

PROCEEDINGS
FIRST
VATICAN
COFFIN
CONFERENCE
19-22 JUNE 2013

VOLUME 1



VATICAN COFFIN PROJECT

Reparto Antichità Egizie e del Vicino Oriente

Laboratorio di Diagnostica per la Conservazione ed il Restauro

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Coffin lid of Djedmut and details, inv. MV25008

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Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

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edited by **ALESSIA AMENTA** and **HÉLÈNE GUICHARD**



EDIZIONI MUSEI VATICANI





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Birth, (re)-birth and votive beds: New evidence from a Third Intermediate Period context in Theban Tomb 14

Marilina Betrò

The Università degli Studi di Pisa has been working in the Northern area of the Theban necropolis, under my direction, since 2003.¹ Work started with the study and archaeological investigation of TT 14, a Ramesside tomb located at the foot of the main hill of Dra Abu el-Naga. It is a quite small rock-cut tomb, decorated for Huy, a *wab*-priest attached to the cult of the deified king Amenhotep I, and composed by a single room and a sloping passage (Fig. 1).

As many tombs in the Theban necropolis, the Ramesside TT 14 was reused in the Third Intermediate Period: the tomb indeed housed many burials dating to the 21st and 22nd Dynasty in one of the subterranean ramifications of its sloping passage, G. This is a narrow and low gallery, departing from the main part of the sloping passage: it stretches for about 5.50m from NE to SW and ends widening in a small chamber, slightly higher than the passage (about 1.50m). Since the material retrieved there pertains mainly to the 21st- 22nd Dynasties, this side branch was probably cut into the rock in that period, as an enlargement of the Ramesside funerary section. Possibly, its usage knew no interruption from the end of the 19th Dynasty up to the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, but the lack of texts – first of all because of the conditions of preservation of the finds – prevented us from undersanding whether the people buried here were descendants of Huy or had reused the tomb having no family relationship with him.

Once abandoned, TT 14 was repeatedly invaded by occasional flash floods, arising from the rare but violent and sudden rain storms which sometimes strike the desert West of the Theban necropolis. The excavation of G, in 2004, 2007 and 2008, revealed that it had been almost completely filled by the compact deposit brought by at least three subsequent flash floods. The layers of mud brought into G by the flash floods sealed the room and preserved the archaeological context, which appeared to be untouched by the 19th century looters (although not by ancient robbers) (Fig.2).

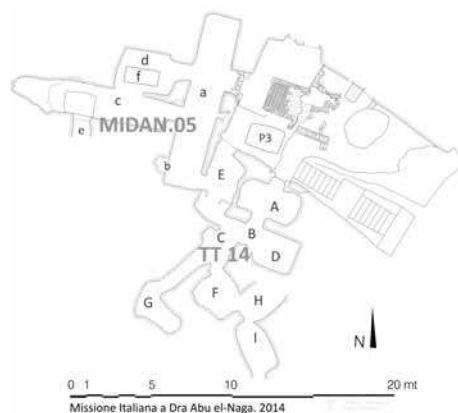


Fig. 1. Plan of TT 14, on the South side of M.I.D.A.N.05 forecourt (© Marilina Betrò, drawing by Paolo del Vesco and Emanuele Taccola).



Fig. 2. The narrow gallery G before excavations, with flash floods deposit still filling it (© Marilina Betrò).

¹ For the results of the first seven campaigns, up to 2007, see Betrò *et al.* 2009. A preliminary report of archaeological investigation on the area from 2008 to 2011 is in Betrò *et al.* 2012.



Fig. 3. Fragments of decorated coffins from G (© Marilina Betrò).

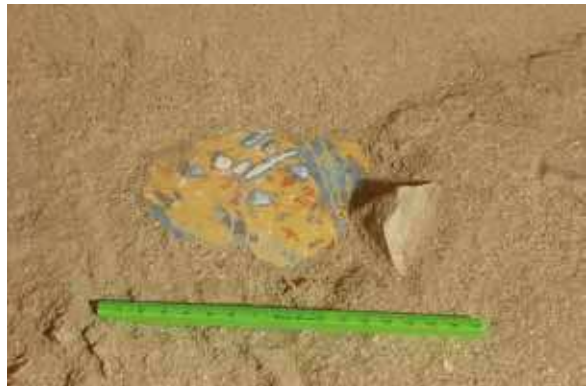


Fig. 4. Fragment of coffin emerging from the sand in G (© Marilina Betrò).



Fig. 5. Cartonnage fragment from G showing the right side of a female wig and collar (© Marilina Betrò).

The original setting of burials in TT 14 was deeply altered by the joint action of flash floods and ancient robbers: the latter opened the coffins in search for precious materials, broke the cartonnages (sometimes dragging the mummies outside G for acting in a much larger space), and probably heaped up coffins, abandoning their mummies on the ground. When, much later, the floods entered the tomb, they gradually covered piled up coffins, cartonnages, and human remains. The mud filled the spaces between the objects and the empty shells of cartonnage, and lifted what floated on its surface, until this hardened: bodies were lifted even 50 cm above the ground. The extent of the second flash flood which entered the tomb was such to cause a violent displacement of objects and bodies, even projecting some of them against the rear wall, as the evidence on the skeletal remains (heavy compression and bend of the backbones, dislocations of the superior incisors into the nasal cavity, contracted position of the bones) disclosed under examination by our anthropologist, Barbara Lippi.² Finally, the permanence of coffins and mummies in the mud caused their deterioration or decomposition.

During the clearing of room G, we found a remarkable concentration of fragments of painted plaster, rotten wood and many skeletal or partly mummified human remains, indicating that a significant number of interments was gathered here: Barbara Lippi identified at least six almost complete individuals buried in G, two adult males and three women, among which a young woman pregnant

² Lippi, internal report. See also Betrò *et al.* 2009, 157.



Fig. 6. The votive bed with the small stelae and the fragment of female figurine originally deposited in G (© Marilina Betrò).

with a 40-week foetus (individuals **u** and **u**).³ We can suppose that, before the intervention of ancient thieves and flash floods, the most interior part of G housed the earlier burials, but this layout is no more detectable, because of the alterations already described.

The chronological framework of this context is roughly fixed by four pottery vessels around the 22nd Dynasty.⁴ Coffins and cartonnages fragments suggest that G was used at least from the 21st up to the beginning of the 22nd Dynasty (Fig. 3): five wooden hands with outstretched fingers and one fist, together with many fragments of brightly painted yellow plaster with decoration modelled in the gesso and painted (Fig. 4), point to the 21st Dynasty;⁵ cartonnage fragments attest a 22nd Dynasty usage (Fig. 5). Even cartonnages seem however to reveal a prototypal phase, probably marking the transition between the 21st Dynasty decorative and colour schemes, and the new ones of the 22nd.⁶

Although we can assume that ancient thieves had stolen all they considered valuable, it is noticeable that very few grave goods were found with the fragments of the coffin ensembles: finds in G were made up of a few pottery vessels, two wooden shabtis, some scattered faience tubular beads, a fragment of faience shabti, a poor wristlet of fruit seeds found near the body of a girl, and a painted terracotta set, composed by a votive bed, two small terracotta stelae and a fragmentary female figurine (Fig. 6). The very few faience beads and the lower part of the faience shabti were very probably brought into the tunnel by the mud waves and do not belong to the burials in G. The two

3 Lippi 2007, 30-35.

4 So far only the pottery of the first campaign in G (2004) has been published, see Guidotti 2006, 32-34, Fig. 19, nos. 2-4; Fig. 20, no. 10.

5 Also a wooden broken foot was retrieved in this area: it could hint at the presence of a now vanished coffin lid of the 19th Dynasty open-work type (Niwiński types la-b: Niwiński 1988, 12-13, Figs. 10-11, Pl. IIA) or point to Niwiński type IVc/Taylor lid layout B, rarely attested in the 21st Dynasty (Niwiński 1988, 79-80, Pl. XIA-B; Taylor 1985, 160-161, Fig. 15). Another valid assumption could be the reuse, during the Third Intermediate Period, of one or more 19th Dynasty coffins, see Cooney 2012a; 2012b. Other plaster fragments in G, completely detached from their original wooden base and representing parts of a female mask and collar, with circular ear-studs, plaits framing the face, and semi-circular floral decoration under the wig lappets, find parallels in female coffins of the Ramesside Period or early 21st Dynasty, see Del Vesco 2009b, 158 and Fig. 145.

6 The iconography of female wigs, very similar to the mask described in the previous note, recalls closely Ramesside representations and has no parallels after 969 BC; also the collar lotus flowers terminal declines in popularity and disappears after the pontificate of Pinedjem II. The combination of this kind of wig and collar with the new 22nd decoration attested on the fragments from G (rectangular panels with seated and mummyform standing deities) and with crossing columns of texts, appears only on mummy boards and coffin lids of the Ramesside Period or on 21st Dynasty coffin lids of Niwiński type II, see Del Vesco 2009b, 160-161.

wooden shabtis could instead belong to the original burial: similar wooden shabtis dated to Dynasties 21st-22nd are known.⁷ Unfortunately, their inscription was completely washed away by the mud. The votive bed, the miniature stelae and the female figurine had certainly been placed in the chamber at the bottom of G, but some time later, ancient thieves probably accidentally broke them while plundering the burials, and some fragments were dragged outside the tunnel, in the nearby sections of the sloping passage C and F.

In conclusion, no more than a few vessels, two wooden shabtis, a poor wristlet, and a votive set result from the original grave goods of at least five people buried in G.⁸ We could assume that other elements of the burial equipment in G underwent such a heavy deterioration, because of the mud, to dissolve and become completely unrecognizable, but our experience in TT 14 and the nearby tombs in Pisa concession – M.I.D.A.N.O5 and Tomb E, all of them invaded by the flash floods – demonstrates that, even under many layers of flood deposit, at least traces of wooden shabti boxes, pottery and mud shabtis, and other objects were still identifiable. I am persuaded that the burial equipment of the dead people in G was always very basic, as it often was in this period for middle-rank people, not belonging to the élite. This paucity of grave goods makes even more striking the presence of the votive set.

Paolo Del Vesco studied these kinds of objects thoroughly in his PhD thesis, defended in 2008 and published in 2010.⁹ Later in that year, Emily Teeter published the votive sets from Medinet Habu.¹⁰ Votive beds represent a miniaturized kind of bed, namely ‘the decorated bed for women’, quoted in some ostraca from Deir el-Medina and represented in the so-called ‘birth-arbour scenes’. Their decoration (Bes figures, boat in a papyrus marsh, frontal standing nude girls, sometimes playing lute, etc.) and the frequent association with female figurines link this object to fertility and birth-protection rituals in the Theban region, where they are attested all over the Third Intermediate Period, possibly in the social milieu of the temple musicians and songstresses. Their main finding context – and therefore usage context – is domestic: among 85 specimens traced by Paolo Del Vesco and examined in his study, 60 come from residential structures built over or around the remains of religious buildings (Medinet Habu, Karnak, Deir el-Medina), 14 from funerary contexts (5 certain, 9 probable), and 11 are unprovenanced. The small stelae usually come from the same contexts and share with the beds a similar type of decoration. As the author concludes, the funerary context must be considered secondary: probably the objects belonged to the deceased during the lifetime and were placed in the tomb in order to accompany him/her in the netherworld.¹¹

It would be desirable to have more precise data for the five certain funerary archaeological contexts so far known,¹² but, sadly, they are missing and we do not even know the gender of the deceased interred with this kind of object. Some hints could suggest that those known funerary contexts were related to female burials. Tomb MMA 825 at Assasif, excavated by Herbert Eustis Winlock, was an 11th Dynasty tomb, reused later: a search in the Metropolitan Museum of Art database for finds coming from that tomb results in a rather large list of objects dating from the Third Intermediate Period to the end of the Late Period, among which typically female ornaments and amulets, beads and cowrie

7 See for instance Inv. London UC 40010-15.

8 The pottery retrieved in G is dealt with by Guidotti 2006, 32-34, Fig. 19, nos. 2-4; Fig. 20, no. 10. The other finds here mentioned are published in Betrò *et al.* 2009: Cat. nos. 62-63 and Fig. 153 (shabtis); Cat. no. 231 and Fig. 154 (wristlet); Cat. nos. 87-93 (votive set).

9 Del Vesco 2010b; see also Del Vesco 2009a and 2010a.

10 Teeter 2010.

11 Del Vesco 2010b, 67: “L'utilizzo di tali materiali in ambito funerario (...) doveva costituire solo un loro impiego secondario, come oggetti appartenuti al defunto e depositati nella tomba insieme agli altri elementi del corredo, per accompagnarlo nel viaggio ultramondano”.

12 Three votive beds and a miniature stela were found in Tomb MMA 825, Assasif: Invv. MMA 31.3.108, 31.3.109, Cairo JE 56284 (beds), MMA 31.3.110 (stela); one bed with a stela and a female figurine in the tomb 59 at Dra Abu el Naga, Pennsylvania excavation: Invv. Philadelphia 29-87-572 A-E (bed), 29-86-603 (stela), 1 bed + 2 stelae + 1 figurine in TT 14.



Fig. 7. The skeletal remains of the pregnant woman in G (© Marilina Betrò).

shell strings appear together with the mentioned beds and stela.¹³ Unfortunately, the excavation notes give no other information nor mention the anthropological remains:¹⁴ it seems highly probable that women were buried in MMA 825 in the Third Intermediate Period, but it is not possible to establish any certain connection between the beds and these grave goods. In the Middle Kingdom tomb 59 investigated in 1922 by Clarence Stanley Fisher for the Pennsylvania Museum expedition at Dra Abu el-Naga, so far unpublished, the set with votive bed, stela and female figurine belongs to a Third Intermediate Period reuse phase and was found together with carnelian, faïence beads, and faïence shabtis naming a woman called *Tt-t3hny*, as Paolo Del Vesco was able to ascertain.¹⁵ Also in this case, it was not possible to link the woman *Tt-t3hny* with the votive set with certainty. Indeed, only the set in TT 14 has a reliable archaeological context (finds and human remains), and a clear chronological range. It seems therefore useful to consider this set in its relation with the general context.

I have already stressed the paucity of burial goods and, conversely, the striking presence of the votive set. It is not possible to link it specifically to any of the people buried in G, but, among the human individuals recovered there, there is a young female individual, 20-25 years old, who was pregnant at the time of her death (Fig. 7). She was found in posterior *norma* (upturned position) and, at the height of her abdomen, the small bones of a foetus, about 38-40 weeks old, were found (Fig. 8). A surprising detail was that the young woman had not undergone an embalming process, but had only been bandaged:

¹³ For the tomb and the votive beds, see Winlock 1932a, 37 and Fig. 38; Winlock 1942, 219, Pl. 89; Del Vesco 2010b, 59-60.

¹⁴ I wish to express here my thanks to Catherine Roehrig, who kindly checked for me the excavation records in the Metropolitan Museum.

¹⁵ Del Vesco 2010b, 64.



Fig. 8. Bones of the foetus over the bandages, once removed the mother's body (© Marilina Betrò).

linen bandages were found with her body, but traces of resin were detected only inside her cranium. At the moment of their retrieval, the bones of the foetus were over the bandages, a detail indicating that the child was still inside her mother's body (lying on her belly, as previously said). Most likely, mother and baby died because of childbirth complications: the anthropological analysis of the mother's bones revealed a very compromised health status, with slight long bones and the right coxofemoral joint strongly deteriorated. Probably the mother failed to carry the pregnancy to term or, eventually, she was not able to expel the foetus, which was maybe too large for her fragile and narrow pelvis. As usually remarked, death in childbirth was tragically common in ancient Egypt.¹⁶ The lack of any trace of embalming on this woman is puzzling if we consider the chronological context of G, dating to the 21st-beginning of 22nd Dynasty, i.e. the period where maximum emphasis was placed on the importance of mummification and mummies.¹⁷

A similar case can be seen in some female human remains found in the tomb of the future king Horemheb at Saqqara. Bones of two individuals, N1 and N2, had been recovered on the rim of a shaft in the pillared hall of the tomb. Archaeological evidence found in the shaft suggested that the burial belonged to the royal wife Mutnedjemet. Geoffrey Martin supposed that the mummy of the queen (N1) had been carried by tomb plunderers outside the shaft up to the hall and here broken in pieces by the thieves searching for objects of value.¹⁸ Strouhal's analysis revealed that the only traces of a possible original embalming were on the convexity of the vault and the inner surface of the skull. He

16 A number of texts, spells, ritual tools and amulets to conjure the many dangers of that delicate moment are known on this topic (see Strouhal 1992, 18; Robins 1993, 61, 64, 85; Robins 1994-95, 27-28; Feucht 1995b, 94; Nunn 1996, 193-94; Meskell 2005, 69-74), but no comprehensive collection of the anthropological evidence in Egyptian cemeteries exists. Some cases are cited in anthropological and paleopathological literature, see Cockburn *et al.* 1998, 54, and Aufderheide 2010, 482-487; more scattered examples are available in excavation reports. Four cases of women buried with a foetus next to their body, in Nubian post-Meroitic and Christian cemeteries, are analysed by Filer 1998: in one case the foetus was a full-term or nearly full-term baby.

17 Among the many works dealing with mummification technology and its leap forward in this period, see Ikram and Dodson 1988; for the religious, social and economic aspects of mummification in the 21st Dynasty, see Taylor 2010c, Cooney 2012a and 2012b.

18 Martin 1991, 97-98.

added: "Intimately scattered among the bones of the queen were the whole and fragmented tiny bones of a foetus or newborn",¹⁹ individual N2, of 260-266 days gestation, i.e. about 37-38 weeks, and continued: "The context, revealing foetal bones intimately mixed with scattered adult bones, suggests that the foetus was still a part of its mother's body when transferred by the robbers from the burial chamber through the shaft up to the pillared hall." The skeletal analysis of the woman disclosed evidence of several ailments and a state of heavy debilitation. Here too the bones were very small and frail. Strouhal was inclined to believe that mother and baby died together during the delivery.

Another case of a rich female burial without evidence of mummification was recorded by Herbert Winlock in his report of the 1924 expedition to Deir el-Bahari, although here no pregnancy status was reported.²⁰ Winlock described the abnormal circumstance of the rich girl Henuttawy (F), who lived during the 21st Dynasty, whose tomb had been discovered at the end of the archaeological campaign:

"The girl Henttowe - she was about eighteen years old - found in the tomb of Minmose, had not been subjected to the long process of embalming but had been merely bandaged up and buried alone in the abandoned tomb as soon as she died. Haste had been shown, but no particular economy, for her coffins were of the best and her shrouds of the most voluminous. Furthermore, on her wrist there were nine little bead bracelets, on her throat three strings of beads with gold lions hanging in front, and on her left hand two gold rings with green glazed scarabs. It is noticeable, though, that these were the little trinkets which Henttowe wore in life and not the sepulchral amulets especially made for the dead. What her story may have been we cannot guess."

Haste - as Winlock presumed - could be a possible, although weak, explanation: it must be noted that her set of coffins was very well prepared and rich, expressly made for her, with her name and inscriptions carefully painted.²¹ One might wonder whether the reason of this lack of mummification was pregnancy, but Henuttawy (F) had been chosen with other human remains found in that season to be examined by the famous anthropologist Douglas E. Derry and Winlock does not state anything about such a circumstance. It must be noted, however, that Winlock's and Derry's interest in that occasion focussed on mummification techniques: the 10 mummies had been expressly chosen among burials of the 21st Dynasty as specimens of the highest technical level in mummification, to study it. It is possible that, once he had unwrapped the body and discovered that the girl was not mummified, Derry left her aside, with no further examination.

Death during delivery (or pregnancy), foetus inside the mother's body, absence of mummification: these are significant features common to the woman in TT 14 and the female remains identified as Queen Mutnedjemet in Saqqara, and maybe to infer for the peculiar burial of Henuttawy (F).

These issues raise the question whether we can establish a cause-effect pattern: did ancient Egyptians conceive a kind of religious taboo towards the mummification of pregnant women?

The high mortality rate for ancient Egyptian women during childbirth is often remarked upon, essentially because of the number of young women buried, but actually I could find no data on

19 Strouhal 2008, 3; see also Strouhal 1982, 317-322.

20 Winlock 1926, 21-22. On this young woman and her peculiar burial, see also Ikram and Dodson 1998, 128: "The lack of mummification is difficult to explain, given the very high quality of her coffins."

21 Invv. MMA 25.3.182a, b; 25.3.183a, b; 25.3.184.

mummified pregnant women in ancient Egypt.²² of course, a complete well-made mummification, involving evisceration, would destroy any trace of pregnancy and would be sufficient to explain such a lack of data, but the respectful attitude of ancient Egyptians and Nubians toward the newborn and even unborn child²³ and, on the other side, the existence of a few fetuses, mummified or not, buried with their relatives,²⁴ strengthen the above made observations and support the existence of such a reluctance towards the mummification of pregnant women.

Possibly the incision of abdomen - necessary for embalming - was felt as a potential damage to the baby still inside its mother's belly *in view of its rebirth*. Such a concern could explain the absence of mummification for Mutnedjemet and the TT 14 young pregnant woman, and, maybe, for Henuttawy (F) too.

This idea might cast a new light on the votive set in TT 14: the objects, ineffective in performing their protective function during the delivery which had caused the the death of the woman and her baby, were brought into the tomb from her house, and placed at the bottom of tunnel G, so that they could foster the rebirth of mother and child after a happy completion of delivery in their second, eternal life. Hopefully, new archaeological and anthropological data will be able to confirm or confute the hypothesis I have presented here.

22 It must be considered, however, that mummification was not performed in all the periods and all the social milieu in the same way: the late Nubian women dealt with by Filer 1998 demonstrate the care for infant and fetuses and not the unwillingness to mummify, given the late date and the place (Nubia). Similarly, the dwarf pregnant female worker, from a funerary complex near the Great Pyramids in Giza, found with a foetus in situ and very probably died by childbirth (Kozma *et al.* 2011), cannot be used as evidence for non-mummification in case of pregnancy, because of her ancient dating (Old Kingdom). Modern archaeological reports demonstrate that in many cases, even when the practise of embalming became largely spread, only a very rough mummification ('quasi-mummification') was often made, without brain removal and no drying of the corpse, which was only anointed and wrapped (Fóthi *et al.* 2010, 42). Nonetheless, the case in TT 14 is striking because of its manifest anomaly in a funerary context where all the other buried human remains were mummified.

23 Feucht 1995b, 94; Filer 1998; Meskell 2005, 69.

24 Hawass and Saleem 2011.

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