


RENENUTET: WORSHIP AND POPULAR PIETY AT THEBES IN THE NEW KINGDOM*

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Lady of Heaven, Mistress of the Gods, The Beautiful, The Gracious, The Beautiful Lady who pacifies, The one who returns to kindness, The Mistress of Provisions, these and other numerous epithets attested the many nuances that characterize the personality of the cobra goddess  Renenutet¹. She was already present in the Pyramid Texts Pantheon² and there is evidence of her worship up to the Roman Period³. It was only in the Middle Kingdom (2055 – 1650 BC) that such worship began to become widespread throughout Egypt, mostly in el-Fayum where her temple is settled, the only one preserved for this period⁴. Scholars⁵ were interested in this divinity, not because she was a very important goddess of Ancient Egypt's pantheon - in fact she had a minor role in it - but rather for her complex skills that are not so clear.

With the only exception of Frédéric Mougnot⁶, a historical approach to the study of Renenutet seems to be missing: scholars usually tend to describe her worship through the ages without making a temporal distinction. The analysis of New Kingdom (1550 – 1069 BC) documentation, a period which, after the Middle Kingdom, saw a significant spread of her worship, reveals instead how a very defined image of the goddess arises only at that time⁷.

Ashraf Iskender Sadek, who analyzed the evidence from Deir el-Medina site, argued that Renenutet acquired the aspect of “provider of food” with a specific fertilizer value in the popular piety. In his opinion this was the goddess role in the daily life of ordinary people⁸, but I think that things are more complex and only a holistic approach, taking into account all the aspects of her iconography, as well as the context and the amount of documentation, can enable us to understand where and how she was worshipped.

Despite of the earlier studies, according to me the archaeological evidence asserts that the devotion for the goddess Renenutet is the same in private worship as well as in the popular piety. Indeed, the main task of the goddess seems the same when she is invoked by Theban nobles as well as by the humble community of Deir el-Medina. In both cases Renenutet is guardian of the granary, protector of the fields of the temple of Amun as well as protector of food and guardian of the pantry. Moreover, she is never invoked for her fertility power.

Luckily we have abundant evidence about the worship of Renenutet in the New Kingdom from Thebes⁹. The most substantial *corpus* is dated between the reign of Tuthmosis III/ Amenhotep II (18th dynasty, 1550-1295 BC) and the period before the Amarna experience¹⁰, and most of it comes from funerary contexts, exactly from the tombs of Dra Abu el-Naga,

1 * I would like to thank Marilina Betrò for her precious advices.
WB II, 437. For the variants see Collombert 2005-2007, 21-32.

2 *PT* 302b and *PT* 454c.

3 See Bresciani 1997, 37-41.

4 Bresciani and Gianmarusti 2012, 59-105; Bresciani 2003; 197-230; 1975, 3-9; Nauman 1939, 185-189.

5 The goddess Renenutet has a notable literature. In addition to the *Lexicon der Ägyptologie* entry (*LA*, V: 232-236) and the *Lexicon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (*LÄGG*, IV: 686-692) the most important publications are Broekhuis 1971, where the scholar lists an impressive number of archaeological evidence and makes an overall study of Renenutet, and Collombert 2005-2007, who studied the evolution of the spelling of the name, distinguishing the goddess Renenutet (*Rnm-wt.t*) from the goddess Renenet (*Rnm.t*). In Evans (2013), the authors try to explain why the Egyptians associated a reptile with suckling goddess. Recently Fredric Mougnot (2014) has analysed the nuances of the goddess and has highlighted her role of guardian of precious things.

6 Frédéric Mougnot is an exception to this. Indeed he studies a characteristic of Renenutet relating her evolution over time. See Mougnot 2014.

7 Sadek 1987, 121.

8 *Ibid.*, 122.

9 Broekhuis 1971.

10 The Amarna experience includes the Reign of Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten (1353-1336 BC).

Khokha and Sheik Abd el-Gurna, on the West-Bank of the Nile¹¹. On these hills, there were Theban nobles' cemeteries of the New Kingdom, and the goddess Renenutet is represented many times on the wall paintings and reliefs of their tombs. She is represented in agricultural scenes, i.e. crop and Harvest¹².

The agricultural scenes was very common in the wall paintings of the 18th Dynasty tombs and, together with handicraft scenes, market scenes¹³ and other works scenes, there were included by Lise Manniche in the category "*scenes connected with the office of the tomb owner*"¹⁴. The purpose of their presence was not to represent the specific work carried out by the owner, but to highlight the fact that they fulfilled offices of supervision, involving high responsibility in the State administration.¹⁵

An example is that of Kenamun¹⁶, "foster-brother" of the pharaoh Amenhotep II. This noble was one of the most powerful men of his time and we know a very long list of his titles and epithets¹⁷. In his tomb at Sheik Abd el-Gurna (TT 93)¹⁸, the goddess Renenutet is represented as a cobra erect on an altar, wearing the disk, horns and high feathers. To her Kenamun offers two braziers with burnt offerings of fowl¹⁹ (fig. 1). Henri Wild argued that this scene represents the Harvest Festival, during which the goddess Renenutet was celebrated²⁰, but according to me Kenamun's devotion towards the goddess could be better explained through the relationship between the administrative titles and the goddess epithets. Several Kenamun's titles such as «Overseer of the doorkeepers of the granaries of Amun», «Overseer of the magazine of Amun», «Overseer of the treasury», «Chief steward of the King»²¹, express the range of his activities and virtues as well as his services to the king and to the state. Moreover, Egyptologists knew a Kenamun's statue²² dedicated to the vulture goddess Mut, in her temple in Karnak. The statue²³ portrays the noble kneeling and bringing a *naos* with inside an image of Renenutet²⁴. On this statue there are the Kenamun's titles «Chief Steward» and «Overseer of the cattle of Amun»²⁵.

The tomb at Sheik Abd el-Gurna of Djeserkaraseneb (TT 38)²⁶, is dated to the reign of Thutmosis IV (1400-1390 BC). The owner of the tomb, among the many titles, brings that of «Counter of the grain in the granary of divine offerings of Amun»²⁷ and the main hall includes a representation of the deceased offering fowl on braziers to Renenutet represented as a cobra on a *nb* basket. Behind her is an ear of corn and between the goddess and the man is a table full of offerings. This scene is just a portion of a bigger representation, divided into three registers, where many harvest scenes are shown²⁸ with the aim to exalt his overseer role. On the other side of the same registers Renenutet and the deceased are represented sitting under a baldachin in

11 Broekhuis 1971.

12 Lerstrup 1992, 61-82.

13 Pino 2005, 95-105.

14 Manniche 1988, 32-42.

15 *Ibid.* 36.

16 The tomb of Kenamun is known since long time and some objects of his funerary equipment are stored in few Museums around the world. The coffin of Kenamun has been recently identified by Marilina Betrò. See Betrò 2013, 15-20; Betrò 2014.

17 Davies 1930, pp. 10-16

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.* pl. 64

20 The most important feasts of Renenuter took place in the 4th month of *pwt* (VIII) and the 1st month of *Smw* (IX), see Broekhuis 1971, 63-66.

21 Wild 1957, 226.

22 Wild 1957, 211-215, pl. I.

23 Now preserved in the Cairo Museum (JE 34582). Borchardt 1930, 163, pl. 158.

24 Wild 1957, 212.

25 *Ibid.*, 212.

26 PM, I(1): 69; Davies 1963, pl. 2.

27 PM, I(1): 69.

28 Davies 1963, pl. 2.



Figure 1. Kenamun adoring the cobra goddess Renenetet - Kenamun's tomb (TT 93) - (Fig. by Davies 1930, pl. LXIV)

front of an offering table. To them, men bring crops from the fields of the temple of Amun on the day when the harvest is measured (fig. 2). In the tomb of Menkheper (TT 79)²⁹ «Overseer of the Granary of the Lord of two Lands», at Sheik Abd el-Gurna, the owner choses to represent the goddess Renenetet as a cobra in a wine making scene. Renenetet is in front of an offering table, near some men who tread the grapes³⁰ (fig. 3).

29 PM, I(1): 157.

30 Wrezinski 1988, 256.



Figure 2. Djeserkhara offering birds to Renenutet –Djeserkharaseneb's tomb (TT 38)
- (Photo by Wrezinski 1988 ,143)

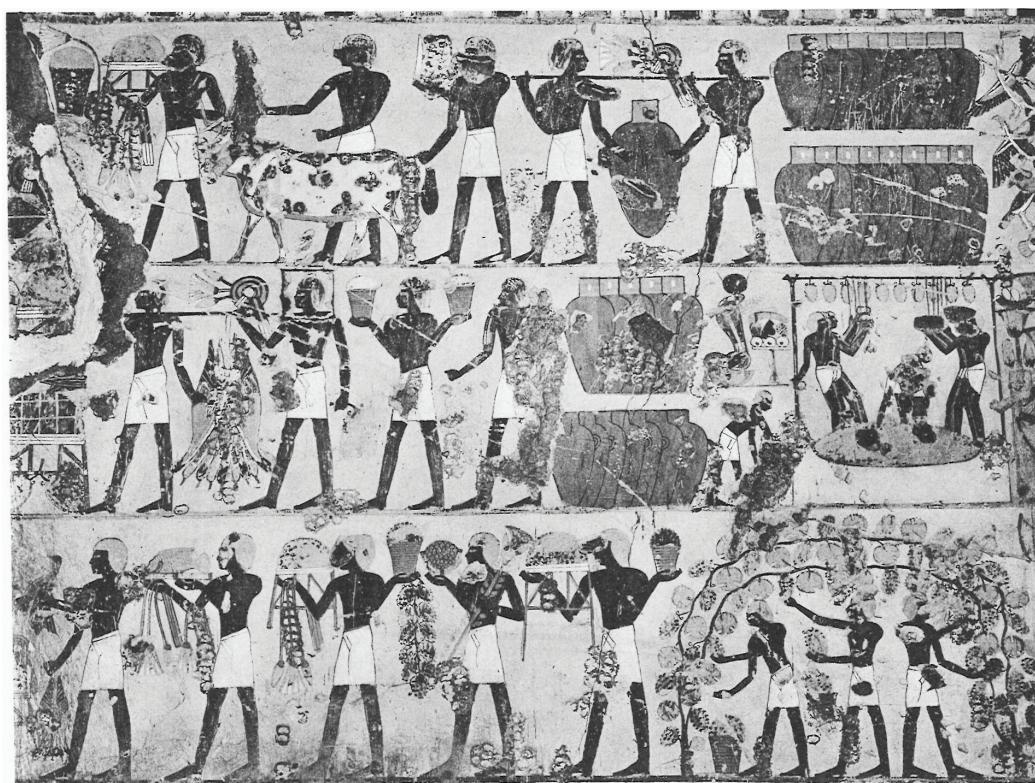


Figure 3. Wine making scene from Menkheper's tomb – TT 79 -(Photo by Wrezinski 1988, pl. 253)

Furthermore, we know many other cases like the one of Kenro, «Head of the magazine of Khons», usurper of the tomb of Huy (TT 54)³¹ at Sheik Abd el-Gurna. Here Renenutet is represented in front of a granary in which the grain is stored³². Still, in the tomb of User (TT 260)³³, «Weigher of Amun» and «Overseer of the ploughed Lands of Amun», the representation of Renenutet is connected with the owner's works as overseer³⁴.

Another one is that of Pahemnetjer, owner of the tomb TT 284³⁵ also at Dra Abu el-Naga, who bears the title of «Scribe of the offerings of all the gods». In his tomb a Harvest Festival is represented near a chapel with a snake statue inside³⁶.

In all the above examples the god Renenutet invoked by these high officials, brings epithets like *Rnn-wt.t šps.t nb.t šnw.ty* = *Renenutet the venerable of the double granary*³⁷, *Rnn-wt.t nb.t kꜥ.w* = *Renenutet mistress of the food*³⁸, *Rnn-wt.t nb.t ḥtp* = *Renenutet mistress of the offerings*³⁹ all of them showing a very strong link with the noble titles of the owner. In addition, the most emblematic case is that of the «Counter of the grain in the granary of the Divine Offering of Amun», Djoserkaraseneb. Thus, in his tomb (TT 38) Renenutet is called *Rnn-wt.t šps.t nb.t šnw.ty* = *Renenutet the venerable, mistress of the double granary*. Moreover, the divinity is mostly represented in harvest or in wine making, filling wine jars scenes, control of the assets to be stored⁴⁰. Indeed, the epithets of the goddess are numerous, and they are all connected with the granaries, harvest and food. So, it is clear that the deceased inserts the goddess in scenes reporting his work, and ensuring through the representation of the divinity the honesty and fairness of his actions.

A proving evidence of this is the one coming from the tomb of the Royal scribe Kaemhat (TT 57)⁴¹ who was «Overseer of the Granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt». Among the tomb's inscription we can find: «Offering of all good and pure things to Renenutet, Lady of the Granary, this first day of Pakhons, day of the birth of Nepri, by the Confidant of the Lord of Egypt (of the Two Lands), the Chief of the Granary of the South and the North, the Royal Scribe Kaemhat, may he resuscitate. Supply of all good and pure plants for the Ka, Renenutet, Lady of the Granary be every day in the favor. From Pa-wah Scribe... of the King of Egypt and Ra, scribe who registers the crops in the granary Pharaoh»⁴².

Finally, the goddess Renenutet is represented also in the tombs of people who do not have the same titles like the previous ones, but who had important responsibility in the administrative offices as well.

Starting from the 19th Dynasty (1295 – 1186 BC) the decorative programs of the Theban tombs changed. The scenes became more explicitly religious than in the earlier tombs, foregrounding the tomb owner's adoration of a range of deities. The scenes connected with the office of the tomb owner disappeared⁴³. As direct consequence of this change, the goddess Renenutet disappeared too. However, the evidence proves that Renenutet worship was not abandoned, but the corpus of records comes almost entirely from Deir el-Medina, one of the most important Egyptian sites for the study of the «domestic religious»⁴⁴. The *ostraka* of Deir el-Medina were used to record many

31 PM, I(1): 105.

32 Broekhuis 1971, 16.

33 At Dra Abu el-Naga. PM I(1), 344.

34 Mekhitarian 1954, 19.

35 PM, I(1): 366.

36 Davies 1939, pl. 19.

37 *Ibid.*, 14-15.

38 *Ibid.*, 20.

39 *Ibid.*, 28.

40 Already Frédéric Mougenot highlights the same peculiarity for the Renenutet of the 18th dynasty Theban tombs, where the goddess always is presented in the part of the scene in which the sowing has already occurred and the harvest done. See Mougenot 2014, 158.

41 PM, I(1): 114.

42 Leibovich 1953, 74.

43 I know just an evidence coming from the Ramesses period. This is the representation of Renenutet in the Tomb of Ipy (TT 217). See PM, I(1): 316.

44 For the literature about this topic, see Stevens 2009. Another site very important for the study of the domestic religion is el-Amarna dated to XVIII dynasty.

subjects such as prayers to divinities and ancestor, magical texts used as protection against evil⁴⁵. In addition, there are many groups of chapels, which are close, or within the village. In these chapels, settled mostly between work-shifts at the rest-huts on the ridge, people of Deir el-Medina worshiped their divinities⁴⁶. However, the traces of the practice of religion in the village fall into several categories: the *lits-clos*⁴⁷, the household shrines, the cult of deceased members of the family. The *lits-clos* were sacred to the deities of motherhood and childbirth, as suggested by the remains of paintings showing the gods Bes, Hathor, Taweret, etc. There is also evidence of domestic niches with significance cult where vertical niches with protruding edges often occurred. Particularly in the second room, and occasionally balanced doorways. Some of them appear to have been decorated with cult scenes, such as the worship of the Queen Ahmose Nefertari and the pharaoh Amenhotep I (1525 – 1504 BC). These shrines were frequently found with a base to support a stela, moreover a small table-of-offering might be placed before them⁴⁸. Many were dedicated to Meretseger, Renenutet, or to both of them, as two aspects of one and the same deity⁴⁹. Meretseger was the mistress of the Theban necropolis, especially of Deir el-Medina. She presided over the whole Theban necropolis, her more usual name was Meretseger “she who loves silence”, which was an apt one for the goddess of the desolate region uninhabited except by the deceased⁵⁰. This divinity is usually represented as a cobra, sometimes with a woman’s head or as a snake-headed woman, just like Renenutet⁵¹. Bernard Bruyère argues that images of both goddess were found particularly in the kitchens, in the space between the sideboard and the oven, but also in the *siloi*, granaries and cellars. Statuettes portraying snakes in stone have been found almost all over the houses. Moreover, the worship of Renenutet in the domestic context is attested, in the richer houses, by stelae put on the walls or in the niches that we mentioned before, and, in the humbler houses there were pottery or limestone *ostraka* fixed on the walls⁵².

In the Bruyère’s Reports there is much evidence of findings from Deir el-Medina known contexts, such as the stela of Mutemopet and Iyefert, now in the Musée du Louvre (Paris E. 16360)⁵³. This one is divided into two registers: in the higher register there is the goddess *Rnn-wt.t nb.t pt = Renenutet mistress of the sky* like a snake with a wrapped body in front of an offering table full of provisions; in the lower register the stela owner, Mutmeopet is adoring seven cobras⁵⁴. Another example is the stela (Paris E. 2175)⁵⁵, preserved in the Musée du Louvre. Here a cobra divinity is represented and it is called *Mr.t-sgr Rnn-wt.t nfr.t, nb.t k̄.w = Meretseger-Renenutet the beautiful, Mistress of the food*⁵⁶.

In the Cairo Egyptian Museum is preserved a lintel (Cairo JE 63644)⁵⁷, found at Deir el-Medina, showing a relief with a bouquet between two snakes representing Renenutet. They are respectively worshiped by two persons called Hornefer and Nedjefa (fig. 4). The inscriptions show: *Rnn-wt.t nfr.(t) nb.(t) k̄.w ir n ʕ n ʕ hr-nfr mʕ ʕrw (hr) ntr ʕ3; Rnn-wt.t nfr.(t) nb.(t) k̄.w ir n ʕ n ʕ Nb-dʃ mʕ3-hrw; = Renenutet the beautiful, mistress of the food, make for the Chief foreman Hornefer, justified at the great god; Renenutet the beautiful, mistress of the foods, make for the chief of the manoeuvre Nebdjefa, justified.*

In the British Museum there are the remains of a limestone *naos* (London EA 597)⁵⁸. These

45 Sadek 1987, 59.

46 Sadek 1987, 59-83.

47 Weiss 2009, 193-208.

48 About these religious cults in Deir el-Medina see Sadek 1987, 77.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *LÄ*, IV: 79-88.

51 See the many evidences cited by Loredana Sist in Sist 1987, 205-220.

52 *Ibid.* 205.

53 Bruyère 1934, 10-11.

54 *Ibid.* fig. 6.

55 Bruyère 1929-1930, 129, 140.

56 *Ibid.* fig. 66.

57 Bruyère 1939, 267.

58 PM, I(2): 721. Exactly, just the lintel and right jamb are preserved here, while the left jamb is preserved in the Egyptian Museum of Turin (Inventory number 50220). See Tosi and Roccati 1972, 188-189.

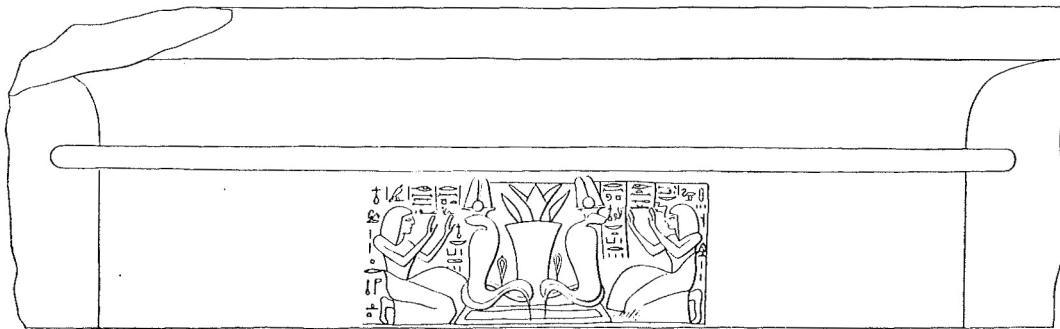


Figure 4. Lintel of Hornefer and Nedjefa. Cairo Museum (JE 63644) - (Fig. by Bruyère 1939, 267.)

belonged to Inherkhaw and are inscribed and decorated with incised figures. On the right side of the lintel, we see the representation of Inherkhaw kneeling and worshipping Ptah and Sobek. On the left side, we see Inherkhaw kneeling and worshipping Renenutet as a cobra that is on a *naos*. The inscriptions mean: *Rnn-wt.t nb.t k^c.w = Renenutet, mistress of the food*⁵⁹. The left jamb brings an inscription where Renenutet, *nfr.t = the beautiful*, is invoked to guarantee a beautiful existence to the *ka* of the “Mistress of the house”, Henutdueu⁶⁰ (fig. 5). This kind of subject is very common. In fact, we have other evidence such as the last mentioned above.

In the Bruyère’s reports 1945-47⁶¹ is cited a lintel with the goddess Renenutet represented under the cavetto cornice, in front of an offering table⁶². The inscription recites: *Rnn-wt.t nfr.t hnw.t df3 = Renenutet the beautiful, mistress of the provisions*⁶³. On the jambs cited in the Bruyère’s reports 1934-35⁶⁴ the goddess Renenutet is represented twisting to a stem of papyrus on both sides: on the right side wearing the red crown and on the left side wearing the white crown. There are also some inscriptions: on the right *Rnn-wt.t špsi nb.t hw mry.t tw ʿš3 k^c.w = Renenutet the noble, lady of the food, the one who is loved, rich of food*, on the left *Rnn-wt.t nfr.t nb.t k^c hnw.t df3.w = Renenutet the beautiful, lady of the food, mistress of the provisions*⁶⁵.

As the archaeological evidence shows, the relationship between the goddess and food is stronger in domestic contexts than in tombs of 18th Dynasty. However, this does not mean necessarily that the community of Deir el-Medina invoked Renenutet only as provider of food. In fact, the stelae placed near the pantries had more a protective value than a propitiatory one. The Renenutet’s epithets present on them increase their protective character. The cobra iconography of the goddess shown in the funerary, such as in domestic contexts, seems to be a confirmation of that. She was certainly associated with the use of her image with the purpose of expelling every malefic influx and guaranteeing protection⁶⁶. Her properties were those of repelling the enemies of the food, such as snakes, rats and insects.

59 Hall 1925, pl. XXVIII.

60 *Ibid.* 188.

61 Bruyère 1952.

62 *Ibid.*, pl. XI, 2.

63 *Ibid.*, 50.

64 Bruyère 1939.

65 *Ibid.* 315, pl. XV.

66 Sist 1987, 206.



Figure 5. Lintel and Jamb of Inerkhaw (EA 597) - (© British Museum)

Abbreviation

BIFAO = Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale

BSEG = Bulletin de la Société d'Égyptologie de Genève (Genève)

FIFAO = Fouilles de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale

LÄ = Lexicon der Ägyptologie

LÄGG = Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen

MDAIK = Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts (Kairo)

OLA = Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta

PT = Pyramid Texts

JEA = Journal of Egyptian Archaeology (London)

JNES = Journal of Near Eastern Studies (Chicago)

WB = Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache

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