

# **INSCRIPTIONS**

# The Newsletter of the Friends of the Egypt Centre, Swansea

# Issue 29

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## *Dancing girls from Nebamun's tomb-chapel* (Photo: Tony Nowell)



For more great pictures from the **British Museum trip**, see Sheila Nowell's article over the page. And don't miss Carolyn's fascinating article on **Tattoos, sex and dancing girls** on page 6.

## *A date for your diary*

This year's AGM will be held on **Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> September 2009**  
commencing at 6.30 pm -- Venue to be advised  
to be followed at 7 pm by a talk on  
**'Hunting the Land of Punt'**  
by Kenneth Kitchen (Emeritus Professor, Liverpool)

From as early as the Old Kingdom the Egyptians sent expeditions to the mysterious land of Punt where they imported numerous luxuries. The expedition conducted during the reign of Hatshepsut has captured the attention of many scholars who have often debated where the fabled land was located. Using the jigsaw method, this lecture will try to determine the exact location of the land of Punt.



# A day at the Museum

Déjà vu. Outside Fulton House, early morning, cold, waiting for a coach to the British Museum. Then just as I am convinced it is not coming a golden horned beast with Diamond on the side appears out of the early morning mist. We all clamber aboard, really impressed because it is an almost new coach and quite luxurious by our previous coaches. Even with a break we are still outside the British Museum at 10:45 am and follow our leader (Ken) to see where we are to meet later for our behind the scenes tour. We then all split up to do our various things, some to go to Covent Garden to shop and lunch!

We hurried off to room 61, the Michael Cohen Gallery dedicated to the stunning Nebamun tomb paintings.

The British Museum acquired 11 wall-paintings from the tomb-chapel of a wealthy Egyptian official called Nebamun in the 1820s. Dating from about 1350 BC, they are some of the most famous works of art from Ancient Egypt.

Following a ten-year period of conservation and research, the paintings are now on display together for the first time. They give the impression of the walls of colour that would have been experienced by the ancient visitors to the tomb-chapel. The paintings come from the now lost tomb-chapel of Nebamun, an accountant in the Temple of Amun at Karnak who died c.1350 BC, a generation or so before Tutankhamun. They show him at work and at leisure—surveying his estates and hunting in the marshes, eternally young and vigorous. An extensive conservation project—the largest in the Museum's history—has been undertaken on the eleven large fragments

The tomb-paintings were acquired by the Museum in the 1820s and were constantly on display until the late 1990s. Since then, the fragile wall-paintings have been meticulously conserved, securing them for at least the next fifty years. The project has provided



*A hunting scene from Nebamun's tomb-chapel*

numerous new insights into the superb technique of the painters called by one art-historian 'antiquity's equivalent to Michelangelo'—with their exuberant compositions, astonishing depictions of animal life and unparalleled handling of textures. New research and scholarship have enabled new joins to be made between the fragments, allowing a better understanding of their original locations in the tomb. It is, however, a world of ancient Egypt the ruling classes wished to be seen and the paintings were intended to be seen and appreciated by ancient visitors who would bring offerings and give prayers to Nebamun. Having seen them in books so many times it was truly awesome to see them in reality.

After this we went to the Enlightenment gallery, new to me and interesting as it is a refurbishment of the King's Library (George III) built in the 1820s showing interesting curios from the way the world was seen at that time, such as the two mummified heads. One looked just like the painting "The Scream"—not on my mantelpiece thank you! Then to lunch in the Great Court and a much deserved rest.

After lunch we went to our agreed meeting point outside the inner sanctum door for our behind-the-scenes tour. After disposing of our bags we were led into the library to "sign in" and spotted a familiar student—Meg—handling a shabti. We were split into two groups with curators Neal Spencer and Marcel Marée taking us around. First we visited the organic store and were amazed at the number of painted coffins there as well as the new movable shelves to display them. We saw fantastic headrests, beautiful faience bowls, pottery, and so much more.

*...continued overleaf*



*A mummified head*





## Editorial

Welcome to the 29<sup>th</sup> issue of *Inscriptions*, the last issue of the current academic year. Please note the date of the AGM, **30 September 2009**. Details of location and timing are given on the accompanying sheet.

We congratulate our chairman and committee for the excellent programme of lectures for the 2008-2009 academic year. We look forward to another star-studded bill in the coming year!

As always, we need more material for *Inscriptions*. Please, if you can contribute anything, let us have it. We hope to produce another issue some time prior to Christmas 2009, so please get your articles in by early November.

We wish all our readers a pleasant summer holiday and look forward to seeing everyone again in September.

*Mike Mac Donagh*

## A Day at the Museum (continued)

The labyrinth of rooms and corridors seemed never ending. At the papyrus room we saw the tomb robber papyrus, part of the Harris papyrus which had the most beautiful hieroglyphs, and the other half of the Rhind Mathematical papyrus which we had on loan in the Egypt Centre. Lastly we visited the stone room and amongst the things we saw was a statuette which had recently been identified by Vivian Davies (who we like to think of as one of us) as a fake, but special because it was the only likeness of the original statue.

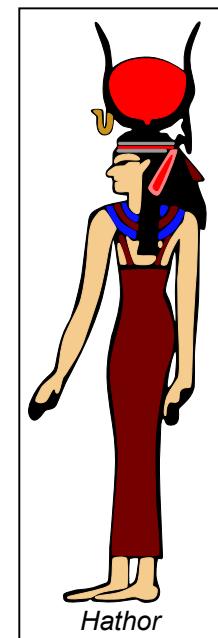
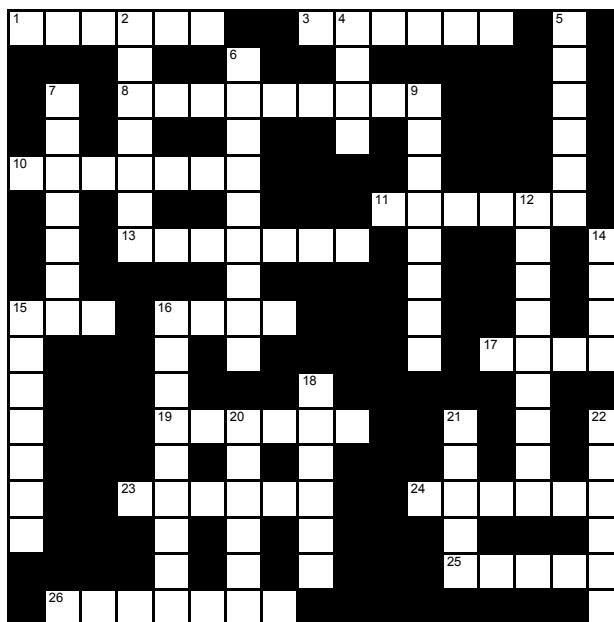
Just time for a cool drink, a visit to the shops and make for our coach waiting outside. It departed on time at 4:30 and even with a break we were back outside Fulton House at 9:15. A great success and thank you to Vivian Davies for arranging it.

*by Sheila Nowell*

*photos by Tony Nowell*

## Crossword

This issue's crossword is all about rocks, metals and precious stones, but we hope it won't be too hard! Solution on page 4.



### Across

- 1 Egyptian chisels were made of this metal (6)
- 3 Precious white metal relatively rare in Egypt (6)
- 8 A sarcophagus is often carved from this stone (9)
- 10 Famous statue of Khafre carved from this hard black stone (7)
- 11 Amulets were made in the shape of this beetle (6)
- 13 Needle-like stone monument (7)
- 15 God of the earth (3)
- 16 Type of limestone used to case the Great Pyramid (4)
- 17 Deserts have a lot of this (4)
- 19 A hole in the ground that yields stone (6)
- 23 A pillar of stone (6)
- 24 A salt used in mummification (6)
- 25 A block on which records are inscribed (5)
- 26 A famous stone bearing inscriptions in Hieroglyphs, Demotic and Greek (7)

### Down

- 2 5th Dynasty stone recording king lists (7)
- 4 Small dagger made from this metal found in Tutankhamun's tomb (4)
- 5 Site of Egyptian alabaster quarries (6)
- 6 Adornment made from precious metals and stones (9)
- 7 Ceramic glazed with blue or green (7)
- 9 An alloy of silver and gold (8)
- 12 A marble stone used for fine statues and vessels (9)
- 14 Precious metal used to adorn royal coffins (4)
- 15 A hard rock used for statues (7)
- 16 An opaque blue-green mineral used in jewellery (9)
- 18 An alloy of copper and tin, used for making many artefacts (6)
- 20 A charm worn in life or death, made from stone, metal, glass or faience (6)
- 21 Material formed into vessels of great artistry, especially in Amarna Period (5)
- 22 Sacred stone symbolising the primeval mound (6)

*by Daphne MacDonald*



# Certificate of Higher Education in Egyptology

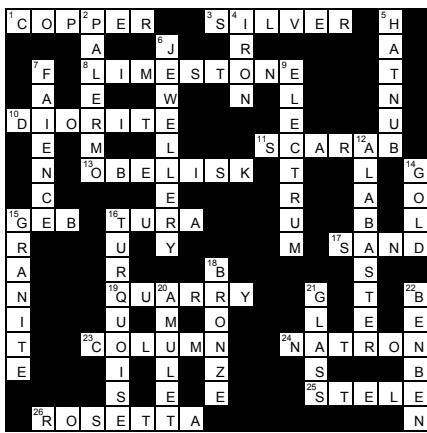
Some of you may know that the Department of Adult Continuing Education (DACE) at Swansea University currently offers the opportunity to study for a Certificate in Higher Education in Egyptology. The Certificate is the equivalent of the first full year of a degree, being 120 credits at level one and once begun should be completed within a five year period. It is taught by the Friends of the Egypt Centre Chairperson, Ken Griffin, and the areas of study available are varied with something to attract anyone with an interest in Ancient Egypt.

In order to qualify for the Certificate a student is required to undertake all compulsory modules as well as any four of the optional modules in order to attain the 120 credits necessary. Each module is assessed through the medium of an in-class test during week 8 and through a 1500 word essay to be submitted by week 12. Once you have accrued 100 credits you will need to work upon a short (ish!) project of 4 to 6,000 words. However, if such things strike terror into your very being it should be noted that it is not compulsory to work toward gaining the Certificate should you wish to attend the classes purely for your enjoyment. Classes take place on Tuesday and Thursday evenings between 6.30 and 8.30 p.m. DACE currently provides 6 modules each year from September to June with the modules being chosen from the list opposite.

In my personal experience the course has been invaluable and very enjoyable. I am now coming to the end of studying for the Certificate and all that (hopefully) stands between myself and the qualification is the terrifying obstacle of the project!

Studying for the Certificate gave me the confidence to enrol for the part time BA degree offered by DACE and I have found the crossover of material between the two courses to be an asset, particularly when studying for degree exams.

## Crossword Solution



At the time of writing the cost of each module is £105 for those in work over 16 hours per week and £35 concession with those receiving benefits able to study the courses for free.

<i><b>Compulsory Modules</b></i>		<i><b>Credits</b></i>
DAL114	Egyptian History 3100-1000BCE	10
DAL115	Egyptian Religion	10
DAL116	Egyptian Civilisation	10
DAL160	Egyptian Literature 1: The Old & Middle Kingdoms	10
DAL170	Art & Architecture In Ancient Egypt	10
DAL173	Material Culture (Funerary Artefacts)	10
DAL177	Dissertation/Project: 4-6,000 words	20
<i><b>Optional Modules</b></i>		
DAL118	Egyptian History: The 18 <sup>th</sup> Dynasty	10
DAL134	Egypt & The Near East	10
DAL169	Middle Kingdom Studies	10
DAL171	The Age Of The Pyramids	10
DAL172	The Ramesside Period	10
DAL174	Early Egyptian History	10
DAL175	The Late Period	10
DAL176	Deir el-Medina	10
DAL178	The Valley of the Kings	10
DAL194	Egyptian Hieroglyphs: Reading Egyptian Monuments	10
DAL195	Egyptian Literature II: The New Kingdom & Late Period	10

If you require any further details on courses offered, costs etc. please either contact Ken Griffin or speak to DACE direct on 01792 295786 or visit their website [www.swansea.ac.uk/dace](http://www.swansea.ac.uk/dace).

Modules running during the 2009-2010 academic year are as follows:

DAL118: Eighteenth Dynasty – Tuesday evenings starting from 29th Sept 2009.

DAL114: Egyptian History – Thursday evenings starting from 1st Oct 2009.

DAL172: The Ramesside Period – Tuesday evenings starting from 12th Jan 2010.

DAL170: Art and Architecture – Thursday evenings starting from 14th Jan 2010.

DAL178: Valley of the Kings – Tuesday evenings starting from 20th April 2010.

DAL175: The Late Period – Thursday evenings starting from 22nd April 2010.

*by L.S.J. Howells*





## 2009 ARCE Report

Every April American Egyptologists, as well as colleagues from far and wide, gather for the annual ARCE (American Research Center in Egypt) conference. This year the conference was held in Dallas, Texas and having heard so much about past conferences I decided that it was about time I presented my research across the water. The conference was held over three days, Friday 24th – Sunday 26th, and was packed with a wide variety of speakers and topics.

As seems to be the case with all Egyptology conferences the weather was exceptional, yet with lectures starting as early as 8.30am and finishing at 5.00pm there would be no enjoying the sun!

Registration took place on the Thursday evening with delegates receiving abstract booklets and name tags. To our horror the name tags informed us that we were from "Swamsea University" but thankfully these were corrected in time for the opening of the conference. The registration gave us the opportunity to meet colleagues both from the States and the UK and we chatted over dinner at a local Tex-Mex restaurant. My talk was scheduled for the end of the first day so I was fortunate to be able to relax for most of the day before the nerves set in.

The topic of my talk was an examination of the rekhyt-rebus and its presence within the temple. A decade ago Lanny Bell, one of the leading American



Meg and a pregnant J.J.

Egyptologists, argued that the presence of the rekhyt-rebus upon the columns of Luxor Temple indicated that the "common people" has access to this part of the temple. However, having looked at the rekhyt-rebus more closely I discovered that it could be found deep within the temple, in the holy of holies, where the commoners surely wouldn't have had access. Bell's arguments had been accepted by many leading American Egyptologists and so it was a little daunting to be arguing against them on their own patch.

Despite this my talk went off without any hitches and was well received by the audience. With four different rooms containing lectures it's often difficult to know just how many people will attend the lectures. Mine was surprisingly well attended, with the room almost full, approximately 100 people. Aside from my own lecture, the quality of the lectures was excellent with the archaeological papers being to most heavily attended. Eminent scholars including David O'Connor, Gay Robins, Betsy Bryan and Salima Ikram presented papers. From the UK, I was joined by Aidan Dodson of Bristol University and Jenny Cromwell of Oxford University. It was also exciting to catch up with former lecturers of Swansea University, Ellen Morris, J.J. Shirley, Greg Mumford, Sarah Parcak and Thomas Schneider, all of whom presented papers. Ellen's paper was particularly interesting and one of the best that I attended during the conference. J.J., who left Swansea last summer, is now pregnant so we were able to get a few photos of her, bump and all. The conference also had the usual bookstalls with some excellent bargains, many of which returned to Wales with me.

Aside from the academic part of the conference, a group of the younger Egyptologists decided that as we were in Texas we should really take in a rodeo. This resulted in us taking a stretched hummer from our hotel, which as you can imagine got some strange Texan looks. Upon arriving at the rodeo we were surprised to find that there was entertainment, pre show, with concert performances, fun fare and plenty of shops to keep the ladies happy. Of course the rodeo itself was the highlight of the evening for all. This included wrestling bulls to the ground, rounding them up, horse and cart racing and "mutton bustin'". This event was one of the most bizarre things I have ever witnessed and consisted of children, no more than six years old, riding on the backs of sheep to see how long they could hold on for. No helmets were worn and one can only wonder what their health and safety record is like!



The gang on their way to the rodeo in the stretched Hummer

The conference was extremely good and it will certainly be my first of many trips across the Atlantic. Next year the conference will be held in San Francisco. For more details check out their website <http://www.arce.org/>

by Kenneth Griffin





## Tattoos, sex and dancing girls

Upstairs in the Egypt Centre we have a small wooden figure decorated with dots and lines. What is it? And how does it relate to tattooed ladies, sex and dancing girls? Some people claim it represents a tattooed dancing girl. This is a brief summary of evidence for tattooing and what it might have meant in ancient Egypt.

Much of the textual evidence for tattooing in Egypt comes from the Graeco-Roman Period when it is clear that tattooing and branding were considered negative (Montserrat 1996, 76, 77). Slaves are branded and tattooing is used as a threat of punishment. Cultic tattooing however, is also mentioned. Sextus Empiricus says the majority of Egyptians are tattooed (Montserrat 1996, 76), and evidence suggests that both men and women were tattooed in this period. However, the extent to which it took place was probably exaggerated by Classical writers to support their ideas of the ‘weird’ nature of the Egyptians. Evidence from bodies themselves suggests a less ubiquitous practice. One of the few possible pieces of evidence comes from Akhmim. According to Strouhal (1992, 89) Maspero’s excavations at Akhmim in Middle Egypt ‘yielded several female mummies of the Graeco-Roman period with tattoo marks on the chin and sides of the nose.’ [The source of Strouhal’s claims are unfortunately not given.] While the discolouration and partial decomposition of mummified bodies means that we would not expect evidence of tattooing on every mummy, one might expect a little more evidence available than merely the Akhmim bodies.

Prior to the Graeco-Roman Period, evidence for tattooing is largely archaeological. One of the few possible textual references comes from in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus (British Museum EA

10188). This papyrus is dated to the 4th century BC but the archaizing language suggests an earlier prototype. The relevant phrase can be translated as ‘their name is inscribed into their arms as Isis and Nephthys....’ The problem is that this may represent scarification rather than tattooing, and like all textual evidence may suggest an idea rather than reality.

Firm evidence for tattooing must ideally come from the bodies themselves. As with the Graeco-Roman Period, the evidence does not suggest ubiquitous practice. In fact only four mummified bodies are known, these all from the Middle Kingdom, all from Deir el Bahri, and all female.

Perhaps the most well known tattooed lady is that of the 11th Dynasty (c. 2055–2004 BC) Priestess of Hathor, Amunet discovered in 1891 in a tomb at Deir el-Bahri. Unfortunately there are no known extant pictures of her tattoos. The body often shown as Amunet in publications is actually that of her companion, an unknown lady from the same tomb who was also tattooed (unfortunately there appear to be no pictures of Amunet’s tattoos; Poon and Quickeneden 2006, 124, fig. 2). Amunet had tattoos on top of the abdomen and above thighs and breasts and on lower legs and arms in a geometrical pattern of dots and lines. The much published tattoos of Amunet’s companion were very similar to her own.

Amunet and her companion were buried close to the temple of king Mentuhotep Nebhepetre in an area which seems to have been given over to other royal ladies, several of whom were priestesses of Hathor and are sometimes considered a harem. Even if these women were royal wives we should not equate this with prostitution or low status. Indeed, there is even

doubt that these ladies were married to the king.

Two other female mummies, again from the 11th Dynasty and from Deir el-Bahri, were found by Winlock in 1923 near the Montuhotep temple. These bodies appear to exhibit scarification as well as tattooing and the pattern of designs, is like that of Amunet and companion, of geometrically arranged dots and dashes (for photos see Keimer 1948, pls. 6–9; Ikram and Dodson 1998, 115). Winlock (1923, 26, 28, fig. 20) identified them as ‘dancing girls’ apparently as their tattoos were the same as the patterns on the faience figurines which Winlock (1923, 20, 22, fig. 15) believed to be dancing girls. However, the titles of these women, if they had any, remain unknown and they were buried with few objects, though it is possible that they had been moved from a former grave. Winlock states that their graves had been robbed when Hatshepsut’s Temple had been built. Thus, their status is unclear.

Meskell (2002, 161; 2003, 58) states that elite women were not tattooed. The case of Amunet and her companion, perhaps also of the two other Deir el Bahri women, would suggest otherwise. Amunet’s title of Sole Lady in Waiting and Priestess of Hathor shows she was a court lady. She was buried near the king wearing bead collars and necklaces. Her companion in the same tomb, given its situation, appears also to be of high rank. As for the other two, the fact that they were buried on such an important site suggests that they may have been court ladies and like many women buried here could have been priestess of Hathor. Such women may have danced, though they are not shown doing so and have no titles suggesting that they danced. They may or may not have been sexually intimate with the king, but they were certainly of high status.



Interestingly, it has been suggested on the basis of the actual skulls and from iconographic depictions that some of these women were black Nubians (Naville 1907, 50, 55; 1913, 9, pl. 2). While representation of skin colouring as black is now known to have religious overtones, associated with Osiris and with fertility and rebirth, rather than necessarily depicting the actual skin colour, the shape of the skull is harder to dismiss. Pinch (1993, 213) identifies Amunet, and the two tattooed ladies found later, as light skinned, though Bianchi (2004, 64), suggests that the mummification process may have reduced the melanin in the skin. A new examination by a modern physical anthropologist may help resolve the matter.

As well as these four tattooed bodies, a number of Middle Kingdom figurines have been found which not only have similar decorations and possible Nubian origins but are also sometimes considered concubines. These figurines fall into two main groups: mainly faience fertility figurines classified by Pinch as type 1; and wooden 'paddle dolls'. Both are Middle Kingdom. The figure mentioned in the first sentence in this discussion, the Egypt Centre example, is a paddle doll. There are of course other types of fertility figurines but it is these two types which most approximate to the Middle Kingdom mummified bodies. Their possible functions are very much debated, but they were not simple concubines.

Pinch's type 1 fertility figurines (Pinch 1993, 198-199, 211; Keimer 1948, pl. 12-13, 17-19), faience 'dolls' decorated with geometric patterns strikingly similar to those on the mummified tattooed ladies are discussed first. These figures date to the late Middle Kingdom-Second Intermediate Period and many are made of faience, stone, wood or ivory. Most are found in

tombs, though one was found in a domestic context at Kahun (Pinch 1993, 199). They are found in male as well as female burials (Pinch 1993, 211) as well as in votive deposits to Hathor. The bands around their bodies are similar to the 'Libyan bands' worn by priestesses. While Pinch (1993, 212-213), the authority on these artefacts, is doubtful of accepting the idea of Nubian origins for them, their Nubian connections do seem difficult to refute. While not identical to pottery Nubian examples, the Nubian ones of the same date do exhibit similar patterns, and like the Egyptian ones are without feet. The similarity of design does suggest a cross-fertilization of ideas surrounding them. Nubia was at least partly under the control of Egypt at this time.

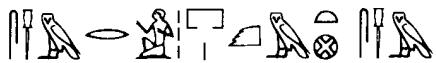
The decoration on the mummies and also the type 1 fertility figurines also bears some similarity to the decoration on paddle dolls, common in the Middle Kingdom (Keimer 1948, pl. 15-17). Such dolls, with emphasized pubic area and long hair which at least sometimes appear to symbolize the feminine erotic, are usually considered fertility figures rather than children's playthings. Interestingly, at least one of these paddle dolls sports a depiction of Taweret (Keimer 1948, 31). Taweret, like Bes, is associated with women and childbirth and in fact the two seem closely linked. Keimer (1948, pl.26) has a picture of Taweret with Bes' face. In the New Kingdom Bes was depicted on the thighs of some women. These paddle dolls are common in Upper Egypt and Nubia.

The geographical distribution of these paddle dolls, the possible Nubian origins of the faience and pottery figurines and possible Nubian origins of the Mentuhotep Nebhepetre have all been linked to evidence for a Nubian connection for tattooing. In each individual

case the evidence is not clear, with the paddle dolls being the most convincingly Nubian. It is probably going too far to claim that these dolls are somehow depictions of the tattooed ladies. The paddle dolls wear long hair while our ladies are shown in their chapels with short hairstyles. However, perhaps together the paddle dolls, faience dolls and Deir el-Bahri women provide some support for a relationship between female body decoration and Nubian influence at least for the Middle Kingdom.

In support of Nubian origins for our ladies, Nubian women were decorated with similar tattoos between the 6th and 18th Dynasties (Strouhal 1992, 89; Poon and Quickenden 2006, 127-128), that is, they were contemporary with the Deir el Bahri ladies. C-group women (2000-1500 BC) in cemeteries near Kubban discovered in 1910 by Firth also had tattoos, like those Amunet and the other three women. Moreover, the Nubian women were buried with pottery dolls exhibiting the same tattoos (Firth 1927, 50; Keimer 1948, 16). Other C-Group tattooed women have also been found (Poon and Quickenden 2006, 128) exhibiting similar dot and dash patterning. Bianchi (2004), states that all the tattoos found in Nubia are on females, though there is at least one instance of a tattooed male from the later periods in Nubia (Poon and Quickended 2006, 128). A Nubian connection may be accepted with caution.

We may ask how the tattoos were executed. An early Dynastic flint flake set in a wooden handle and found at Abydos was said by Petrie to be a tattooing instrument. Petrie (1901, 24) writes "The flint set in wood did not seem capable of bearing any strain, but it was explained by my friend Prof Giglioli as a tatuing instrument of usual form....". This suggests that Professor Giglioli had seen similar contemporary items.





Another instrument consisted of wide flat needles found together was uncovered from 18th Dynasty Gurob. The latter is now deposited in the Petrie Museum (Booth, 2000).

Interestingly tattooing seems to have either continued or been revived in more recent times in Egypt. At least one drawing of an Egyptian woman is known as well as bone figurines, a luster ware dish and other artefacts of the Fatimid Period (AD 969–1171) apparently showing tattoos (Rice 1958). Of course these could indicate body paint.

Ethnographic evidence shows that at times tattooing may be associated with the elite and at other times subordinate groups (Montserrat 1996, 75). It is frequently practiced as a means of healing and protection, thus is not always intended as mere sexual ornament. For ancient Egypt tattooing was certainly evident in the Middle Kingdom associated with some high status women. As to the meaning of the tattoos, all that can be said is that there is some suggestion that the body decorations are associated with fertility. The function of the faience dolls and paddle dolls is difficult to understand, though they are usually believed to have some sort of fertility connection and have designs which appear similar to the tattooed mummies. As for the later Bes body decorations, Bes, if not an erotic symbol, was associated with women in childbirth and hence fertility and/or protection. This, of course need not rule out a connection with eroticism, as the fertility and eroticism are difficult to untangle. What can be ruled out is the association with tattoos and low status women. Additionally the paucity of tattoos suggests it was not common practice.

The positioning of the tattoos on the abdomen and upper breasts and

thighs of these mummified bodies and also on the dolls has suggested to some an erotic connection. However, some of the tattooing also occurred on the lower legs and arms, and besides, position near female genital areas may be associated with either fertility or protection. It is also possible that the tattoos may be marks of devotees to Hathor, given that these dolls are often given as votive offerings to Hathor and that Amunet and possibly the other mummified ladies were Priestesses of Hathor.

By the New Kingdom, women are sometimes shown with depictions of Bes upon their thighs, often assumed to be tattoos. These appear in a different tradition to the geometrical designs of the Middle Kingdom. The Bes ‘tattoos’ are sometimes cited as supporting the link between tattoos and eroticism in ancient Egypt. However this link is open to question for three main reasons: Firstly, we do not know if these were tattoos, scarification, body paint, or intended to symbolize some aspect of those upon whom Bes was depicted. The suggestion that these may have been tattoos is supported by the interpretation of a dotted design on a Nubian Meroitic female mummy from Aksha as a Bes figure (Poon and Quickenden 2006, 128, fig. 3). However, the Meroitic Period is equivalent to the Ptolemaic Period of Egypt, that is, it is much later than the Egyptian New Kingdom. Secondly, Bes was associated with women and childbirth and had an apotropaic role, and was not necessarily erotic as we would define the term. The problem is to disentangle the erotic from the fertility aspects which is probably largely impossible for an ancient society. It is very possible that such a distinction simply was not made in ancient Egypt. Thirdly it is possible that all Egyptian women

had depictions of Bes painted upon their thighs though they are not depicted on higher status women because such women were usually depicted clothed.

To conclude, evidence for tattooing in ancient Egypt is largely limited to the Middle Kingdom and to women and might be associated with Nubians and aspects of fertility. Tattooing’s connection with dancers is more doubtful.

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by Carolyn Graves-Brown

