

**Exceptional setups –  
exceptional beliefs? The  
situation of Amarna and Deir el-  
Medina**

**Anne Austin and Marie-Lys Arnette ‘*Of  
Ink and Clay: Tattooed Mummified  
Human Remains and Female Figurines  
from Deir el-Medina*’ (2022)**

HEA11015 Ancient Egyptian Religion

Portfolio 3



## What do we mean by exceptional beliefs?



Weiss (2015) argues that exceptional belief systems need to be considered via the following frameworks:

**Religious practice**

**Households and individuals**

**Material action and agency**

**Personal Piety**

**Outside formal state religious institutions e.g.**

**Temple**

**Embodied experience**

“**Exceptional beliefs**” can be considered those which don’t operate within formal state religion, but instead work through the embodied experiences of the individual and households and are materially expressed through domestic spaces, material culture and the human body. i.e Personal Piety

*Of Ink and Clay* situates religious embodied experience through the practice of tattooing, which they have demonstrated to be selective and therefore meaningful..



## Why is Deir el-Medina exceptional?

- Comparable sites?
- Demographically distinct
- Dense archaeological records

Comparable sites may be uncommon.

The dense archaeological record at Deir el-Medina allows us to consider the lived experience of the villagers and facilitates the study of non-institutional religion in a way that is rarely available elsewhere in Ancient Egypt.

Inhabited by craftsmen who built the Thebian Necropolis, therefore likely to be better educated.

Representational of a particular social class – customs may have been different from the general population

Inhabitants were probably wealthier and more literate (however oral traditions were predominant and therefore most villagers would not have participated in creating complex written works)

House altars, ancestor busts, religious figurines and ostraca

Deir el-Medina may act as a window towards an understanding of broader religious practice

**How does ‘*of Ink and Clay*’  
add to  
existing  
scholarship?**

- Focuses on the mummified remains of two women and three figurines found at Deir el-Medina and connects embodied religious experience in the form of the tattoos with material representation in the form of the figurines.
- Onto-epistemological – demonstrates that the nature of existence and the way in which knowledge can be passed are totally entangled.

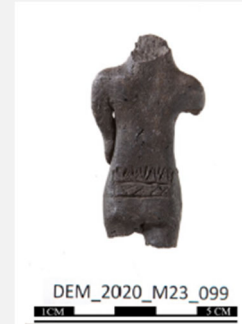
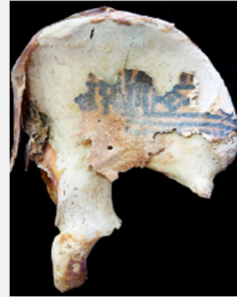
**Uses groundbreaking technology to make the invisible visible  
by use of infrared photography and Dstretch software.**



Here we can see Anne Austin in action, using a digital camera connected to an iPad, using the software to show the previously invisible tattoos.

## Human body as evidence of domestic religion and embodied practice.

- Represents the first direct link between tattoos on human remains that are mirrored on figurines, suggesting a system of apotropaic or magico-religious ritual in the New Kingdom.
- Few women were found to have such tattoos, possibly suggesting a particular socio-religious role within the community.



Apotropaic – to ward off evil or to protect

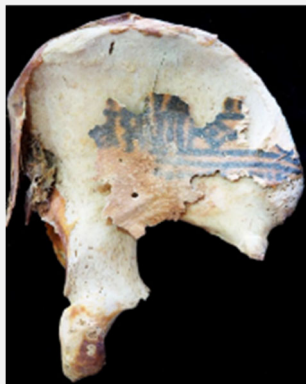


**Not the  
first.....**

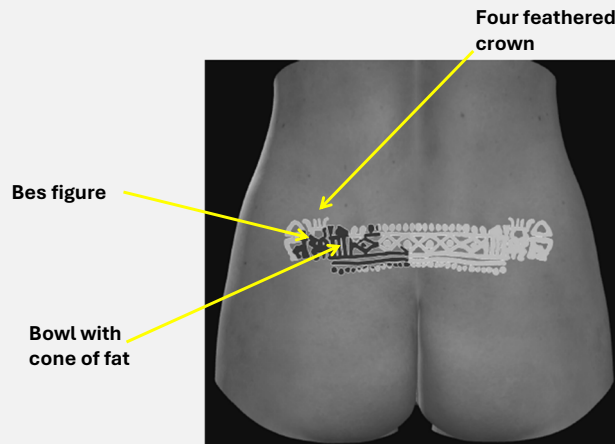
**Gebelein Man 3500 bc  
Tattooed woman**

Gebelein man with horned animal tattoos discovered 1896 near Thebes  
Over 30 tattoos, and I believe, is the mummy mentioned on p.64 ref. DEM 290.15.001 discovered in 2014 evidences tattoos symbolic of Hathor but the lack of imaging here almost makes this part of the discussion a side issue. More could have been done to link this mummy with those for whom imaging is prevalent.

## Tattoos as embodied religious experience



DEM 298.19.004 os coxa c.  
nineteenth to twenty-first  
dynasty



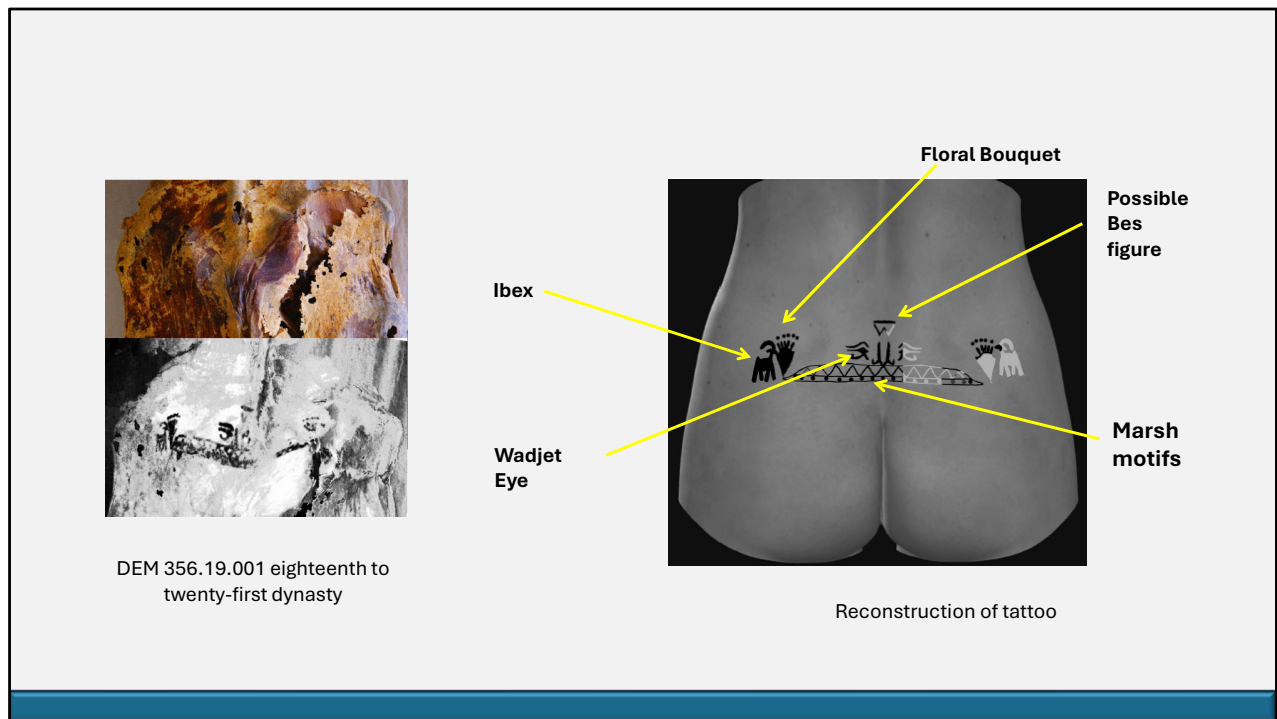
Reconstruction of tattoo

Knowledge of symmetry allows for reconstruction of tattoos

Dark colour and diffuse edges suggest that the tattoo is integral to the skin and not just sitting on it, implying that it was applied when the woman was alive.

Here we can see that the tattoos have been deliberately created in the lower back and hips using Bes imagery for protection particularly in childbirth (note the headdress which can signify protection as well as divine presence and power, but also seen at the threshold of houses which suggests protection within liminal spaces, such as in the process of giving birth where the child is transversing down the birth canal?) whilst the bowl with the cone of fat is suggestive of the practice of post partum purification following childbirth. The suggestion is that these symbols, embodied by the 'midwife' are activated during childbirth, during which both mother and child are vulnerable.

The presence of the bowl of fat is important as Bes is also a god associated with dancing, music and prostitution. The addition of the cone of fat grounds this woman in the realms of childbirth

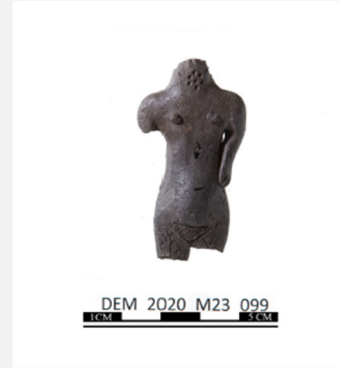
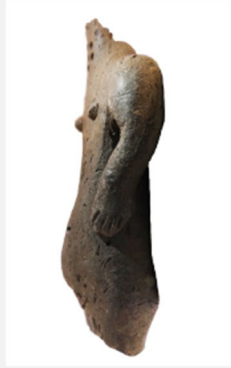


Argues that Ibex and bouquet together are symbols of eroticism and sexuality but also associated with motherhood. They argue that representations connect the body with eroticism, fecundity and motherhood. This may be true but why only some women in this instance? Arguable that the marsh tattoo also symbolises the cooling properties of water on the so called fires of pain in childbirth. Life, rejuvenation, fertility etc Again, this changes the symbolism of the Bes image from one of Music and dance to one of childbirth and confinement. Associations are key.

The practice of female tattooing for motherhood not exclusive to New Kingdom Egypt. Also common among the Amazigh of North Africa and also for women in Iraq.

BUT not ubiquitous, so not for personal pain or reproduction?

## Figurines

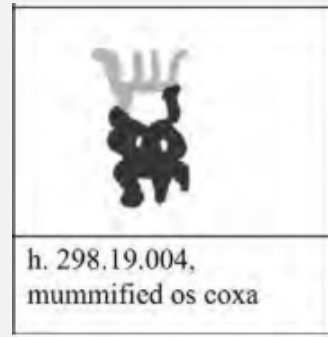
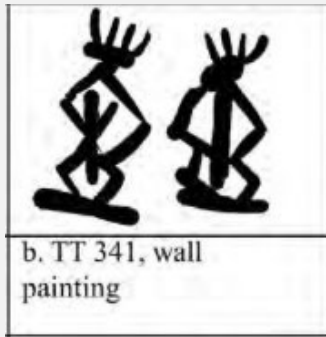


Likely to have come from a domestic context, most probably found in the Grand puis so discarded after use? Some found in houses A small number found in Eastern and Western cemeteries. No information on overall numbers of figurines found but at least 30. Hand made possibly by villagers? Pregnant women themselves as protection? Note the mirroring of the marsh as well as the Bes figure and also the fact that the figure is clearly pregnant (rare in egyptian art), BUT not included in original excavation reports so context is difficult to ascertain with absolute clarity. However, Bruyere does not record these types of figurines generally.

## Figurines



## Evidence of this form of Bes



1. Bes with the four feathered crown

## **Strengths and Weakness**

**Demonstrate that the protection against evil spirits was an ontological, lived experience in Deir el-Medina**

**New technology making the invisible, visible for the first time.**

**Small study, few mummies identified. Would have been useful to include a more detailed discussion of the 'Hathor' mummy which may have given a more rounded view?**

Study carried out of a very small base of two mummies and three figurines so caution needs to be taken when drawing any final conclusions about embodied ritualised practice in a broad sense.

However, exceptional beliefs are not necessarily predicated on all participants having the same experiences, so it is very plausible that a select number of women carried out roles related to the protection of women both pre and post childbirth.

We also don't know how the figures were used, are they meant to be a repository and substitute so the women have another layer of lived experience (i.e a substitute for being tattooed themselves?) Are they being brought to a woman's confinement during labour and birth? Did pregnant women themselves sculpt them to protect during pregnancy and childbirth? Are they substitutes for the tattooed women during childbirth? Are they just representations (used as a shop front to advertise a midwife????)

## Strengths and Weakness

**Not much detail regarding tattoo symbols of Hathor even though this mummy appears important**

**We don't know how the figurines were activated – if indeed they were.**

**Not always clearly written e.g. Buyere quote**

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However, exceptional beliefs are not necessarily predicated on all participants having the same experiences, so it is very plausible that a select number of women carried out roles related to the protection of women both pre and post childbirth.

There is reference to another mummy (DEM 290.15.001) who evidences tattoos symbolic of Hathor but the lack of imaging here almost makes this part of the discussion a side issue. More could have been done to link this mummy with those for whom imaging is prevalent.

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## Conclusion

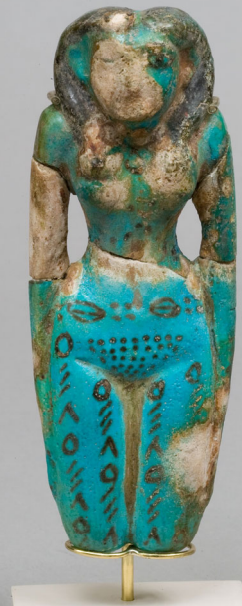
**Confirmation that tattoos were mirrored on clay figurines, representing lived practice**

**Tattoos were permanent and therefore served as perpetual amulets, giving protection against vulnerable life events such as childbirth**

**Personal piety was not just shown in the material culture of Deir el-Medina, but personified within the physical body. Demonstrates religious status of at least some women?**

However, we don't actually know who these women are. Are they intermediaries of Bes the protector? Are they so called Wise women (Rekhet?)

**Future  
research?**



**Cosmetic Spoons  
Hathor figurines  
Faience bowl**

## Bibliography

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