

Fragment of painted limestone relief from the tomb of Kemsit



From the Temple of Mentuhotep II, Deir el-Bahari, Egypt
11th Dynasty, around 2050 BC

A queen or concubine of King Mentuhotep II

Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II succeeded in reunifying Egypt after the instability of the First Intermediate Period (2160-2040 BC). He was also a major architectural innovator, as is demonstrated by his temple at Deir el-Bahari in Thebes. The colonnaded temple was apparently a new design for ancient Egypt, and inspired the neighbouring Temple of Hatshepsut in the Eighteenth Dynasty (about 1550-1295 BC).

Many fragments of scenes that decorated Mentuhotep II's temple came to The British Museum from excavations conducted by the Egyptologist Henri Naville for the Egypt Exploration Fund. This fragment comes from one of several chapels with associated burial shafts, in the central part of the temple. The chapels and shafts date from an early phase of the temple, and were partially blocked and damaged by later constructions. The chapels belonged to royal women and some contained intact burials.

This fragment of painted limestone shows Kemsit holding a jar of scented ointment to her nose, while an attendant (mostly destroyed) presents her with gifts and offerings. The modelling of this relief is very high and very detailed, though the paint has been applied thickly, sometimes obscuring details. The light pink hue of Kemsit's skin is very unusual.

Kemsit's precise relationship to Mentuhotep II is uncertain, though it is clear that she was not one of his principal wives. It has even been suggested that the burials were of women of the harem, buried near their king to be his concubines in the next world.

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