PERSONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICE: HOUSE ALTARS AT DEIR EL-MEDINA*

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The household assemblage at Deir el-Medina reflects the abandonment process of the village rather than the areas of household activity. The analysis of immobile features is therefore more reliable as a source of information than the study of artefacts. An important immovable feature of the houses at Deir el-Medina is the platform (the so-called *lits clos*). It is shown that these platforms served as house altars. The custom of building house altars — perhaps inspired by the shape of official temple altars — was probably established during the reign of Amenhotep III in Malkata, and continued until the Third Intermediate Period. Apart from Amarna, this custom was confined to the Theban area.

In Egyptology several definitions of personal religion and piety have been proposed.[1] However, the problem is not how to define personal religion but how to find it.[2] Personal religion should be defined in terms of how it was expressed in terms of 'religious action in an everyday context'.[3] The exploration of the archaeological evidence seems to be a fruitful approach to illuminate the personal religious practice that took place in the village of Deir el-Medina.

Two remarks on methodology

When studying the archaeological remains of Deir el-Medina two caveats should be made. First, domestic artefacts are often not found in their original context of use, but as left during the process of abandonment.[4] For the study of the remains from Deir el-Medina this is especially problematic, since we know very little about when and how its abandonment took place. Deir el-Medina is the modern name of the Ancient Egyptian workmen's village in which the tomb builders of the kings lived with their families. The village was gradually abandoned at some time between

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[1] For a comprehensive summary, see M. M. Luiselli, 'Modern Theories Related to Personal Piety', *UEE*, PDF download (posted 10 July 2008), 4–5.

[2] A parallel situation is found in other cultures: C. Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven, 1968), 1.

[3] J. Baines, 'Practical Religion and Piety', *JEA* 73 (1987), 79. The importance of the analysis of actual religious actions for a comprehensive understanding of religion has also been put forward by M. Riesebrodt, *Cultus und Heilsversprechen: Eine Theorie der Religionen* (Munich, 2007), 127.

[4] M. G. Stevenson, 'Toward an Understanding of Site Abandonment Behavior: Evidence from Historic Mining Camps in the Southwest Yukon', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 1 (1982), 261; A. Stevens, *Private Religion at Amarna: The Material Evidence* (BAR IS 1587; Oxford, 2006), 314.

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the reigns of Ramesses IX and Ramesses XI.[5] When the rulers of the Twenty-first Dynasty changed burial customs,[6] the skills of the workmen were no longer needed. The village was thus most probably not left because of a threat by the Libyans.[7] Nor did difficult economic circumstances and safety considerations cause a relocation of the crew to Medinet Habu.[8] The so-called 'house'[9] of the scribe Butehamun in Medinet Habu was more probably his office.[10] Hence, the building cannot serve as evidence that Butehamun was living behind the walls of Medinet Habu. More probably the tomb-workers were by then administered from Medinet Habu.

It seems that the workmen and their families moved away gradually to find employment elsewhere. If that assumption is correct, their departure would have taken place as a slow unorganised abandonment process. Peden has suggested that the village may occasionally have been visited by former crew members at a later stage, and assumed that the houses may have served as 'storerooms for various goods and materials'.[11] It is difficult to tell whether or not the latter assumption is correct. The only evidence we have is a letter stating that certain documents from a house were (to be) deposited in a tomb.[12]

All of the preceeding is important because it shows that we do not know where the families from Deir el-Medina went to, nor when exactly they left. Therefore, factors such as distance to the next site, season of abandonment, size of emigrating population, means of transportation,[13] as well as anticipated return,[14] cannot be taken into account when studying the household assemblages at Deir el-Medina. We may assume that return had most probably not been anticipated by the departing workforce. Thus the inhabitants will have tried to remove all their valuable possessions when they left the village.[15] Large and less valuable objects are often left behind in the process of abandonment, whereas small valuable objects will be taken away.[16] For the study of personal religion at Deir el-Medina, this means that we cannot expect to find many artefacts related to actual personal religious practice. For example, the image of a protective household deity would have been highly valuable, and would have been taken away upon leaving the village for good.

Second, another problem when studying artefacts from Deir el-Medina is the archaeological methodology and the recording techniques employed at the time of

[5] For example, J. Černý, *A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period* (BdE 50; Cairo, 1973), 189–90 and D. Valbelle, *«Les Ouvriers de la tombe»: Deir-el-Médineh à l'époque Ramesside* (BdE 96; Cairo, 1985), 123–5 and 370–1.

[6] K. Jansen-Winkeln, 'Der thebanische "Gottesstaat"', *Orientalia* 70 (2001), 168.

[7] B. J. J. Haring, 'Libyans in the Late Twentieth Dynasty', in R. J. Demarée and A. Egberts (eds), *Village Voices: Proceedings of the Symposium 'Texts from Deir el-Medîna and Their Interpretation, Leiden, May 31–June 1, 1991* (CNWS 13; Leiden, 1992), 73.

[8] As assumed by A. J. Peden, 'The Workmen of Deir el Medina and the Decline of Textual Graffiti', in R. J. Demarée and A. Egberts (eds), *Deir el-Medina in the Third Millenium AD: A Tribute to Jac J. Janssen* (EU 14; Leiden, 2000), 288.

[9] Černý, *Community*, 357.

[10] L. H. Lesko (ed.), *Pharaoh's Workers: The Villagers of Deir el-Medina* (New York, 1994), 7.

[11] Peden, in Demarée and Egberts (eds), *Deir el-Medina in the Third Millenium*, 288 n. 12.

[12] Ibid.; P. BM EA 10326 (LRL no. 9), J. Černý, *Late Ramesside Letters* (BAe 9; Brussels, 1939), 18.12–19.1.

[13] M. B. Schiffer, 'Archaeological Context and Systemic Context', *American Antiquity* 37/2 (1972), 160.

[14] Stevenson, *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 1, 259.

[15] Ibid., 259.

[16] Ibid., 244.

its first excavation.[17] The exact find spot of a particular object is often unknown. The village was not excavated in stratigraphical layers. The same is true for later campaigns.[18] In most cases finds are listed as belonging to a particular house or room. Occasionally, a general indication of the find spot such as 'in the west corner' or 'on top of the *lit clos*' is mentioned.

To sum up, the context of most artefacts from Deir el-Medina is insufficiently known: most of them may not have been found in their original context. Further, the circumstances of the abandonment of the village are unclear. Hence, instead of drawing on movable artefacts, a more reliable source of information is the study of so-called 'fixed features and artefacts', including niches and wall paintings in the houses.[19] Although the phase of habitation in which a fixed feature may have been added to the house could be uncertain, this problem is comparatively negligible.[20] An important fixed architectural element, situated in many houses at Deir el-Medina, is the so-called *lit clos* studied in detail here (fig. 1):

Fig. 1. Mrs J. Tadema-Sporry sitting on top of a platform, probably in house S.O. I (J. Tadema-Sporry, *De geschiedenis van het honderdpoortig Thebe* (Bussum, 1967), 31).[21]

[17] B. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1934–1935)*, III: *Le village, les décharges publiques, la station de repos du col de la Vallée de Rois* (FIFAO 16; Cairo, 1939).

[18] C. Bonnet and D. Valbelle, 'Le village de Deir el-Médineh: Reprise de l'étude archéologique', *BIFAO* 75 (1975), 429–46 and pls lxii–lxxii, and eid., 'Le village de Deir el-Médineh: Étude archéologique (suite)', *BIFAO* 76 (1976), 317–42 and pl. lvii. Since Bonnet and Valbelle were most interested in the beginnings of the village in the early Eighteenth Dynasty, the enclosure wall of Thutmosis I was analysed. The find spots of the artefacts were only mentioned in very general terms (such as 'dans la maison NO X (cuisine)' or 'contre le mur de la salle I': cf. Bonnet and Valbelle, *BIFAO* 75, 445). No find spots are indicated on the maps (Bonnet and Valbelle, *BIFAO* 75, pl. lxiii and lxiv and Bonnet and Valbelle, *BIFAO* 76, 342, fig. 11).

[19] B. S. Düring, *Constructing Communities: Clustered Neighbourhood Settlements on the Central Anatolian Neolitic ca. 8500–5500 cal. bc.* (UNINO 105; Leiden, 2006), 34.

[20] Ibid., 35.

[21] I would like to thank Rob J. Demarée for providing me with this photograph by A. Tadema.

Technical description

The so-called *lit clos* is a rectangular mudbrick structure of about 75 cm in height, 170 cm in length, and 80 cm in width, with steps attached to it. The term *lit clos* is not quite adequate, since it implies a function of the mudbrick structure which is subject to debate (see below).[22] In order to adopt an objective view on their use and function the structure is here simply referred to as a platform.[23]

In most cases — but not exclusively[24] — the platform is situated in the first room of the house, which was probably not a courtyard.[25] Not all platforms looked alike. There are simple and more elaborate platforms, but all have steps, either along the side or perpendicular. Bruyère presents a plate with three different types (fig. 2), but he did not apply his typology to the archaeological record.

State of research

All suggestions for the function of the platforms are based on Bruyère's initial study.[26] They have been interpreted as beds,[27] as seating accommodation,[28] or as belonging to the so-called 'female sphere'.[29] Other authors have suggested that the platforms were

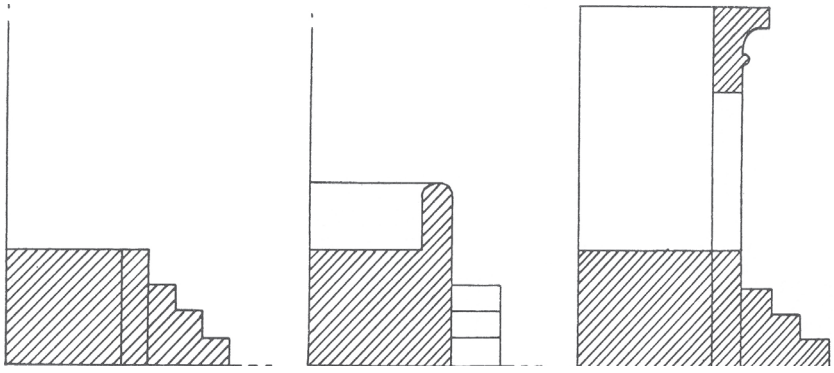

Fig. 2. Types of *lit clos* (from Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 57, fig. 18).

[22] As noted already by Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 57.

[23] Kleinke introduces the term *Podest*, 'pedestal' for similar reasons: N. Kleinke, *Female Spaces: Untersuchungen zu Gender und Archäologie im pharaonischen Ägypten* (GM Beihefte 1; Göttingen, 2007), 3. Borghouts has suggested that the Egyptian term may have been *ḥb.t*: J. F. Borghouts, 'The Magical Texts of Papyrus Leiden I 348', *OMRO* 51 (1971), 44; cf. Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 195.

[24] In one house (S.O. II) the structure is located in the third room, and in four houses (N.E. I, S.O. I, S.E. IV and C. I) it is situated in the second room. Apparently the location of the platform was to some degree flexible.

[25] Contrary to A. Koltsida, 'Birth-bed, Sitting Place, Erotic Corner or Domestic Altar? A Study of the So-called "Elevated Bed" in Deir el-Medina Houses', *SAK* 35 (2006), 170 and id., *Social Aspects of Ancient Egyptian Domestic Architecture* (BAR IS 1608; Oxford, 2007), 42, who assumes that these rooms had no permanent ceiling. Roik suggests that the 'courtyard' may have been partly covered: E. Roik, *Das altägyptische Wohnhaus und seine Darstellung im Flachbild* (Europäische Hochschulschriften 38/15; Frankfurt, 1988), 130. However, the presence of limestone columns in the first room seems to indicate that they carried a heavy, i.e. probably a permanent, roof.

[26] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 54–64.

[27] Ibid., 62, and J. F. Romano, *Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians* (Pittsburgh, 1990), 27.

[28] C. Hobson, *Exploring the World of the Pharaohs* (London, 1987), 117.

[29] Bruyère already mentioned the existence of paintings related to the female sphere, which encouraged interpretations of the platforms as being altars for a fertility god: E. Brunner-Traut, 'Die Wochenlaube', *MIO* 3 (1955), 30; and F. Dunand and C. Zivie-Coche, *Hommes et Dieux en Égypte* (Paris, 2006), 184. Meskell's interpretation of the platforms as a 'ritual place for sexual intercourse and/or conception' (L. Meskell, 'An Archaeology of Social Relations in an Egyptian Village', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 5/3 (1998), 223) follows Bruyère's notion of a possible 'emploi accidentel' as a 'lit conjugal' (Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III,

used multifunctionally.[30] Recently most scholars seem to agree that the platforms may have been used as altars,[31] a view reinforced here.

Analysis of the decoration of the platforms

A total of 29 platforms have been preserved at Deir el-Medina.[32] Whether there may have been more, which have fallen into decay,[33] cannot be proven. On ten platforms, remains of decorations have been preserved: a geometric pattern (house N.O. XII), a polychrome dancing female (house S.E. VIII), a polychrome standing girl in a papyrus boat (house N.O. XII), a so-called 'morning toilet scene' (house C. VII), the god Bes (five times: houses N.E.X, N.E. XII, N.E. XIII, S.E. IX, and S.O. VI), and an unclear figure (house C. V). Apart from the two polychrome paintings, all other paintings were made with white brushstrokes on a grey background. In house S.E. I[34] and in house S.O. VI wall paintings appear. The former shows a childbirth scene or a morning toilet scene.[35] The latter is a representation of Bes.[36] In both cases only the feet have been preserved. Whether or not these representations are related to the platforms is unclear. Since the varying decoration has recently been summarised by Kleinke,[37] only a few additional remarks will be presented here.

An attempt at a new reconstruction

The most completely preserved Bes figure is found on the mudbrick structure of house N.E. X.[38] When this drawing is closely examined, it becomes clear that Bruyère's reconstruction of the fragments of decoration from house N.E. XII (fig. 3)[39]

64). Bruyère also raised the question of whether or not the mudbrick structures may have been used as a kind of 'lit de naissance' (ibid., 56).

[30] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 64; F. D. Friedman, 'Aspects of Domestic Life and Religion', in Lesko (ed.), *Pharaoh's Workers*, 99, followed by L. Meskell, *Archaeologies of Social Life, Age, Sex, Class et cetera in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 1999) and most recently K. Szpakowska, *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 2008), 26.

[31] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 61; E. Brunner-Traut, 'Die Wochenlaube', *MIO* 3, 30; A. Badawy, *A History of Egyptian Architecture*, III (Berkeley, 1968), 65; M. Bierbrier, *The Tomb-Builders of the Pharaohs* (London, 1982), 69; G. Robins, 'Dress, Undress, and the Representation of Fertility and Potency', in N. B. Kampen (ed.), *Sexuality in Ancient Art, Near East, Egypt, Greece and Italy* (Cambridge, 1996), 29; Koltsida, *SAK* 35, 165–74; Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 75–6; Stevens, *Private Religion*, 234, and most recently Koltsida, *Social Aspects*, 24.

[32] Bruyère counted 28 mudbrick structures in 68 houses (ibid., 61). I cannot explain the difference of one mudbrick structure between Bruyère's and my own computation. The description in the excavation record is sometimes contradictory. For example, on Bruyère's map no mudbrick structure is visible in house N.E. IX, whereas, according to Bruyère, there had been one. In house N.E. XIV a mudbrick structure has been preserved, for which the evidence is even more contradictory. Bruyère referred to a structure as being a *lit clos*, whereas on his plate xiii the caption on the map tells us that four *pétrins* (dough troughs) in four different houses (among them house N.E. XIV) are depicted on that plate. Perhaps Bruyère confused the plates of the so-called *pétrins* with a plate of another mudbrick block structure in the first room of the house. But since the structure in the first room of house N.E. XIV has no stairs, it is probably a different type of platform. This mistake may perhaps explain why Bruyère counted one more *lit clos*. But this idea is not fully convincing since another structure has to be subtracted. In fact, a hypothetical structure in house S. E. IX should also not be counted. Although no T-shaped platform has been preserved, Bruyère assumed that there had been a *lit clos* because of some fragments of a mudbrick mask of Bes, which he considered to be part of the decoration of a platform. That is, however, subject to debate (see below).

[33] Meskell, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 5/3, 222.

[34] B. Bruyère, 'Un fragment de fresque de Deir el Médineh', *BIFAO* 22 (1923), 122.

[35] G. Pinch, 'Childbirth and Female Figurines at Deir el-Medina and Amarna', *Orientalia* 52 (1983), 407.

[36] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 330 (fig. 202).

[37] Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 18–24.

[38] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 255 (fig. 131).

[39] Ibid., 257 (fig. 133).

cannot be correct. A new reconstruction is possible, although not all fragments fit into the puzzle.

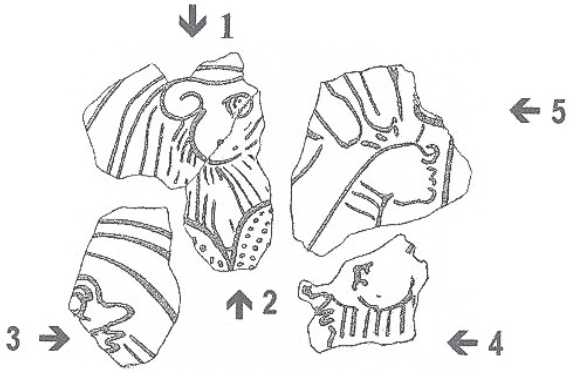

Fig. 3. Bes in N.E. XII (from Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 257, fig. 133).

Most probably the attempt at reconstructing a single figure of Bes from the fragments presented by Bruyère is a misleading approach. For example, at first glance fragments 1 and 2 seem to fit together. At a closer look, however, it becomes clear that they are not compatible. Both fragments seem to resemble the right ear of Bes as well as parts of his face and of his mane. When compared to Bruyère's fig. 131 it becomes clear that the shoulders and the ends of the cape are at the height of the collarbone of Bes, whereas they ought to be situated somewhere below the middle of the face of the Bes figure. The curving line Bruyère puts against the lower part of the eye (fragment 1) is in fact rather the right part of the left nostril of a Bes figure. Fragments 3 and 4 are unclear. Fragment 3 possibly shows the left ear and remains of the mane of Bes; fragment 4 may show parts of the cheek of Bes with remnants of the mane below. Fragment 5 clearly depicts arm and hand of Bes. But why is the wrist oddly bent outwards? Obviously this fragment cannot be part of a Bes-figure that had been depicted with his arms outstretched as in as depicted in house N.E. X.[40] The thumb would be placed on the wrong side of the hand. Instead of the drawing of one single Bes-figure, we are probably dealing with the fragments of a scene showing a series of Bes figures, as in the workmen's village of Amarna.[41] Although only the lower parts of the Amarna figures have been preserved, it can be suggested that the fragment 1

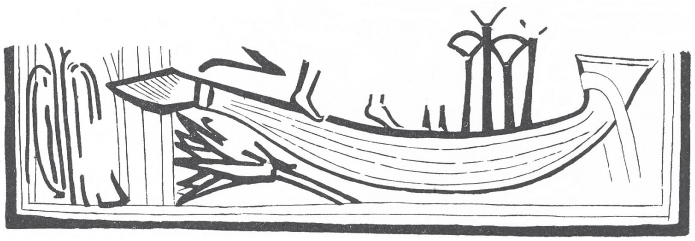

Fig. 4. Papyrus boat, decoration of the platform in house N.O. XII (from Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 286, fig. 157).

[40] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 255 (fig. 131).

[41] As suggested to me by Maarten Raven. See B. J. Kemp, 'Wall Paintings from the Workmen's Village at el-Amarna', *JEA* 65 (1979), pl. vii.

from Deir el-Medina shows a side view of a Bes. Fragment 5 may have been part of a dancing Bes with his hands raised. Since there are no fragments preserved which actually fit together, any reconstruction must remain speculative.

A boat scene

Another platform (house N.O. XII) is decorated with a fragmentary boat scene (fig. 4).[42] An exact parallel has been preserved on a pictorial ostracon.[43] Clearly a small girl is depicted on the boat,[44] thus it remains questionable if an erotic meaning was involved here.[45] Perhaps it is safe to assume a general regenerative significance.[46]

The so-called morning toilet scene

A further remark concerns the scene on the platform in house C. VII, which is generally considered to be a morning toilet scene (fig. 5).[47] This is one of the very few cases in which Bruyère has provided the size of a drawing: the grey panel measures 53 × 69 cm and is framed in white.[48]

Fig. 5. So-called morning toilet scene (from Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 311, fig. 182).

The interpretation of the scene as a morning toilet is subject to debate. Women are usually depicted sitting on a bed during their morning toilet,[49] whereas the scene shows a kneeling person here. The smaller figure on the right may or may not be interpreted as a child. The main reason to assume a toilet scene here is the so-called convolvulus behind the kneeling person, which is considered to be an element of the so-called 'female sphere'.[50] Although there are several scenes in which both women and the plant appear, it seems to be doubtful whether the scene belongs exclusively to a female sphere. First, the exact nature of the plant is not fully clear, but it is

[42] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 286 (fig. 157) and pl. ix.

[43] J. Vandier d'Abbadie, *Catalogue des ostraca figurés de Deir el-Médineh nos 2734 à 3053* (DFIFAO 2/4; Cairo, 1959), 224 and pl. clv.

[44] Koltsida, assumes that a man is depicted here: Koltsida, *Social Aspects*, 23.

[45] As suggested by E. Brunner-Traut, *Die alten Ägypter* (Stuttgart, 1976), 87.

[46] Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 51.

[47] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 311 and Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 51.

[48] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 311.

[49] E. Brunner-Traut, *Die altägyptischen Scherbenbilder der Deutschen Museen und Sammlungen* (Wiesbaden, 1956), pl. xxvi, no. 69 (O. Berlin 21461), 70 (O. Munich 1543), and 72 (O. Berlin 3428); the latter scene is considered a 'Speisetischszene' by Brunner-Traut (p. 72). Also J. Vandier d'Abbadie, *Catalogue des ostraca figurés de Deir el-Médineh nos 2256 à 2722* (DFIFAO 2/2; Cairo, 1937), no. 2235 (pl. xlix), 2236 (pl. xlix), and 2343 (pl li). These scenes are considered to be birth arbour scenes by the author (p. 69). Nevertheless, these ostraca show women receiving objects that may be related to the morning toilet.

[50] E.g. J. Vandier d'Abbadie, 'Une fresque civile de Deir el Médineh', *RdE* 3 (1938), 30.

striking that a similar plant appears, for instance, on wall paintings in the tomb of *Kj-nbw* (TT 113), where several men are carrying provisions to the tomb.[51] The same plant appears again in TT 113, associated with the deified king Amenhotep I and his mother Ahmes-Nefertari.[52] The plant should thus probably be considered as a general festival motif,[53] and not as referring to the female sphere only.

Second, the kneeling posture, with one knee drawn up, may fit both the depiction of a male or of a female figure.[54] It is unclear who is represented here. The difference in size between the figures could indicate that a child is depicted, or the smaller person might be someone with a lower rank, for example a servant. Third, the furniture in front of which the person is kneeling looks like a table, perhaps an offering table,[55] rather than a toilet equipment box.

An aspect of personal religious practice that has not yet been addressed here is that ancestor cults and other house cults were common in Deir el-Medina.[56] Certain niches provide evidence that this ancestor cult took place in some of the first rooms of the houses (e.g. in house C. VI).[57] The performance of ancestor cults in relation to the possible offering scene would be especially interesting, since the posture looks similar to the banquet scenes that appear in tombs from the Eighteenth Dynasty. They depict the family of the deceased eating in front of his tomb during the Beautiful Festival of the Valley in Thebes.[58] These scenes have been interpreted as referring to sexuality and rebirth.[59] From the middle of the Eighteenth Dynasty depictions of the tomb owner offering to the gods become gradually favoured over banquet scenes.[60] It is not impossible that they occurred in the domestic context: similar banquets, perhaps on a smaller scale, could have been performed for ancestors at home.[61]

[51] This plant is not identical to the one Manniche has identified as convolvolus (or birthworth as she called it): L. Manniche, *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal* (London, 1989), 78–9 versus 141. Manniche also seems to be in doubt which plant is depicted in TT 113 describing the plant in question as 'baskets of loaves(?)'. Unfortunately, the decoration of the tomb is still largely unpublished: F. Kampp, *Die thebanische Nekropole: Zum Wandel des Grabgedankens von der XVIII. bis zur XX. Dynastie* (Theben 13; Mainz am Rhein, 1996), I, 394–5; I have been unable to check the notes of Hay quoted there (Hay MSS 29822, 124).

[52] Cf. BM EA 37993 and BM EA 37994: E. A. W. Budge, *Wall Decorations of Egyptian Tombs* (London, 1914), pl. viii. I owe this reference to the kind assistance of Kasia Szpakowska.

[53] Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 52.

[54] E.g. N. M. de Garis-Davies and A. H. Gardiner, *The Tomb of Amenemhēt (no. 82)* (TTS 1; London, 1915), pls xxi (females) and xxxv (male and female).

[55] Cf. Brunner-Traut, *Scherbenbilder*, pl. ii, no. 94 (O. Berlin 3317). Also the table on O. IFAO 2336 looks very similar: Vandier d'Abbadie, *Catalogue des ostraca figurés nos 2256 à 2722*, pl. xlix.

[56] Thoroughly studied by R. J. Demarée, *The ỉḫ-iḳr-n-Rʿ-stelae: On Ancestor Worship in Ancient Egypt* (EU 3; Leiden, 1983); and more recently by N. Harrington, 'From the Cradle to the Grave: Anthropoid Busts and Ancestor Cults at Deir el-Medina', in K. Piquette and S. Love (eds), *Current Research in Egyptology 2003* (Oxford, 2005), 71–88.

[57] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 171, fig. 66, and 309. In other houses the ancestor cults may have been carried out in other parts of the house. In the second rooms of several houses niches have been located which may have been used to place cult objects. Additional support for the performance of ancestor cults in the second room is provided by the occurrence of false doors (e.g. in houses S.E. V, S.E. VII, S.E. VIII, N.O. II, N.O. IV, N.O. VI, N.O. XII, N.O. XV, N.O. XX, S.O. IV, and S.O. V). These false doors may have served as transition doors to enable the ancestors to enter the house, or as point of contact between the living and their ancestors: L. Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt* (Princeton, 2002), 119.

[58] E.g. S. Schott, *Das schöne Fest vom Wüstentale: Festbräuche einer Totenstadt* (AAWLM 1952/11; Wiesbaden, 1952), 65–72.

[59] Robins, in Kampen (ed.), *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, 31, following L. Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1987), 40–3.

[60] J. Spiegel, 'Die Entwicklung der Opferszenen in den Thebanischen Gräbern', *MDAIK* 14 (1956), 202–3.

[61] The appearance of ritual meals has also been sugested for the houses at Amarna: Stevens, *Private Religion*, 283.

A mask of Bes?

A problematic case is the find of two clay masks of Bes in house S.E. IX. Although no platform was found in the house, Bruyère assumed that the masks may have been part of the decoration of a platform that had fallen into decay.[62] Such an interpretation seems doubtful. There is no evidence that mudbrick sculpture was used as a decorative element in pharaonic Egypt,[63] so such a decoration would be unique for Deir el-Medina.

Another interpretation of the objects suggests that they were masks to be used in some kind of cult of Bes. Masks were used during cult practice on certain occasions.[64] An argument to support this interpretation is the fact that they were life size.[65] On Bruyère's plate, whether the back side of the presumed mask was smooth or not cannot be determined, nor, due to the fractures, whether the mask had eye-holes, and in any event, the best-preserved cultic mask from ancient Egypt, a clay mask of Anubis from the Ptolemaic period, has no eye holes in the natural position of the eyes.[66] It has been argued that there is earlier evidence for the use of Bes masks. For example, a fragmentary piece from Middle Kingdom Kahun has been interpreted as a Bes mask.[67] Although it seems clear that this is a mask, it is doubtful whether it depicts Bes.[68] Prior to the New Kingdom it is certainly not Bes who is depicted, but a predecessor at most. The fact that this mask has been found together with a female lion statuette and two ivory clappers allows DuQuesne to assume that 'all these objects belonged to a ritual dancer, midwife, physician or pratitioner of magic'.[69]

There are two more, though similary uncertain indications which have been used to support the idea that masks of a predecessor of the god Bes were used in the Old Kingdom. Both are fragmentary reliefs interpreted as showing masks of a Bes-like figure.[70] The first fragment has no context and therefore it is not fully clear whether or not a mask is depicted. The second fragment shows a group of young men, with one figure depicted apparently wearing a lion mask.[71] Above the figure *ḫb.t jn šdḫt* is written. This text has been translated as 'dance of the *šdḫt* youth' by Smith.[72] The

[62] Bruyère mentions two masks, but only one is presented in his publication: *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 276, fig. 148.

[63] As far as I know the only case are the so-called Bes chambers from Saqqara. On the walls of these Late Period chambers figures of modelled mudbrick depicting Bes were situated: J. E. Quibell, *Excavations at Saqqara (1905–1906)* (Cairo, 1907), 12–14 and pls xxvi–xxix.

[64] E.g. M. A. Murray, 'Ritual Masking', in *Mélanges Maspero*, I: *Orient ancien* (MIFAO 66; Cairo, 1935–1938), 253.

[65] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 58.

[66] D. Sweeney, 'Egyptian Masks in Motion', *GM* 135 (1993), 102.

[67] T. DuQuesne, 'Concealing and Revealing: The Problem of Ritual Masking in Ancient Egypt', *DE* 51 (2001), 8, quoting W. M. F. Petrie, *Kahun, Gurob, and Hawara* (London, 1890), 30 and pl. viii. See also M. J. Raven, 'A Puzzling Pataekos', *OMRO* 67 (1987), 12, and Stevens, *Private Religion*, 201.

[68] For example, Seeber has raised doubts whether the iconographic details are sufficient for an identification of the figure as Bes: C. Seeber, 'Maske', in *LÄ* III, 1197 and 1199, n. 10.

[69] DuQuesne, *DE* 51, 8, based on V. Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Oxford, 1993), 70.

[70] DuQuesne, *DE* 51, 9 citing L. Borchardt, *Königs Śaśḥu-reʿ*, II: *Die Wandbilder* (WVDOG 26; Leipzig, 1913), 38–9 and pl. 22.

[71] W. S. Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom* (Boston, 1946), 211, fig. 83, cited by DuQuesne, *DE* 51, 9.

[72] Smith, *Egyptian Sculpture*, 210. Capart suggested that *šdḫt* may be a spelling of *ḫrd.t* 'children': J. Capart, 'Note sur un fragment de bas-relief au British Museum', *BIFAO* 30 (1931), 74. Capart here follows *Wb*. III, 398.11. The other reference cited in the *Wb*. has *ḫrd.t* rather than *šdḫt*. Although the interplay of *š* and *ḫ* is well-known, in this case it does not appear to be convincing that both characters should be exchanged. Whether we are dealing with a hapax legomenon *šdḫt* seems to be subject to debate.

meaning of the whole scene remains unclear. Most probably a lion mask is indeed depicted, but it is difficult to associate this with the god Bes, who is not attested before the New Kingdom.

An interesting difference between Bes and his companion the goddess Thoeris is that the god Bes never appears on stelae. This observation may lead to the assumption that there was a difference in rank and quality between the cult of other gods worshipped in the domestic context and that of the god Bes. Since there is no evidence for a cult of Bes in pre-Ptolemaic Egypt, the appearance of a cultic mask of Bes in house S.E. IX would be equally enigmatic, either as a mask or as decoration element.[73] Unfortunately, the evidence does not allow a decision between these problematic options.

Summary on the decoration of the platforms

The decoration has been preserved only on very few platforms. It may be assumed that more had originally been decorated. The ten platforms with preserved decoration show depictions of the god Bes and general regenerative motives, a dancing female, an unclear scene, and perhaps an offering or banquet scene. The analysis of the decoration does not reflect a primary female sphere in the first room of the houses at Deir el-Medina.[74] The idea that the platforms may have had a prophylactic function of protecting women in the dangerous period of childbirth may certainly be one aspect of these structures.[75] One occurrence of a childbirth scene and one occurrence of a depiction of a dancing female are not sufficient to support the idea that all platforms were primarily connected to a female sphere.[76] Although the god Bes can act as protector of women in childbirth, and of children, one should not forget that he was a tutelary god who appears in various contexts,[77] and who was a protective god of the household in a wider sense. This notion is even more important since Roth has recently shown that fertility in Ancient Egyptian terms was understood as meaning the creation of life by men, while the women were considered as the receivers.[78] Accepting Roth's conclusion, fertility could be viewed as a cosmological neccesity involving men and women, but mainly men. Domestic fertility cults and regeneration cults in general could then be interpreted as maintaining the cosmological order on a small scale within the house. As seen above, the decoration on the platforms show fertility[79] and/or regeneration motifs.[80] If these motifs are taken as evidence supporting the hypothesis that the platforms served as house altars, they could indicate that fertility and regeneration rituals may have been performed on such house altars. The platforms would certainly provide an ideal space for rituals playing an important role for the well-being of all members of the household.[81]

[73] Compare also Stevens' discussion of an enigmatic pottery face found at Amarna: Stevens, *Private Religion*, 199–201

[74] See also Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 75.

[75] Kemp, *JEA* 65, 52.

[76] Contrary to Brunner-Traut, *MIO* 3, 30.

[77] H. Altenmüller, 'Bes', in *LÄ* I, 720–4; for a short summary, see also Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 54.

[78] A. M. Roth, 'Father Earth, Mother Sky; Ancient Egyptian Beliefs About Conception and Fertility', in A. E. Rautman (ed.), *Reading the Body: Representations and Remains in the Archaeological Record* (Philadelphia, 2000), 189. I would like to thank Emily Teeter for most helpful suggestions and comments.

[79] Brunner-Traut, *MIO* 3 (1955), 30, and Robins, in Kampen (ed.), *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, 30.

[80] Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 51.

[81] Similary Koltsida, *Social Aspects*, 43 and 141–2.

Analysing artefacts: an example

Hypotheses drawing on portable artefacts should be treated with caution, but sometimes they can provide insights on their context of use. On the platform in house N.E. XI artefacts were found that may allow such a glimpse. As argued above, valuables such as divine statues would probably have been removed during the abandonment process. However, when these objects were broken and in poor condition the owners may have left them *in situ*, being de facto refuse. The artefacts found on the platform in house N.E. XI may then serve as an example of the sorts of religious practices that may have been performed on a possible house altar.

The finds included a limestone headrest, a fragment of a female statuette, and a fragment of an *Atef*-crown made of wood from a divine or royal statue.[82] The presence of the female statuette probably points to an interpretation of the crown fragment as being part of a statue of the deified king Amenhotep I.[83] The female statue wears a pleated dress similar to the one in which queen Ahmes-Nefertari is often depicted.[84] The appearance of both on an altar would make sense, given that Amenhotep I was seemingly regarded as the founder of the village and was worshipped as a patron deity together with his mother Ahmes-Nefertari. Perhaps these are fragments of divine statues used in cultic activity for Amenhotep I and Ahmes-Nefertari. The fact that a damaged offering table was found next to the platform may be no coincidence.[85]

More difficult to explain is the presence of a limestone headrest on top of the platform in house N.E. XI.[86] This find is the primary evidence for the argument that the platforms may have been used as beds.[87] That this idea is not convincing has been shown by Friedman.[88] In line with the argument for a domestic cult performed on the platform, it could be suggested that that the headrest had been left where it had been placed for symbolic reasons.[89] Some authors have suggested that headrests, or at least their decoration, may have symbolised protection.[90] For example, Kleinke links the appearance of the god Bes as a decorative element on headrests to his appearance on the platforms.[91] Others have assumed that the headrest is symbolically related to the cult of the sun, suggesting that the shape of the headrest could have been adopted from the *ꜣḫ.t*-sign.[92] Lying with his head on a headrest, the sleeper would have received the same protection against Apophis during the night hours as the sun god did. The

[82] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 256.

[83] J. Černý, 'Le culte d'Amenophis I^{er} chez les ouvriers de la nécropole thébaine', *BIFAO* 27 (1927), especially 165–76, figs 6–8 and pls i.1, ii, iii, v, and vii, and Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 175–82.

[84] M. Gitton, *L'épouse du dieu, Ahmes Néfertary: Documents sur sa vie et son culte posthume* (Paris, 1981), 77.

[85] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 256 and 257, fig. 134.

[86] Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 256; for another example found on the platform in house C. VII: ibid., 312. The observation that only two headrests have been found on a platform is perhaps due to the fact that headrests are portable objects that may have been carried away during the process of the abandonment of the village.

[87] E.g. Romano, *Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, 27.

[88] Friedman, in Lesko (ed.), *Pharaoh's Workers*, 98.

[89] A similar idea has been proposed by Kleinke, who assumes that the headrests may have been offered to request birth or regeneration: Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 41.

[90] E.g. *BD* spell 166: T. G. Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth By Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expresssed in their own Terms* (SAOC 37; Chicago, 1974), 162.

[91] Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 41.

[92] B. R. Hellinckx, 'The Symbolic Assimilation of Head and Sun as Expressed by Headrests', *SAK* 29 (2001), 61–95; cf. Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 41.

headrest was thus symbolically linked to the regenerative process of the daily journey of the sun,[93] which may explain an incidental use of these objects for votive purposes, as has been argued by Kleinke.[94] This could perhaps be supported by an interesting scene apparently situated in chapel no. 1211 at Deir el-Medina, showing a headrest which might be related to the bark of the god Sokar.[95] A problem with the idea of the headrest as a symbol for protection is that all examples mentioned above are derived from funerary contexts, while our headrest was found in an everyday-life context. Funerary cults and domestic cults might have been interrelated to some degree (in ancestor cults), but the idea of the headrest as a symbolic offering would be unique and therefore cannot be proven. So far there is no fully comprehensive explanation for the presence of the headrests on the platforms.

To sum up, the meaning of the platforms cannot be based on the scarce and contradictory evidence found on a single platform. While the statue fragments may indicate the performance of religious actions, there is no comprehensive explanation for the presence of the headrest. Hence, the material evidence from house N.E. XI cannot support the altar hypothesis.

The orientation of the platforms

The random orientation of the mudbrick structures also seems to contradict the altar hypothesis. The orientation of the performer of an Egyptian ritual, 'whether private believer, priest or magician',[96] is believed to have been crucial for the effectiveness of the ritual. Therefore it appears to be implausible that the direction of prayers or other religious activities would be left to chance.

Nine of the platforms were oriented towards the west. If we assume that these mudbrick structures were used as altars for ancestor cults, their orientation to the west is not surprising, since the west is the place of the deceased and the necropolis. However, the west can also be negative when it is associated with the desert as place where the god Seth lives. And why were the 20 other platforms built against different walls? One may counter with the assumption that perhaps not all platforms served exactly the same purpose. The orientation of the eight mudbrick structures oriented to the south may be explained by the general preference of the south, as shown by Keßler.[97] Raven has elaborated that 'orientation towards the south reflects the order of the universe'.[98] So the orientation of an altar to the south would perhaps have also been adequate. The orientation to the east is ambivalent: it is often considered as bad and evil,[99] but is also the compass direction of the rise of the sun. And what about

[93] E. Hornung, *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter* (Zurich, 2000), 513 followed by Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 41.

[94] Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 41.

[95] A. H. Bomann, *The Private Chapel in Ancient Egypt: A Study of the Chapels in the Workman's Village at El Amarna with Special References to Deir el Medina and Other Sites* (London, 1991), 41. Unfortunately from Bomann's short description, the details of what is depicted are not clear. The drawing is not mentioned by B Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1922–23)* (FIFAO 1.1; Cairo, 1924), 66–7; and *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1929)* (FIFAO 7.2; Cairo, 1930), 17–18, nor is the scene noted in Bruyère's unpublished notebooks. I would like to express my special gratitude to Nadine Cherpion who kindly checked Bruyère's notebooks in the IFAO in Cairo.

[96] M. J. Raven, 'Egyptian Concepts of the Orientation of the Human Body', *JEA* 91 (2005), 38.

[97] D. Keßler, 'Himmelsrichtungen', in *LÄ* II, 1213.

[98] Raven, *JEA* 91, 40.

[99] Following Keßler, *LÄ* II, 1213.

the north, often considered as the end of the world?[100] The lack of textual evidence from Ancient Egypt explaining the underlying symbolic meaning of cardinal points leaves us in uncertainty, and exposed to the risk of too far-fetched interpretations.[101] In addition, one may argue that orientation within a house is not fixed to the cardinal points, because houses cannot be rigidly aligned to them and may face opposite directions, or the inhabitants focused on symbolic, not literal orientations.[102] Probably it was due to personal preference, space considerations, or practical reasons that a certain wall was chosen.[103] The varying directions which the platforms face thus neither contradict nor support the altar hypothesis.

Two pictorial ostraca

Support for the altar hypothesis is provided by two pictorial ostraca. The first ostracon depicts Hay, the deputy of the crew of workmen, the son of a scribe Amennakht, standing before an offering table.[104] It is situated in front of an altar on which the god Thoth is sitting in a shrine. The drawing of the altar combines three characteristics of the platform: it has a cavetto cornice, five frontal steps, and a small door leaf. Both the door leaf and the altar are shown in a side view. In other words, the drawing combines the two essential characteristics of an altar. The one or two door leaves[105] of the pictured shrine are opened and we can look inside, although it is shown from a lateral perspective. In other words, the god Thoth is sitting on the altar and the deputy Hay is facing him. The similarity between the altar and our platforms is striking.

The second ostracon is O. Louvre E. 25301, on which the snake goddess Meret Seger is shown on a similar platform.[106] This platform is slightly less elaborately drawn: it has the frontal view and frontal steps in a lateral view but no door leaves or parapet. Interpreting the Meret Seger ostracon as a depiction of a house altar would make sense since she was a prominent tutelary goddess in Deir el-Medina.[107]

[100] Ibid.

[101] Raven, *JEA* 91, 52.

[102] For similar observations concerning burials and the orientation of bodies: B. J. Kemp, 'The Orientation of Burials at Tell el-Amarna', in Z. A. Hawass and J. Richards (eds), *The Archaeology and Art of Ancient Egypt: Essays in Honour of David B. O'Connor* (CASAE 36; Cairo, 2007), II, 24–5.

[103] Varying orientations of stepped house altars are also known from Amarna: Stevens, *Private Religion*, 226–8, and 231, and see also below.

[104] Pictured L. Keimer, *Études d'Égyptologie,* III (Cairo, 1941), pl. xviii (this volume consists of a singe study entitled 'Sur un certain nombre d'ostraca figurés, de plaquettes sculptées, etc., provenant de la nécropole thébaine et encore inédits'); present location of the ostracon is unknown.

[105] Based on the lateral view, it cannot be decided whether the altar has one or two door wings. In this view only one wing is visible: H. Schäfer, *Principles of Egyptian Art*, tr. J. Baines (Oxford, 1974) 114.

[106] Pictured Keimer, *Études d'Égyptologie* III, pl. xiii. Keimer thought that a sanctuary or a tomb is depicted here: ibid., 18 no. 46, and pl. xiii. See also G. Andreu and A. M. Donadoni Roveri (eds), *Gli artisti del Faraone: Deir el-Medina e le Valli dei Re e delle Regine* (Milan, 2003), 254, no. 219b.

[107] B. Bruyère, *Mert Seger à Deir el Médineh* (MIFAO 58; Cairo, 1930), 105. See also the wooden snakes found by Möller, which probably served as cult images: R. Anthes, 'Die Deutschen Grabungen auf der Westseite von Theben in den Jahren 1911 und 1913', *MDAIK* 12/1 (1943), 59 and fig. 25. Unfortunately, their exact find spot is not indicated. There also exist other depictions which look similar to the platforms. These structures, however, have no steps in front, so it is not fully clear whether these examples are depictions of house altars. They may also depict chapels. Bruyère, *Mert Seger*, 106 (O. Cairo 51972), 123 (stela Cairo), 127 (stela Turin 123), 165 (BM 597), 239 (wall painting in the chapel of Ipuy), and 268 (wall painting in TT 214) and J. Černý, *Graffiti hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques de la nécropole Thébaine* (DFIFAO 9; Cairo, 1956), nos 1082 and 1218.

To sum up, both depictions could support the idea that the platforms served as house altars. Alongside worship in the chapels close to the village,[108] there was apparently the need to have tutelary gods at home. Another interesting suggestion about the relation between chapels and house altars is implied when Pinch suggests that votive offerings may have been magically prepared at home to strengthen them before being offered at an official temple.[109] Similar strengthening rituals may have been performed on the house altars before offerings in the family chapel. Interestingly, there were smaller portable shrines with the same shape as the platforms in Deir el-Medina.[110]

The interpretation of the platforms as house altars is in line with the large percentage of space that the platforms occupied within the first room (about 10%). This observation led Friedman to assume a multifunctional use.[111] However, to dedicate a rather large space of the house to an altar for the protective household deities makes good sense. In an altar located prominently in the first room, the domestic gods may have been warding off evil right at the entrance of the home.[112] Not all platforms were situated in the first room of the house, but one may think of various explanations (e.g. refurbishment of the house). In addition, there is no reason to assume that all altars were used by all households for exactly the same kind of cult practice. As shown by the two pictorial ostraca, the cult of a certain god may have been tailor-made to meet the demands of the individual family. Different families may have worshipped a single deity or a variety of gods and goddesses.[113]

Comparison with temple altars

Another important argument for the altar hypothesis is the striking similarity of the architecture of the platforms from Deir el-Medina with the altars in official temples.[114] The shape of official temple altars may have served as a guideline when constructing the proposed domestic altars. This situation is paralleled by the shape of private chapels being inspired by the shape of official temples.[115]

Ernst has defined the major characteristics of an altar in the New Kingdom:[116] it is situated in a court, oriented towards the sun, and has steps in front.[117] Although it often shows inscriptions, there was no standard decoration pattern, and some altars were not decorated at all. In several temples stepped sun altars have been found.[118] However, there are several differences between the altars in the temples and the platforms in the houses of Deir el-Medina. It does not seem convincing that the platforms at Deir

[108] Bomann, *Private Chapel*, 40–55

[109] G. Pinch, *Votive Offerings to Hathor* (Oxford, 1993), §341.

[110] Brunner-Traut, *Scherbenbilder*, pl. x.

[111] Friedman, in Lesko (ed.), *Pharaoh's Workers*, 99.

[112] This is in line with van Gennep's argument that spiritual *rites de passage* were performed at the entrance of a house (e.g. offerings for a protective deity): A. van Gennep, Les rites de passage, étude systématique des rites (Paris 1909), 27–33.

[113] Similar Kleinke, *Female Spaces*, 76.

[114] The similarity in shape of the T-shaped platforms and altars in temples was pointed out by Bruyère, mentioning altars in Amarna, Deir el-Bahari, and Medamud: Bruyère, *Rapport 1934–1935* III, 61.

[115] Bomann, *Private Chapel*, 81.

[116] H. Ernst, 'Altar oder Barkenuntersatz', *GM* 180 (2001), 59–62.

[117] Ernst notes that there are exceptions. Steps are sometimes also a later addition to naoi.

[118] E.g. the temples of Seti I and Ramesses II in Gurna, the temple of Merenptah, Medinet Habu, the Akhmenu in Karnak, Luxor temple, Abu Simbel, and the temple of Taharka at Karnak: J. Karkowski, *The Temple of Hatshepsut: The Solar Complex* (Deir el-Bahari 6; Warsaw, 2003), 91 and pl. 83.

el-Medina were sun altars. Although the winged Bes as a decoration element and the two headrests may indicate at least some solar aspects, a purely solar purpose of the platforms is unlikely. The platforms were not situated in domestic sun courts. Perhaps we may assume a shift in meaning when the small altars occur in houses.

Comparison with other proposed domestic altars

Interestingly, platform-shaped altars in houses were an invention of the New Kingdom. The first platforms appear in the period of the reign of king Amenhotep III, in his residence in Malqata.[119] Other house altars are situated at Amarna.[120] Again, the shape of the altars at Amarna is very similar to the platforms from Deir el-Medina, although the former were left undecorated. Contrary to Deir el-Medina, most house altars at Amarna were situated in the central room of the house, perhaps due to the distinctive layout of the houses.[121] In Amarna, the elite houses display a square ground plan with a central room in the middle and the adjacent rooms grouped around the centre.

The workmen's houses in Deir el-Medina are arranged in a linear pattern, with no dominant architectural core. This different layout may have caused the different location of the house altars. Similar to Deir el-Medina, no clear orientation pattern supports a choice of the wall which the altars were attached to that would indicate a religious motivation behind this choice at Amarna.[122]

That house altars at Amarna may have been used for libation offerings is indicated by a scene on the talatat blocks found inside the ninth pylon in Karnak (Luxor J. 223). The common interpretation of the room in this scene as a bathroom is not convincing.[123] The bathrooms at Amarna, described by Borchardt, all clearly display a drain, and none is visible here.[124] Very probably it is not a bathroom, but a house altar that is depicted.

The fact that the earliest comparable house altars appear at Malkata undermines the idea that the personal piety in the Ramesside period was mainly a reaction following the Amarna Period.[125] Recent research has shown that the elimination of the traditional religion was much less thorough than believed earlier. For example, Stevens was able to show that there may have existed a 'degree of freedom of both religious thought

[119] P. Lacovara, *The New Kingdom Royal City* (London and New York, 1997), 49 and 141, fig. 48, and Stevens, *Private Religion*, 233. Unfortunately, the material from Malqata is largely unpublished. But see recently A. Koltsida, 'Malkata Revisited: Defining Domestic Space at the Palace City of Amenhotep III', in J.-C. Goyon and C. Cardin (eds), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists* (OLA 150; Leuven, 2007), I, 1011–1022.

[120] L. Borchardt, *Porträts der Königin Nofret-ete. Aus den Grabungen 1912/13 in Tell el-Amarna* (WVDOG 44 = ATA 3; Leipzig, 1923). His interpretation has recently been confirmed by Stevens, *Private Religion*, 219–32.

[121] Stevens, *Private Religion*, 226.

[122] Borchardt first argued that all altars faced the east (cf. Borchardt, *Porträts der Königin Nofret-ete*, 22). He had to admit later that there was no standard pattern. Interior design greatly varied in different houses. There was neither a standard room in which the altars were situated nor a cardinal point towards which the house altars were oriented: L. Borchardt and H. Ricke, *Die Wohnhäuser in Tell el-Amarna* (WVDOG 91 = ATA 5; Berlin 1980), 255–6.

[123] J. Lauffray, 'Les "Talatat" du IXe Pylône de Karnak et le Teny-Menou', *Cahiers de Karnak* 6 (1973–1977), 79. Relief Luxor J. 223 is shown in his fig. 5.

[124] E.g. the bathroom in houses P 47.7, H. Ricke, *Der Grundriss des Amarna-Wohnhauses* (WVDOG 56 = ATA 4; Leipzig, 1932), 23 and pl. 9, and P. 47.2, ibid., 35 and pl. 25. See also Ricke's reconstruction: ibid., 34, fig. 32.

[125] As put forward by H. Brunner, 'Persönliche Frömmigkeit', *LÄ* IV, 951, and J. Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, tr. D. Lorton (London, 2001), 224.

and expressions' even in Amarna.[126] This freedom could be reflected in the erection of house altars on which, for example, fertility cults took place or the domestic gods may have been worshipped.

Other close parallels to the platforms at Deir el-Medina have been found at Medinet Habu.[127] Unfortunately, no decoration or finds have been found which could indicate the use of the structure. In view of the similarity of these structures to the house altars in Amarna and Deir el-Medina, Hölscher's idea that they were altars used to worship minor popular deities is convincing.[128] Similar to most altars at Amarna, the examples from Medinet Habu are located in the middle of the house in a central room.[129] Hölscher dates the houses to the Eighteenth and Twentieth Dynasty. If his dating is correct, the altars in Medinet Habu fit perfectly into the time span of our proposed house altars. The Eighteenth Dynasty altars would date shortly before the Deir el-Medina ones, which are probably Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasty, whereas the Twenty-second Dynasty altars would be their successors.

The problems concerning conclusions drawn from artefacts are also valid for Medinet Habu. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that no finds are known which could illuminate the use and function of the structures: not for the Eighteenth Dynasty houses, nor for the Twenty-second Dynasty houses. Just based on shape, one may argue that they are house altars, similar to those at Malqata, Amarna, and Deir el-Medina.

Conclusion

The main conclusion is that the *lits clos* should no longer simply be called platforms. It has been argued that they served as house altars, on which various religious actions were performed in daily life. According to the present state of research, the construction of stepped house altars was confined to the Theban area and Amarna. The custom of building stepped house altars in the domestic sphere may have been introduced at the end of the reign of Amenhotep III in Malkata. They were modelled after the official temple altars. It was thus a very specific type of altar, which had been transferred to the domestic sphere. This is in line with the idea that state religion and the increasing importance of religious festivals and processions may have encouraged the people to address the gods personally on domestic altars.

[126] A. Stevens, 'The Amarna Royal Women as Images of Fertility', *JANER* 4 (2004), 123–4, and more recently Stevens, *Private Religion*, esp. 290–5.

[127] U. Hölscher, *The Excavation of Medinet Habu*, II: *The Temples of the Eighteenth Dynasty* (OIP 41; Chicago, 1939), 68–71 and figs 54, 55, and 56, and U. Hölscher, *The Excavation of Medinet Habu*, V: *Post-Ramessid Remains* (OIP 66; Chicago, 1954), 7, fig. 6.

[128] Hölscher, *The Excavation of Medinet Habu* II, 69.

[129] Hölscher, *The Excavation of Medinet Habu* V, 68, fig. 54.