# Birth-bed, sitting place, erotic corner or domestic altar?
## A study of the so-called „elevated bed" in Deir el-Medina houses*

Aikaterini Koltsida

*Abstract*
One of the most agitated components of the houses in the workmen's village of Deir el-Medina is the so-called „elevated bed", namely a brick elevated structure at one of the front room corners. The most widespread theory for its use is that it meant for childbirth. Nevertheless, the position of the structure in the most public area of the house, the fact that at least one house had two such structures and furthermore its size and height (that would make it hard to use during delivery), makes the assumption for the aforementioned use highly unlikely. This paper argues that those structures were most possibly used as house-altars, a fact that is further supported by their similarity with the altars within the Amarna villas.

The village of Deir el-Medina lay at the West Bank of Thebes between the Valleys of the Kings and the Queens. It was founded during the early 18th dynasty in order to house the workmen of the Royal Tombs and was occupied until the late 20th Dynasty, undergoing several extensions that resulted to the final layout of 68 houses.[1] The village is walled and roughly rectangular in plan, with one main gateway at the north, leading to the main village street. The plan gives the impression of terraced housing built in rows attached to each other.[2] Almost all the houses share the same basic features: they were roughly rectangular and consisted of four successive rooms, which were unequal in size. The main entrance to the street was at one of the narrow sides. The sides of the houses were party-walls with the neighbouring houses, and the narrow rear wall, characteristically the circuit wall of the village, never possessed an opening or a window.

The front rooms in Deir el-Medina were rectangular, roughly rectangular or trapezoid. Their dimensions varied from 10.5 square metres (NE IX)[3] to 39 square metres (SO IV).[4]

* This article is dedicated to Antonis, Vaso and mostly Elias Lazanas, for supporting me during the most difficult period of my life.

1 The plan of the village given by B. Bruyère includes 68 houses, described in 241–335 of the publication (B. Bruyère, Rapport sur les Fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1934–35), Troisième Partie: Le Village, Les Décharges Publiques, La Station de Repos Du Col de la Vallée des Rois, Cairo 1939 – abbreviated here as Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35). However, at page 16 of the same publication he mentions 70 houses inside the walled village. It remains unclear if this is just a typographic mistake or if he thought that a couple of houses were initially divided into two smaller ones, a fact that he does not mention in the detailed analysis of the houses.

2 The excavator divided the village houses in five quarters, according to their orientation. The Northeast quarter (NE) consisted of 19 houses; the Northwest (NO) of 27; the Southeast (SE) has 9 houses; the Central quarter (C) 7; and the Southwest (SO) 6 houses.

3 The number of houses here follows the one of the excavator, who gave Latin numbers to houses.

4 These measurements were made from the village ground plans. The excavator very rarely provides such information in the publication.

The most important component of the front room was a large structure incorporated within one of its corners (fig. 1).[5] The excavator named these brick[6] structures 'elevated beds'

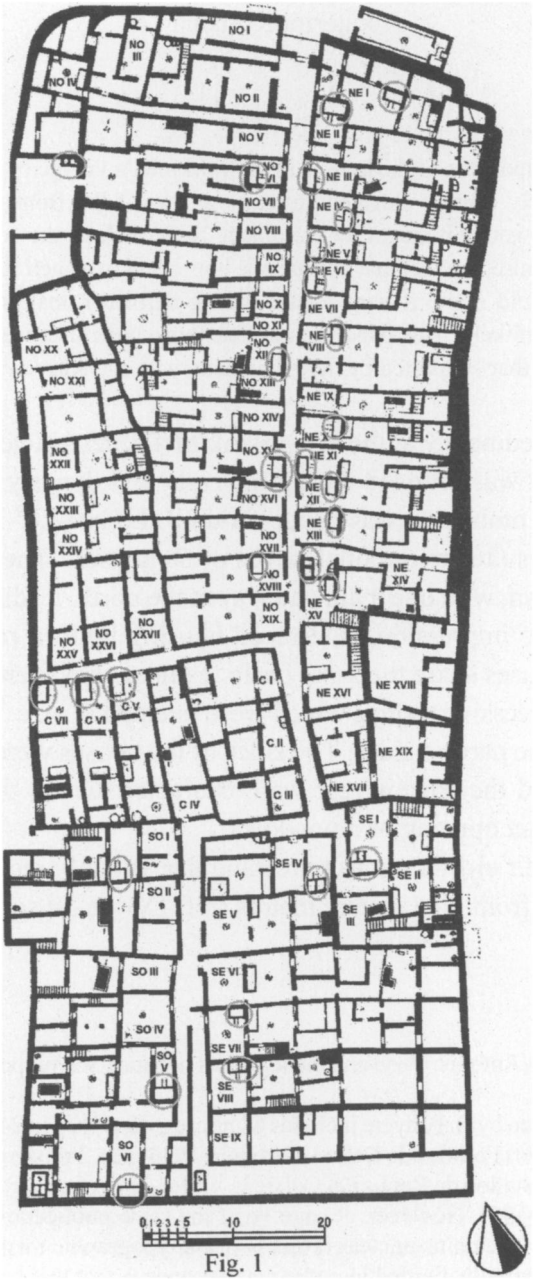

Fig. 1

[5] Northeast corner: NE I, NE II, NE VIII, NE X, NE XII, NE XIII, NE XV, SE VII, SE VIII; Northwest corner : NO XVIII, C V, C VI, C VII ; Southeast corner : NE IV, NO XII, NO XV, SO VI; Southwest corner: NE III, NE V, NE VI, NE XI, NE XIV, SE I, SE IV, NO VI, SO I; In SO V it was against the south wall. In houses SE VI, SE IX and SO IV the excavator mentions the existence of destroyed ‚elevated beds', which have not been planned. House NO IV possessed two such structures: one at the

('lit clos').[7] They were rectangular (about 1.70–2.10 m by 0.80–1.20 m) and elevated (about 75 cm to 1 m), with a row of three to five steps leading to them,[8] which were generally whitened,[9] and in some cases protected with side-walls (fig. 2a).[10] The two sides of the structure that were unencumbered by the corner of the room, were either open or enclosed by two thin walls (about 40 cm wide), that reached in some cases, according to the excavator, the roof level.[11] Bruyère dated the earliest of those structures at the end of the 18th Dynasty, in the period that followed the reign of Tuthmosis III,[12] since the early 18th Dynasty houses do not possess such a characteristic. According to his opinion this feature became an essential part of the houses during the 19th and 20th Dynasties, when they were either added to the front room of the house (for those houses that were built before that period),[13] or constructed at the same time as the house walls, for the houses dated after the mid-18th Dynasty.[14] The use of this structure and the reason it was placed in the most public area of the house seems to have haunted Egyptology for the last eighty years.[15] Its definition by the excavator, as a ‚bed' apparently influenced research, leading most scholars to follow the assumption that the structure was more or less related to bed-connected activities/uses. In this paper Bruyère's „elevated bed" will be referred to as elevated structure, or simply as structure.

front room, already mentioned, and a second at the northeast corner of the North rear room.

6 There is reference of their constructions for the houses: NE II, VI, XI, XII, XIII, SE I, VIII, C VII, SO VI.

7 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 62.

8 Three steps: NE II, III, XI, XII, XIII, NO XII. Four steps: SE I. Five steps: C VII. The steps had an average height of 20 cm and an average width of 35 cm.

9 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 56. In the detailed description of the houses, whitened steps are recorded for NE XI, SE VIII, C VII.

10 NE II, VI, SE I.

11 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 56–57.

12 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 61.

13 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 61.

14 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 55.

15 B. Bruyère, in: BIFAO 22, 1923, 121–133; J. Vandier d'Abbadie, in: RdE 3, 1938, 27–35; Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, pp. 54–64, 241, 243, 244, 246, 248, 250, 252, 254–257, 259–261, 264–265, 271, 274, 276, 282, 286, 291, 294, 305, 308, 311, 321, 325, 330; E. Brunner-Traut, in: MIO 3, 1955, 11–30; L. Keimer, Remarques sur le Tatouage dans l'Égypte Ancienne, 1948, 101–105; B.J. Kemp, in: JEA 65, 1979, 47–53; G. Pinch, in: Or 52, 1983, 405–414; J.J. Janssen/R. Janssen, Growing up in Ancient Egypt, 1990, 4, 6–7; J.F. Romano, Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians, 1990, 26–27; G. Robins, Women in Ancient Egypt, 1993, 75; F.D. Friedman, „Aspects of Domestic Life and Religion", in L.H. Lesko (ed.), Pharaoh's Workers. The Villagers of Deir el-Medina, 1994, 95–117; G. Robins, „Dress, Undress and the Representation of Fertility and Potency in New Kingdom Egyptian Art", in: N. Boymel-Kampen (ed.), Sexuality in Ancient Art. Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy, 1996, 30; L. Meskell, Egyptian Social Dynamics: The Evidence of Age, Sex and Class in Domestic and Mortuary Context, D. Phil. Dissertation, Cambridge 1997, 59–61; L. Meskell, in: Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory 5 (3), 1998, 217; L. Meskell, Archaeologies of Social Life, Oxford 1999, 99–100; J.K. Toivari, Women at Deir el-Medina. A Study of the Status and Roles of the Female Inhabitants in the Workmen's Community during the Ramesside Period, D. Phil. Dissertation, Leiden 2000, 161–166.

Decoration on the elevated structures was usual. The commonest image depicted on them was the god Bes, which appeared in five cases: in C V[16] and SO VI[17] the god is illustrated dancing; in NE X Bes is depicted twice, once in profile – dancing and playing music – and once en face with stretched hands, holding lotuses and dancing (fig. 2b);[18] in NE XIII only his legs are preserved in white colour,[19] while fragments of two masks of Bes are modelled in relief at SE IX.[20] Besides Bes, other scenes appear, such as the polychrome decoration of a man on a papyrus boat at the marshes in NO XII (fig. 2c),[21] and an unidentified wall painting with white designs on a grey panel from NE XII.[22] The structures were also decorated with scenes related to female activities. Traces of a wall painting showing a woman at her toilette is preserved in C VII (fig. 2d),[23] while in SE VIII a young dancing woman is depicted, dressed in a transparent cloth and having a tattoo of Bes on her thigh.[24] Keimer suggests that women with tattoos were possibly prostitutes.[25] Conversely, Pinch argues that tattoos were most likely of protective character, used as amulets and worn by females to assist conception or to safeguard them during delivery.[26]

However, the most agitated case is the fragmentary painting of SE I. It depicts the legs of four women between the bases of two columns (fig. 3a). At the left part of this painting are the legs of two standing women facing right, while the right part consists of the legs of two more women: those at the far right belong to a Negro female facing left and in front of her is a seated female, who also faces left.[27] The shape of the chair on which this figure rests is closely comparable to chairs upholding breast-feeding women, which are preserved on ostraca (BM EA 8506, fig. 2e[28]; IFAO 3787, fig. 2f[29]). In both cases the scenes are surrounded by arbour leaves, which is also the case for the SE I wall painting. In the original publication of this fragmentary scene, Bruyère noted the resemblance with the ostraca and suggested that the seated woman was in fact the goddess Hathor breast-feeding the infant god Horus (fig. 3b). The rest three figures were considered as being servants presenting toilette objects to their mistress. They were identified as a Negro female, a woman from Upper and a woman from Lower Egypt, thus representing the three human races.[30] However, those identifications are imaginative and remain unsubstantiated. Based

16 The design was white on grey background. Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 305.
17 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 330, fig.202.
18 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 255, fig.131.
19 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 259, fig.136.
20 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 276, fig.148.
21 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 286.
22 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 257.
23 The designs were white on a grey panel. Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 311.
24 Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 274, fig.145. Vandier d'Abbadie, in: RdE 3, 1938, 27–35.
25 Keimer, Remarques sur le Tatouage, 101–105.
26 Pinch, in: Or 52, 1983, 412.
27 Bruyère, in: BIFAO 22, 1923, 121, fig.5. Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 264.
28 Robins, Women, fig.22.
29 J. Vandier d'Abbadie, Catalogue des Ostraca Figurés de Deir el-Médineh, Cairo 1937–59, no.2858. A.R. Schulman, in: JARCE 22, 1985, 99, fig. 3.
30 Bruyère, in: BIFAO 22, 1923, 132, fig.5; Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 264.

on the similarities with the Deir el-Medina ostraca depicting breast-feeding women with a special hair-style, Brunner-Traut reconstructed the seated figure as a breast-feeding woman with a hair-dress similar to that on the relevant ostraca (fig. 3c), a reconstruction that seems legitimate.[31]

Having interpreted one scene on such a structure as showing a breast-feeding woman, the whole structure was then regarded as a birth-bed.[32] Based on this assumption, the scenes representing Bes were also read as being related to childbirth, since he was a divine figure associated with fertility and protection during pregnancy and delivery.[33] Bes was indeed protector of delivery but together with Taweret,[34] who is never depicted in any painting on the Deir el-Medina front room structures. Neither is Hathor, who is also connected with childbirth, unless Bruyère's unsubstantiated identification of Hathor in the SE I scene is accepted.

Based on the reconstruction of Brunner-Traut showing the seated female having the peculiar hair dress, and also on suggestions that wigs were maybe erotic symbols,[35] and that Bes was generally a protector of female private life,[36] Friedman argued that those front room structures were symbolically connected with all aspects of female sexuality, ‚including the procreative, the maternal and even the erotic'.[37] Hobson refers to the structure as a sitting place,[38] while Romano, who legitimately found it unlikely that such a structure would be constructed for very occasional use in connection with birth, envisaged it as the ‚principal sleeping area of the house',[39] with Bes protecting those sleeping in it and its elevation being primarily for protection from scorpions and other insects.[40] Meskell suggested that it was used for midday short naps,[41] and also for eating or other domestic activities,[42] without excluding the possibility of two people possibly sleeping in them, or that the area ‚acted as a ritual place for sexual intercourse with or without conception'.[43]

All these suggestions are difficult to reconcile with the position of the structure in the front room of the house, and its essentially public context. Furthermore, an issue that seems

[31] Brunner-Traut, in: MIO 3, 1955, 14–16, fig.5.
[32] Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 59; Brunner-Traut, in: MIO 3, 1955, 23 (she envisages it as a structure with analogous function to that of a mammisi). Pinch, in: Or 52, 1983, 405–414. It is then claimed that during the New Kingdom birth would sometimes take place on a specially built birth bed, perhaps erected in a house area, or in the garden (Janssen/Janssen, Growing up, 4).
[33] Pinch, in: Or 52, 1983, 412, Friedman, in: Lesko (ed.), Pharaoh's Workers, 98.
[34] H. Altenmüller, „Bes", in: LÄ I, 1975, 722; R. Gundlach, „Thoeris", in: LÄ VI, 1986, 494–497; J. Baines, Fecundity Figures: Egyptian Personification and the Iconography of a Genre, 1985, 128.
[35] Ph. Derchain , in: SAK 2, 1975, 55–74.
[36] L. Manniche, Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt, London 1997, 101.
[37] Friedman, in: Lesko (ed.), Pharaoh's Workers, 110.
[38] C. Hobson, Exploring the World of the Pharaohs. A Complete Guide to Ancient Egypt, London 1990, 117.
[39] Romano, Daily Life, 27.
[40] Romano, Daily Life, 26–27.
[41] Meskell, Social Dynamics, 59–61.
[42] Meskell, in: Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory 5 (3), 1998, 217. Meskell, Social Life, 99.
[43] Meskell, Social Life, 100.

never to have occurred in the minds of those suggesting that the structure was used as a delivery area is its height and the fact that it was in most cases enclosed by a wall. Birth giving in ancient Egypt took place either on wooden structures, specially designed for deliveries, which are most possibly similar to our modern gynecological tables, or – most commonly – on bricks, in which case the woman was seated.[44] If a structure similar to our modern gynecological table was placed on such an elevated structure, then the woman would have been 1.50 to 2 m higher than the floor level! Thus it would be rather high for a midwife to aid during delivery (unless ancient Egyptian midwives were really tall). Someone could argue of course, that midwives were also standing on the elevated structure, but its space is limited for both a delivery structure and one or two people aiding delivery to stand all together on it. The same ‚lack-of-space' and ‚parturient-being-too-high' arguments stand for the hypothesis of bricks placed on it. However, it can be suggested that when such a structure existed, a separate gynecological table or chair was not required, and women just lied on it to deliver. Nevertheless, in such a case, it would be again really impractical, because its enclosing wall would bind the movement of those aiding delivery, and its limited space was not enough for concurrent use of the parturient woman and one or two midwives, considering also the fact that they would have to move to and from the structure (using the steps, which in many cases were really narrow) to bring within whatever necessary for the delivery. Therefore, besides the fact that it seems somewhat unreasonable to erect in the most public area of the house a structure for a very private occasion, which, furthermore, would happen – with the most optimistic calculations – once a year, its size, height and configuration, makes it unfeasible for deliveries to have taken place there. Nevertheless, the most important argument against the use for this structure as a birth bed is the case of house NE VI,[45] which possessed two such structures: one at the front and one at one of the rear room of the house.

Having excluded the birth-giving use of this structure, all other suggestions of its use connected with childbirth are also excluded, since they would have been meaningless without the primary use of the structure as a birth-bed. The proposal for its use as a sitting or sleeping area appears, therefore, more legitimate. However, the houses were equipped with a proper sitting area (the central room of the house), while one of the rear rooms was presumably used as a bedroom, and it seems that such a space use was not necessary in the front one, which was most possibly a courtyard.[46]

A similar wall painting to those shown on the Deir el-Medina front room structures, decorated the front room wall of the house at Long wall Street 10 in the Amarna Workmen's Village. The decoration shows human figures on a grey mud background, while a few fragments on the north wall of the same room were possibly belonging to the same composition.[47] Those represent alternately tall and short figures, the taller of whom wear

[44] Robins, Women, 83; W. Westendorf, „Geburt [B]", in: LÄ II, 1975, 460.
[45] Bruyère, in: BIFAO 22, 1923, 281–282.
[46] A. Koltsida, Social Aspects of Ancient Egyptian Domestic Architecture, Ph.D. Thesis, Liverpool 2001, 119–122.
[47] T.E. Peet/C.L. Wooley, The City of Akhenaten I, London 1923, 84–85.

long robes and could possibly represent women, while the shorter ones between them are naked and are perhaps young girls. Those figures, presumably a procession of women, are either dancing or walking to the northeast corner of the room, as if they come from the door (located at the southwest corner of the room). Traces on the north wall of the same room show that this procession could have been continuing on this wall, again illustrating women advancing to the right, i.e. the northeast corner of the room.[48] Underneath this painting and at the northwest corner of the front room are the remains of a bin, which Kemp suggested might have served as a base for an offering table.[49] This observation led Kemp to the suggestion that in both villages the particular areas of the front room meant to celebrate successful delivery and childbirth,[50] while Arnold proposed that the decoration had apotropaic nature[51] and Robins suggested that they were shrines for such household deities as Bes, Hathor and Taweret,[52] or that the fertility figures on them are connected with the desire to be reborn in afterlife.[53] This suggestion that the front room structures were actually house altars is further supported by their considerable similarities with the domestic altars placed in the living rooms of the Amarna villas.[54] Furthermore, many villas had a chapel outside the house proper and in particular in the enclosure.[55] Since the front room in the tripartite houses was presumably an open court,[56] we can possibly identify an analogous situation with the chapels in villas' enclosures, namely the placement of a ritual area in the open space of a domestic unit. However, family chapels were also constructed outside the village in both Deir el-Medina and Amarna Workmen's Village, and it is most possible that those are analogous with the chapels in the large house compounds.[57]

In any case, the similarities of the front room structures with the house altars are significant, and thus, instead of considering them as the place for deliveries or sexual activities, it seems more likely that they were altars that served as domestic shrines, placed in the front instead of the middle room of the house, due to lack of space in the latter, where fertility and successful childbirth were celebrated (as Kemp proposed), among other possible rituals, which may had apotropaic nature or were related to the afterlife (following the suggestions of Arnold and Robins).

[48] Kemp, in: JEA 65, 1979, 49, fig.2, pl.VIII.
[49] Kemp, in: JEA 65, 1979, 49.
[50] Kemp, in: JEA 65, 1979, 53
[51] Do. Arnold, „Aspects of the Royal Female Image during the Amarna Period", in Do. Arnold (ed.), Royal Women of Amarna: Images of Beauty in Ancient Egypt, New York 1996, 99–102.
[52] Robins, Women in Ancient Egypt, 75.
[53] Robins, in: Kampen (ed.), Sexuality in Ancient Art, 30.
[54] Peet/Wooley, The City of Akhenaten I, 48; S. Lloyd, in: JEA 19, 1933, 1–2; P.T. Crocker, in: JEA 71, 1985, 56; S. Ikram, in: JEA 75, 1989, 98–101.
[55] Peet/Wooley, The City of Akhenaten I, 48; Lloyd, in: JEA 19, 1933, 1–2; Crocker, in: JEA 71, 1985, 56; Ikram, in: JEA 75, 1989, 98–101.
[56] Koltsida, Social Aspects, 119–122.
[57] Bruyère, Rapport 1934–35, 36–49; Peet/Wooley, The City of Akhenaten I, 92–108. B.J. Kemp, e.a., Amarna Reports I, London 1984, 14–39; Amarna Reports II, 1–50; Amarna Reports IV, 56–86; A.H. Bomann, The Private Chapel in Ancient Egypt, London 1991.

However, more than half of the houses do not possess a front room structure.[58] Thus, it is possible that such an element was a status symbol for the house owner, which anyone entering the domestic area would notice.[59] It is also feasible that their decoration was a sort of solemn promise to the related divinity, not only related to childbirth, but also with other aspects of everyday life. In such cases the one who placed the vow would promise in return to illustrate on the walls of the household domestic shrine, either in the form of the god to whom the prayer was addressed, or a scene related with the matter requested to be solved. A further support to this is that only 11 of the 32 elevated structures were decorated. It is fairly possible that the decoration of the rest has not survived. However, the fact that such a wall painting has been preserved in all areas of the village -i.e. in the best and also in the least well-preserved houses- shows that their decoration was probably less widespread than initially considered.[60] The use of this architectural feature as an altar would not absolutely exclude a concurrent use as a sitting area or even as a bed, as it is possible that a ritual votive area might be used for sitting or lying at a crucial moment. It seems that all other suggested uses of the elevated structure might represent occasional uses of a structure, relating to its design, at a time of a special crisis.

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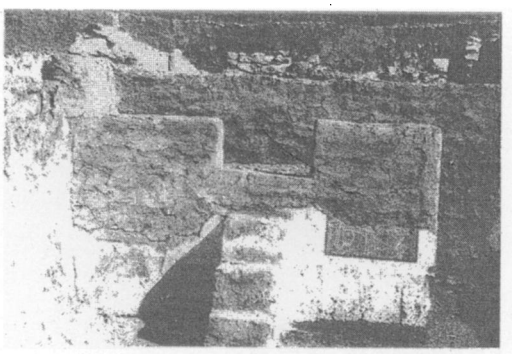
fig. 3c Brunner-Traut, in: MIO 3, 1955, 14–16, fig. 5.

[58] 31 houses have a preserved front room structure (45% – one house has two structures – see above).
[59] The domestic altars in the houses of Akhetaten can also be considered as a status symbol. Crocker, in: JEA 71, 1985, 63.
[60] For example, one of the best preserved examples of decoration, namely the dancing girl with the tattoo on her thigh (house SE VIII), comes from a badly preserved front room structure.



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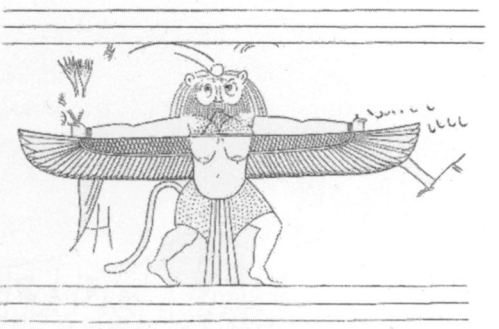

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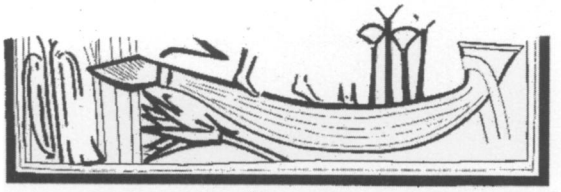

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Fig. 2

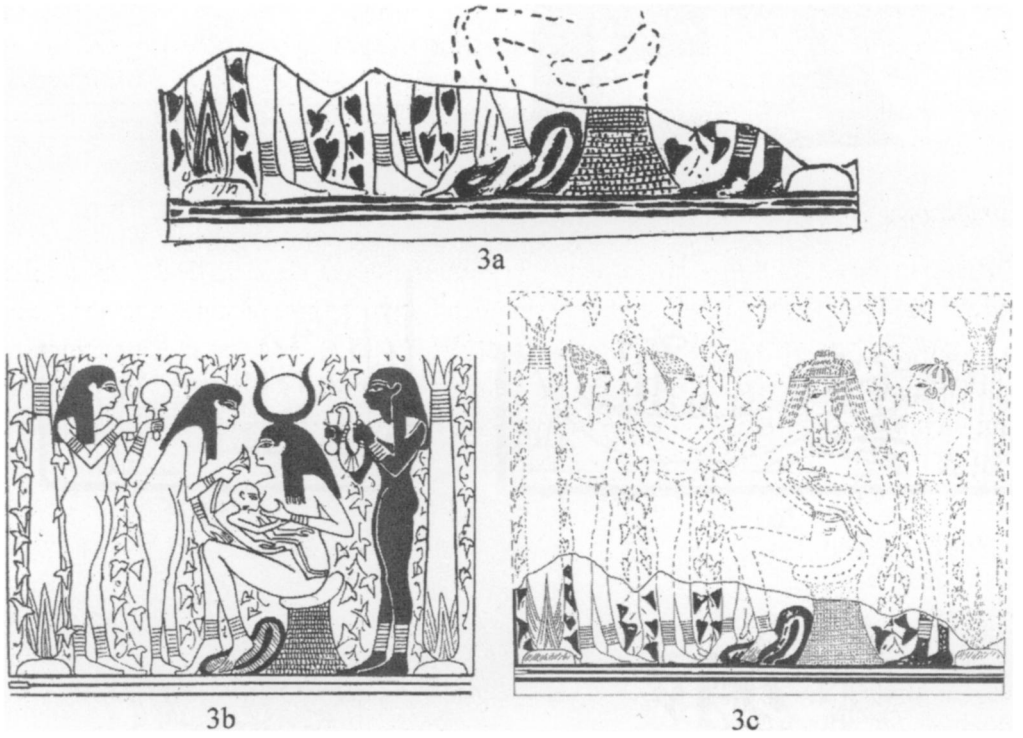


Fig. 3