

Fuzzy Boundaries
Festschrift für Antonio Loprieno



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II

H. Amstutz, A. Dorn, M. Müller,
M. Ronsdorf, S. Uljas (Hg.)

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Monkey Business at Deir el-Medîna¹

Deborah Sweeney

I do not know whether Antonio Loprieno has ever yearned for an unusual pet, but certainly the unusual in all its forms attracts and inspires him, so I hope he will enjoy a few reflections on unusual pets at Deir el-Medîna.

Keeping animals and birds for milk, meat, sale or rental was a useful budget-stretcher for some of the royal craftsmen and their families at the tomb-builders' village, and is documented in economic, legal and administrative texts from the site.²

Pets are less in evidence, since there is no record of an especially rare or beautiful cat or dog being sold or given as a present, but indications of pet-keeping can still be found via tomb chapel representations, statuary and archaeological remains at the village.³

By the New Kingdom, monkeys and baboons were no longer native to Egypt⁴ – if, indeed, they ever had been – but had to be imported from elsewhere, mostly from Punt or via Nubia.⁵ These were green monkeys, also called vervet monkeys (*Cercopithecus aethiops*),⁶ hamadryas baboons (*Papio hamadryas*), and Anubis baboons, also called olive baboons (*Papio cynocephalus Anubis*).⁷

Nonetheless, despite the expense and effort involved, several people at Deir el-Medîna seem to have kept monkeys, and even in one case a baboon. Monkeys are very sociable animals: in the wild they are used to being part of a group of monkeys.⁸ They would have provided their owners with amusement and good company, due to their tendency to imitate human behavior.

The following people at the workmen's village kept pet monkeys:

1 This research was supported by the ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (grant no. 1045/13). Many thanks to Mr. Nir Orlev for drawing the illustrations, and for other help in preparing this article, and to Dr. Tamar Friedman of the Ben Shemen Monkey Park for confirming my identification of the baboon in fig. 5 and for other helpful advice. All mistakes are mine alone.

2 E.g. McDowell 1992; Janssen 2005.

3 E.g. Sweeney 2009.

4 Loth 2006: 56.

5 Boessneck/von den Driesch 1987: 161, 205; Linseele/Van Neer 2009: 25.

6 Linseele/Van Neer 2009: 25.

7 Osborn/Osbornova 1998: 38.

8 Washburn/Hamburg 1965: 2.

1. The Chief Workman Neferhotep (ii)⁹ had his pet monkey, along with his young slave and subsequently protégé Hesysunebef (i),¹⁰ represented on a tomb statue of himself and his wife Wabkhet (ii) (Fig. 1). Neferhotep (ii) had no children, so he might have been more inclined to commemorate his pet than other villagers were. The association of the boy and the monkey conforms to local artistic convention, where young lads are often depicted looking after simians.¹¹

The monkey is restrained by a rope attached to a belt around his waist, which passes through the slats of the chair and is then held by Hesysunebef. The monkey is clearly male, and is represented standing, turning backwards to look up to his keeper and holding out his left front paw to take an object, perhaps a bunch of grapes,¹² which the lad is holding out to him. With his right paw he holds a gourd or cucumber to his chest. Like several other pets at Deir el-Medîna,¹³ the monkey is depicted wearing an earring.



Fig. 1 Hesysunebef (i) and his master Neferhotep (ii)'s pet monkey

Hesysunebef is represented naked, according to the conventions of depicting children in ancient Egypt; apart from the monkey's rope and the object he is offering to him, he also holds a long thin stick, probably for disciplining the monkey. Instead of looking at the monkey he is gazing straight ahead, which might give the impression that he is not particularly interested in his work.

2. In the tomb of Thothhermaktef (i) (TT 367)¹⁴ a monkey is depicted under a chair on which Thothhermaktef (i) and his wife Werel (i) are sitting (Fig 2). It is seated facing left, with its knees drawn up, and is attached to the chair-leg behind it by a cord around its waist. It holds a flower in its right hand, whose elbow rests on its knees, and raises its left hand to its mouth.

⁹ The inhabitants of the village are identified according to the numbering system of Davies 1999.

¹⁰ Janssen 1982: 109–115; Davies 1999: 32.

¹¹ Brunner Traut 1956: 111, no. 121; Vandier d'Abbadie 1936: 2004, 2010, 2035, 2036, 2037, 2041, 2045; Vandier d'Abbadie 1959: 2743, 2744, 2745.

¹² Bruyère 1925: 41.

¹³ Sweeney 2009: 534.

¹⁴ Andreu 1985.



Fig. 2 Monkey under chair in tomb of Thothhermaktef (i)

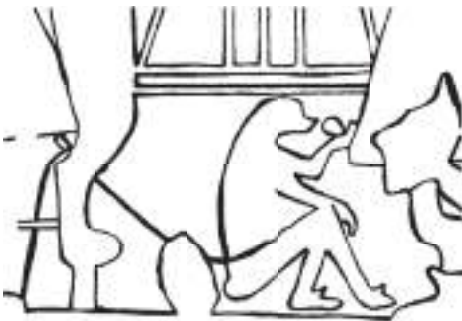


Fig. 3 Monkey under chair in tomb of Hay (i)

3. In the tomb of Hay (vii) (TT 267)¹⁵ a monkey is depicted under the chair of the tomb owner's wife (Fig. 3).¹⁶ The monkey is seated, facing right, attached to the chair-leg behind it by a cord around its waist. Its left paw rests on its knees, and in its right paw it holds something up to its mouth.

4. In the tomb of Khabekhnet (i) (TT 2), a monkey is represented under the chair of the tomb owner's mother Ineferti (iii).¹⁷

Neferhotep (ii)'s monkey clearly existed, and was part of the family, since it is commemorated on a statue, together with the youth who looked after it. One might argue that the other three are artistic motifs, but since monkeys are rarely depicted in tombs at the site, I am inclined to take these representations at face value; their owners were probably proud of their exotic pets.¹⁸

Monkeys, and occasionally baboons, are also depicted on figured ostraca from Deir el-Medīna and the Valley of the Kings. Figured ostraca are also found at many sites in Western Thebes and elsewhere in Egypt,¹⁹ so one should not automatically attribute any unprovenanced figured ostrakon to the workmen's community. This essay will discuss only ostraca found at the village or the royal burial sites.

Representations of monkeys and baboons on ostraca from Deir el-Medīna are

15 Valbelle 1975.

16 Valbelle 1975: pls. v, xix.

17 Porter/Moss 1960: 6.

18 Vandier d'Abbadie 1966: 160–161.

19 For New Kingdom figured ostraca from other Theban sites, such as Deir el-Bahri, the mortuary temple of Amenhotep son of Hapu, Dra Abu el-Naga, the Ramesseum and Sheikh abd-el Gurna, see for instance Naville, 1913: pl. xxii; Vandier d'Abbadie 1946: 3; Niwinski 1985: 198; Pischikova 2004: 198–201; Dorn 2005: 8–9; Menéndez 2008; Demarée 2002, 27, 29–30, 37. New Kingdom figured ostraca have also been found elsewhere in Egypt at sites such as Amarna, Giza, Abydos, and Kom Ombo. See Brunner-Traut, 1956: 1–2, 23–24 (no. 7), 80–81 (no. 80); Demarée 2002: 37, 44–45, 47–48.

not necessarily pictures of specific monkeys kept at the village. Nonetheless, they show us what the tomb-builders knew or thought about monkeys and baboons.

On the other hand, assessing which of these representations actually represent what pet monkeys or baboons might have done brings us neatly into the theme of this volume, since boundaries here are definitely fuzzy. In many cases, representations of baboons or monkeys clearly belong to the tradition of the 'topsy-turvy world' of Egyptian animal cartoons,²⁰ where animals undertake unlikely human activities. In some instances, the representation may even be satire or parody, where the point is not so much the humor of a monkey performing a task that monkeys normally cannot execute, but mocking the normal human performer by equating them with a monkey. A case in point is the representation of a monkey as the scribe of the granary on O. DeM 2283.²¹ Since an official and his master are both represented as monkeys, this is probably a satirical image, as Flores suggests.²²

Monkeys were sometimes depicted on ostraca playing the harp or the flute.²³ Although Brunner-Traut²⁴ and Houlihan²⁵ argued that monkeys were taught to make music, this is unlikely since recent research shows that non-human primates do not seem to be particularly musical. Results vary according to the species of primate, the type of music and the setting of the experiment, but it seems that although monkeys can detect the presence of rhythm, preferring slow tempos to fast,²⁶ they cannot follow a beat.²⁷ Rhesus monkeys seem able to recognize octave intervals.²⁸ Some types of monkey, such as the vervet monkey²⁹ and some gibbons³⁰ are not particularly affected by music, although other gibbons may find it stressful.³¹ Tamarins and marmosets actually seem to prefer silence.³² Chimpanzees and rhesus monkeys, by contrast, seem to find music soothing.³³

Drawings of monkeys making music are therefore probably cartoons, as Vandier d'Abbadie³⁴ and el-Kilany³⁵ argue, or representations of monkeys playing around with musical

20 Flores 2004: 243.

21 Vandier d'Abbadie 1996: 157.

22 Flores 2004: 244.

23 E.g. Vandier d'Abbadie 1936: nos. 2291, 2292; Vandier d'Abbadie 1959 nos. 2845, 2846; O. BTdK 315 rto. (Dorn 2011: 313, pls. 272–273).

24 Brunner-Traut 1956: 98–99.

25 Houlihan 1996: 106.

26 McDermott/Hauser 2007: 654, 658.

27 Honing/Merchant/Háden/Prado/Bartolo 2012.

28 Wright/Rivera/Hulse/Shyan/Neiworth 2000: 291.

29 Hinds/Raymond/Purcell 2007 discovered that green monkeys do not seem to be affected in anyway by harp music, although they note that green monkeys are a relatively calm species, and suggest (2007: 95) that more excitable species of monkeys might demonstrate a more marked relaxation response in such circumstances.

30 Wallace/Kingston-Jones/Ford/Semple 2013: 425.

31 Wallace/Kingston-Jones/Ford/Semple 2013: 425–426.

32 McDermott/Hauser 2007: 654, 666.

33 Lutz/Novak 2005: 186–187.

34 Vandier d'Abbadie 1966: 185, 188.

35 El-Kilany 2013: 31.

instruments, whose clumsy attempts to make music were considered amusing.³⁶ Sometimes these drawings are even parodies of scenes of musicians at banquets, such as O. DeM 2281,³⁷ where the lyrics of the monkey's song are recorded, "I am the singer of..."³⁸

Monkeys were also represented dancing or jumping up and down.³⁹ P. Anastasi III 4.1 mentions that "one teaches monkeys to dance,"⁴⁰ and to this day dancing monkeys can be seen in street performances in modern Cairo.⁴¹ Thus it seems that these representations are rooted in reality and monkeys were indeed taught to dance.⁴²

Ostraca from the village occasionally depict monkeys working in tasks such as helping to set a table.⁴³ These representations are often considered to be comical representations of monkeys behaving like humans,⁴⁴ part of the topsy-turvy cartoon world where animals are represented performing unlikely human activities,⁴⁵ or parody or satire,⁴⁶ rather than tasks actually performed by monkeys. A key item in this debate is the representations of monkeys and baboons climbing trees and picking fruit (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Monkey picking fruit. O. DeM 2009

Houlihan discussed representations of monkeys climbing palm-trees and concluded that they were probably feeding themselves, rather than picking the fruit for their human owners.⁴⁷ On the other hand, el-Kilany argues that monkeys could easily have been trained to do this

36 Flores 2004: 245.

37 Vandier d'Abbadie 1966: 186.

38 Vandier d'Abbadie 1937: 58 suggests restoring *jnk [mrjj nb.f] ḥḏ ḥsji n [nsw.t?] ... s*, but the *ḥḏ* sign is in fact a *ḥ*.

39 Vandier d'Abbadie 1936: no. 2042. Vandier d'Abbadie 1946: 19–20 notes that in O. DeM 2061 the word *Tnf*, to dance (Wb. V 380.11), is used to describe the behavior of a monkey whose figure unfortunately has not been preserved.

40 Gardiner 1937: 24.6–7.

41 El-Kilany 2013: 30.

42 Vandier d'Abbadie 1946: 19; Brunner-Traut 1956: 98–99; Vandier d'Abbadie 1966: 188–189; Houlihan 1996: 106; El-Kilany 2013: 30–31.

43 O. Berlin 21772; Brunner-Traut 1956: 111, pl. xxxix.

44 Houlihan 1997: 31.

45 Flores 2004: 243.

46 Vandier d'Abbadie 1966: 193.

47 Houlihan 1997.

work,⁴⁸ just as macaques are trained to pick coconuts in south-east Asia,⁴⁹ and that they would have been allowed to eat fruit as they picked to give them an incentive to work.

Perhaps we should not underestimate the possibilities of training. Cheney and Seyfarth record cases from South Africa and Namibia of trained baboons who worked competently as goatherds, and even as a railway signalman.⁵⁰ Ostraca from the site also represent men driving monkeys or baboons, often waving sticks at them.⁵¹ Vandier d'Abbadie suggested that these men are training the monkeys, and that the monkeys may have needed to be trained before being adopted as pets.⁵²

Nonetheless, the monkeys probably did not accompany their owners to work at the Valley of the Kings, since they could have made quite a nuisance of themselves at the worksite if unsupervised, by throwing or stealing items or smearing paint. On ostraca from the village, monkeys are often represented in the care of a young lad. Probably, during the working week, one of the sons or nephews took care of the family pet. Incidentally, not everybody seems to have enjoyed this task: the dream interpretation text of P. Chester Beatty III, which formed part of the library of the village scribe Qenherkhepshef (i),⁵³ describes a dream of looking after monkeys as ill-omened, boding unwelcome changes ahead.⁵⁴

Some Egyptologists have suggested that the Egyptians viewed monkeys as having erotic connotations, or as conveying female sexuality.⁵⁵ This suggestion is supported by two ostraca discovered by the Basel University expedition at the workmen's huts in the Valley of the Kings (O. BTdK 139, 140),⁵⁶ which depict a naked Asiatic woman in the company of a gazelle and a monkey; the latter is reaching up to touch her buttock. A monkey is also included in the corner of a birth booth on O. DeM 2858.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, monkeys are also susceptible to diseases such as tumours, rickets and tuberculosis,⁵⁸ although only the last might have endangered human beings.

There is also a case of baboon keeping at Deir el-Medīna. On the sides of a small statuette representing the chisel-bearer Ipuy (i)⁵⁹ are depicted his cat Tamit and a simian (Fig. 5). Bruyère believed the latter to be a monkey, but it is actually a baboon, since it has the large dog-like muzzle characteristic of baboons. Its body is relatively stocky and its limbs are short in relation to its body, whereas monkeys are represented with slender bodies and long slender limbs. Its iconography differs from that of the pet monkeys described above: it is not attached

48 El-Kilany 2013: 34–35.

49 Houlihan 1997: 32–34.

50 Cheney/Seyfarth 2007: 29–34.

51 Vandier d'Abbadie 1936: nos. 2038–2040, 2042, 2043.

52 Vandier d'Abbadie 1946: 21.

53 Szpakowska 2003: 67–68.

54 P. Chester Beatty III rto. 9.27; Szpakowska 2003: 111.

55 Derchain 1975: 68–69; Janssen/Janssen 1989: 22.

56 Dorn 2011: 256–257, pls. 130–133.

57 Vandier d'Abbadie 1959: 187.

58 Janssen/Janssen 1989: 20.

59 Bruyère 1929: 18–19, fig. 11.



Fig. 5 Baboon on statuette of Ipuy (i)

to a chair by a lead and eating fruit, but its pose is reminiscent of representations of baboons adorning the rising sun.⁶⁰ However, since it does not have the prominent fur cape of male hamadryas baboons, Ipuy (i)'s pet was either an Anubis baboon or a female hamadryas baboon.

Baboons have a reputation for being difficult to handle.⁶¹ They are used to living together with other baboons, and would miss their company;⁶² individually caged baboons can become disturbed to the point of injuring themselves.⁶³ Baboons can be aggressive and give nasty bites. Male baboons have long canine teeth⁶⁴ that can inflict serious injuries. For this reason, female baboons were preferred as pets,⁶⁵ although some baboon remains from ancient Egypt show that their canine teeth or

incisors were removed or blunted to make them safer to live with.⁶⁶

In addition, in the wild baboons emit loud shrieks and bound around in the warmth of the early morning sun.⁶⁷ This would probably not have endeared Ipuy's pet to the other inhabitants of the village.

However, their rarity,⁶⁸ the difficulty involved in keeping baboons, and their solar associations, may have made them a status symbol. Baboon keeping might have suited Ipuy, who seems to have been one of the most prominent animal-lovers at Deir el-Medina. Ipuy's tomb contains four other representations of cats,⁶⁹ and a small bird.⁷⁰ But since Ipuy was away on site during the working week, his wife Dwameres (i) would have had the main responsibility for the baboon, though she probably assigned one of their children to look after it, if they were old enough.

The remains of mummified baboons from Tuna el-Gebel from the mid to late 1st millennium BCE show that the Egyptians were probably not aware of the best conditions for keeping baboons. The baboons kept in honour of the god Thoth at the local temple had, from a

60 Cf. Houlihan 1996: 96.

61 Hall/De Vore 1965:53.

62 Brent/Butler 2005: 4.

63 Kessel/Brent 2001: 71–72.

64 Brent/Butler 2005: 5.

65 Germond 2001: 89.

66 Winter 2006: 454.

67 Houlihan 1996: 96.

68 Loth 2006: 57.

69 Davies 1927: pls. xxvi; xxx and xxxvi; the two latter might be the cat or the kitten in pl. xxvi or different cats.

70 Davies 1927: pl. xxxvi.

modern perspective, rather sad lives: they suffered from tuberculosis, arthritis,⁷¹ rickets and vitamin D deficiency, as well as joint deformities,⁷² probably since they were kept in uncomfortable cages⁷³ in the dark and were not properly fed.⁷⁴ Although baboons are fairly adaptable in their eating habits,⁷⁵ their keepers were probably unaware of what they would eat in the wild.⁷⁶ Most of these baboons lived for only about 4.5 to 10 years, although baboons can in fact live as long as 30 years.⁷⁷

One hopes that Ipyu and his family treated their baboon better; they could have kept it in a larger cage, although baboons need to be kept in sturdy cages since they are strong and tend to chew their cages.⁷⁸ They also like to chew other items in their environment,⁷⁹ so the baboon would probably not have done their furniture any good.

The baboon on the statuette is represented with a branch and two large luscious figs, so Ipyu and Dwameres understood that baboons need a varied vegetable diet and are partial to sweet treats; it is to be hoped that they did not overdo the latter.⁸⁰

Baboons are particularly fond of dom-nuts, since their massive teeth allow them to pierce the kernels and drink their sap,⁸¹ and they are sometimes represented trying to break into bags of dom-palm nuts.⁸² Dwameres would have had to keep an eye on the family food supplies to prevent the baboon from burgling the larder.

It may be significant that Ipyu and Dwameres gave their cats much more prominence in their tomb decoration than they did their baboon. It does not appear there, unless the statuette on which it is depicted came from their tomb. (It was found in the local necropolis, on the path between tombs 1138 and 325.)⁸³ Given the solar associations of baboons, the statuette may have been placed in the tomb forecourt.

Ipyu and Dwameres may have acquired the baboon after their tomb was already decorated, although one would imagine that they could have altered the decoration to include it if they had wanted to. Perhaps it was depicted in the tomb-chapel, which has not been preserved.⁸⁴ However, one does wonder whether they decided against including it in their personal afterworld. The cats would have been quieter company.

71 Maurer 2006: 98.

72 Nerlich/Parsche/von den Driesch/Löhrs 1993: 190, 196.

73 Nerlich/Parsche/von den Driesch/Löhrs 1993: 189.

74 Nerlich/Parsche/von den Driesch/Löhrs 1993: 196. Some of the baboons excavated by Lortet and Gaillard in the Wadi Gabanet el-Qurud in Western Thebes also suffered from tuberculosis and arthritis, which the excavators attributed to the same causes (Lortet/Gaillard 1907: 1–2).

75 De Vore/Hall 1965: 43.

76 Maurer 2006: 98.

77 Nerlich/Parsche/von den Driesch/Löhrs 1993: 190.

78 Brent/Butler 2005: 4.

79 Brent/Butler 2005: 6.

80 Brent/Butler 2005: 5.

81 Santolini 1984: 214.

82 Vandier d'Abbadie 1966: 155–156; Houlihan 1997: 41.

83 Bruyère 1929: 18.

84 Davies 1927: 36–37.

Incidentally, Tuthmosis III had a baboon buried with him in KV 34, perhaps as a pet,⁸⁵ or perhaps, as John Baines suggested to me, for religious reasons⁸⁶ but being a king, Tuthmosis could presumably delegate the less enjoyable aspects of baboon-keeping to someone else.

It is difficult to know how the tomb-builders acquired their simians, but a few suggestions may be made. Khabekhnet (i) depicted his family participating in ceremonies at the temple of Mut at Karnak in his tomb chapel.⁸⁷ He might thus have visited Western Thebes and bought his monkey there.

Ipuy (i)'s tomb chapel represents an occasion where he received rewards from the king.⁸⁸ This may be wishful thinking, although Karen Exell has argued that votive stelae from Deir el-Medîna representing Ramesses II as an intermediary to the donors' prayers may commemorate a royal visit to the village, or the villagers' participation in a major religious ceremony in Thebes.⁸⁹ In addition, a relief from Deir el-Medîna depicting Ramesses II officiating at the Feast of the Valley⁹⁰ includes an Ipuy whom Valbelle identifies with Ipuy (i).⁹¹ If so, Ipuy might have acquired his baboon as a royal reward, or through his contacts with the court.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1: After Bruyère 1925: 41, fig. 4.

Fig. 2: After Andreu 1985: pl. 1.

Fig. 3: After Valbelle 1975: pl. xix.

Fig. 4: After Vandier d'Abbadie 1936: pl. 1.

Fig. 5: After Bruyère 1929: 19, fig. 11.