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FEMALE FIGURINES (PHARAONIC PERIOD)

التمائيل الصغيرة النسائية (العصر الفرعوني)

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## FEMALE FIGURINES (PHARAONIC PERIOD)

### التمائيل الصغيرة النسائية (العصر الفرعوني)

Elizabeth A. Waraksa

Frauenfiguren  
Figurines de femme

*Figurines of nude females are known from most periods of Pharaonic Egyptian history and occur in a variety of contexts. Female figurines were fashioned from clay, faience, ivory, stone, and wood. A generic Egyptian term for "female figurine" is rpyt; terms specifically for clay figurines include sjn (n 3st), rpyt nt sjnt, and rpyt 3st. Formerly interpreted largely as "concubine" figures, female figurines are now regarded as components of magico-medical rites to protect and heal.*

تمائيل الإناث العاريات معروفة من أغلب عصور تاريخ مصر الفرعونية و تظهر في العديد من السياقات. غالباً ما صنعت هذه التماثيل من الطين، الخزف، العاج، الأحجار، أو من الخشب. التعبير المصري القديم لتمثال نسائي هو «ربيت». يوجد أيضاً كلمات أكثر تحديداً مثل «سين (ن أست)»، «ربيت نت سينت»، و «ربيت أست». اعتبرت هذه التماثيل في السابق كمحظيات، و الآن تعتبر كمكونات لطقوس السحر المرتبطة بالطب و الحماية و الشفاء.

**F**emale figurines of Pharaonic Egypt are small, portable representations of nude females averaging approximately 15 cm in height and occurring in clay (both fired and unfired), faience, ivory, stone, and wood. Such figurines are best represented from the Middle Kingdom onwards. Long regarded as toys, dolls, or concubine figures, female figurines have commonly been referred to as votive "fertility figurines." However, recent research suggests a broader and more active function for these figures, including evidence for their deliberate destruction, in a variety of healing and apotropaic rites.

#### *Materials, Manufacture, and Form*

Although most female figurines take the form of a nude woman, clothing is indicated on a few examples. Particularly emphasized on female figurines are the hair, breasts, and pubic area. Some female figures hold or

suckle a child, or have a child next to them on a bed. Female figurines often lack proper feet and were not intended to stand upright, although some female-on-a-bed figures could be supported by the legs of the bed. Some rare female figures are fashioned in a seated or kneeling position (e.g., Boutantin 1999: fig 11; Pinch 1993: pl. 47B).

Depending on the material of which they were made, female figures were either carved or modeled by hand, or molded in an open mold; many were painted or embellished. Clay figurines could be modeled or molded of Nile silt, marl clay, or local oasis clay, and were frequently painted. Many New Kingdom through Late Period ceramic figurines were coated with a red wash post-firing (Waraksa 2007: 61 - 65). More elaborate ceramic and stone figures, in particular those depicting a female on a bed, were painted in polychrome, especially during Dynasties 18 - 20. A

particular type of Third Intermediate Period ceramic figurine was painted with polychrome stripes (Teeter *fc.*: 28, 74 - 86).

Some marl-clay figures of the Middle through New kingdoms were embellished with faience or metal jewelry; fringed, colored linen; and “beaded” hair—that is, hair represented by beads of mud, faience, or shell strung on linen thread (Castel et al. 1985: 19; Pinch 1993: 200 - 203).

Faience female figurines, including woman-on-a-bed examples (Pinch 1993: 207 and pl. 51d), were molded and feature darker coloration to emphasize the eyes, nipples, navel, and hair, as well as to indicate jewelry, tattooing, and, on some examples, patterned clothing (Pinch 1993: 198). Holes in the heads of some faience figurines reveal that hair, either real or artificial, was probably attached (Pinch 1993: 199).

Ivory figurines, which are rare, were carved and polished (Muscarella 1974: no. 170). Stone figurines were carved and sometimes painted either in polychrome or with a single pigment such as black (to emphasize hair and jewelry), or red or yellow (to emphasize flesh areas).

Wooden female figurines, including the group known as “paddle dolls,” were carved and painted in black or polychrome to indicate jewelry, fabric, and pubic hair. Some examples bear painted images of birds, crocodiles, scarabs, and the goddess Taweret (Desroches Noblecourt 1995: 98; Keimer 1948: 27 - 29, pl. XVI; Pinch 2006: 127, fig. 67). These figurines were also sometimes embellished with attached artificial hair (Keimer 1948: pls. XV - XVII; Pinch 1993: 199).

Most female figurines adhere to standardized types within chronological periods. This uniformity, together with their decoration in a variety of media, suggests mass production at a state-supplied workshop. Temple workshops are the most likely locale for their production, and male craftsmen, their most likely manufacturers.

### *Archaeological Context*

Female figurines have been found in the full range of excavated sites in Egypt, from houses, temples, and tombs in the Nile Valley to cemeteries in the western oases, mining sites in the Eastern Desert and Sinai Peninsula, and Nubian forts. Often, female figurines derive from refuse zones in proximity to these areas.

### *Archaeological Condition*

One significant aspect of female figurines dating to the Middle Kingdom and later is their pattern of breakage. Although some female figurines are found whole, many display a clean, horizontal break through the torso-hip region—usually the most robust part of the figure (Jacquet 2001: 62, note 101; Waraksa 2007: 19 - 21, 75 - 80)—and are therefore recovered as either the upper or lower half only, or in joining fragments (e.g., Waraksa 2007: cat. no. 2). Such breakage is indicative of deliberate destruction, which most likely occurred at the conclusion of a rite before the figurine was discarded. In combination with the frequent occurrence of the figurines in refuse zones, this breakage highlights their temporary utility (Kemp 1995: 30; Waraksa 2007: 81 - 85).

### *Terms and Textual Evidence*

Egyptian terms for magical figures are difficult to isolate. Nevertheless, several terms for clay female figurines have recently been identified (Waraksa 2007: 150 - 174). A spell to repel venomous snakes calls for a *sjn (n ʒst)* (P. Turin 54003, rt. 13 - 16; Roccati 1970), which can be translated “clay figure (of Isis).” A spell to relieve a stomachache (P. Leiden I 348, rt. 12,2 - 12,4; Borghouts 1971: 25, pls. 12, 29) calls for the words to be spoken over a *rpyt nt sjnt*, a “female figure of clay,” and for the pain to be transferred into this *rpyt ʒst* or “female figure of Isis.” The term *rpyt* may be understood as a generic one applied to female images of all sizes and materials, including magical figurines (Eschweiler 1994: 31 - 32, 42, 67, 97 - 100; Rössler-Köhler 1984: 236 - 242, especially note 9), and some anti-venom spells call for objects like a *rpyt ʒst m ht n sdt*, a

“female figure of Isis in firewood” (BM EA 9997 + 10309, V, 3; Leitz 1999: 8 - 11). There can be little doubt that many other spells calling for female figurines existed but are now lost to us. Inscribed female figurines are very rare; only three examples are known, each bearing an appeal for a child (Desroches Noblecourt 1953: 35 - 40, fig. 14, pls. IV, V; Pinch 1993: 217 - 218; Polaczek-Zdanowicz 1975: 142, note 21; Teeter *fc.*: 27, note 36). The wording of the appeals is indicative of a funerary context (in one case, the *hetep di nesut* formula is used), suggesting a supplicatory role for inscribed female figurines in a tomb setting.

#### *Function*

Despite their being a well-known class of object, the exact function(s) of female figurines of Pharaonic Egypt has remained elusive. They have been variously categorized as “toys,” “dolls,” “wife figures,” “concubines (du mort),” or “Beischläferin.” Many of these terms were employed on the erroneous assumption that the figurines served as male tomb owners’ magical sexual partners in the next life, but it is now clear that female figurines could be placed in the tombs of men, women, and children, as well as deposited in domestic and temple areas, and the concubine theory has largely been abandoned. The prevailing theory on the function of female figures is the votive “fertility figurine” thesis suggested by Pinch (1983, 1993). The iconography of the figures, as well as their discovery in temples to Hathor and domestic shrines, favors such an interpretation, as do inscribed female figures asking for the birth of a child (see Terms and Textual Evidence above). Recently, this thesis has been expanded to situate female figurines

in a broader range of magico-medical rites not exclusively related to women and fertility (Waraksa 2007). Magical spells calling for female figures of clay and wood reveal that such objects were ritually manipulated in rites to repel venomous creatures and heal stomachaches (see Terms and Textual Evidence above). These spells, together with the excavation of female figurines as part of a magician’s kit (Pinch 2006: 131), suggest that the owners and users of female figurines were literate priests/magicians. Female figurines are thus best understood as ritual objects applicable to a range of magico-medical situations and that were frequently broken and discarded at the conclusion of their effective lives (see Archaeological Condition above).

#### *Religious Associations*

The context, textual evidence, and iconography of female figurines relate them to a host of female deities. Archaeological evidence suggests a connection to the goddesses Hathor (Pinch 1993) and Mut (Waraksa 2007). The iconography of painted wooden figurines suggests an association with Nut and Taweret. Magical spells explicitly link female figurines to Isis and Selqet. It is likely that female figurines were fashioned as generic females so that they could serve as any one of numerous goddesses, depending on the situation at hand. The figurines possibly also were fashioned in this generic form in order to protect the deity invoked from the affliction she was being asked to address. It was through the recitation of a spell that a female figurine actively became a goddess for the temporary purposes of healing and protection.



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