

Historical Article

Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet: first rhinologist in history

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Abstract

Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet has always been referred to as the first rhinologist in history. Translations of the hieroglyphics depicted on all the illustrations accompanying previous publications do not substantiate this claim. The research presented is a result of an investigation of the original monument related to the doctor at its present location in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. The research proves that Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet was the first rhinologist in history.

Key words: History of Medicine, Ancient; Egypt; Nose

All textbooks and articles dealing with the history of Rhinology refer to Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet as the first rhinologist in history. The illustrations display Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet with his wife and behind them his eldest son/assistant and underneath him other sons/assistants (Figure 1).^{1–7}

On close inspection of such illustrations, and deciphering the hieroglyphics inscribed therein, the translation does not substantiate such a claim.

Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet was a physician to King Sahura in the Vth Dynasty in Ancient Egypt (2487–2475 BC).⁸ The doctor's tomb was discovered in Saqqara, and first reported by Mariette in 1889.⁵ The false door of the tomb was moved to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Stele number 1482 (Ground Floor, Salle 47). Auguste Francois Mariette was the first to hold an official position for conservation of the antiquities in Egypt in 1858, then designated as 'Maamour' of Antiquities. He later founded the Antiquity Services.⁹ Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet means Sekhmet possesses life. His titles included Chief Physician, Chief Physician of the Palace, and Chief Dentist of the Palace.^{3,5}

Several visits to the Egyptian Museum to inspect the false door personally, sometimes accompanied by experts in hieroglyphics, initially failed to solve the problem of whether Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet did actually heal the King's nose. Of note is the fact that the inscriptions are of the Old Kingdom and are difficult to decipher. At the initial inspections the area depicted in the textbooks was the area of the false door that was exclusively concentrated upon and thoroughly researched, helped by five different experts in reading hieroglyphics.

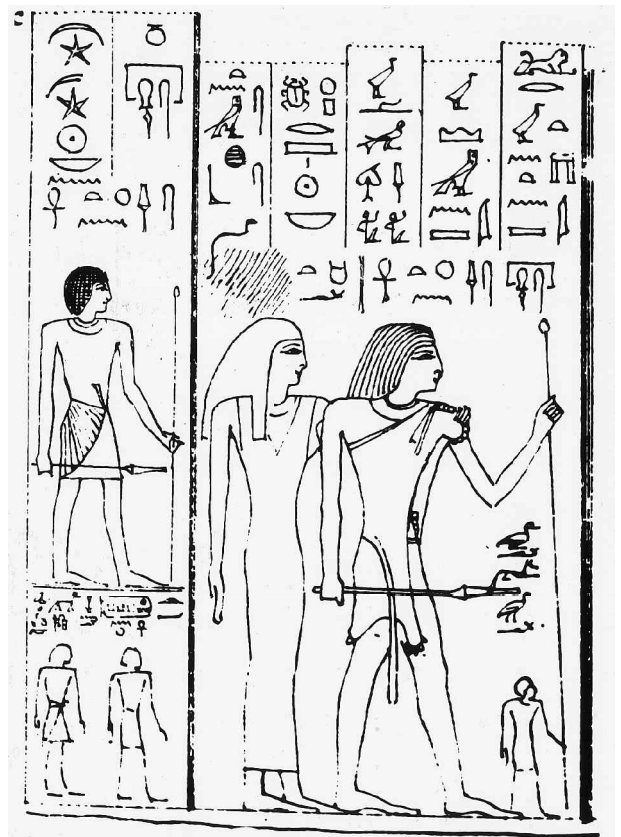


FIG. 1

Illustration from the lower portion of the right shoulder of the false door showing Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet with his wife and children/assistants.



FIG. 2
Right shoulder of the false door.

A full description of the false door is found in the von Ludwig Borchardt Catalogue of the Cairo Museum (1937),¹⁰ with the inscriptions printed out. Borchardt was the Head of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo during the 1930s.

All the illustrations in the books and articles showed the doctor, with his wife, and sometimes their children/assistants. The inscriptions above such scenes recorded the doctor's and his wife's names. Most such illustrations were of the lower part of the right shoulder of the false door (Figure 2), and sometimes the lower part of the left shoulder as in Jonathan Wright's book (Figure 3). Of note here is that the wife's name was not visible on the right shoulder, but could be read, with difficulty, on the left side. Further visits to the museum followed with a thorough search for the hieroglyphics representing the nose all over the false door (Figure 4), in contrast to just concentrating on the area depicted in the otorhino-laryngology history publications. The inscription relating to the healing of the King's nose was eventually located on the left shoulder (for an observer looking from the front of the false door, this would be the right). The writing on the shoulders should read from top to bottom. The part relating to the King's nose is in the top part of the first line (Figure 5). This is far removed from the engraving of

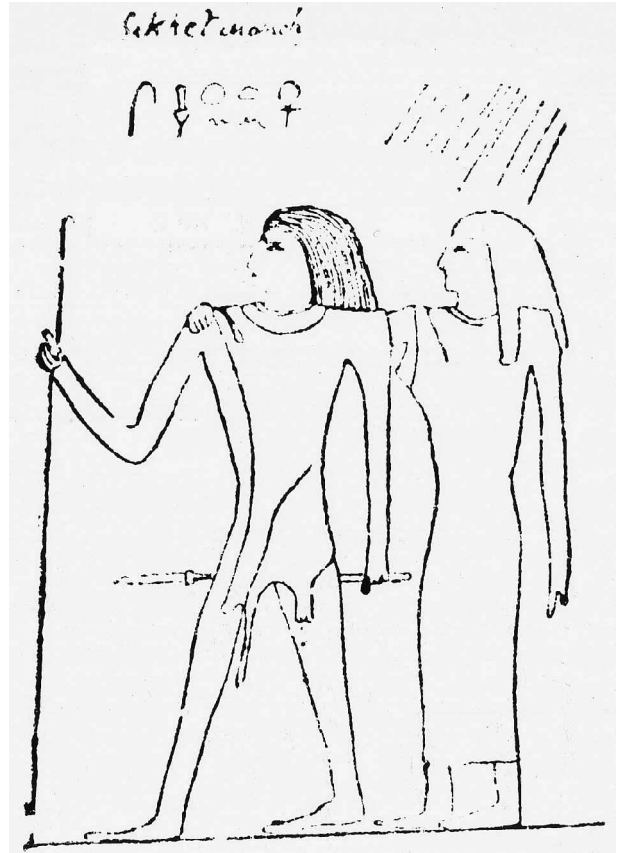


FIG. 3
Illustration from the lower portion of the left shoulder.

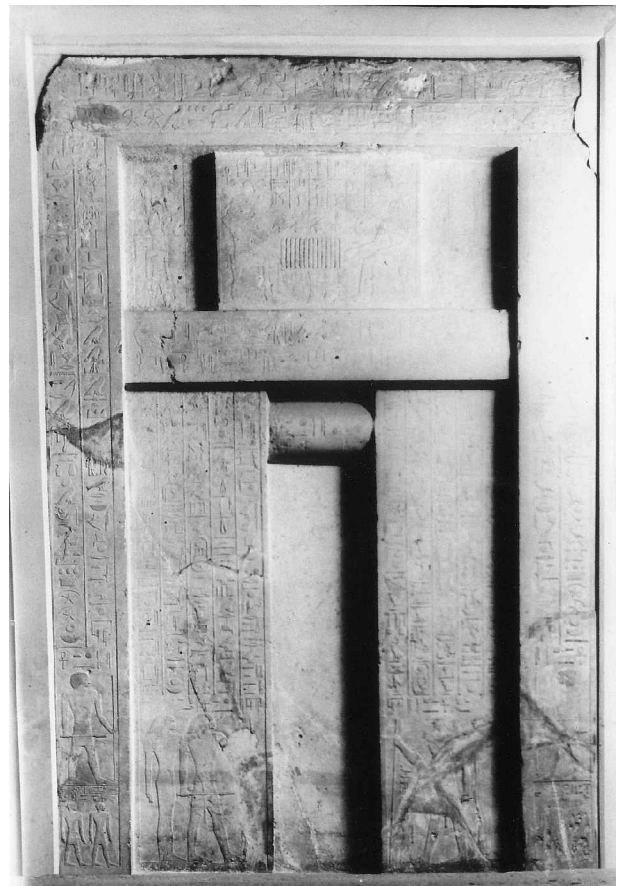


FIG. 4
The entire false door.



FIG. 5

Left shoulder of the false door. Inscription referring to healing of the King's nose is in the upper part of the far left vertical column (arrow).

the doctor and his family/assistants, the scene always portrayed in all the books and articles about the subject.

Figure 6 shows this inscription hand-written clearly for the purpose of this article for easy identification and hence translation:

dd	words
in	by
hm.f	his Majesty
n	to
wr	great
swnw	physician
Ny-cnh-shmt	Ny-Ankh-Sekhmet
snb	the one who healed this (participle)
fn	nose
pn	this is (demonstrative pronoun comes always after its name i.e. nose)
mrrw	beloved by the
ntr.w	gods

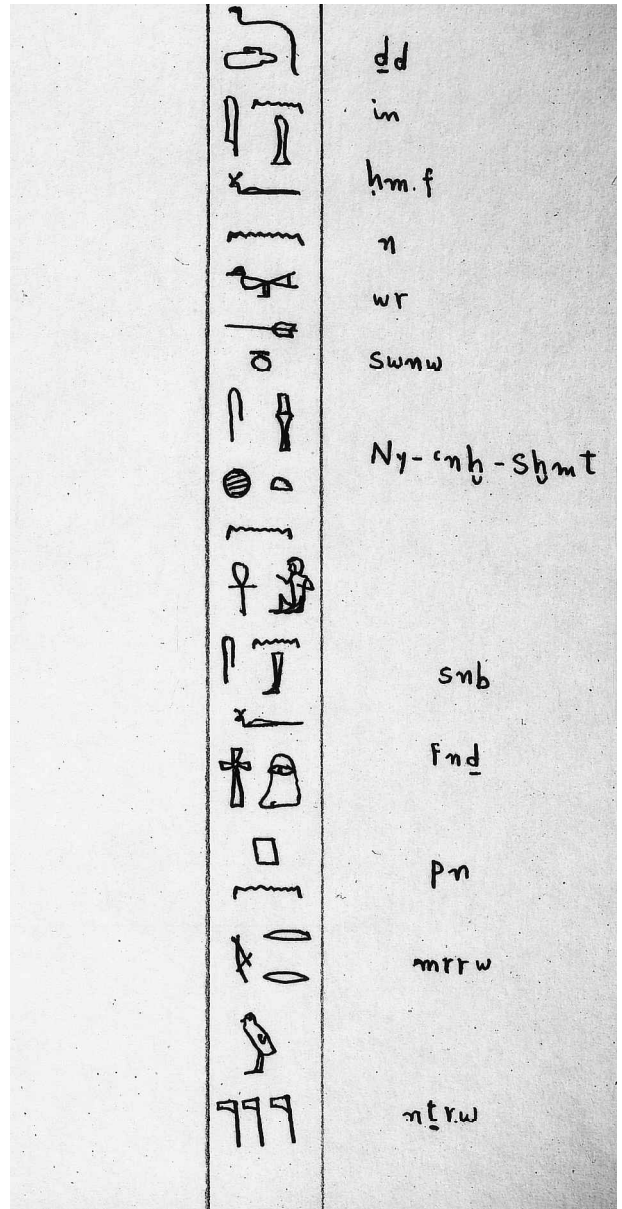


FIG. 6

The inscription recording the healing of the King's nose.

For the purpose of this research the most important part of the inscriptions of the whole false door is: 'the one who healed this nose', referring to the King's nose. The two-words: 'snb fn' do not appear in the illustrations shown in all articles and textbooks dealing with the subject. Perhaps the two words should be added to the illustration.

There is no indication from the inscriptions what was wrong with the King's nose. However, common treatable nasal conditions in ancient Egypt were nasal polyps,¹¹ ozaena¹² and trauma to the nose.⁷

Thus Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet was the first physician in history to be recorded as healing a disease in a particular anatomical area, which in the case of our present research was the nose. Hence it can be concluded that Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet was the first rhinologist in history.

- **The hitherto publication of the hieroglyphics relating to Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet refer to him as the first rhinologist in history**
- **The translation of the hieroglyphics does not substantiate this claim**
- **Thorough research of the original monument in its present location in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo shows that on a different part of the same monument there is confirmation that Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet was indeed described as a rhinologist – the first in history**

Summary

A thorough research of the false door of Ni-Ankh-Sekhmet, located in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, proved that he was the first rhinologist in history.

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Mr A. L. Pahor takes responsibility for the integrity of the content of the paper.

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