



## The Sexual Symbolism of the Votive Beds' Decorations and Its Relation to their Function

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### Abstract

The baked clay votive beds are small bench-like structures that appeared mainly in the domestic context of the Third Intermediate Period Theban society. They contained a rectangular front panel with traditional iconography related to their function. This paper aims at understanding the symbolism of the decorative motifs of the votive beds. It discusses their erotic and sexual symbolism as well as their function and importance for the owners of the votive beds. It also sheds the light on the original places where they were used for determining their function and how important was their popularity in the Theban society. It employs a descriptive and analytic methodology for the votive beds and their scenes. It displays samples found in different places with a focus on those of Medinet Habu. It concludes that each decorative motif has an erotic connotation and sexual symbolism. Thus, the votive beds were tools for sexual stimulation and fertility through their decorations beside other functions.

## I. Introduction

The term “Votive bed” refers to a small bench-like structure that is made of clay and has a rectangular front panel on only one side. The votive beds have two legs on the opposite side of the panel to allow them to stand upright. Their main characteristic feature is the representation on their front panel that shows two figures of god Bes on the left and right sides and between them one or three women. Typically, a complete votive bed has a model of terracotta bed that is handcrafted with longer legs and a vertical panel on one of the long sides. The panel, which designates the object’s main or front face, invariably displays an open-work decorative motif, a scene that has been molded, or both of these types of ornamentation. (Del Vesco, 2009, 1)

The votive beds from Medinet Habu, as an example, have constant front panel width, a maximum of 27.5 cm and a minimum of 22.0 cm, with an average of 24.5 cm. Furthermore, these votive beds range in height from 11.0 cm to 16.5 cm, with an average height of 13.6 cm. In many examples, the decoration of multiple beds and even some small clay votive stelae was made by using a single mold. (Teeter, 2010, 157)

In general, various kinds of votive objects were presented to the deities for reinforcing specific prayers for help and support while others were for asking personal requests such as life, health, prosperity, marriage, and fertility. The votive offerings were not simply artifacts but a surviving part of an act of worship (Pinch, 1993, 339). They were not seen as a way of fulfilling a pledge after a prayer was answered by the deities, but as an offering in expect of favors or a way to please a deity (Pinch; Waraksa, 2009, 2). Thus, the meaning of “votive offerings” in ancient Egypt is indicating optional desired practice during the worship of gods in their shrines and temples which is different from the employed term “votive” which is derived from the Latin word “votum” meaning promise. This could be confirmed by the absence of religious textual evidence that ask or encourage making such offering to a deity (Pinch; Waraksa, 2009, 1-3).

Some studies dealt with votive beds and tried to reveal their function. For instance, Hölscher documented and studied 38 votive beds that he discovered during the years 1926-1933 in the complex temple of Medinet Habu. He was the first to call these objects “votive beds”. (Hölscher, 1954) Winlock also recorded 3 objects, found in a tomb in the Assasif necropolis (MMA 825), of the same type which he called “terracotta stands” (Winlock, 1942, 219). In addition, Baraize (1914, 23) and Bruyère (1952, 10) described a discovered fragment of a front panel of a “votive bed” at Deir el-Medina as “a low relief fragment” and “a fragment of a pottery stand with decoration”. Del Vesco (2008, 144-146; 2009, 31-37; 2010, 7-204) later studied the decorations of all the known votive beds until the date of his publications. He concluded that the appearance of these objects originally came from the reduction to scale a certain type of beds, called the “decorated bed for women”, mentioned in Deir el Medina furniture purchase texts and depicted on many ostraca bearing the so-called scenes “birth tree” (Vandier d’Abbadie, 1936, pl. L, 2337, 2340, pl. LI, 2343, pl. LII, 2347, pl. LIII, 2344, 2346, pl. LIV, 2359- 63; pl. LVII, 2353; Vandier d’Abbadie, 1937, pl. CXX, 2859, pl. CXXI, 2863). Teeter (2010, 157-195) published in the same year the votive sets and their decorations from Medinet Habu including the votive beds which he suggested that they were objects for commemorating the birth of a child, celebrating sexuality, having fertility, and protecting the child. These studies

did not focus on the sexual symbolism of each motif as well as the places of discovery which are essential elements for identifying the function of the votive beds.

## II. Objectives of the Study

1. Shading the light on the original places, where votive beds were used for determining their function and popularity in the Theban society.
2. Classifying the main types of votive beds according to their decoration.
3. Indicating the main differences and characteristics of the depicted motifs on these types as well as their symbolism.
4. Determining the relation between the depicted motif and the main function of the votive bed.
5. Discussing the erotic and sexual symbolism of votive beds as well as their function and importance for their owners.

## III. Methodology

The paper applies a descriptive and analytical study of votive beds and their main types according to their depicted motifs. It analyses their function according to their provenance. It also discusses the common decorative elements in all the discovered votive beds by displaying samples found in different places with a focus on those of Medinet Habu.

## IV. Discussion and Results

### Votive Beds' Places of Discovery

Many of the votive beds have unknown provenance as they were bought on the antiques market or donated by private individuals to museum collections without indication to their places of discovery. As for the votive beds whose origin is known, they all come surely from different locations at Thebes. Thus, it could be suggested that they were produced because of an exclusive local tradition and belief of the Theban community. They were discovered in only Karnak at the east bank while in many locations at the west bank. They were found in dwellings, temples, tombs, and shrines (Teeter, 2010, 166; Teeter; Johnson, 2009, 74). The votive beds are divided by Teeter (2010, 159- 160) into two main types according to their decoration. The main motifs of the depictions on type 1 Table (1) are:

1. A woman represented in profile, seated in a boat, facing right, playing a lute and has a floral or conical headdress.
2. A nude woman stands behind the musician (on the left hand side), propelling the boat forward with a long pole.
3. A nude woman stands on the bow while grasping a papyrus stem.
4. Tall papyrus stems are between the three female figures.
5. The bow takes the shape of a duck/goose head.
6. Figures of Bes exist at the left and right sides, framing the scene.

While the decoration of type 2 Table (2) has the following features:

1. A nude woman appears standing in the middle of a boat. She is represented frontally grasping long slender papyrus stems in each hand. She wears almost a modius and rarely a spiky floral headdress.
2. One of the variations of this style depicts a central female figure sitting on a high chair and holding lotus flowers in her hands (Figs. 9&10), her companions are two female partners one of them is pulling papyrus and the

other one is in the stamp which moves the boat (Del Vesco, 2009, 33, 34; Del Vesco, 2010, 74).

3. The bow is decorated with a duck/goose head and sometimes with a bird tail on the stern.
4. Figures of Bes are shown at the left and right edges of the scene. (Teeter, 2010, 160).

**Table (1) Scenes in Votive Beds of Type 1**



Fig. (1) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in the Oriental Institute Museum, No. 14779. (After Teeter, 2010, 169)

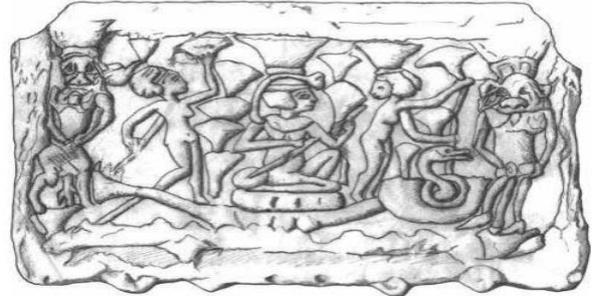


Fig. (2) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in Egyptian Museum No. JdE 5984 (After Del Vesco, 2010, 153)



Fig. (3) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in Egyptian Museum No. JdE 59847 (After Teeter, 2010, 170)



Fig. (4) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in the Oriental Institute Museum, No. 14781 (After Teeter, 2010, 172)

**Table (2) Scenes in Votive Beds of Type 2**



Fig. (5) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in the Oriental Institute Museum, No. 14776. (After Teeter, 2010, 170).



Fig. (6) Front panel of a votive bed. Third Intermediate Period, Dynasties 22—23, Provenance unknown, clay, now in Petrie Museum. (After Teeter, 2010, 180; Del Vesco, 2010, 126).



Fig. (7) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in the Oriental Institute Museum, No. 14782a—e (After Teeter, 2010, 180).



Fig. (8) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in the Oriental Institute Museum, No. 14780. (After Teeter, 2010, 183).



Fig. (9) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in the Cairo Museum No. (JE 30124). (After Del Vesco, 2010, 122)



Fig. (10) Decoration on votive bed, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, now in Petrie Museum in (UC 55184). (After Del Vesco, 2010, 129)

One of the largest discovered number of votive beds at one site at Thebes was in the areas located to the east and north of the great mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu, where Hölscher has discovered some objects including about 37 fragments of votive beds and two molds used for impressing decoration upon them (Holscher, 1934, 2; Del Vesco, 2009, 31; Del Vesco, 2010, 45). Other 14 fragmentary examples were discovered in the treasury of Tuthmosis I at Karnak. In addition, there are 3 votive beds found during the excavation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the tomb 825 at Assasif that were made in the 11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and reemployed as a “dwelling place” during the 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty. Another votive bed (Brussels MRAH E 2398), maybe dating back to the Third Intermediate Period, has been found by Quibell at the Ramesseum. In addition, there are 3 models found in Dra Abu el-Naga (Teeter, 2010, 167), one of them is almost a complete votive bed found fragmented in rooms number C and G in the tomb TT 14 (Del Vesco, 2009, 2, 162; Del Vesco, 2010, 73; Del Vesco, 2011, 29). There are also 2 models found at Deir el Medina, one model in the area of the Temple of Sethi I at Qurnah by the German excavation in 1984-1985, and another model in Abu el Gud at Karnak (Del Vesco, 2009, 33, 35; Teeter, 2010, 167).

In general, the provenance of votive beds is Thebes between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasties, and they appeared mainly in the domestic context and a dating limited to the Third Intermediate Period (Del Vesco, 2009, 33). Most of the votive beds were found in domestic residential buildings that were constructed over or around the ruins of religious structures as many God's Wife shrines at Karnak and Medinet Habu as well as the votive bed that was found in Abu el Gud at Karnak. (Del Vesco, 2009, 37). Others were also found in the non-mortuary context as the dwelling in Assasif tomb 825 (Figs. 11&12) and Deir el-Medina while some others appeared in a religious context such as Seti I temple at Gournah, and Karnak. However, there are some votive beds which appeared in the Theban mortuary context as the example found in a 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty tomb at the Ramesseum, Theban Tomb 14 (Del Vesco, 2010, no. 2) and some other examples are coming from tombs at Dra Abu Naga (Teeter, 2010, 167).



Fig. (11) Votive Bed frontal side from the dwelling in Assasif tomb 825, now in MMA Museum (After <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/550811>, accessed in September 2022)



Fig. (12) Votive Bed back side from the dwelling in Assasif tomb, now in MMA Museum (After <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/550811>, accessed in September 2022)

The votive beds' provenance is a significant factor in identifying their function. They were found in different contexts; mostly in domestic places (dwellings as in Karnak, Medinet Habu and Deir el-Medina), sometimes in cult places (temples of Karnak and Seti I at Qurna) and sometime in burial places (tombs at the Ramesseum and Dra Abu Naga). This confirms that they had a multifunction role; daily life domestic one and religious one connected with a belief in their importance in the afterlife. Their high popularity was only in a short time, between the 22<sup>nd</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty, but they continued to be used from the 24<sup>th</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty among the Theban local community. This suggests that these votive beds were manufactured by and for the local residents of the low and middle classes at Thebes in times of political and social turmoil. It seems that these votive beds have no relation with the influence of the Libyan or Nubian dynasties that ruled Egypt at these times as their use was exclusively in Thebes.

Some pieces of evidence that show a mix of the two types of votive beds were found together in the same places of discovery. This was interpreted by some scholars as indication that each type differs and completes the function of the other. Furthermore, it was suggested that their placing in adjacent positions in some cases as the three votive beds (nos. 220, 237-38) from MH 28.32 or in a group as the three examples

found at tomb 825 (used as a dwelling) was due to the relation of each one with the birth of a specific child or the commemoration of an individual ancestor. (Teeter, 2010, 168) The archaeological context in room number G in the tomb TT 14 includes a votive set containing a votive bed that Betro proposed to be for a young woman of 20-25 years old, who died due to childbirth problems. She concluded that although the group of votive objects did not provide the woman and her child the needed protection, they were brought from her residence to her tomb for helping the child and mother to be rebirthed in the afterlife after safe childbirth. (Betro, 2017, 63-70)

### **The Main Elements in the Decorations of the Votive Beds**

For revealing the function of the votive beds, it is necessary to understand their decoration and the included motifs in them. Each decorative motif is a visual image placed for a specific purpose that serves the level of effectiveness of the votive bed and thus its function. Each one of them has its symbolism that was designed for a goal and the union of all the elements in one image has an intended meaning, which certainly indicates the purpose of making these beds. Examples of votive beds found in mainly Medinet Habu and some other provenance will be provided to clarify the idea.

#### **1- God Bes Motif**

In the front panel of the votive beds, there is always a representation of two figures of god Bes on the right and the left sides of the scene (Figs in Tables (1) & (2)). Bes was associated with sexuality, fertility, humor, dancing and music (Hill, 2010). His image was strongly believed to have protective magical power, especially for the household. As a result, many of the ancient Egyptians would place a statue of him close to the house door to guard it and scare away evil spirits (Mark, 2016). He was a protector god of pregnant women and children during and after childbirth as well as during times of sleep and dreams. By dancing, yelling, and shaking his rattle, it was thought that he might frighten any evil spirits that exist around the birthing room. A statue of Bes was put next to the mother's head when she was facing a difficult birth, and prayers were said asking for his assistance. He was even shown in some royal birth scenes, especially in the Greco-Roman times. He was associated with Taweret and Hathor goddesses of childbirth (Dasen, 2013, 67; Robins, 1993, 75). Moreover, his function was to get rid of negative emotions such as vanity and jealousy of others. Bes image played also a protective role in different aspects of daily life (Kaiser, 2003; El-Kilany, 2017, 3).

Bes image was associated with childbirth because the ancient Egyptians saw adult dwarfs as exceptional human beings who overcame all the risks and difficult circumstances surrounding their birth and after (Romano, 1989, 1-5). According to studies, the mother female dwarf's abnormally tiny birth canal caused 50% of newly born dwarfs to die at delivery or in the first few months of life (Weeks, 1977, El-Kilany, 2017, 4). Therefore, the ancient Egyptians thought the dwarf god Bes, who had survived and vanquished terrible forces and spirits, would be able to use his powers to ensure a safe delivery that would safeguard mothers and infants.

The god Bes image was connected with bedroom contents as it was inscribed on mirror handles, cosmetic items and more importantly on beds, headrests and chairs. (on the leg of the bed see; Bruyère, 1939, fig. 32; Dasen 1993, 71-73, fig. 6.3; Kleinke, 2007, 54-55; on the footboard of a folding bed of Tutankhamun (Carter and

Mace, 1923, pl. 49 ). Showing his image on the cosmetic containers and objects related to the woman and her beauty would aim at preparing for the sexual pleasure of the women and her partner. Having the Bes image itself on such tools used for cosmetic purposes could be a way of sexual stimulation. The image of Bes on the legs of beds and chairs on which sexual activities occurred could be for using his magic power in protecting a woman in her sexual relationship and increasing fertility for having a child. The mixed form of Bes between scary and funny character could represent a stimulus for pleasure and sexual performance. His frightening shape terrifies evil spirits that prevent a woman not only from getting pregnant but also from having sexual pleasure.

One of the examples that show the Bes image as a tattoo is on a faience bowl (Fig. 13) dating back to the New Kingdom. Here, the tattoo of Bes image is depicted on the thigh of a female flute player (Fig. 3) (Keimer, 1943, 159- 161). Naked women playing with musical instruments and having a tattoo of Bes can be found in some wall scenes of houses in the workmen's village at Deir El-Medina from the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. One of these examples shows a naked female musician with a tattoo on her left leg while she is standing and playing with a flute (Vandier d'Abbadie, 1938, pl. III). Tattooing his image on the thighs, over the pelvic and pubic region of sacred prostitutes and female dancers and musicians was possibly intended for the sexual seduction, the god luck and the pleasure that could be generated through the god's power. Its magic could increase the prostitute's abilities of seduction and sexual pleasure as it is a visual erotic and seductive symbol. It would also protect them from sexually transmitted diseases (Schumann-Antelme & Rossini, 2001, 68).



Fig. (13) A Faience bowl showing female musician with tattoo of Bes Image on her thigh, N.K, Thebes, now in Leiden (After <https://www.archaeology.org/exclusives/articles/1352-faience-egypt-amunet-hathor-bes> Accessed 12 November 2022)

As dwarfs in ancient Egypt were largely involved in entertainment activities, especially music and dance, the god Bes dwarf was associated with music, dance, and even alcoholic beverages. He was considered a patron god of musicians. From the New Kingdom, the role of the Bes-image as a musician and dancer appeared. As a musician, Bes was shown playing a variety of instruments such as the lute, double flute, harp, and tambourine (Emerit, 2013, 7).

God Bes appeared in high relief on a slab dating back to the Ptolemaic Period found at Saqqara. He was shown with a nude female companion named Beset who is dancing and banging a tambourine. There are also mud plaster images of them decorated “incubation chambers” at Saqqara which maybe indicate that pilgrims would spend the night here, hoping for erotic dreams to cure them of infertility or impotence. The discovery of erotic votive figurines in some of the nearby rooms suggests that couples may have tried to conceive in some of the rooms (El-Kilany, 2017, 8).

The double image of god Bes on the right and left side of other motifs means that they surround, fortify and protect what is between them. Thus, they protect the boat with a brow in the shape of a duck/goose head that carries the seated female lute player and other female figures or the boat that carries a nude woman that holds long slender papyrus stems in her hands. The image of god Bes on the votive beds is protecting the sexual process and the fertility that occurred metaphorically in the central elements of the scene. Through this, the owner of the votive bed will have sexual pleasure, protection from diseases and fertility.

## 2- Female Lute Player Motif

The female lute player is one of the essential motifs depicted on the decoration of the votive Beds. She was represented as a nude woman seated in a boat, shown in profile and playing lute. The female lute player in the scene of Type 1 is largely similar to the musician depicted on the interior of the New Kingdom faience bowl (Fig. 15) from Leiden (Brooker, 2009, 97).<sup>\*1</sup> (Fig. 1, 2, 3, and 4).<sup>\*2</sup> In each scene, the woman is depicted in the right-facing profile, playing the lute with a raised knee to support it. She is wearing a circle with a streamer flanked by flowers. A usual depiction of the goose or duck on the boat shown on the votive bed appeared on the neck of the lute.

In Egyptian art, female lute musicians are usually represented in a sensual nature as a nude or semi-nude. Many examples show them nude as in the tomb of Nakht (TT 52) (Wilkinson & Hill, 1983, fig. 52; Peck, 2013, 184), the tomb of Djoserkaraseneb (TT 38) (Wilkinson & Hill, 1983, fig. 30.9.4; Scott, 1944, fig. 34; Davies & Gardiner, 1965, pl. XXXVII) and on a bas-relief at the Egyptian Museum (no. 2266) (Bruyère, 1937, fig. 66; Schäfer, 1974, fig. 217a). They were also shown in transparent dresses as in the tomb of Thotnefer (TT80) (TT 93) (Hickmann, 1953, 172, fig. 8, Manniche, 1989, fig. 2) and in the tomb of Haremhab (TT 78) (Lirscher, 2013, 4, fig. 225). Some banquet scenes of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty at Thebes show nearly nude women, servants and musicians including these female lutenists (Manniche, 1997, 29). The lutenist players were always depicted moving their feet as if dancing, although it was difficult for them to move from their place during their performance (Manniche, 1988, 194). They

<sup>\*1</sup>The theme of the seductive musician shows that this bowl was used at a banquet or similar entertainment (Peck, 1978, 56, pl. XV, Robins, 1998, fig. 83).

<sup>\*2</sup> Due to Egyptian ties with Asia, the lute, one of the stringed instruments, was introduced to Egypt during the New Kingdom and was performed by both men and women; Sibylle, 2013: 3, Bleiberg, 2002: 48.

were accompanying the rhythm by dancing that can be found in the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty tomb of Nebamun (TT 90) (Davies, 1923, pl. XXIII). They were also in some cases accompanied by monkeys or apes (Graves-Brown, 2010, 81, 108).

The female player with lute has a clear sexual symbolism that can be confirmed through one of the fragments that were found at the tomb of Puyemre (Fig. 14). The scene shows a missionary sexual position in which a standing man lies on top of a woman who is seating on a chair with her legs up while they are facing each other. (Manniche, 1977, 17) The woman is holding her lute in one hand which indicates that she was playing the lute and her music stimulated the sexual desire of the man who hurried to have sexual intercourse with her. The lute itself seems to have sensual connotations because of its inclusion in the sexual scenes of the Turin Papyrus and because of the duck-head motif often depicted on the lute. Many lutes were shown with duck-head terminals (Graves-Brown, 2014, 118-119).

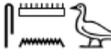
In the case of the votive beds, the image of a female lute player has a sexual and erotic symbolism for the owner of the bed. Its inclusion in the elements of the decoration is to act as an indirectly stimulating sexual image. Its place in the center of the scene indicates its functional importance to the votive bed's owner.



Fig. (14) Sketch of a fragment found in Puyemre tomb, N. K. at Thebes  
(After, Manniche 1977, 17, fig. 1)

### 3- The Figure of Duck or Goose

The duck or goose had a special symbolic significance and was a common ornamental element in all periods (Wilkinson, 1992). Goose is known in the ancient Egyptian

language by several names, including  *smn* (Wb IV, 136), which appeared since the Old Kingdom period. The goose or duck appeared in some scenes standing on the brow of the boats, or as the brow itself in the hunting scenes, and while performing the ritual *sš-w3d*. (2008, مصباح)

This bird had a sexual symbolism and was associated with the god Amun by the New Kingdom period. It was believed that the ancient Egyptians used this symbolism to seduce birds, so it appeared in the hunting scenes standing on the brow of the boat as a decoy bird. In addition to the nature of the bird, it is easy to stimulate. It is alert and

makes annoying sounds if it feels the slightest danger. Therefore, here it plays the role of protection or alerting to any danger, so the bird was depicted flying over the brow of the boat in the Middle Kingdom scenes of the pilgrimage to Abydos. As for the boats that appeared in the New Kingdom scenes of tombs or in the minor arts, the front of which was adorned with the head of a goose or took the shape of the body of a goose, and carried a woman or a couple, they have a sexual symbolism because the goose is a symbol of fertility, reproductive power and rebirth, so the shape of this bird was used in the decoration of many tools, jewelry, and musical instruments.

(ابراهيم، 2015، 135-138)

According to ancient Egyptian beliefs, the duck or goose mainly symbolizes the repression of evil and the evocation of fertility and rebirth. It also symbolizes the beginning of the primeval world. It lives in the marshes, the essential place for creation and the domain of the goddess Hathor (Diab, 2021, 89). It represents the sacred image of the god of earth, god Geb (Abdelhamid & Elnwagy, 2016, 20). The practice of a woman holding a duckling to her breast is suggested to symbolize her role as a male sexual partner (Ferguson, 2012, 68). As the bird has erotic overtones, it was mentioned in the Egyptian love songs, where the woman presents a duck to her lover. The same manner occurs in the carved image of the spoons as a nude girl swimming and holding a duck (Binder, 2000, 116). In type 1 of the votive beds (Table (1)) is noticed in its illustrations, from a horizontal angle, that the figure of the nude woman standing on the brow of the boat assimilates the image of goddess Nut while the brow in the form of a duck's head and neck assimilate the sacred image of god Geb (Fig. 15). The woman, representing Nut, is stretching her hands and feet and reclining over the goose figure, representing the male partner god Geb, which stimulates him. The construction of the decorative elements has an intended sexual symbolism that could indicate the votive beds' function.

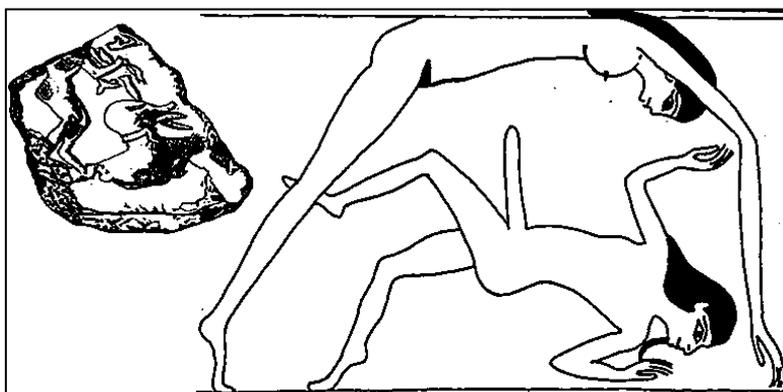


Fig. (15) The image of the naked sky goddess Nut stimulates her partner god Geb beneath her, Funerary papyrus of Tameni, Third Intermediate Period, British Museum Papyrus (EA10008, 3). (After Budin, 2015, 325, fig. 16)

#### 4- The Figures of Nude Women

The ancient Egyptians expressed the idea of fertility and its importance through their different images of nude women in the context of domestic cult in order to guarantee conception and birth, as in the case of the Middle Kingdom fertility figurines known as "paddle dolls" (Koen, 2008, 66, 69; for details on these figurines see Kamal, 2016). The illustrations of nude women are believed to be related to male pleasure, sex, and fertility. They emphasize female sexuality and fertility; the beautiful and young faces, the full breasts with a small waist, the wide thighs and buttocks, and the pubic triangle

are usually distinct and prominent features for nude women. The eroticism of female nudity had a well-established mutual connection with music, as in the case of the female musicians and dancers illustrated in the New Kingdom banquet scenes and some decorated ostraca, and the literary evidence referred to the goddess Hathor not only as the goddess of music but also of love. Female beauty and nudity were also expressed in the New Kingdom love poetry (Goelet, 1993, 26, 27).

Among the images represented on votive beds (type 1) are usually three figures of nude women with two usual attitudes; the first and main figure acted as a musician playing lute usually seated in profile either on a thick stool or on a high chair on the middle of the boat surrounded by papyrus- the marsh setting that symbolizes creation (Robins, 2014, 135); the second stands behind the musician propelling the boat forward with a long pole, and the third one stands forward on the bow and performs the ritual of pulling or shaking papyrus. She appears to lack facial details, a small breast and a prominent pubic region. Only one figure of the nude woman is shown as the main figure in the illustrations of votive beds (type 2). She usually stands forward in the middle of the boat and holds long slender papyrus stems in each hand to perform the ritual of pulling or shaking papyrus. She is shown wearing a tall headdress that symbolizes the characteristic feathered crown of goddess Anuket\*, the goddess of the annual flood of the Nile River and thus was connected to fertility (Del Vesco, 2009, 35; Monaghan, 2014, 18). The same feathered headdress is usually worn by the god Bes as indicated in the illustrations that might refer to the Nubian nature of the god (van Oppen de Ruiter, 2020, 15).

The act of the outstretched arms of the nude woman in the illustrations of (type 2) is also a main feature for the goddess Anuket as an attribute for the Nile River in addition to the ostrich feathered headdress. It symbolizes the two tributaries of the Nile and this is indicated in the meaning of the goddess's name "the Embracer" (Monaghan, 2014, 18). A third characteristic feature of Anuket appears in the act of swift-moving objects like the papyrus stems represented in the hands of the nude woman. This act refers to the association of the goddess with the speed flow of the river which was the main reason for holding the usual papyrus scepter in her hand (الهجرسي, 2021, 160).

One of the variations of the illustrations of (type 2) depicts the central female figure sitting on a high chair and holding lotus flowers in her hands (Figs. 9&10). This female figure may refer to a goddess that appeared wearing a crown with nine feathers similar to that of goddess Anuket and of god Bes. This goddess is called "Hatet" and was referred to in the inscription of a stela discovered at Abydos as "Mistress of the West" (Fig. 16). The stela shows one of the attributes of the goddess that is grasping the curving stem of a lotus flower. She was suggested to be a goddess of vegetation (Cartwright, 1929, 188, fig. 14).

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\* Anuket was an ancient local goddess of the First Cataract. She was the "Lady of Elephantine", where she was worshiped, predominantly on the side of Satet or as a third member of the cataract triad (Khnum, Satet, and Anuket). Especially in the New Kingdom, the Anuket epithets focus on the south and Nubia - a magical papyrus from Deir el-Medina even calls her *nhsjt*, "the Nubian". She has a strong protective function, especially in relation to the southern border of the country. Her characteristic tall headdress is first documented under the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty king Senwesert I and was stereotyped from that point forward (Budka, 2002, 20, 21).



Fig. (16) The stela of goddess Hatet (After Cartwright, 1929, fig. 14)

The illustrations in both types (1 & 2) show the figures of nude women with figureheads like sacred scribbles (Betrò, 2013, 66).

The sexual nature and symbolism of the imagery of the nude women in the illustrations of both types (1&2) are obvious, linking them to the concepts of successful birth, life and rebirth (Robins, 2014, 133, 135).

### 5- The Ritual of Pulling, or Shaking Papyrus

The ritual of pulling, or shaking papyrus *sšš-w3d* is represented in the illustrations of votive beds; in (Fig. 17) where the third nude woman stands forward on the brow of the boat and performs the ritual; and in (Fig. 18) where the main figure of a nude woman standing forward in the middle of the boat and holding a long slender papyrus stems in each hand to perform the ritual. It is an important ritual that was performed in the marshes by seizing one or more papyrus sticks growing in the swamps, and perhaps it was done by shaking the papyrus, uprooting it, or perhaps sanctifying it. It had a role in achieving resurrection, renewing the life and rebirth of the deceased and achieving fun, joy, and pleasure, as well as ensuring protection for those who carried it out, repelling evils and harm from them, increasing fertility, re-creation and re-growth cycle. (مصباح، 2008)



Fig. (17) Decoration on votive bed, Type 1, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, Cairo JdE 59846. (After Teetern 2010, pl. 94)

Fig. (18) Decoration on votive bed, Type 2, Dynasties 22-23, found in Medinet Habu, MH 28.32b. (After Teetern 2010, pl. 103)

The ritual was associated with goddess Hathor "sš-w3d ht-hr" as stated in PT (388) and was performed in order to pacify her and to have her protection and blessing for a long prosperous life (Wisner, 2002, 35). The ritual takes place in the "papyrus thicket" of the northern marsh area, where in the mythical worldview of ancient Egypt the border between earth and sky lies and where direct ascension to heaven is possible. The thicket of papyrus specifically marks the threshold area that separates this world from the hereafter (Altenmüller, 2002, 28). It was depicted in the Old and Middle Kingdom tomb reliefs beside the scenes of music and dance in the context of the cult of goddess Hathor (Mironova, 2021, 62). The jangling sound of the breeze rustling/blowing through the papyri is referred to in the ancient Egyptian name of the sistrum "sššt" as a musical instrument and a sacred symbol of goddess Hathor. The name sistrum itself was derived from a Greek verb meaning "being shaken" that originated in the practice of shaking the bundles of papyrus flowers. This sound of shaking papyrus was thought to appease the deities. The papyrus marsh itself was an ancient Egyptian symbol of creation. Hathor was believed to first emerge from the papyrus thicket, the place where goddess Isis raised her son Horus as well (Tahya, 2018, 12; El-Sabban, 1998, 59).

The ritual was expressed in detail in the decorations of the Old Kingdom tombs, where the earliest depiction of the ritual is found in the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty mastaba of Queen Meresankh III at Giza. On the northern side of the east wall of the main chamber, the Queen and her mother are shown standing on a boat in the reeds, performing the ritual of pulling papyrus stems from the marsh (Fig. 19). The accompanying text that is usually repeated in all later tombs depicted the ritual: *sšš.s w3d n Hwt-hr m phw hn<sup>c</sup> mwt.s m33.sn iht nbt nfrt ntt m mht* "She pulls papyrus for Hathor in the marshlands with her mother; they see every good thing which is in the marsh" (Dunham & Simpson, 1974, 10, fig. 4; Altenmüller, 2002, 37). The process of papyrus being pulled out of the papyrus thicket still occurs in the New Kingdom and Late Period (Altenmüller, 2002, 36). During the New Kingdom appeared further pieces of evidence concerning the religious character of the ritual, as it was included in the scenes of hunting birds in the marshes that were usually accompanied by the expression: "passing time with the work of Sekhet". Sekhet was believed to be a form of the goddess Hathor and the goddess of marshlands and fields. Thus the act of holding bunches of papyri and water lilies by female figures could symbolize Hathor/Sekhet and the traveling in the marshes refers to the context of worshiping the combined form of the two goddesses (Binder, 2000, 115).



Fig. (19) Scene of the ritual of pulling papyrus in mastaba of Queen Meresankh III at Giza (After Binder, 2000, 128, Fig. 11.23;

[https://www.osirisnet.net/popupImage.php?img=/mastabas/meresankh3/photo/meresankh3\\_cm\\_084\\_detail\\_01.jpg&lang=en&sw=1280&sh=1024](https://www.osirisnet.net/popupImage.php?img=/mastabas/meresankh3/photo/meresankh3_cm_084_detail_01.jpg&lang=en&sw=1280&sh=1024), Accessed 12 November 2022)

## V. Conclusion

The votive beds were only used by the Theban local community during the Third Intermediate Period Theban. They can be divided into two main types according to their decoration. There are some variations between the same types of decoration. The votive beds were used largely between the 22<sup>nd</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty and less from the 24 to the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. The votive beds presumably were a local tradition adopted by Theban local low and middle classes at Thebes.

- The reason behind the appearance of such votive beds was not because of a foreign influence of the Libyan or Nubian dynasties that ruled Egypt as the votive beds were exclusively used at Thebes. Therefore, the votive bed is a religious idea, apparently, made by or for the local people in Thebes mainly, with the aim of getting closer to the gods who are related to their demands. It was created as a manual for obtaining a set of personal requests regarding sexual ability, fertility, and protection for the newborn. Thus, it is a part of the personal piety of the Theban local community.
- The votive beds' place of discovery varied between mostly the domestic context (dwellings as in Medinet Habu, Karnak and Deir el-Medina) and sometimes in cult places (temples of Karnak and Seti I at Qurna) and in burial places (tombs at the Ramesseum and Dra Abu Naga). Their appearance in such different contexts indicates the varied functions that they were employed. In some cases, a mix of two types of votive beds was found together. They were used mainly for daily life purposes but also they were reemployed for afterlife aims.
- The following table gives a summary for the discussed main motifs found in the two types of votive beds. They are all similar except for two main differences; the master female figure in the center of the scene, the female musician appears in Type 1, while the standing female figure of goddess Anuket or the seated figure of goddess Hatet appears in Type 2; and the figures of the three standing nude women that are represented in Type 1.

Motif	Deities	Sacred images & symbols	Rituals (Pulling, or Shaking Papyrus)	the female musician (lute player)	Figures of nude women
<b>Type 1</b>	God Bes	Duck/ goose of god Geb Papyri of goddess Hathor	√	√	√ (3)
<b>Type 2</b>	God Bes Goddess Anuket Goddess Hatet	Duck/ goose of god Geb Papyri of goddess Hathor	√	×	√ (1)

- The two found types of votive beds play two different functions related more to sex and fertility, a safe pregnancy, birth and rebirth in Type 1 and to a safe pregnancy, birth and rebirth in Type 2. It seems that Type 1 was more comprehensive in its functions than Type 2 that could be confirmed by the included motifs in each type. The presence of the votive beds in the homes and dwellings could be read as a wish and request for successful sexual intercourse between the married couple in their residence, especially the woman who will

be pregnant and carry the child during a risky time for herself and her child. In addition, their appearance in the temples or the God's Wife funerary chapels was for asking the gods through them to help the woman to have the desired intercourse and fertility and thus a safe pregnancy and childbirth. Moreover, the existence of these votive beds in some funerary contexts was intended to help in the rebirth of the child and his mother in the afterlife even if they did not succeed in their life.

- The decoration of the beds is related to two main themes: the Old Kingdom ritual of plucking papyrus and New Kingdom erotic symbolism, both of which are rich in references to rebirth. At the same time, the votive bed no. 239 that has two recumbent calves which are sign for *wr* "to conceive" positioned at the base of the floral stalks that the woman grasps. This indicates the function of the votive bed in helping the women to become pregnant.
- Each decorative element has a sexual and erotic symbolism showing the function of the votive beds and their role in stimulating the women sexually, helping them to become pregnant and protect their child during their pregnancy.
- The sexual symbolism included in the decorations of the votive beds did not intend to seduce their owners for a prohibited pleasure but it was only for the sexual pleasure that give children to maybe those women who want to conceive and may have difficulties.
- The two images of god Bes on the right and left side of the votive beds' decorations were not only for the sexual stimulation of the couple but also for the protection and surrounding of their sexual intercourse and the fertility of the women.
- The image of the female lute player in Type 1 is one of the stimulating sexual images in the concepts of the ancient Egyptians that can be understood through the fragment found in Puyemre tomb showing a woman with a lute in her hand engaged in sexual intercourse with a man.

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## الرمزية الجنسية لزخارف الأسرة النذرية وعلاقتها بوظيفتها

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### الملخص العربي

إن الأسرة النذرية المصنوعة من الطين عبارة عن هياكل صغيرة تشبه المقاعد ظهرت بشكل أساسي في سياق الحياة اليومية لمجتمع طيبة خلال فترة العصر الانتقالي الثالث. كانت تحتوي على لوحة أمامية مستطيلة الشكل ذات أيقونات تقليدية معتادة تتعلق بوظيفتها. يهدف هذا البحث إلى فهم رمزية العناصر الزخرفية للأسرة النذرية ويناقد رمزياتها الجنسية للتعرف على وظيفتها وأهمية الأسرة النذرية لأصحابها. كما أنه يلقي الضوء على أماكن اكتشافها، حيث تم استخدام هذه الأماكن لتحديد وظيفتها ومدى شيوع استخدامها في مجتمع طيبة. يستخدم البحث المنهج الوصفي والتحليلي للأسرة النذرية ومناظرها و يعرض نماذج تم العثور عليها في أماكن مختلفة مع التركيز على تلك المكتشفة في مدينة هابو. ويخلص البحث إلى أن كل عنصر زخرفي له دلالة ورمزية جنسية. وهكذا كانت الأسرة النذرية أدوات للتحفيز الجنسي والخصوبة من خلال زخارفها إلى جانب وظائف أخرى.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أسرة نذرية، رموز جنسية، الآلهة بس، عازفة العود، تحفيز الجنس