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## Experiencing Emotional Pain in Ancient Egypt

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### Abstract

Emotions play a critical role in the formation of human personality across all civilizations. They are reflections of life experiences expressed through facial or verbal expressions, and physical attitudes. In ancient times, the heart was considered the seat of sensations and consciousness; therefore, people believed that pain and pleasure were mainly experienced in the heart. In ancient Egyptian culture, physical and psychological pain were deeply interconnected and often represented through metaphors and symbols. Unlike contemporary understandings that often categorize emotional suffering, the ancient Egyptians viewed emotional pain as an integral aspect of human existence, closely linked to their concept of Maat. Furthermore, they expressed their psychological pain through various forms of art, literature, and religious practices. Therefore, the study of emotional pain in ancient Egypt is crucial to understanding their perception of suffering and its impact on their daily lives.

### Keywords:

Pain - Emotions - Mourning - Suffering - Deities

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## Introduction

This study explores how the ancient Egyptians perceived emotional pain as a function of their cultural and religious practices, drawing upon artistic and textual evidence. They perceived the *ib* 'heart' and *r-ib*/ *Xt* 'belly' to be the containers of negative and positive emotions such as love, anger, fear, awe, and pain, which were caused by internal or external forces.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the heart was not removed during mummification. They believed that keeping the heart in situ was essential for performing the weighing of the heart ceremony in the Judgement Day, which was crucial for the deceased to join the deities in heaven. Furthermore, they acknowledged the strong connection between the person's physical and psychological condition, which could cause misery and pain in the body's organs, thus affecting the person's life and emotional state.

Although little is known about the ancient Egyptians' perception of several emotions, including pain, the remains of physical evidence, such as inscriptions, artifacts, and texts, provide important information regarding this matter. Most scientists and Egyptologists agree that pain feeling is difficult to express in words. This is due to the intangible nature of pain that cannot be accessed whether by touching or seeing. Only the person experiencing pain can feel it; however, it is difficult for him to transfer or accurately describe his actual pain feeling. Therefore, people usually associate physical and psychological pain with metaphors that could easily give some hints to the nature of their pain. These metaphors commonly included those related to weapon injuring effects, such as stabbing, burning, shooting, or killing pain.

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<sup>1</sup> Nyrod argues that although several Egyptologists linked between the words *ib*, *r-ib* and *HAty*, they cannot be used as both mind-like or material entities. He points that *ib* is closely connected with emotional aspects of the heart, whereas *HAty* basically refers to its physical aspect. See: Nyrod, R. (2009). *Breathing Flesh. Conceptions of the Body in the Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Copenhagen, pp. 65-67

## The perception of pain

Although pain is considered the oldest medical problem that intrigued the interest of physicians, philosophers, clinicians, and psychologists to understand the way by which the mind and body interact together through a painful experience, it remains the least understood and defined one. However, there is a general agreement that pain is essentially a mental/psychological experience. Accordingly, this means that the feeling of pain is also defined and considered as pain and needs to be treated with care.<sup>1</sup>

According to the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP),<sup>2</sup> pain is broadly defined as “*an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or in terms of such damage*”. In other words, it can be described as a complex perception, its nature depends mainly on the emotional state of the person, as well as both stimulant severity and experienced situation.<sup>3</sup> This emphasizes that pain is not mainly connected with physical injury or internal tissue damage, but it can also be the outcome of some emotional experiences, such as humiliation, grief and solitude.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Salomons, T.V., et al. (2022). Is Pain “All in your Mind”? Examining the General Public’s Views of Pain. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 13, pp. 683-684.

<sup>2</sup> The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) is a non-governmental association founded by John Bonica in 1973 with its headquarters in Washington for the purpose of understanding pain and studying its methods of treatment and relief. See: Breivik, H. (August 2002). International Association for the Study of Pain. Update on WHO-IASP Activities. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 24/2, pp. 97-101.

<sup>3</sup> West, C.P. (2012). *A Mixed Methods Sequential Explanatory Study of the Impact of Chronic Pain on Family Resilience*. D. Phil. Thesis, James Cook University. Townsville, pp. 25, 28.


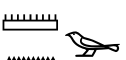

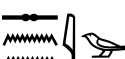


<sup>4</sup> Duncan, G. (July 2017). The Meanings of 'Pain' in Historical, Social and Political Context. *The Monist* 100 (4), p. 514.

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Notably one can share an emotional state by understanding the pain of others, and sympathizing with their unpleasant experience. In this context, several studies stated that the compassion sensation resulting from witnessing someone in pain and imagining his suffering experience, elicits brain regions responsible for compassion and pain feeling, however, to a lesser extent than actual pain experience.<sup>1</sup>

### Psychological pain of the living

Several lexicographical studies on pain in ancient Egypt concluded that the terminology used for describing pain did not distinguish between physical and psychological pain. In other words, most of these terms were used for the description of both types of pain. According to these studies, the terms used by the ancient Egyptians to describe their physical or psychological pain

included some frequently used ones, such as  *mr*, 'illness/ *pʿin*/ *shffer*',<sup>2</sup>  *mn*, 'suffering/ *pʿin*',<sup>3</sup>  *whdw* 'to suffer/ be *pʿinfhl*',<sup>4</sup>  *snni* 'to suffer mentally',<sup>5</sup>  *shw*, 'pʿin/ *trqhble*',<sup>6</sup> and  *ihm*, which literally means 'to suffer/ sorrow/ mourning/ affliction'.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, other terms were attested on a smaller

<sup>1</sup> Giummarra, M.J., et al. (2016). The Social Side of Pain: What Does it Mean to Feel Another's Pain?. In S. van Rysewyk (Ed.). *Meanings of pain*. Cham, pp. 357-358.

<sup>2</sup> *Wb* II, p. 95; Selden, D.L. (2015). *Hieroglyphic Egyptian Language and Literature in the Middle Kingdom*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Texas, pp. 255, 472.

<sup>3</sup> *Wb* II, p. 66; Lesko, L.H. (2004). *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian*, vol. I, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Massachusetts, p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> *Wb* I, p. 356.

<sup>5</sup> *Wb* III, p. 461; R. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*. Oxford, p. 286.




<sup>6</sup> *Wb* II, p. 12; Hannig, R. (1995). *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch - Deutsch (2800-950 v. Chr.)*. Mainz, p.10; Gardiner, A. (2007). *Egyptian Grammar being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. Oxford, p. 550.

<sup>7</sup> Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch*, p. 95; *Wb* I, p. 118; Lesko, *Dictionary* I, p. 43.


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scale in literary, medical and religious context, such as  *ḳsn*,  
 ‘*pʿinfhl/ trqḥbling*’,<sup>1</sup>  *šni*, ‘suffer from something/ suffer in oneself’,<sup>2</sup>  
 *ind* ‘to be sick/ in trouble/ afflicted/ be sad’.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the ancient Egyptians considered the pain resulting from emotional triggers, such as grief, depression, distress, and solitude, as another form of physical pain. These triggers were related and cannot be separated because they incorporate the entire heart, mind, and body parts. Despite that, the ancient Egyptians were aware of the difference between the pain caused by emotional triggers and that caused by external physical stimuli.<sup>4</sup> In this context, Papyrus Leiden I 371 (lines 9-10) expressed the pain felt in the heart in a text reading:

 *bw-pw.i*

*ḥꜣr bw-pw.i rdi šntt ḥꜣty.t,*<sup>5</sup> ‘I did not abandon. I did not cause your heart to suffer’. This text gives a strong connection between the person’s emotional and physical state. On the other hand, the Ebers Papyrus stressed the strong

<sup>1</sup> *Wb* V, p. 69; Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, p. 345; Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 596; Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch*, p. 866; Lesko, *Dictionary* I, p. 159; Jasnow, R. (1992). *A Late Period Hieratic Wisdom Text* (P. Brooklyn 47.218.135). Chicago, p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, p. 327; *Wb* IV, p. 494.

<sup>3</sup> Lesko, *Dictionary* I, p. 36; Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, p. 29; *Wb* I, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Prakash, T. (2020). Everybody Hurts: Understanding and Visualizing Pain in Ancient Egypt. In S. Hsu & J. L. Raduà (Eds.). *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*. Leiden and Boston, pp. 110-111.

<sup>5</sup> The meaning of the particle *bw-pw* is 'not', whereas the verb *xAa* means 'abandon'. See: Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch*, pp. 250, 581; *Wb* III, p. 227.





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relationship between emotions, blood vessels and the heart. In other words, it highlighted the fact that the blood vessels of the heart are blocked when the person feels grief or other negative emotions.<sup>1</sup>

Biro pointed that other psychological stimuli affect the physical pain experience and modify it as well; these include the person's internal emotions, memories, attitudes, and expectations. Although in some painful experiences such as betrayal or depression, there is no tissue damage or actual physical pain feeling, the person's psychological pain in these cases is equated to that caused by physical injury. On the other hand, the intensity of physical pain could worsen the person's psychological condition, which eventually leads to a chronic psychiatric illness.<sup>2</sup>

Not to mention that some determinatives are usually linked to words expressing sadness and pain of lamentation and mourning. Some of these

determinatives are that of a man with raised arms , or that of a man placing one hand to his mouth . Additionally, the hair lock  and the crying eye  are significant determinatives that are used in words expressing pain of mourning and despair, which is usually accompanied by tearing hair and tears.

On the other hand, the ancient Egyptians perceived the pain resulting from some feelings such as the fear of an enemy or the chase of a lion, which crushes the stomach, to be equivalent to the pain of childbirth. Therefore, it is signified

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



<sup>1</sup> McDonald, A. (2020). Emotions. *UEE* 1 (1), 2020, p. 2; Hsu, S. & Raduà, J.L. (2021). The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia: an Introduction. In S. Hsu and J.L. Raduà (Eds.). *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East*. Leiden and Boston, pp. 1-2; O'Dell, E. (2008). *Excavating the Emotional Landscape of Ancient Egyptian Literature*. D. Phil. Dissertation, Brown University. Rhode Island, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Biro, D. (2014). Psychological Pain: Metaphor or Reality?. In R. Boddice (Ed.). *Pain and Emotion in Modern History*. Hampshire, pp. 54-55.

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
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


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by the determinative of a woman giving birth .<sup>1</sup> Moreover, several words indicating injury or disease used the pustule determinative . This determinative was also used in other words with the meaning of ‘bad, painful and unpleasant things’, for instance, the word    *nh3*, which means ‘alarming/ terrible’. It is worth noting that for the ancient Egyptians, anything with a bad smell was considered painful and thus caused horror to them.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly, as was the case in other ancient civilizations, psychological pain was usually caused by several negative emotions such as mourning, grief, loneliness, fear, speechlessness, injustice, shame, depression, and longing. This type of pain was also felt because of some natural disasters, diseases, famines, weakness of the government, disorder, or foreign invasions.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, this type of pain could also result from some bad emotions, such as envy, greed, and jealousy. These emotions are usually mentioned in texts as those caused by some venom creatures, such as snakes or snake-like demons,

which were associated with emotions like     *wn-ib*, meaning ‘greed/ rapacity’.<sup>4</sup> This type of pain or dangerous disease was stated in the

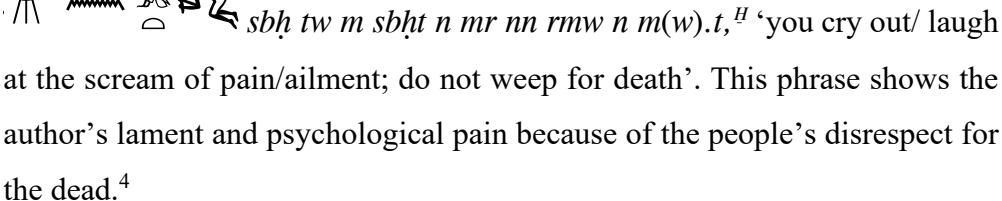
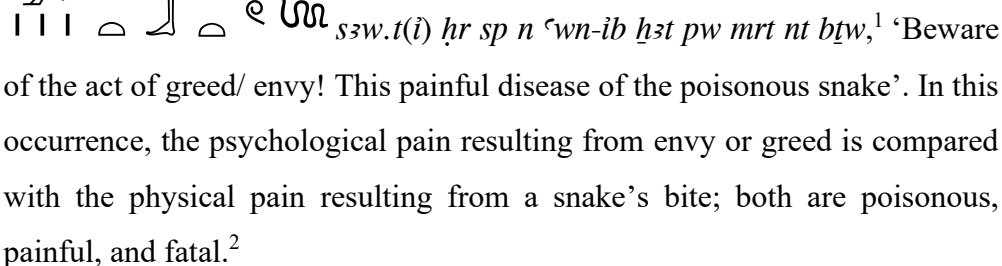
Teachings of Ptahhotep (19<sup>th</sup> maxim). The text reads:      



<sup>1</sup> Beaux, N. (2017). Écriture des émotions en égyptien. In N. Tersis & P. Boyeldieu (Eds.). *Le langage de l'émotion: variations linguistiques et culturelles*. Paris, pp. 231-232, 235.

<sup>2</sup> Rosso, A.M. (2021). The Egyptian Theory of wxdw and the Ancient Greek MedicineX. *Journal of Research in Environmental Science and Toxicology*, 10 (5), p. 108; Dickson, P. (2006) *Dictionary of Middle Egyptian in Gardiner Classification Order*. San Francisco, p. 144; *Wb* II, p. 290.

<sup>3</sup> Hsu & Raduà, *Expression of Emotions*, pp. 67, 81-82.

<sup>4</sup> Dickson, *Middle Egyptian*, p. 27; Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 557.



<sup>1</sup> The verb sAwT , which was later written as  means ‘watch/ guard’, however, when used in the sDM.f form it means ‘beware’. See: Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 588. Furthermore, the word sp means ‘act/ deed/ conduct’, the word XAt means ‘disease’, and the word bTw means ‘poisonous snake/ incurable disease’. See: Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, pp. 247, 274; *Wb* III, p. 359; Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch*, p. 266.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, F. (2022). *The World Turned Upside Down: a Comparative Study of the “Topsy-Turvy Motif” in Egyptian and Northwest Semitic Texts*. Master thesis, University of Washington. Washington, pp. 47-48.



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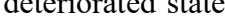
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*Ipḥwer* describes the psychological pain, laments, and woes experienced by the Egyptians during this period. However, the response of the Lord of All suggests that the Egyptians' sufferings and the land's bad condition were the results of the people's wrongdoings only and had nothing to do with the creator.<sup>1</sup>

Another occurrence from the New Kingdom, which expresses the person's psychological pain due to the occupation of one's country, is illustrated in the limestone stela of Kamos, which is preserved in the Cairo Museum (JE 41790).

In his words, the king says:

 *wn.in.sn mr hr ib n hm.f*, ‘so they are painful in his majesty's heart’. These words illustrate how the king felt when he saw the deteriorated state of the city and the panic shown on the people’s faces as a result of the aggression done by the Hyksos ruler.<sup>2</sup>


On the other hand, the pain of speechlessness is expressed in the ‘Complaints of *Kh<sup>c</sup>kheberre-sqneb*’, dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. His words convey the difficulty and pain caused by hiding his feelings and distress in his heart by saying:

<sup>1</sup> Hassan, F.A. (2007). Droughts, Famine and the Collapse of the Old Kingdom: Re-reading Ipuwer. *CASAE* 36 (1), p 361.

<sup>2</sup> Labib, H. (1972). *The Second Stela of Kamose and his Struggle against the Hyksos Ruler and His Capital*. ADAIK 8. Gluckstadt, pp. 31-32; PM I, p. 618-619; Helck, W. (1990). *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit und neue Texte der 18. Dynastie*. Wiesbaden, 2002, p. 84.

Furthermore, the psychological pain of grief and loss could be manifested in the New Kingdom 'Tale of the Doomed Prince'. The king was obliged to fulfill his son's wish of having a dog in order to grant him happiness, although he already knew that his son was destined to be killed by a dog. Additionally, he

<sup>2</sup> Simpson, W.K. (2003). The Lamentations of KhaKheperre-sonbe. In W.K. Simpson (Ed.). *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: an Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New Haven and London, p. 213; Hsu, S. (2021). I Wish I Could Die: Depression in Ancient Egypt. In S. Hsu, & J.L. Raduà (Eds.). *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East*. Leiden and Boston, p. 69.

means ‘mourning’, the word  means ‘place’, niwt means ‘town/ city’, and spAt means ‘nome/ district’. On the other hand, the word ianw means ‘woe’ and the word twt means ‘entire/ united’, the preposition Xr means ‘through/ under’, and iw means ‘injustice’. See: *Wb* I, pp. 41, 48, 323; Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, pp. 554, 561, 587, 589; Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, pp. 33, 76, 156, 250, 363; Dickson, *Middle Egyptian*, pp. 50, 52, 110, 179, 233, 280; *Wb* III, p. 455; Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch*, pp. 30, 32, 692, 921.


<sup>4</sup> Chobanov, J. (2010). The Notion of the Judge during the Middle Kingdom in Ancient Egypt. *JES* 3, p. 82.

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accepted the departure of his son to explore the outer world despite of knowing that he might lose his son forever. Certainly, this caused grief and great emotional pain to the king's heart for losing his son.<sup>1</sup>

The grief feeling resulting from deep sadness for losing the beloved ones or for being exposed to sorrowful events was one of the main causes of psychological pain in ancient Egypt through modern days. This psychological pain, resulting from mourning and grief feelings was extensively represented in reliefs and paintings since the Old Kingdom onwards. In the ancient Egyptian perception, showing the bereaved's pain and grief through whining and weeping was essential for the deceased's transition to the afterlife. Therefore, the mourners from both genders frequently appeared as main participants in scenes showing funerary processions.<sup>2</sup> Specific words were said by mourners during the funeral to lament the deceased expressing their pain for his departure. This is attested in scenes in the New Kingdom tomb of Neferhotep at Thebes (TT 49), where the mourners constantly repeated the word  *imw*, meaning 'grief/ mourn', referring to their pain and lamentation (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Salim, R. (2013). *Cultural Identity and Self-presentation in Ancient Egyptian Fictional Narratives. An Intertextual Study of Narrative Motifs from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman Period*. D. Phil. Thesis, University of Copenhagen. Copenhagen, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Mahran, H. (October 2022). Acts of Official Grief on the Berlin Museum "Trauerrelief" (AMP 12411). *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 8 (4), p. 221; Ebrahim, M. A. (2024). Psychological Traumas Induced Mental Disorders in Ancient Egypt. *SHEDET* 12, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, S. (2022). *Exploring Pain in Ancient Egypt*. D. Phil. Dissertation, University of Chicago. Chicago, p. 204; Ghaly E. & Ibrahem, O. (March 2017). The Funerary Procession Scenes at Private Tombs of Post-Amarna Period in Thebes and Memphis. *International Journal of Heritage, Tourism and Hospitality* 11 (1), p. 154; Mahran, *Official Grief*, p. 228, fig. 9; Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, p. 21.

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Similarly, sadness was one of the several causes of psychological pain as it was usually associated with mourning and grief. Although there was no medical designation for sadness, it was extensively recorded in literary texts and was even attributed to some medical ailments. For example, the psychological pain of prince Khaemweset, the fourth son of King Ramesses II and the high priest of Ptah, is inscribed in a demotic text written on a papyrus preserved in the British Museum (EA 10822).



**Fig. 1. Mourning scene from the tomb of Neferhotep at Thebes (TT 49)**  
(After Mahran, *Official Grief*, p. 228, fig. 9)

The story narrates about a Nubian sorcerer, who challenged the king and the court's officials to read the sealed scroll that was strapped to his body without trying to open it, or else the sorcerer would boast about the shame that would come upon Egypt if they failed to do so. In this context, the story illustrates the psychological pain and physical illness caused by Khaemweset's sad feeling resulting from his inability to read the sealed scroll. However, his wife told him after checking his body temperature that there is 'no fever in your chest, it is because of the sadness of your heart'. Notably, the psychological

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pain of sadness in many cases resembles the physical pain resulting from an illness.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient Egyptians expressed their emotional pain in apologies as well. This is attested in some letters dating from the late Ramesside Period. In one letter from the reign of Ramesses XI (no. 46), a man expressed his pain for what he had done and what he had said to his friend that caused the damage of their relationship.<sup>2</sup> In this letter, the writer expressed how he unintentionally insulted a friend of his, who was a high official, by making inappropriate comment, which was not funny and made his friend upset. As a result, his friend decided to cut off their relationship. Therefore, the writer wrote this apology letter to express his deep regret, in which he used emotional language, such as ‘feeling like an orphan without you’. Thus, he felt lost without his friend and attempted to influence him to restore their former relationship. In this incident, there are two forms of psychological pain, the one felt by the writer because of the abandonment and worrying about their relationship, and the other felt by the receiver because of his friend’s public insult.<sup>3</sup>

In the Middle Kingdom tale of Sinuhe, the emotional pain of solitude was expressed, where Sinuhe passionately evoked the deity for intervention to ease his homesickness after living for many years in a foreign country, and he

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<sup>1</sup> Ritner, R.K. (2003). The Adventures of Setna and Si-Osire (Setna II) 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. In W.K. Simpson (Ed.). *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: an Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New Haven and London, p. 477.

<sup>2</sup> Sweeney, D. (1997). Offence and Reconciliation in Ancient Egypt - a Study in Late Ramesside Letter No. 46. *GM* 158, p. 72; Wente, E.F. (1967). *Late Ramesside Letters*. Chicago, pp. 2, 80-81.

<sup>3</sup> Ridealgh, K. (2020). “Without You I Am an Orphan”: Exploring Emotion and Interpersonal Pragmatics in the Late Ramesside Letters. In S. Hsu & J.L. Raduà (Eds). *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*. Leiden and Boston, pp. 132, 134.


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wished for a miracle to return to Egypt. He says in (lines 161-162): 



*ir.f mî ht r smnh phwy n sfh.n.f ib.f*  
*mr n dkr.n.f r nh hr h3st,*<sup>1</sup> ‘(May) he act as such to make a perfect end for the afflicted one, (may) his heart pains/ suffers for the one excluded to live in foreign land’.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the pain of solitude and humiliation is attested in the tale of the official and priest of Amun temple at Karnak, *Wen<sup>c</sup>mhn*, which dates from the early 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty and is now preserved in the Moscow Museum. It narrates about the priest’s trip to Phoenicia to obtain timber for the god’s sacred ceremonial *b<sup>c</sup>rkhe*. After reaching Byblos, he was stolen by one of his men. He tried to make a complaint to the prince of Byblos Tjekerbaal but in no vain. He waited for 29 days until the king agreed to see him. Unexpectedly, the king did not welcome him, as was the custom in ancient times. Furthermore, the king humiliated him and reminded him of Egypt’s deteriorated status and that its authority had already faded. He felt pain in his heart because he was not able to return home after spending more than five months waiting for that opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the word *mi xt* is ‘like/ as such’, the verb *smnx* means ‘to distinguish/ to make perfect/ to advance’, and the word *pHwy* means ‘end’. Furthermore, the verb *sfn* means ‘to afflict’ and can also be written using the profile determinative , and the verb *dqr* means ‘to exclude/ expel’. See: Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, pp. 130, 277, 282, 390; Dickson, *Middle Egyptian*, pp. 57, 276; Lesko, *Dictionary II*, p. 43; *Wb IV*, pp. 115, 136; Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, pp. 565, 603; *Wb I*, p. 535; *Wb V*, p. 496.

<sup>2</sup> Osman, A. (2021). *A Methodological Approach to Utilize Egyptian Colloquial Arabic as a Source for Ancient Egyptian Linguistic Analysis*. Master thesis. Cairo, p. 92; Allen, J.P. (2015). *Middle Egyptian Literature. Eight Literary Works of the Middle Kingdom*. Cambridge, p. 110-111; Lee, *Exploring Pain*, p. 164-165; Nyrod, *Breathing Flesh*, p. 93.

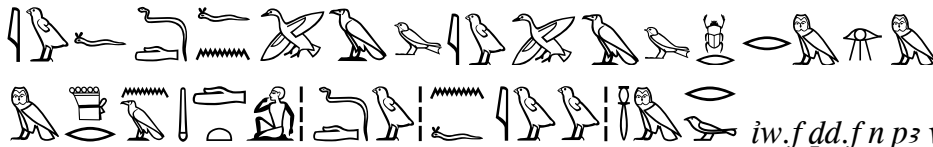
<sup>3</sup> Wilson, J.A. (1992). Egyptian Myths, Tales and Mortuary Texts. In J.B. Pritchard (Ed.). *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Princeton and New Jersey, pp. 25, 29; Shoaib, W. (2005). Literary Sources for Ancient Egyptian History. *JGUAA* 5 (1), pp. 17-18.

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In this tale, the psychological pain of pity was experienced by prince Tjekerbaal when he was reported about Wenamun's deteriorated status and how he was affected by his psychological pain of solitude and fear from being arrested. Therefore, the prince wept after hearing these words and ordered food, drink, and singers to be sent to Wenamun. The pain of the prince once he heard the news is attested in (lines 2.67-68), as they read:



*pʒ wr hpr rmw m-dr nʒ md(w)t i-dd.w n.f iw.w mr,*<sup>1</sup> ‘Then he told it to the prince. Then the prince wept after (hearing) these words which were told to him, (because) they were painful.’<sup>2</sup>

As for the Victory Stela of Piye (*Piṛnkhī*) from Gebel Barkal,<sup>3</sup> in the Cairo Museum (JE 48862), it documents another sort of emotional pain, which is feeling pain for others. It stated that the person could feel for the miserable animals who were mistreated or experienced pain. The Nubian king felt pain

<sup>1</sup> The literal meaning of the word pA wr is the 'great son', which could be translated as the 'prince'. Furthermore, the meaning of m-Dr is 'after', the demonstrative pronoun nA means 'the/ this/ these' and is usually used in the plural sense, and the word mdwt means 'words/ speech', see: Lesko, *Dictionary I*, pp. 145, 172, 225; Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, p. 152, 399; *Wb II*, p. 181; Dickson, *Middle Egyptian*, p. 142, 227; Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 572.

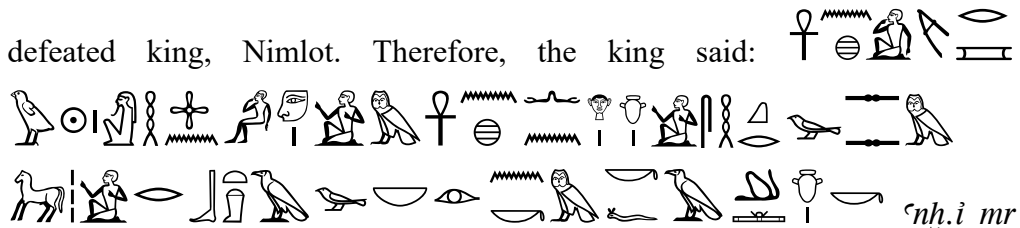
<sup>2</sup> Joseph, A. (2018). Pain Infliction, Inflictors and Healers in Egyptian Religious, Magical and Literary Perceptions. *Études et Travaux* 31, p. 70; Ritner, R.K. (2009). *The Libyan Anarchy: Inscriptions from Egypt's Third Intermediate Period*. Atlanta, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> The site of Gabal Barkal ‘Pure Mountain’ is one of five sites that stretched along the Nile and had great importance in the Nabatan and Meroitic cultures during the Second Kingdom of Kush. This site was associated with religious traditions, where the ancient Egyptians believed that Amun resided on a sacred mountain. The mountain is now called ‘Gebel Wadi el-Karsani’, and is still considered sacred by the local residents of the city, where they visit the tomb of a Sheikh who is buried there. See: Kendall T., & E.A. Mohamed, *Sudan’s Holy Mountain Jebel Barkal: a Visitor’s Guide, Archaeological Studies Series (1)*. Karima, 2022.

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in his heart when he found that the horses were starving in the stables of the

defeated king, Nimlot. Therefore, the king said:




wl R<sup>c</sup> ḥwn fnd.i m ḥnh ksn nn ḥr ib.i shkr ssmw.i r btz nb ir.n.k m kfz ib.k,<sup>1</sup>

‘As I live, as Re loves me, as my nostrils are rejuvenated with life, nothing is (more) painful in my heart (that) my horses being starved than any crime that you did from your discretion’.<sup>2</sup>

### Psychological pain of the deities

As stated in some religious texts, physical and psychological pains were experienced by the deities in the same way as they did with humans. More accurately, the living were the ones who suffered the same pains that afflicted the deities in earlier times. Accordingly, the magicians used the exact spells that healed the deities from these ailments and performed them on the patients who, in this case, were believed to represent the deity who experienced similar suffering. Therefore, since these spells and concoctions have healed the deity, they will definitely heal the patient successfully.<sup>3</sup>

For example, some spells were recited by the deities on behalf of Isis during her labor. They were also intended for the protection of the mother and child

<sup>1</sup> The word anx.i at the beginning of the sentence is used as an oath, the verb Hwn means ‘refreshed/ be rejuvenated/ become youthful’, and the word fnd means ‘nose/ nostrils’. Furthermore, the verb shqr means ‘make hungry’, the word btA means ‘crime/ harm/ offence’, and the term kfA ib means ‘discreet/ trust/ careful’ and could be abbreviated as . See: Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, pp. 54, 293, 350; Dickson, *Middle Egyptian*, p. 48, 221, 261; Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch*, p. 519, 738; Wb III, p. 54; Lesko, *Dictionary I*, pp. 142, 164; Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, pp. 564, 566, 597.

<sup>2</sup> Simpson, *Lamentations of KhaKheperre-sonbe*, p. 213, 276; Hsu & Raduà, *Expression of Emotions*, p. 69; Karlsson, M. (2020). Gender and Kushite State Ideology: the Failed Masculinity of Nimlot, Ruler of Hermopolis. *MittSAG* 31, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> Brotto, A. (2016). *The Death of the Ancient Egyptian Gods: Terminological and Semantic Analysis of Literary Evidence*. Tuscany, p. 255.



and to ease the labor process. In one occurrence in Papyrus Leiden I 348 (spell 34, verso 11.4), a prayer was made for god Re and Aten to hasten the labor pain of a woman, who in this case was identified with Isis in her labor with the new born Horus. The woman invoked the deities' assistance to relieve her from pain as they did with Isis. The spell reads:

 'Ist 3st hr

*mnt phwy.s m iwr*,<sup>1</sup> 'now Isis is suffering in her back as being pregnant'.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it is stated that the ancient Egyptians used opium for treating headaches; and it was even prescribed by goddess Isis for the treatment of god Re's severe pain seizures in his head.<sup>3</sup>


As for psychological pain, it is attested that deities also suffered pain of mourning and grief. The pain of mourning is expressed in a hieratic spell inscribed in the New Kingdom Theban tomb of Maya (TT 338), where Isis mourns Osiris by saying: 'My eyes are filled with tears, my heart is heavy with grief, and my body suffers for my good brother! If I know what hurts him, I would command pain to leave him'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the pain of the absence of

<sup>1</sup> The non-enclitic particle ist/ 3st means 'now/ while', meaning of phwy is 'back', it might be stated in this sentence as to refer to the back pain associated with labour. As for the verb iwr, it means 'to be pregnant'. See: Lesko, *Dictionary I*, p. 153; Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, pp. 114; Winkler, A. (2022). *Magical Obstetrics: Anubis, Bird Blood, and a Black Shrew. JNES* 81 (1), p. 64; Dickson, *Middle Egyptian*, pp. 50, 121; Schweitzer, *Egyptian Dictionary I*, p.497.

<sup>2</sup> Leprohon, R.J. (2008). *Egyptian Religious Texts*. In R. H. Wilkinson (Ed.). *Egyptology Today*. Cambridge, p. 239; Röpke, F. (2018). *Mythologische Erzählungen in den Heiltexten, Band I (a): Allgemeiner Teil und Textsammlung*. Heidelberg, p. 44.


<sup>3</sup> Koestler, A.J. & Myers, A. (2002). *Understanding Chronic Pain: a Handbook for People Coping with Chronic Pain and Suffering and Those Who Seek to Understand and Support Them*. Mississippi, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Bommas, M. (2022). I am Isis: the Role of Speech in the Cult of Isis. In J. Spier, & S.E. Cole (Eds.). *Egypt and the Classical World: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Antiquity*. Los Angeles, p. 46.


*rh.k wi whd.k n ʔk.s*  
*m ht tʔ mrt*, ‘I know you (Osiris) are suffering from its (Maat) disappearance  
 from the beloved land’.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, shame was one of the causes of psychological pain for the deities. This is attested in the myth entitled ‘Contendings of Horus and Seth’, as Seth sexually assaulted Horus to prevent him from inheriting his father’s throne. However, when the Ennead heard about that incident, Horus was the one who felt ashamed because they spat on his face, whereas Seth boasted about his work. Consequently, Horus felt great emotional pain because of the Ennead’s scorn and his shame feeling. Despite that, the Ennead gave the throne to Horus as he was the rightful heir of Osiris.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the pain of compassion for others was expressed in the same previous text. It is narrated that Isis felt pain of compassion for her brother Seth after harpooning him in the water and after hearing his words about their kinship. In this sense, the text reads:


*wn in.s ḥr šnt ḥṣty.s n.f,*  
 ‘indeed she stopped and felt pain in her heart for him’.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lee, *Exploring Pain*, p. 48. For the meaning of the word Aq ‘to perish/ disappear/ lose’ see: Lesko, *Dictionary I*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Wente, E.F. (2003). The Contendings of Horus and Seth. In W.K. Simpson (Ed.). *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: an Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*. New Haven, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, *Exploring Pain*, p. 182. For the meaning of wn ‘stop/ lapse’, see: Lesko, *Dictionary I*, p. 101.

## Expressing emotional pain

All living creatures, whether men or animals express their emotional status through some visual gestures and physical attitudes. These gestures, give important clues about the body postures that help to understand and read the others' body language, and thus be able to respond emotionally with their inner feelings, which they cannot express easily. In other words, these gestures allude to the creation of communication tools between people and thus help responding to them. Additionally, body gestures are considered crucial means for reading the ancient Egyptian scenes and to convey their meaning.<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 2. Mourning scene from the mastaba of Ankhmahor, Saqqara, 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty**  
(After Verbovsek, *Correlation of Rituals*, p. 243, fig. 2)

<sup>1</sup> Schebesch, A. (2014). Reading the Body Language of Mankind's Oldest Figurines: an Experimental Approach. *Tracing Gestures: the Art and Archaeology of Bodily Communication*, Conference Programme 4-5 November 2014. London, p.1.

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For example, the upraised arms of the mourners was almost the sole characteristic feature of the early representations of grief. However, in later times the most common characteristics also included tears, raised arms with one or both hands placed on the head or slapping the forehead (fig. 2). Notably, the mourning representations of the Old Kingdom that included overlapping bodies and other physical contact between the mourners as well as fainting on the ground, all visualized the deep connection between emotional and physical pain.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to other emotions, such as fear, love, anger, grief, and mourning, which were explicitly represented and described in several literary sources and were expressed clearly in the ancient Egyptians' body language, the sensation of pain did not have much attention. Furthermore, when examining how they perceived pain, most of the Egyptologists focused their studies on the expressions of pain and even the pain sensation in lexical and literary sources; only a few of them discussed the expressive modes used by the Egyptian artists to indicate pain feeling in their works. They mainly relied on analyzing the descriptive inner pain expression in these sources and tried to link it with the external expression viewed in art. This could be a result of the Egyptologists' inability to understand the ancient people's actual reactions and behavior in various situations, especially when dealing with negative emotions such as pain or suffering.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the tendency of idealism in art made it hard to accurately express the actual feelings that were linked with the daily life scenes. Not to say that the captions accompanying most of these scenes usually mention the owner's

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<sup>1</sup> Assmann, J. (2005). *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*. New York, pp. 309-310.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, E. (February 2000). The Animated Pain of the Body. *The American Historical Review* 105 (1), pp. 37, 39.

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happiness and good life and rarely indicate their suffering.<sup>1</sup> However, certain universal gestures and expressions are widely recognized as being linked to emotions like grief or pain, a consensus shared by both neurologists and anthropologists around the world. These signals transcend cultural boundaries and are instinctively understood across diverse societies, reflecting a shared human experience of emotion.

Even in recent days, most of these gestures can be noticed in people suffering from bad emotions. These include the facial features of weeping, the cry/scream of pain, the frown, and the turned-down mouth. Despite that, anthropologists noted that people of different ethnics reacted differently towards pain. Moreover, they insisted that the social status of the people highly affected their expression of pain. According to Baines, scenes showing distress or pain were very rare among the elite, who enjoyed a luxurious life and had several servants to carry the burdens of life on their behalf, whereas these specific scenes can be found in the inferiors' daily life incidents.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, Cornelius added that when it comes to facial features, the ancient Egyptian artist usually tended to display neutral facial features without showing any emotions, especially when it comes to the elite representations. Not to mention that there are always some exceptions to every rule. He argued that some facial features were clearly indicate of the person's emotional status. According to him, the eyes were obvious indications of different feelings, as

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<sup>1</sup> Baines, J. (2017). Epilogue: on Ancient Pictorial Representations of Emotion: Concluding Comments with Examples from Egypt. In S. Kipfer (Ed.). *Visualizing Emotions in the Ancient Near East*, OBO 285. Zurich, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, *Animated Pain*, p. 37, 39; Baines, *Pictorial Representations*, p. 268.

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they are shown with tears in mourning scenes, and wide-opened in scenes of adoration, prominence, or fear. Moreover, the facial expressions indicating emotions included the representation of fear by the huge eyes, anger by the large wide nose, and happiness by the smiling mouth.<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, Schmidt argues that the neutral or soft facial features of the depicted person while experiencing pain or suffering might refer to his willingness to lead a life towards joining the divine in the afterlife by acting happily and with satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the study of the way by which the ancient Egyptians expressed their physical and psychological pain in art is of great importance. On the other hand, Cohen stated that the pain expression is very different from the pain sensation. Although both norms are related to the suffering person, their perception is different for the observer.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Baines pointed out that the artists usually expressed suffering and painful emotions depending on the hierarchical status, as the lower rank people and especially animals were the major representatives of pain suffering. This is of course, due to their involvement in the daily life activities that were practiced on behalf of their employers. In his point of view, the representation of pain suffering in animals was in fact a reflection of the man's negative emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius, I. (2017). "The Eyes Have It and the Benign Smile" – the Iconography of Emotions in the Ancient Near East: from Gestures to Facial Expressions?. In S. Kipfer (Ed.). *Visualizing Emotions in the Ancient Near East*, OBO 285. Zurich, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, E. (1986). *Ägypten und Ägyptische Mythologie: Bilder der Transition im Werk Andrej Belyjs*. Munich and Berlin, p. 362.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, *Animated Pain*, p. 39.



**Fig. 3. Labor scene of a hippopotamus, mastaba of Idut, Saqqara, 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty**  
([https://www.reddit.com/r/ArtefactPorn/comments/ucbrap/a\\_relief\\_from\\_the\\_mastaba\\_tomb\\_of\\_princess\\_idut/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ArtefactPorn/comments/ucbrap/a_relief_from_the_mastaba_tomb_of_princess_idut/) accessed on 8-1-2024)

It is worth noting that the ancient Egyptian artist skillfully represented pain suffering on the faces of animals. In this sense, the screaming wide-opened mouth, in addition to the protruded tongue and the lifting up of tail are clear indications to the severe pain and distress felt by the animals (fig. 3).<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusions

The ancient Egyptians, renowned for their remarkable architectural achievements and sophisticated cultural practices, also experienced a profound sense of psychological pain. This emotional distress was deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs and the harsh realities of their daily lives. Despite their many accomplishments, they were not immune to the universal human

<sup>1</sup> Baines, *Pictorial Representations*, p. 273, 275-276; Zwickel, W. (2013). The Iconography of Emotions in the Ancient Near East and in Ancient Egypt. In J. Liesen & P.C. Beentjes (Eds). *Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook* 2011/1, p. 15.

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experience of psychological pain, which was deeply rooted in their beliefs, social circumstances, and physical hardships. Their emotional pain resulted from several negative emotions, such as grief, compassion, shame, mourning, and solitude. Furthermore, in ancient Egyptian mythology, the deities experienced psychological pain as well. They were believed to possess human-like emotions and vulnerabilities, which often led to conflicts within the divine realm. Their stories serve as a reminder that emotional suffering is a universal aspect of the human condition, transcending even the divine realm.

The ancient Egyptians expressed their psychological pain through various forms of art, literature, and religious practices, providing a unique window into their emotional lives. In their art, they depicted scenes of mourning, grief, and emotional distress, often using vivid imagery and symbolism to convey the depth of their psychological pain. Literary works, such as the 'Tale of Sinuhe', featured themes of loss, longing, and emotional turmoil, offering a glimpse into the inner lives of the Egyptians. Religious practices, including elaborate funerary rites and the recitation of spells, were also used to cope with psychological pain. Through these creative and spiritual expressions, the ancient Egyptians were able to process and make sense of their emotional experiences, leaving behind a rich legacy of psychological insight and emotional intelligence.



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