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Carl Graves, Gabrielle Heffernan, Luke McGarrity
Emily Millward and Marsia Sfakianou Bealby

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Female Figurines from Deir el-Medina: A Review of Evidence for their Iconography and Function

Joanne Backhouse

Introduction

Bruyère's report on the excavation of the village of Deir el-Medina states that hundreds of fragments of female figurines were found at the site (Bruyère 1939, 109). This includes standalone figurines, those integrated into beds, models and plaques (Bruyère 1939, pl. XLVIII, XLIV and XLV). By today's standards the material is poorly published; the exact number found is unknown, as is the current location of many published pieces. Furthermore, there is no detailed contextual information for the majority of individual figurines. This paper will re-evaluate this material, integrating Bruyère's extensive reports from the site as a whole and subsequent scholarship. It will also include an analysis of figurines that are currently in the Louvre, which represents the largest corpus of material I have studied to date. At this stage this is the only group of figurines from the site which have been located. The aim of this paper is to assess the significance of the data, examining why representations of the female form were so prevalent at the site and to discuss what purpose they served.

Source Material

Bruyère excavated at Deir el-Medina between 1922 and 1951 while working for Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO). The majority of evidence concerning the figurines is documented in the 1934–35 season when Bruyère excavated the village (Bruyère 1939), although some earlier reports contain references to the discovery of both figurines and model beds. The earliest record, I have found, is in the 1927 report which notes that two terracotta model beds were found in tomb 335, shaft 1099, dated to the Eighteenth Dynasty (Bruyère 1928, 13 fig. 5h). It is worth noting some tombs at Deir el-Medina were given Theban Tomb numbers but not all. Those in the eastern cemetery were simple shaft tombs; these were subsequently filled in leaving no visible remains. As such most tombs referred to in this paper follow Bruyère's numbering, only those with a TT (Theban Tomb) designation are modern tombs numbers. Bruyère's 1930 report discusses clearing piles of debris, to the east and south of the walled enclosure which had built up during the lifetime of the village (Bruyère 1933, 5). Bruyère here recalls that model beds and standalone figurines had previously been found in the tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty,

but now in the rubble of the village he finds, for the first time, figurines integrated into beds (Bruyère 1933, 13).

In the cemeteries of the east and west Bruyère recovered standalone figurines and model beds. In tomb 1375 in the eastern cemetery he records a broken 'doll' of terracotta that was found next to the foot of a bed (Bruyère 1937b, 164, fig. 86). Real beds were often included in tomb assemblages at the site, for example tomb 1377 (Bruyère 1937b, 45, fig. 19), so it is impossible to say if the association was accidental. Tiny model beds were also used as tomb goods, for example tomb 1370 contained an example only 19mm in length and 0.5mm in height (Bruyère 1937b, 132, fig. 73). In addition fragments of three standalone figurines and three model beds were also found next to a group of coffins in tomb 1352, in the western cemetery, which Bruyère dates to the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty (Bruyère 1937a, 95–97). This suggests that beds, and not just figurines, were key elements in tomb assemblages.

Bruyère's 1953 publication details his work excavating the votive chapels and temples north of the Ptolemaic temple. He records finding six fragments of figurines integrated into beds and two fragments of standalone figurines, one of which is described as being '*en état de grossesse*' (Bruyère 1953, 35–36, fig. 3.2). These were found in '*le grand puits*,' this is located behind the Ptolemaic temple and still visible today. It is believed this was dug in the Ramesside Period in an abortive attempt to reach the water table. It was a substantial undertaking, fifty metres deep and thirty-five metres wide. The abandoned pit subsequently became filled with debris (Bruyère 1953, 129). Subsequent work by Bonnet and Valbelle (1975, 445) also found half a model bed in house XX and a fragment of a figurine in house XIII. The next season they dug two sample trenches to the south of the village; here they found a fragment of a model bed, a fragment of a figurine integrated into a bed and two fragments of standalone figurines (Valbelle and Bonnet 1976, 341). The evidence suggests that figurines were endemic to the site, found in the houses, the debris of the village and tombs. It is noteworthy that no figurines integrated into beds are recorded in the tombs, but they are present in all other areas. This may reflect lack of detail in recording or it may suggest they fulfilled a different function at the site.

The Evidence

The discussion in this paper will use published material and the collection of figurines currently in the Louvre Museum, which I examined and photographed on a study visit in February 2011. For the purposes of this study I have divided the figurines into six broad groups based on iconography, each of which will be examined below. An overview of those figurines currently in the Louvre is presented in Figure 2.1. All measurements given in this paper are for current length, no estimates for fragmentary pieces are included. No individual contextual information is recorded for the majority of figurines. However, as the 1939 publication details the season of 1934–35, when Bruyère excavated the village, it is likely those published in this work were found in the debris of the houses (Bruyère 1939).

Plaques, Ostraca and Models

Bruyère's photographs (1939, pl. XLIII and XLV) show eleven plaques incorporating features of the female form, seven of which are now in the Louvre, an example is seen in Figure 2.2. The present location of the remaining plaques is unknown. An additional plaque is noted in the

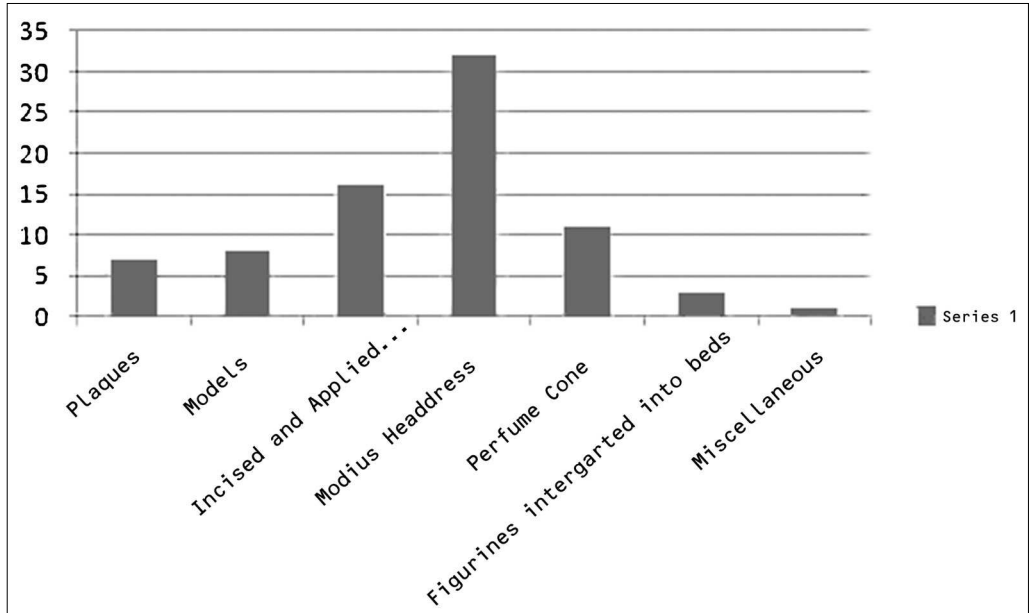


Figure 2.1: Figurines now in the Louvre.



Figure 2.2: E16503b – Plaque figurine, 8.5cm.

main body of the excavation report, found in house XXV (Bruyère 1939, 299, fig. 167). Bruyère (1939, 143) succinctly described them as polyhedrons, that is a solid object in three dimensions with flat surfaces and a flat face and edges. These plaques are hand-modelled, with incision and occasional applied decoration. The examples in the Louvre are between 3.9cm and 8.5cm in length. All complete figurines have their pubic triangle indicated, with dots or incised lines. The navel is denoted on five plaques, either by a series of dots or applied decoration. No facial features

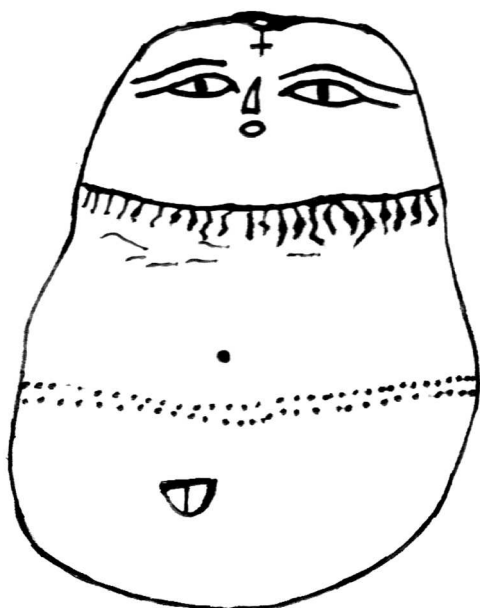


Figure 2.3: Figured ostraca – drawing based on Bruyère 1939, plate XLV.

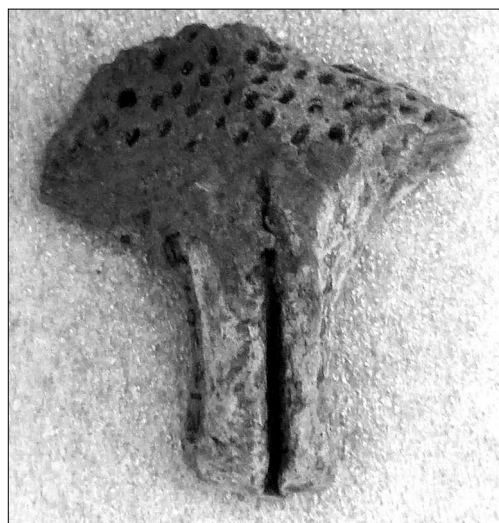


Figure 2.4: 16504a – Model, 4.7cm.

are depicted although two plaques (Louvre E16503a and Louvre E16503b) have two sets of parallel horizontal lines close to the top edge. These could indicate eyes or a hip-girdle, as seen on more realistically depicted figurines.

Bruyère (1939, pl. XLV) also records seven figured-ostraca, (current location unknown). The surface of the ostraca is used in its entirety to suggest an abstracted female form, with no limbs, although facial features are depicted. The most consistent element of iconography is the pubic triangle, appearing on all pieces and the navel is shown six times. Two of the pieces also include depictions of necklaces and hip-girdles. A cross is drawn on the forehead of four of these pieces, an example is shown in Figure 2.3. The significance of this is unknown.

Small clay, hand-crafted models representing female genitalia were also found at the site (Bruyère 1939, pl. XLV and XLIII). Bruyère (1939, pl. XLV) shows eight pieces which are now in the Louvre and Bruyère (1939, pl. LXIII) shows up to twelve additional pieces, current location unknown. The examples in the Louvre range in size from 3cm to 6cm in length, Figure 2.4 shows an example. They are decorated with a series of dots and incisions. Due to the shape of the pieces it is likely the decorative motifs are used to depict the navel (e.g. Louvre E1605b) or the pubic region (e.g. Louvre E16504a). Three examples have a deep linear incision which probably represents the vulva (for example Louvre E16504f). Two examples also exhibit a row of dots possibly suggesting a hip-girdle (e.g. Louvre E16504g). Also recorded by Bruyère (1939, pl. XLIII) were small circular pieces of modelled clay, current location unknown. They are decorated with incision and dot motifs and similar items have been recorded at Amarna (Stevens 2006, 89) and Memphis (Giddy 1999, 334). Given the similar decorative techniques and motifs, as seen on the plaques and models, I agree with Stevens (2006, 89) in her suggestion that they may represent stylised body arts.



Figure 2.5: Example of 'jeux de nature'. Drawing based on Keimer 1940–1945, plate VII.

In addition to the material published by Bruyère, Keimer (1940–45b) wrote an illuminating article on '*jeux de la nature*,' which are stones or pebbles that resemble human or animal forms and which have been enhanced by the addition of painted decoration. Keimer asserts many were found at Deir el-Medina, but were largely unpublished. A number depict the female form (Keimer 1940–45, pl. V, VI and VII). Those depicted in plate VII (Keimer 1940–45b pl. VII) wear a large wig and broad collar, with a lotus flower decorating both their head and used to symbolise the vulva, Figure 2.5 shows an example. The stones have been carefully selected as they all have a large circular groove in the centre which protrudes, suggesting an extended abdomen and possibly indicating pregnancy. Those in plate V (Keimer 1940–45b pl. V) show women with large wigs and the shape of the stone emphasises their large breasts. Bruyère (1939, 277) refers to finding '*un silex représentant un tronc de femme gross, les mains sur le ventre*' in house S.E. IX. It is likely this is what he was referring to.

Stand Alone Figurines with Incised and Applied Decoration

Over thirty figurines with incised and applied decoration were recorded by Bruyère (1939, pl. XLIII and XLV). Sixteen are now in the Louvre; all are fragmentary ranging in size from 3.6cm to 11cm. The current location of the remaining figurines is unknown. All sixteen in the Louvre have incised decoration with six also having applied decoration. The individualistic and crude style of manufacture suggests all figurines were hand-modelled, with the possible exception of one, which could have been made using a half mould, suggested by its flat back (Louvre E16505). Although individualistic in style, repeat motifs and areas of significance are identifiable. On eleven figurines the breasts are indicated, either modelled or by the use of applied and incised decoration. The dot motif is also used in extensive manner on two pieces (Figs 2.6 and 2.7); this is unparalleled in the general corpus of New Kingdom figurines. It is unlikely that this was used to suggest tattooing as it covers the whole body of the figurine. It may denote the significance and importance of the female body as a whole, illustrating the use of the female form as a vehicle for decoration and a canvas upon which to encode meaning. The navel is indicated eight times, either by a circle motif or simple incision. The pubic triangle is represented six times. Two figurines are depicted with protruding stomachs, suggesting pregnancy (Figs 2.8 and 2.9) and there is at least one other example of a figurine with a protruding stomach in Bruyère's publication (Bruyère 1939, pl. LII).

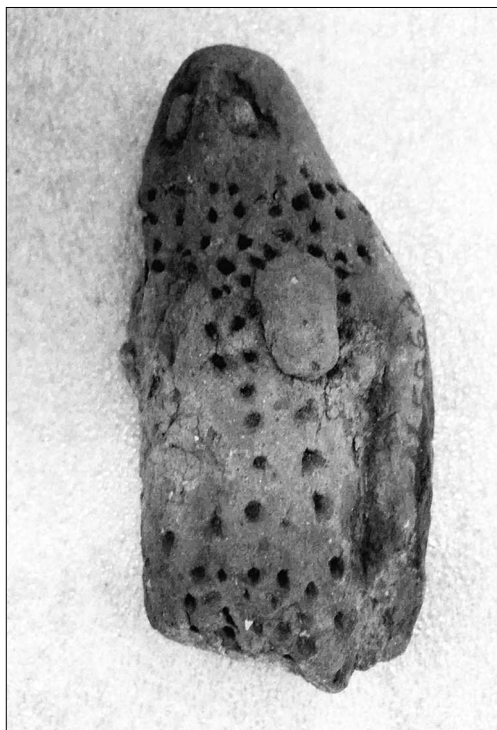


Figure 2.6: Figurine with incisions, E16506a, 7.3cm.



Figure 2.7: Figurine with incisions, E16506e, 4cm.



Figure 2.8: Figurine with protruding stomach, E16507, 6.9cm.

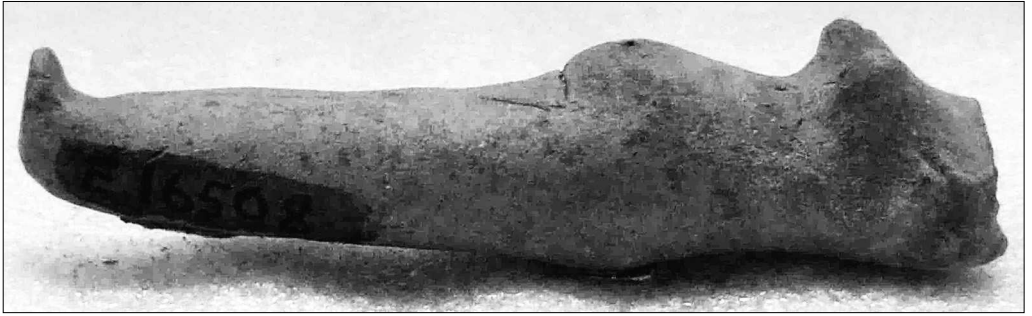


Figure 2.9: Figurine with protruding stomach, E16508, 8.3cm.

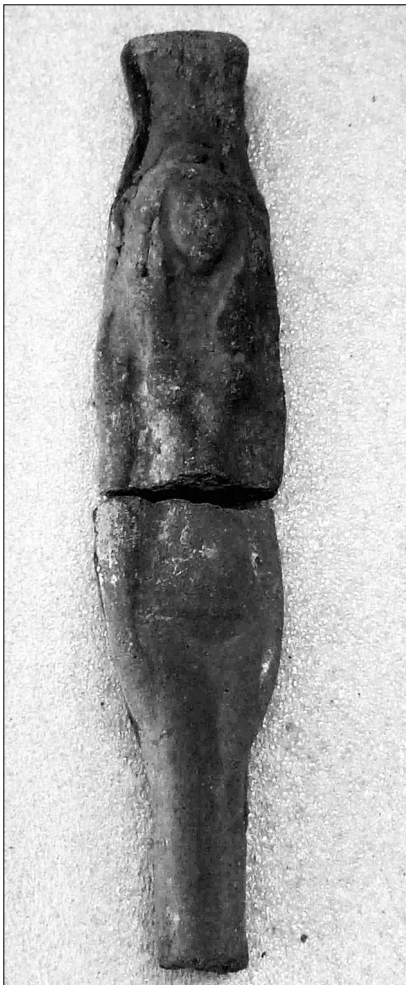


Figure 2.10: Figurine with arms elongated, E16513h, 13.5cm.

Figurines wearing a large modius headdress

Bruyère records twenty-three figurines wearing a large modius-headdress in plate XLIII, seven more are depicted in plate XLIV, with twenty-five more shown in fig. 58 (Bruyère 1939, pl. XLIII, XLIV, fig. 58) although there may be some duplication of images. Thirty-two of these figurines are now in the Louvre; all are fragmentary, ranging in size from 3.9cm to 8.2cm in length, and in twenty-eight pieces only the upper body remains. The figurines are represented in two poses. Nine have elongated arms resting at the side of their body, (e.g. Fig. 2.10). On fifteen pieces one arm is bent at the elbow and folds across the chest resting on the breast; in twelve cases it is the left arm of the figurine which bends across the chest (e.g. Fig. 2.11), on three pieces is the right arm (Fig. 2.12). The remaining pieces are too fragmentary to discern their pose. In six instances the figurines appear to be holding something, although the precise nature of the object is not distinguishable, as seen in Figure 2.11. Bruyère (1939, 141) believed the figurines held either '*menat*' necklaces or a blue lotus flowers. With regard to the figurines I have handled personally, it has not been possible to identify either of these objects. Bruyère (1939, 141) also cites one unique example which held the sceptre of Ptah, comprising of the '*was* sceptre', surmounted by an '*ankh*' and '*djed*' symbols, which I believe is depicted in the 1939



Figure 2.11: Figurine with left arm across body, E16513e, 6cm.



Figure 2.12: Figurine with right arm across body, E16513c, 8.2cm.

publication (Bruyère 1939, pl. XLIII). If so, this would be a unique piece in the general corpus of these New Kingdom figurines. Ptah was venerated at the site as the god of craftsmen and so the figurine may have been made as a votive offering to the god.

Figurines Wearing a Perfume Cone

Bruyère (1939, pl. XLIII) records six figurines with perfume cones on their heads, while a further eleven are shown in (Bruyère 1939, pl. XLIV). The latter group are now in the Louvre, and again there may be some duplication in plates. All eleven pieces in the Louvre are fragmentary, showing only the upper body of the figurines. They range in size from 4.9cm to 7.8cm in length; the perfume cones take various forms, from tapering (Fig. 2.13) to large and bulbous (Fig. 2.14). All the figurines have the remnants of painted decoration, some more pronounced than others. Red paint is commonly used for the flesh, black for the wig and white for the perfume cone. Remnants of paint are visible on the reverse of seven pieces (e.g. Fig. 2.15). This suggests the figurines were not designed to be solely displayed frontally but could be mobile, and were possibly made to be held. The figurines are carefully modelled with attention to detail, earrings or ears are seen on at least five pieces, with a lotus flower and headband shown on at least two and individual locks of hair are also represented.



Figure 2.13: Figurine with tapering perfume cone, E16512r; 5.4cm.



Figure 2.14: Figurine with bulbous perfume cone, E16512s, 4.8cm.



Figure 2.15: Figurine with paint on the reverse, E16512s, verso.

There are however, a number of hitherto unexplained iconographic traits within this dataset. In five examples the eyes are emphasised heavily with black outline (e.g. Fig. 2.13) which is undocumented in previous or subsequent scholarship. White stripes can also be seen on two figurines (e.g. Fig. 2.16). These stripes may be suggestive of a certain style of dress, as seen for example on priestesses in the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Ken-Amun who are vividly attired in striped robes with ribbons or beads across their chest (Davies 1930, pl. XLI). If so, the figurines may have been designed to represent priestesses and so act as votive offerings to the god they served, however only a very small number of figurines have these markings so this is not a common feature of the corpus. So called paddle dolls are often depicted with beads or ribbons diagonally crossing their chest but these are dated primarily to the Middle Kingdom, one such example being found by Winlock at Deir el-Bahri (Winlock 1942, pl.

38). Alternatively these features may be due an accident of preservation or poor workmanship. However, the latter is not in keeping with the overall degree of detail the figurines exhibit; this leads me to believe the markings were intentional.

Figurines Integrated with Beds

Bruyère (1939, pl. XLIV) recorded eight fragments of figurines integrated into beds, three showing upper bodies and five of lower bodies. In the body of the text he also depicted two almost complete examples (Figs 2.18 and 2.19); these are now in the Louvre Museum (Bruyère 1939, 142). Bruyère (1933, 13 fig. 4) had previously included an example in his 1930 report (Fig. 2.17) which is also in the Louvre Museum. The current location of the remaining pieces is unknown. The figurines integrated into beds are substantial pieces, for example figurine E14385 (Fig. 2.17) is 19.2cm in length, 8.6cm in depth and 10.5cm in height. These artefacts, therefore, were clearly not made to be carried around as an amulet or charm. It is more likely they were created for display. They are made of clay, which has been pressed in

a mould, fired in a kiln, and then painted. All three show a recumbent woman on a bed with a child. The women are all nude, yet they wear a large wig, surmounted with a perfume cone and discus earrings. Figurines E14385 and E16515 (Figs 2.17 and 2. 18) are very similar; both women lie with their heads on a pillow and with their arms resting by their side. The ochre red of their bodies, contrasts strongly with the white of the bed. Both have their wigs painted black and on one side of their body rests a child, on the other a mirror is depicted. Both beds have a foot rest and originally had four legs. Both have been broken in antiquity. Figurine E16514 (Fig. 2.19) differs from the previous two pieces, although all three are linked thematically; the woman still lies on the bed, but no pillow can be detected. Although there are traces of paint remaining, overall the piece is less vibrant, with a muted ochre tone. The child is held to the breast, and the hair of the wig tucked behind the woman's shoulder. The woman appears to be wearing a thick headband, as seen on figurine E14385 (Fig. 2.17). Similar imagery is depicted on the fragmentary pieces Bruyère records in plate XLIV (Bruyère 1939, pl. XLIV). The two poses should be seen a variation on a theme, the overriding similarity between the two groups unites them.

NB – all measurements are from top to bottom of figurines (head to toe)



Figure 2.16: Figurine with distinctive markings, E16512p, 7.4cm.

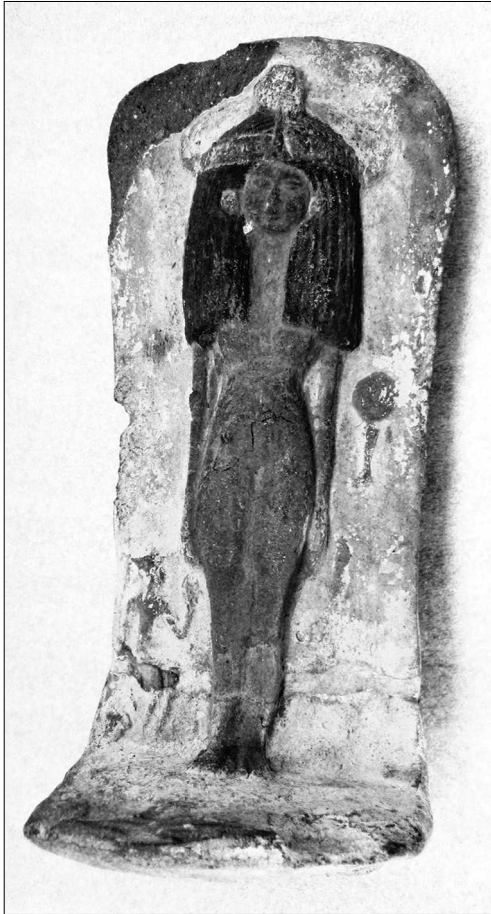


Figure 2.17: Figurine integrated into a bed, E14385, 19.2cm.

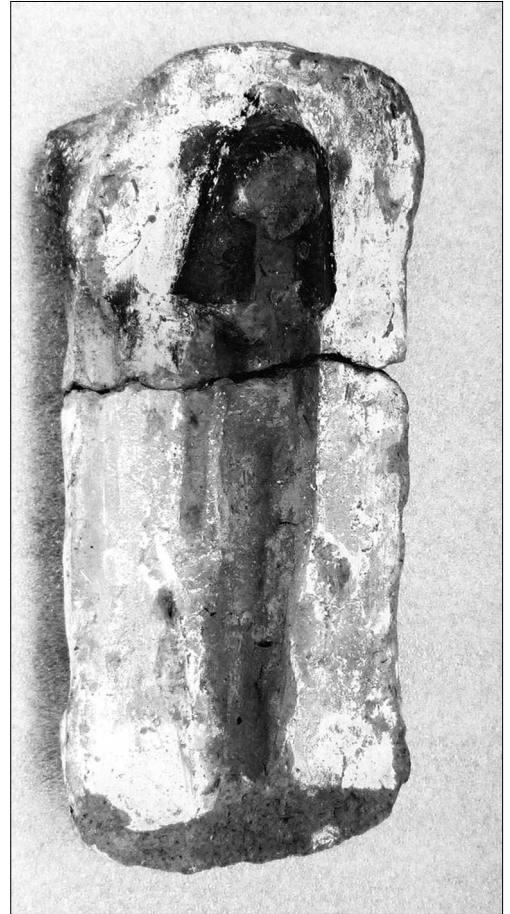


Figure 2.18: Figurine integrated into a bed, E16515, 16.2cm.

Miscellaneous

There are also a number of figurines which due to their fragmentary nature and the quality of publication it is not possible to classify with any degree of accuracy (Bruyère 1939, pl. XLIII). Bruyère (1939 pl. XLIII) shows ten fragments of torsos; it is likely they belonged to the 'modius head dress' or 'perfume cone' group due to stylistic similarities. Bruyère (1939, 142) describes other standalone statuettes that were produced '*la nourrice debout ou encore assise et jambes allongées.... et donnant le sein, toujours le gauche et toujours à un enfant male.*' Two such figurines are recorded in the publications (Bruyère 1937a, fig. 41; 1939, fig. 60, 142). Their present location is unknown and due to the poor quality of photographic reproduction it is not possible to make a detailed analysis of these pieces. No similar examples have been recorded in subsequent scholarship. Finally there is one example in the Louvre's collection of a standalone figurine which does not wear a perfume cone or modius headdress (Louvre E16512). This figurine has been published several times due to the high standard of workmanship and

preservation (Andreu 2002, 115 fig. 56; and Musée du Louvre 1980, 93 fig. 131). Stevens (2006, 85) records a significant number of figurines which do not wear any head apparel at Amarna. She also notes the difficulty of classifying the figurines into groups due to the diverse iconography of the dataset.

Dating and Typology

Bruyère (1939, 109) believed the majority of figurines belonged to the New Kingdom; although some could be dated to the Middle Kingdom. He suggested they formed a continuum with the figurines integrated into beds being the last style developed (Bruyère 1939, 141). Bruyère (1939, 140) believed the figurines with the modius headdress preceded the figurines wearing perfume cones and both he believed were forerunners of the figurines integrated into beds. This may be due to the fact that Bruyère records finding model beds and standalone figurines in the tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty but not figurines integrated into beds (Bruyère 1933, 12). He states he found these only in the rubble of the village, which was occupied until early/mid Twentieth Dynasty. While we have to acknowledge Bruyère's assertion on dating it must be noted that figurines integrated into beds were found in other New Kingdom cemeteries for example Edfu (Michalowski *et al.* 1939, 207–209, pl. XXV, XXVI). Also a similar diversification of evidence is found at Amarna. Stevens (2006, 85) records over two hundred fragmentary female predominantly moulded, standalone figurines. However, she also records twenty-

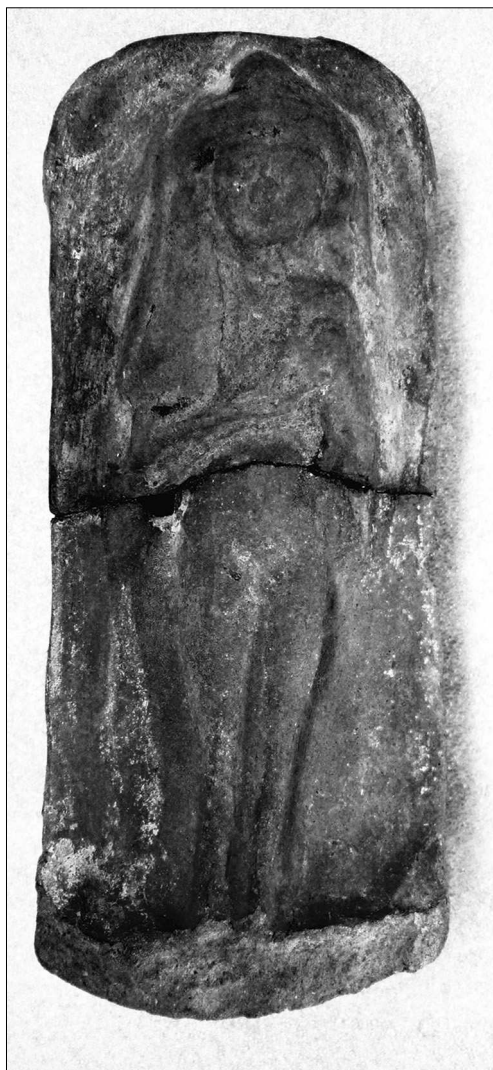


Figure 2.19: Figurine integrated into a bed, E16514, 17.5cm.

four mud, clay and pottery plaques, and ten figurines which show signs of being joined to a bed. Also at Edfu a plaque figurine was found in a tomb which also contained a model bed, and so it is possible the two were related (Michalowski *et al.* 1938, 121; 112). This tomb is dated to the Middle Kingdom so the association of figurines and beds may be more ancient than Bruyère anticipated. Some standalone figurines were accompanied by model beds at Deir el-Medina (Bruyère 1937a, 97 fig. 41). Similar evidence is found at Sawama (Bourriau and Millard 1971, fig. 11) and Amarna (Peet and Wooley 1923, 25 pl. XII). However, at both Deir el-Medina and Amarna, the number of figurines greatly exceeds the number of beds, suggesting that not all figurines were accompanied

by a bed. The evidence suggests figurines of a diverse form were made and used concurrently at Deir el-Medina. Due to the lack of contextual information it is impossible to ascertain which figurines were accompanied by a bed, however it is clear the association of women and beds was significant, as discussed in my previous paper (Backhouse 2012, 27–30).

Production

No pottery workshops have been found at Deir el-Medina so we can only surmise if the figurines were made in the village or brought in. Many were hand-modelled and some were of a rudimentary nature. Furthermore, although the figurines incorporate common traits, many were individualistic in design (e.g. Figs 2.6 and 2.7). The lack of uniformity of the standalone figurines suggests small-scale or home production. Others were moulded suggesting that mass-production was possible and implying a workshop. The majority of moulded figurines have flat backs or show no signs of modelling, suggesting they were made in an open mould, although four figurines in Bruyère's publication (1939, pl. XLIII) and two figurines in the Louvre (E16513e and E16513i) show signs of modelling on the reverse, which suggests they were made in a double mould. The production of figurines in a mould suggests that these items were inexpensive and accessible to all. Similarly the figured-ostraca and the '*jeux de la nature*' were created from readily available source materials. They demonstrate a process of transformation, whereby disregarded materials are made into objects through a creative input. Meskell (2004, 2) describes this as the 'making of a thing from a non-thing.' They also illustrate the use of different mediums to express the same motifs. This implies that the motif, the female form, was central to the belief system of the community, given the prevalence of representations.

Iconography

Defining Characteristics

The plaques and models focus on the sexual characteristics of the female form. They are devoid of facial features and of adornment. The abstraction and physiological nature of the plaques suggests they were concerned primarily with the desire for procreation, not aesthetics; the association with fecundity is demonstrated clearly on a number of figurines (e.g. Figs 2.8 and 2.9) and the '*jeux de la nature*' pieces (e.g. Fig. 2.5) depicted with protruding stomachs, suggesting pregnancy. Depictions of pregnant women are rare in Egyptian art, although a plaque figure from Edfu also has a protruding stomach (Michalowski *et al.* 1938, 114 pl. XXVI5). At Deir el-Bahri Queen Ahmose is shown pregnant with Hatshepsut, but this is a divine conception as Ahmose was impregnated by the god Amun (Naville 1896 pl. XLIX). As birth was associated with rebirth in Egyptian culture it is likely images of pregnant woman were powerful totems in the community. This link is seen vividly in the tomb of Nefer-renpet at Deir el-Medina (TT336), where we see Meretseger breast feeding the deceased tomb owner who is depicted as a child and we are told he becomes a child again in another time (Bruyère 1929, fig. 21).

Naked but Adorned

In comparison to the lack of personification seen in the plaques and models, the remaining figurines, both standalone and those integrated into beds, are all naked but adorned with elaborate

wigs and jewellery. There is some continuity with the plaques, principally the use of incision, seen on a number of examples in the modius headdress group. It is used to depict elements of personal adornment, for example hip-girdles, necklaces and to create holes for the insertion of earrings. Earrings are depicted on many of the standalone figurines and those integrated into beds, again demonstrating the iconographic continuities between the dataset. Bruyère (1939, 127) regarded the jewellery with which the figurines were decorated, as talismanic adornments which increased the power of the figurines. I believe the wearing of jewellery by naked women suggests they were adorned for a purpose, possibly for sex, with the jewellery worn to heighten their physical attraction.

Hair and Wigs

Wigs and hair are important decorative motifs within the dataset. In the collection at the Louvre there are six figurines which have holes in their head probably for the insertion of material to suggest hair. Bruyère (1933, 12) records finding crudely modelled figurines of unfired clay and figurines in terracotta with flowers or feathers attached to their head. Although he does not record any figurines with beads attached to their head, they are common at other sites for example at Gebel Zeit (Castel *et al.* 1984, fig. 4). The material is not as important as the intent, to suggest and emphasise the hair; on many of the figurines wearing perfume cones, individual braids can be differentiated (Figs 2.13 and 2.14). Two figurines in the Louvre's collection show signs of modelling on the reverse (E16513e and E16513i) and may have worn a tripartite wig. A number of pieces in Bruyère's publication (1939, pl. XLIII) are also depicted with tripartite wigs. The figurines integrated into beds all wear large wigs; there is here a juxtaposition of the naked figure, lying on a bed, yet with 'coiffured' hair. Again there must have been a reason for the adornment, possibly to entice. There are numerous references to hair in New Kingdom Love Poetry, where hair is seen as sexually alluring for example in *Papyrus Harris 500 Collection 1* (Kitchen 1999, 357). Giddy (1999, 29) in her analysis of New Kingdom figurines from Memphis, also found hair to be one of the two most important iconographic elements in her dataset, the other being the pubic region. In all other respects the figurines at Memphis were poorly rendered with no attention to detail. The emphasis on hair and the pubic region suggests these two areas were essential to the defining characteristics of the figurines and were possibly linked.

Modius Headdress

The apparel that surmounted the hair and wigs also carried meaning and intent. I use the term modius headdress, but Bruyère (1939, 140) describes it as '*une sort de diadème ou de couronne,*' a simple cylinder more or less raised, or sometimes a reversed cone, which resembles a crown of feathers as worn by Anukis, a goddess of the cataracts. I prefer the term modius headdress as this avoids any overt associations with goddesses or royalty. Bruyère (1939, 139) also believed the headdress may have represented the hieroglyphic sign for '*neb*' which depicts a basket. Handling the figurines has confirmed many have an indentation in the middle of the headdress, giving the impression of a basket or bowl. The association may have been more etymological, based on the word '*neb*,' than the function of a bowl or basket. Linguistically this means 'lord' or 'master', with the feminine counterpart signifying mistress. The '*nb.t*' sign came to symbolise women generally and was part of the common epithet '*nb.t prt.t*,' mistress of the house. Bruyère (1939, 139), also noted the '*neb*' sign may have been used by Nephthys, as part

of her distinctive headdress, which is made up of the hieroglyphic elements of her name, a tall headdress surmounted with a basket. Nephthys is most commonly shown at the head end of the coffin or sarcophagi, opposite her sister Isis, both protecting the deceased. This may reflect the ultimate funereal function Bruyère believed the figurines fulfilled. Pinch (1993, 225) also believed one of the functions of the figurines was funereal. This will be discussed in more detail later.

In the general corpus of New Kingdom figurines those wearing a modius headdress are rare. Two such figurines have been recorded by Teeter (2010, 32–33) from Medinet Habu, both dated from the late New Kingdom to the Third Intermediate Period. Another example was found in an Eighteenth Dynasty tomb at Sawama, which is ninety miles north of Thebes (Bourriau and Millard 1971, fig. 11). The high modius headdress is also worn by women depicted on votive beds, which were confined to the Theban region, dated mainly from the Third Intermediate Period, as discussed by Teeter (2010, 157–159). It is possible the modius headdress was a regional trait which spanned both the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate period.

Perfume cone

Perfume cones surmounted the head of eleven of the standalone figurines, and all three of the figurines integrated into beds, in the collection of the Louvre Museum. Cherpion (1994, 80–86) demonstrates convincingly that the cones were symbolic only, used to suggest the idea of perfume and anointing. These concepts were clearly significant to the purpose and function of the figurines. Both Cherpion (1994, 87) and Manniche (1999, 96) discuss the use of word play in this symbolism, the Egyptian word ‘*stj*’ means scent, but also engender, or beget and to pour. There are frequent references linking perfume to sex in the New Kingdom Love Poetry, one in particular ‘*The Cairo Love Song*’ described the preparation before love making and how the body is ‘sprinkled with perfume’ (Tobin 2003, 318). Cherpion (1994, 79) refers to the perfume cone as ‘*gage de survie*.’ She sees the cone as a wish for eternity, presumably through sex, birth and rebirth, although she does not fully articulate this. She makes the important point that perfume cones are rarely depicted on three-dimensional objects; instead they are shown only in two-dimensions, often on tomb scenes and engraved on stelae. However, Cherpion overlooks the inclusion of perfume cones on the three-dimensional figurines. The rarity of the depiction of a perfume cone in the round, suggests its inclusion in the morphology of the figurines was significant and purposeful.

Use

A full discussion on the function of female figurines in New Kingdom Egypt is outside the remit of this paper. The intention is to examine the possible uses of the figurines at Deir el-Medina only. Given the variations in iconography and context it is possible the figurines served different purposes. The size and the variety of textures incorporated into the design of the plaques suggest they were made to be held. Bruyère (1939, 144) noted one example with a compartment on the reverse containing chippings of nails, hair, some scraps of skin or remains of clothing. He suggested the plaques may have been used in magic (I assume he means ritual practise), possibly for bewitchment or as love charms. Waraksa (2007, ii) has suggested that New Kingdom figurines were standard ritual objects, used in magical/medical procedures. She believes they were used in conjunction with spells and a process of transference was invoked whereby the illness left the afflicted, entered the figurine, which was then snapped and disregarded, accounting

for their presence in refuse zones. While the advocacy of a proactive use for the figurines has much strength, their iconography suggests that if they were used in rituals it would be relating to fertility or female ailments. Yet the textual references Waraksa (2007, 153; 170) cites call for figurines of Isis to cure snakebites and stomach aches. There is no reason to assume that the figurines represented a divinity. It is more likely, if the figurines were used in magic, that it was by women in their own personal religious/magical/medical practise, and the spells were transferred aurally, as opposed to 'official' male magical practitioners/priests, who were more likely to record the spells. In addition the figurines integrated into beds are substantial pieces and a strange choice if made to be broken. Furthermore, Bruyère did find standalone figurines and model beds in the tombs of Deir el-Medina; this is difficult to explain in light of Waraksa's theory, unless we assume they were taken to the tomb to be used as ritual objects in the afterlife. Waraksa (2007) based her theory on the work she had carried out at the temple of Mut at Karnak dating from the late New Kingdom to the Third Intermediate period. While thought provoking, her analysis demonstrates the problems of attempting to apply one theory to a whole category of objects regardless of context.

Bruyère (1939, 144) believed the figurines were used around a structure he referred to as a '*lit clos*,' in the first room of the house. He believed these were cultic installations which also served utilitarian purposes, to sleep or give birth in (Bruyère 1939, 137). These were discussed in relation to images and representations of women in my previous paper (Backhouse 2012, 32–35). The point to note is that Bruyère believed the figurines were used in the home to celebrate the daily cult of the family, which focused on ancestor cult and lineage. However, Bruyère (1933, 14) believed the figurines ultimately had a funereal function. This corresponds with the data from Deir el-Medina where we find many goods included in tomb assemblages which show signs of use in everyday life. It is quite possible the figurines were used in the home and then taken to the tomb. Bruyère (1939, 142–144) believed the figurines integrated into beds represented the final stage of evolution of this artefact, due to the inclusion of a child in many examples and saw the figurines, representing the living, symbolising the perpetuation of the family line. However, he saw their nudity as indicative of their subservience and inferiority to man (Bruyère 1939, 149). I suggest Bruyère was 'reading' the figurines as a Twentieth Century European male, not viewing them in the symbolic landscape of New Kingdom Egypt. Concerned with reproduction and rebirth the figurines represent the power of the female not her inferiority.

However, there clearly was a dichotomy in the role of women in relation to childbirth. As Roth (2000, 200) notes, women were seen as the carriers of children but not the creators of life; a woman's role in ancient Egypt was to entice men to be sexual active. This is expressed in the '*Song of the Harpers*' (TT 50) which describes the life cycle, it states 'Men beget and Women Conceive' (Lichtheim 1945, 178). While in Egyptian cosmology the male is endowed with the power to give life and impregnate, at Deir el-Medina we do not see an abundance of representations of the male form celebrating their creative powers. It is the female image which predominates. It is noteworthy that many examples of wooden phalli were found in the Eighteenth Dynasty shrine of Hathor at Deir el-Bahri (Hornblower 1926, 81). Hornblower (1926, 82) suggested these could be ex-voto, but based on the principles of sympathetic magic they were more likely to be prayers for children to be born. However, no phalli are recorded from the site of Deir el-Medina, here the female organs are clearly emphasised. Perhaps at a temple, a place of organised religious practise, the emphasis was on the power of the male to produce and impregnate but domestic cult seems clearly to have centred on the female element. This may of course be linked to the unusual nature of Deir el-Medina, where the men worked away

from the village, for an eight day week returning at the weekend (Janssen 1980, 132). This left a predominantly female population in the village.

It is useful to consider the work of Pinch (1993, 225) here. She believes the figurines were concerned essentially with reproduction, not simply sexuality, given the inclusion of children on many pieces. She suggested they were placed in a funerary context to ensure the fertility of the deceased in the afterlife and assist their rebirth. In addition they could be offered to or placed in the vicinity of 'higher powers' or deities associated with fertility or spirits of the dead. The multifunctional purpose of the figurines is supported by evidence from Deir el-Medina, where we find figurines in the home, tombs and in the vicinity of chapels. An interesting group has been found in a niche cut into a wall of a house at Amarna, consisting of a standalone figurine, model bed and small scale stela (Peet and Wooley 1923, 25, pl. XII). It is possible the figurines at Deir el-Medina were displayed in a similar way, as niches were cut into many of the walls opposite the '*lit clos*,' which Bruyère maintained was the focus of ancestor cult (Bruyère 1939, 60). The figurines may have served as a link between the past generations, the present and the future generations.

Conclusions

Although varied, the evidence from Deir el-Medina forms a coherent group. All depict a naked woman, with the possible exception of two miscellaneous figurines, which could be dressed. It is possible the figurines form two groups, thematically linked. The plaques and models are devoid of any personification and emphasize the sexual characteristic of the female form, as do the figurines with incised and applied decoration, the '*jeux de nature*' and the figured ostraca. These were all clearly mobile and may have been used as ritual instruments in magic or as votive offerings. The figurines wearing the modius headdress, perfume cones and those integrated into beds are richly adorned. Due to their decorative features and the more robust nature of the figurines integrated into beds, it is possible they were made for display, and some of the standalone figurines may have been displayed on model beds. These may have been used in ancestor cult and worship. Bruyère's reports suggest the figurines integrated into beds were not found in tombs but standalone figurines and model beds were. It is impossible to know the accuracy of the recording. The figurines however, form a coherent group with the emphasis on the sexual characteristics of the female form, the rare depictions of pregnant women, and the inclusion of children on the figurines integrated into beds, suggesting all were concerned with reproduction. Given their presence in the debris of the village, the votive chapel area and tombs it is likely their purpose was to engender fertility in this life and rebirth in the next, through ritual magic, worship and offering.

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