and no failure in the ensuring of their prosperity. Thus the quantity of goods brought by Renenutet (from the four corners of the world?) is multiplied by four.

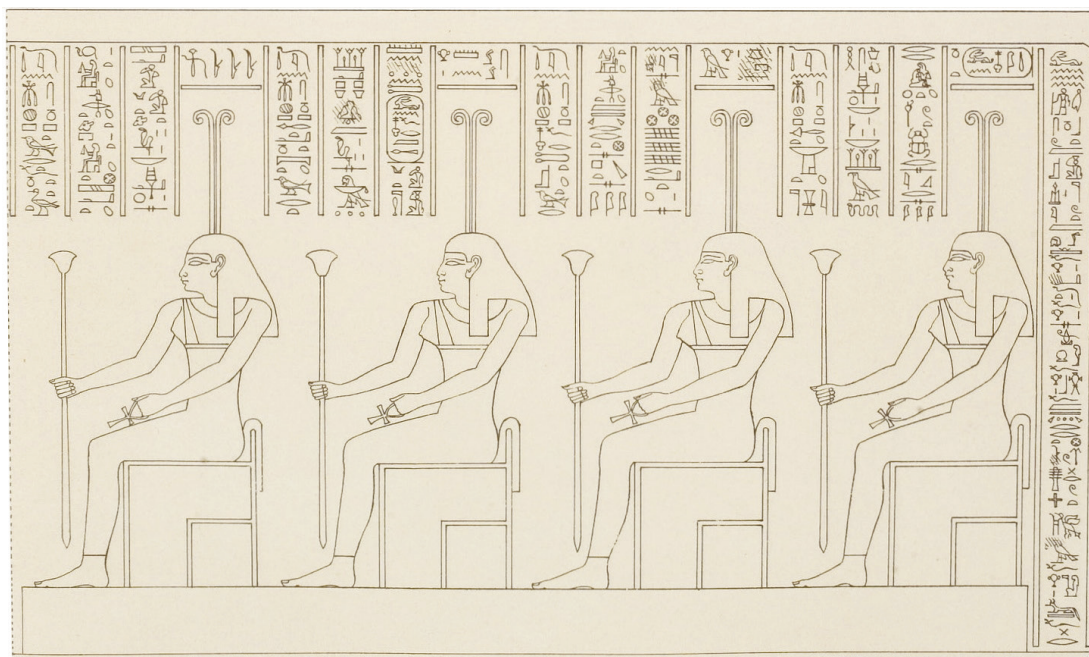


Figure 7. Dendara: the four Meskhenets.

The four Renenutets are also closely connected with the four Meskhenets, goddesses of birth and rebirth, personifications of the four bricks used by women in labor (Spieser 2011: 71-73).

In the Mammisis of Edfu and Dendara, the two groups echo each other on the gates of side chapels [12, 13]. Together with the four Rerets, the four Renenutets and the four Meskhenets are also paired two by two in the frieze on each side of the sanctuary of Edu, among all the gods of the temple [14]. And the two Renenutets depicted on the gate of Isis in Dendara [15] come with two Meskhenets, and together they are probably linked with the “place of nativity” (Cauville 1999: 50-51 and 303-304, pl. 58-58). This proximity between the divinities of childbirth and the goddess of prosperity can be explained by the late assimilation of Renenutet with Renenet, the personification of the individual’s fortune that starts at birth (Quaegebeur 1975: 152-160).

It is very significant in the frame of the Mammisi, where the birth of the child-god is reenacted and celebrated. As Renenutets the four goddesses bring food and strength to the child and his mother (Arnette 2015, 7, 9, 22-28), and as Renenets they ensure the newborn a prosperous life of plentiness¹⁰.

The decision to create a group of four Renenutets, and not two or seven for instance, may have been influenced by many intricate religious habits, starting with the “architectural” feature of protecting buildings, rooms, chests and all kinds of containers with four corners. Perhaps, through the familiarity of Renenet with the gods of birth, the figures of the four Meskhenets have played a role as well. They are attested since the Ptolemaic period, but the use of four birth bricks dates back at least to the Old Kingdom, and it is probably the number of those actual bricks that entailed the multiplication of the traditionally single Meskhenet (Wegner 2009: 472-473). No such equation can be established for Renenutet, except maybe (with a little imagination and trust in a very late and sometimes extravagant source) in a text by Aelian in the early 3rd century CE. In his compilation *On Animals*, he reports that the Egyptians “in their temples, as they say, they build dens and burrows like shrines in every corner and make homes for the Thermuthes, and at intervals they provide them with calves’ fat to eat” (X,31; translation by A. F. Scholfield). The “Thermuthes” here are a sacred variety of cobra that bears the Greek name of Renenutet, Thermuthis (Lacau 1970: 45-48). Considering the importance of the four corners in the rituals of foundation, during which Renenutet was installed in the ground to protect the divine house from evil (Goyon 1985: 124-127), Aelian’s text seems not deprived of all accuracy. Then maybe actual snakes, considered as manifestations of the goddess, were taken care of inside the temple’s precinct: they could have been four, the traditional and ritual number of the corners and foundation deposits of the temple. These four Renenutets would then be an illustration of a well-spread Mediterranean and European tradition of deference to one or several benevolent snakes living in the walls or foundations of the house they bless by their presence (Maspero 1893: 411-412; Lecouteux 2000: 24, 66; Cour 1911: 60; Schmidt 1871: 184-187).

10 It is maybe significant also that Renenutet-Serket should be part of these rituals, since the scorpion-goddess has to do with the work of birth and rebirth (Spieser 2001).

Occurrences of the four Renenutets in the temples of Edfu and Dendara

1. Edfu – Walls of the Treasury

Ptolemy IV (222-204 BC)

Anthropomorphic with a cobra on the head

E II: 284 and 295, pl. XLV

– West

- *Rnnwtt w3dt hntt St-wrt*

- *Rnnwtt nfirt hntt hwt-df3w*

– East

- *Rnnwtt Srkt hntt st-nfirt*

- *Rnnwtt nfirt hntt hwt-ht*

2. Dendara – Gate of the Treasury

1st century BC¹

Cobras

D IV: 148-149, pl. CCLXXXVIII

- *Rnnwtt nfirt hntt St-R^c*

- *Rnnwtt w3dt hntt Pr-W^t*

- *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-ht*

- *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w m-hnt st-nfirt*

3. Edfu – Gate of the annex of the New Year court

Ptolemy VI (180-145 BC)

Anthropomorphic with a cobra on the head

E I: 587, pl. XXXIX b

- *Rnnwtt nfirt*

- *Rnnwtt w3dt*

- [...]

- *[Rnnwt]t [...] hntt Hwt-Hr*

4. Dendara – Gate of the New Year court

1st century BC

Anthropomorphic with a feathered Hathoric headdress

D IV: 179-183, pl. CCXCVIII

– West

- *Rnnwtt w3dt hntt Pr-W3dyt*

- *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w*

– East

¹ The empty cartouches in those scenes have traditionally be interpreted as a clue to date them of the last rules of the Ptolemies or the beginning of the Roman Empire.

- *Rnnwtt nfrt hntt st-nfrr*
- *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-ht*

5. Dendara – West crypt No. 1, between rooms A and B

- 1st century BC
Cobras
D VI: 72-73, pl. DXII
– West
- *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-ht*
 - *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w*
 - East
 - *Rnnwtt w3dt hntt st-nfrr*
 - *Rnnwtt Srkt hsfwt ddfw*

6. Dendara – West crypt No. 2, between rooms B and C

- 1st century BC
Cobra-headed with a feathered hathoric headdress
D VI: 130-131, pl. DXLIX
– West
- *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-ht*
 - *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w*
 - East
 - *Rnnwtt w3dt*
 - *Rnnwtt nfrr + Rnnwtt Srkt*

7. Edfu – Chamber of garments

- Ptolemy IV (222-204 BC)
Cobra-headed with a feathered hathoric headdress
E I: 135-136, pl. XXI a
- *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-mnh*
 - *Rnnwtt nfrr*
 - *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-ht*
 - *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w*

8. Dendara – Chamber of garments

- 1st century BC
Cobra-headed with a feathered hathoric headdress
D IV: 124-125 and 140-141, pl. CCLXXX, CCLXXXV
– South
- *Rnnwtt w3dt*

- [...]²
- North
- *Rnnwtt Srkt hntt hwt-mnh*
- *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-ht*

9. Dendara – First western chapel

- 1st century BC
Cobra-headed with a feathered hathoric headdress
D III: 100-101, pl. CCIII
- *Rnnwtt [...]³*
 - *Rnnwtt w3dt*
 - *Rnnwtt [...]⁴*
 - *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w*

10. Dendara – East crypt No. 1, between rooms A and B

- 1st century BC
Woman-headed cobras
D V: 7, pl. CCCXXIII
- West
 - [...]
 - [...]
 - East
 - *Rnnwtt w3dt*
 - [...]

11. Edfu – Mammisi: sanctuary

- Ptolemy VIII (145-116 BC)
Cobras
E Mammisi: 7-10, pl. XIV
- South
 - *Rnnwtt w3dt*
 - *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-ht*
 - North
 - *Rnnwtt Srkt*
 - *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w*

2 Probably *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w*, especially if you compare with [7].
3 Probably *Rnnwtt nfrt*, for she is carrying *nfr*-signs in a basket, as *Rnnwtt w3dt* is carrying *w3d*-signs and *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w* some ducks that write the stem *df3*.
4 Probably *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-ht*, who generally precedes *Rnnwtt hntt hwt-df3w*.

12. Edfu – Mammisi: gate of the southern chapel

Ptolemy X (107-88 BC)
 Cobras
 E Mammisi: 44, pl. XVIII 1
 - *Rnnwtt w3dt*
 - *Rnnwtt [...]*⁵
 - *Rnnwtt ḥntt ḥwt-ḥt*
 - *Rnnwtt ḥntt ḥwt-df3w*

13. Dendara – Mammisi of Nectanebo II: gate of the southern chapel

Ptolemy X (107-88 BC)
 Cobra-headed
 Daumas 1959: 37, pl. VIII
 - *Rnnwtt w3dt*
 - *Rnnwtt Srkt*
 - *Rnnwtt ḥntt ḥwt-ḥt*
 - *Rnnwtt ḥntt ḥwt-df3w*

14. Edfu – Upper frieze around the sanctuary

Ptolemy IV (222-204 BC)
 Cobra-headed
 E I: 53 and 66, pl. XVI-XVII
 – West
 - *Rnnwtt Srkt*
 - *Rnnwtt w3dt*
 – East
 - *Rnnwtt ḥntt ḥ3t-ḥt*
 - *Rnnwtt ḥntt ḥwt-df3w*

15. Dendara – Gate of Isis

Tiberius, Claudius and Nero (30-68 CE)
 Anthropomorphic with a feathered Hathoric headdress
 Cauville 1999: 48-49, pl. 56-57
 – South
 - *Rnnwtt nfrt ḥntt ḥwt-ḥt*
 – North
 - *Rnnwtt nfrt ḥntt [...]*⁶

5 Probably *Rnnwtt-Srkt*, if you compare to [11] and [13].

6 Probably *Rnnwtt ḥntt ḥwt-df3w*.

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