

Identities in Ink: Exploring Connections Between Tattoos and Ethnic Identities in the Ancient Nile Valley

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Abstract

Tattooing has been practiced throughout human history using different methods and for many, culturally specific, purposes. Studying tattoos from archaeological contexts provides an opportunity to access the cultural practices that might be connected to tattooing, in particular the complex social messages conveyed by tattoos within and between groups. This thesis reviews the archaeological evidence for tattooing practices in the ancient Nile Valley to investigate their possible connections to ethnicity. The scope of this study includes known tattooed human remains and material culture related to the practice of tattooing from the regions of Egypt and Lower Nubia from the mouth of the Delta to the site of Kerma. It includes the Egyptian Predynastic Period to the New Kingdom (5300–1069 BCE), and temporally encompasses the Nubian A-Group, C-Group, Pan-Grave, and Kerma cultures.

At the core of this project is a case study of three women with tattoos, uncovered during excavations at the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II at Deir el Bahari, Egypt, in 1891 and 1923. These individuals have been understudied thus far and interpretations of them are controversial, with the primary point of contention being their supposed ethnicities. Can they be identified as Nubian or Egyptian, and how might their tattoos inform our discussions and interpretations? This case study speaks to broader questions in the scholarship regarding if, and how, tattoos might have been specific to certain cultures or ethnic groups and functioned as markers of ethnicity in the ancient Nile Valley. Overall, this research problematises the simplistic correlation of tattooing styles with dichotomic constructions of ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Nubian’ ethnicities. Future research on this topic might investigate how other aspects of identity including gender, age, status, and familial links are connected to tattooing in intersection with ethnic identities.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed) _____
Michelle Kay

Date: 06/12/2022

Content Advice

Please be advised that this thesis contains images of archaeological human remains.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Why study ancient tattoos?

Tattooing, defined in this study as the practice of permanently decorating the body with pigments inserted into the skin, is known by historical and archaeological evidence to have been practiced by diverse cultures across the globe.¹ The earliest direct evidence for tattooing, namely, preserved human skin bearing tattoos, is over five thousand years old.² It is impossible to determine how old tattooing is as a phenomenon, or at what point our early human ancestors began to permanently modify their skin, because soft tissues including skin are rarely preserved in the archaeological record, except under specific depositional environments or through direct cultural intervention.³ Evidence from such contexts is sufficient to demonstrate that tattooing has been practiced in cultures on every inhabited continent for hundreds – and in some instances thousands – of years and likely originated even earlier.⁴

The possible motivations, purposes, and meanings of tattooing vary widely. In modern Western culture, the most significant motivating factors for attaining tattoos include beautification, individualisation, group affiliation, and pain endurance.⁵ Anthropological studies have identified other motivating factors for tattooing.⁶ For example, traditional tattooing practices in India are thought to be culturally specific in terms of designs and placements, and the practice has been connected to ornamentation, medicine, religious beliefs and practices, caste membership, rites of passage, and other purposes, depending on the particular cultural context.⁷ Similarly, tattoos borne by Moroccan women are thought to convey multiple social messages including about tribal affiliation, conformity, female beauty, and amuletic protection.⁸

¹ Deter-Wolf and Krutak 2017, 3; Deter-Wolf et al. 2016, 19; Gill-Frerking et al. 2013, 61.

² Deter-Wolf et al. 2016, Table 1; Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th October 2022.

³ Such environments include hot, dry conditions such as deserts; cold, dry conditions with ice; naturally occurring environments with high salt levels; and peat bogs (Gill-Frerking et al. 2013, 59; Samadelli et al. 2015, 753–754; Sydlar et al. 2015, 1165). Anthropogenic mummification, the processes by which people deliberately preserve the soft tissues, is known from cultural contexts in North Africa and South America (Guillén 2004; 141–142; Sydlar et al. 2015, 1165).

⁴ Deter-Wolf et al. 2016, 19, 23.

⁵ Wohlrab et al. 2007, Table 1.

⁶ Friedman 2017, 34.

⁷ Rao 1942, 176–178.

⁸ Searight 1984, 246.

Tattoos preserved on ancient, mummified individuals have also been interpreted in this way. One of the oldest known tattooed individuals, known as Ötzi or the Tyrolean Iceman (3370–3100 BCE),⁹ is thought to have been tattooed for medicinal reasons.¹⁰ Another of the oldest known tattooed individuals, a male individual from the Chinchorro culture of El Morro, Chile (2563–1972 BCE), presented a mark resembling a moustache on the upper lip, which has been interpreted as cosmetic.¹¹ Tattoos from the Meroitic Period (350 BCE–350 CE) in Nubia are thought to be connected to social status, group affiliation, beautification, and social messages regarding marriage status or ethnic identity.¹² Another tattooed individual dating to the Christian Period (550–1500 CE) in Nubia seemingly bore her tattoo as an expression of religious devotion.¹³

These few examples from across the known geographic and temporal span of tattooing demonstrate the diversity of not only tattoo designs and placements, but the reasons why people attain tattoos, and the meanings tattoos hold for individuals and groups. In general, tattooing is thought to have immense social significance and communicate important social information about the tattooed individual to others within and without their social context.¹⁴ The examples above also demonstrate the recurring links between tattoos and ethnicity; tattoo practices are usually specific to a cultural group, and often thought to communicate group membership, including on an ethnic level.

1.2. The current study

1.2.1. Aims, scope, and focus

Studying tattoos from archaeological contexts allows scholars to access information about aspects of the culture to which the tattooed individuals belong including medical practices, beauty standards, ritual practices, and the ways in which social differentiation and identities functioned and were expressed. This thesis focuses on one small subset of this broad topic, namely the question of if, and how, tattoos might have been connected to ethnic identities in the context of the ancient Nile Valley. This thesis employs a novel approach to interpreting tattoos, and the possible connections to ethnicity (Chapter 2). The evidence for tattooing in the ancient

⁹ Deter-Wolf et al. 2016, Table 1.

¹⁰ Gill-Frerking et al. 2013, 61; Samadelli et al. 2015, 756–757.

¹¹ Allison 1996, 126; Arriaza 1988, 21; Deter-Wolf et al. 2016, 22, Fig. 2; Krutak 2015, 1.

¹² Alvrus et al. 2001, 395, 399. See Appendix 1 and §§ 3.1.2 and 3.3.

¹³ Vandenbeusch and Antoine 2015, 16. See Appendix 1.

¹⁴ Krutak 2015, 1.

Nile Valley is reviewed in order to reconsider the possible connections between tattoo practices and ethnicity on a broad scale (Chapter 3). A dedicated case study re-evaluates the ways in which ethnic identities are reconstructed by scholars for three tattooed women from Middle Kingdom Deir el Bahari (Chapter 4). The thesis concludes by summarising the new observations and interpretations and by identifying priorities for future research (Chapter 5).

The temporal scope for this thesis is approximately 5300–1069 BCE;¹⁵ encompassing the Egyptian Predynastic Period to New Kingdom and the Nubian A-Group, C-Group, Pan-Grave, and Kerma cultures (see timeline, **Figure 1** in Chapter 2). Of these, tattoos are currently known from Predynastic, Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom, C-Group, and Pan-Grave contexts. The geographical scope includes the regions of Egypt and Lower Nubia from the Delta to the site of Kerma.¹⁶ This scope is partly defined by the available data (see Appendix 1 and Chapter 3). Currently, the earliest evidence for tattooing dates to the Predynastic Period,¹⁷ while there is a significant temporal gap between tattooed individuals dating to the New Kingdom,¹⁸ and the next confirmed examples of tattoos which date to the Meroitic Period.¹⁹ Significant changes in style and content are observed in tattoos dating to the Meroitic, X-Group, and Christian Periods in Nubia compared to earlier periods. This therefore represents a logical place to restrict the scope of this study, which coincides with the end of the Pharaonic Period in Egypt and the latest evidence for the Pan-Grave and Kerma cultures.

This thesis focuses on a case study of three tattooed individuals from pit burials within the mortuary temple complex of Mentuhotep II at Deir el Bahari, Egypt. The first individual is known as Amunet based on inscriptions inside her sarcophagi.²⁰ The other two individuals' names are not preserved, so for the purposes of this work they will be referred to as Individual 1 (who was buried in Pit 23) and Individual 2 (buried in Pit 26).²¹ Rather than selecting one

¹⁵ Following the chronology established by Shaw (2000, 479–481).

¹⁶ While there is evidence that the geographic span of the Pan-Grave archaeological culture extends far beyond this area into Upper Nubia and areas of the Eastern and Western Deserts (de Souza 2019, Fig. 100), no purported evidence for tattooing is available from these regions; to date, the only tattooed individuals from Pan-Grave burials come from cemeteries in the regions of Egypt and Lower Nubia (see § 3.1.2).

¹⁷ Friedman 2017, 12–17; Friedman et al. 2018.

¹⁸ Austin and Arnette 2022; Austin and Gobeil 2016.

¹⁹ Alvrus et al. 2001; Vila 1967, 368–377, pl. XIII–XIX. See Appendix 1.

²⁰ It is, of course, always possible that the sarcophagus in which this individual was buried was not originally intended for her and therefore Amunet may not be her name. However, there are some contextual clues that support her being the original owner of the coffin (see § 4.1). Furthermore, this is the only name for this individual known to modern scholars and she has been referred to this way throughout the previous scholarship. Therefore, this analysis will continue to utilise this name for the purpose of clarity.

²¹ Renault (2020, 68, 73–74) assigns identifiers to tattooed individuals based on the 'type' of their tattoos. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, classifying tattoos as belonging to either an 'Egyptian' or 'Nubian' type or style is reductive and oversimplifies the complexity of tattoo practices in this context. For this reason, Renault's identifiers are not utilised in this analysis.

individual as a case study, all three tattooed individuals from this context are considered together due to their common context and traits.²² These individuals are generally understudied; they have never been published in detail and few analyses have been undertaken of the available data.²³ They have also become a source of some controversy in the discourse, primarily surrounding the interpretation of their supposed ethnicities and how this might be connected with their tattoos.²⁴ These factors necessitate a new analysis of these individuals, particularly with regard to their tattoos and purported ethnicities, and position them as an ideal case study for investigating the potential connections between tattoos and ethnic identities in the ancient Nile Valley. The limited existing scholarship regarding these individuals considers all three together and draws comparisons between them.²⁵ While considering them together provides an opportunity to address the existing material in its entirety, this study takes a critical perspective of these previous interpretations and employs a novel approach emphasising the individuality of these women. In this way, this thesis aims to provide a foundation that can be expanded in future studies to encompass other aspects of identity including gender, age, familial relations, occupation, status, and the complex ways in which these identities intersect.

1.2.2. Limitations

While it has been necessary to impose some restrictions upon the scope of this study, this research is also limited by unavoidable shortfalls in the available data. Scholarly interest in tattooing within archaeology and Egyptology has historically been minimal, as evidenced by the few studies analysing the available data or attempting to generate more data. This might be attributed to the stigma associated with body modification and specifically tattooing in Western societies in recent centuries, in which the practice has been associated with criminality, mental illness, and low socio-economic status, among other negatively perceived factors.²⁶ Further, for this reason, cultural tattooing in colonial contexts has been criminalised and vilified by Western colonial structures.²⁷ This seemingly resulted in a moral aversion to studying ancient tattoos throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁸ As this stigma has abated in recent decades, and simultaneously the academy has become increasingly accessible to previously marginalised

²² See § 4.1 regarding their common mortuary and social context, and § 4.2 regarding their tattoos and scarification.

²³ Friedman 2017, 22.

²⁴ Friedman 2017, 26. See § 4.3 regarding the previous constructions of ethnicity, and § 4.4 for a new interpretation.

²⁵ For example, Bianchi 1988, 22; Derry 1938 in Keimer 1948, 14–15; Friedman 2017, 22–26; Roehrig 2015.

²⁶ See, for example, Wohlrab et al. 2009, 204–205.

²⁷ Deter-Wolf and Krutak 2017, 4.

²⁸ Austin 2022, 405; Bianchi 1988, 23.

groups, scholarly interest in ancient tattoos has increased. Still, there is ample scope both for new studies and for critical review of previous scholarship.

The primary limitation is the dearth of known examples of tattooed individuals; in the accessible published record there is currently a total of only eleven individuals dating from the Predynastic Period to the New Kingdom and contemporaneous Nubian contexts (see Appendix 1). To date, only two individuals from the late Predynastic Period are published,²⁹ as well as three each from the early Middle Kingdom and the C-Group culture.³⁰ This makes it impossible to observe broad trends, either diachronically or within a particular temporal or cultural context. Even where it is possible to observe similarities or distinctions between tattooed individuals, these cannot be confidently extrapolated to trends and any such observations are necessarily highly speculative. Of course, this is not a reason to avoid attempting to analyse this data; rather, it requires scholars to be highly reflexive and willing to adapt interpretations as new data becomes available.

Further, the three individuals from Deir el Bahari who form the case study for this thesis present a particular challenge because they were excavated and published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³¹ In comparison to modern scientific protocols, details were not recorded, material was not published, and analyses that might have been very valuable were not undertaken. This may be partially attributed to the prevailing contemporary societal and scholarly attitudes to tattooed individuals, and tattooed women in particular.³² Further, in the time since their initial publications, new techniques have been developed which, if applied to these individuals, would undoubtedly provide more detailed information about their tattoos.³³ All of these factors mean that the available information about their burial contexts, the extent of their tattooing, and other details about their bodies, are very limited.³⁴ It is hoped that new analyses can be undertaken in the near future that might resolve some of the remaining gaps in the data pertaining to these individuals.³⁵ Some of the impacts of these factors might be offset by the discussion in this thesis which will seek to problematise the apocryphal existing interpretations of these individuals.

²⁹ At least three more individuals dating to the Predynastic Period are known to be tattooed but they are not yet published, and dates are not confirmed; see Appendix 1 and § 3.1.1.

³⁰ It is important to note that “the C-Group cemetery at Hierakonpolis is one of the last in existence as the rest are now beneath the waters of Lake Nasser” (Friedman 2001a, 24), which poses a significant impediment to studying this culture in general, but particularly for burials and human remains.

³¹ See § 4.1 for a summary of their excavation history.

³² Austin 2022, 405.

³³ Such as infrared photography techniques, originally developed by Armelagos 1969; Kroman et al. 1989; Smith and Zimmerman 1975, and recently progressed further by Alvrus et al. 2001 and Samadelli et al. 2015.

³⁴ See § 4.1 and 4.2.

³⁵ See § 5.2 for recommendations for future research which might begin to answer the remaining questions.

2. Background and theory: tattoos and identity

2.1. Theorising tattoos

2.1.1. Body modification and embodied identities

“Tattoos show us that the body itself can become a medium of identity features.”³⁶

As discussed in § 1.1, connections have repeatedly been drawn between tattoos and the communication of complex social information, particularly pertaining to identity construction and expression.³⁷ This section delineates a theorisation of these connections through ‘embodied identities’, which, like the closely related ‘biocultural approach’ in bioarchaeology,³⁸ recognises that human biology is inextricable from socialisation.³⁹ Such approaches consider the body through the lived experience of the individual, as opposed to approaching the body as an artefact;⁴⁰ the body is not “an object, a thing”.⁴¹ Therefore, “human remains can be viewed as experiential, social, and agential, allowing a wealth of interpretive lenses that were previously inaccessible concerning identity, intimacy, and the experience of the archaeological past”.⁴²

These approaches are primarily utilised to interpret incidental modifications to the body that occur as a result, but not an intended consequence, of participation in cultural practices.⁴³ Such studies are usually restricted to skeletal remains due to the lack of preservation of soft tissues in many archaeological contexts.⁴⁴ They might include isotopic analyses to reconstruct migration and diet, biomechanics to reconstruct activity, and paleopathology to study disease and trauma.⁴⁵ This type of study acknowledges that the body “is mutable and plastic, able to change and adapt to an individual’s environment”,⁴⁶ and that the impacts of such adaptations on bodies can

³⁶ Della Casa 2013, 11.

³⁷ Nystrom 2018, 259.

³⁸ Nystrom 2018, 259.

³⁹ Nystrom 2018, 258–259; Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 15.

⁴⁰ Fisher and Loren 2003, 226; Nystrom 2018, 258–259.

⁴¹ Meskell 2000, 13. This position does not enjoy unanimity among scholars who work with archaeological human remains, as evidenced by Samadelli’s comments to Tradii (2016, 120): “[Mummies] are cultural goods which have nothing human about them anymore. They have nothing to empathize with, their face is completely different from a human’s. If they had no head, it would be the same. They have no affective value anymore. A mummy is an artefact, something artificial made by man. It is not a corpse. [...] They are cultural goods not because they are particularly beautiful, but because they convey information about the past.”

⁴² Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 15.

⁴³ Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 20, 22.

⁴⁴ Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 17.

⁴⁵ Nystrom 2018, 264; Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 22.

⁴⁶ Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 15.

provide data to address social questions because they occur as a result of a person's lived experience, including their participation in social structures and cultural practices.

The same concepts can be applied to deliberate body modification practices which are connected to cultural expression,⁴⁷ including cranial vault modification, dental modification, tattooing, piercing, scarification, and branding.⁴⁸ These are all cultural practices in which the body is deliberately and permanently modified in appearance, and sometimes also in function. There are myriad examples of temporary body adornment practices which similarly constitute cultural practices and the conveyance of social information, including body paint, clothing, jewellery, make up, and hairstyling.⁴⁹ By contrast, the permanence of body modification practices suggests that the social information they convey is so significant that the body should reflect that information for the rest of the individual's life.⁵⁰ However, even permanent body modifications are not necessarily active in conveying social messages to others at all times and in all circumstances. Some forms of body modification such as piercings and tattoos might be performed on areas of the body that are not always visible to others. While body modifications which are permanent and usually visible "can serve as an interface between the individuals and society",⁵¹ it is also important to consider the significance of information that is not publicly displayed. In these cases, the social information conveyed by the modification might be intended for a restricted audience, or primarily for the individual themselves to experience. Questions that are centred on interpreting the communication of social information through deliberate body modification are therefore twofold. It is necessary to consider what the symbolic significance of the modification is to the person who bears it, and what messages might be conveyed to others who observe the modification.⁵² Finally, it is important to consider that individuals' identities are comprised of "multiple, complex, and overlapping" aspects,⁵³ and that any of these aspects might be embodied in permanent body modification or temporary body adornment, which might interact with each other on physical and aesthetic levels.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 20.

⁴⁸ Alvrus et al. 2001, 397–398; Della Casa 2013, 12; Fox 2019, 89; Lohwasser 2012, 532–549; Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 20.

⁴⁹ Della Casa and Witt 2013, 5; Fox 2019, 89; Lohwasser 2012, 527, 529–532; Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 19.

⁵⁰ Fox 2019, 89; Lohwasser 2012, 529; Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 19–20.

⁵¹ Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 19.

⁵² Fox 2019, 20.

⁵³ Schrader and Torres-Rouff 2020, 22. Liszka (2018, 187) makes a similar point about "a multitude of dynamic identities".

⁵⁴ See § 4.2.2 regarding the interaction between tattoos, scarification, and beaded jewellery worn by Individual 1 – the individual from Pit 23 at Deir el Bahari.

2.1.2. Defining a tattoo practice

Through this thesis, the phrase ‘*tattoo practice*’ will be used to refer to a distinct way of practicing tattooing. Previous analyses frequently refer to ‘traditions’, ‘styles’, or ‘types’ of tattooing without defining what these terms mean. For example, Friedman refers to “the tattooing traditions of Egypt and Nubia”,⁵⁵ and uses ‘style’ terminology to differentiate between tattoos which are made in geometric patterns using dots and dashes, and figural, image-based tattoos.⁵⁶ Similarly, Renaut refers to “two tattooing traditions” and categorises tattoos as belonging to one of two ‘types’ on the basis of their aesthetic qualities.⁵⁷ Chapter 3 will interrogate these frameworks in light of the available evidence, and this section will define the terminology and the ways it will be used throughout the remainder of this analysis.

The term ‘tattoo tradition’ is restrictive because it implies a longstanding and unchanging *tradition* of practicing tattooing in a particular way. The terminology is helpful in contexts where an important aspect of the way tattooing is practiced is the continuation of and connection to longstanding traditions, including Indigenous and traditional societies.⁵⁸ In this way, the ‘tradition’ of tattooing might be a defining feature of a tattoo practice, but referring exclusively to a ‘tattoo tradition’ does not adequately take account of the way(s) in which tattoo practices may develop and change over time.

Similarly, the term ‘tattoo style’ is appropriate for referring to one aspect of a tattoo practice. Wiessner defines style as “formal variation in material culture that transmits information about personal and social identity”.⁵⁹ As discussed above, the communication of complex social information is an important aspect of body modification practices. Wiessner defines two aspects of style: ‘emblemic’, “formal variation in material culture that has a distinct referent and transmits a clear message to a defined target population about conscious affiliation or identity”;⁶⁰ and ‘assertive’, “formal variation in material culture which is personally based and which carries information supporting individual identity”.⁶¹ She notes that “both types of style may also occur

⁵⁵ Friedman 2017, 26.

⁵⁶ Friedman 2017, 18, 26.

⁵⁷ Renaut 2020, 67.

⁵⁸ Such as tattooing in the Philippines, where the revival and continuation of ancient tattoo traditions are central to the ways in which tattooing is practiced in modern contexts – see Krutak 2017 and Salvador-Amores 2017 regarding the ancient and modern tattoo practices respectively. See also Dale and Krutak 2017 regarding the modern revival of Pazyryk tattoo styles and Te Awakotuku 2003 regarding the history and resurgence of Māori Ta Moko practices in Aotearoa.

⁵⁹ Wiessner 1983, 256.

⁶⁰ Wiessner 1983, 257.

⁶¹ Wiessner 1983, 258.

on a single item”,⁶² using clothing styles as an example wherein some features might be emblematic and correlate directly with group affiliation, while other features might be assertive and operate on a more personal level and across group boundaries.⁶³ Similarly, tattooing styles might operate within both aspects of style. The general form of the markings and the content and placements that are considered appropriate might be emblematic stylistic features, while the specific designs and placements chosen by individuals can operate on an assertive stylistic level.

The tools and methods utilised to make tattoos are another factor by which distinct tattoo practices might be delineated. This is strongly connected to emblematic style; the form of the tattoos might be determined by the types of tools and methods used to produce them, and equally particular tools and methods might be designed to produce a specific form. These processes could occur in both directions and might constitute a feedback loop wherein the desired form of markings and the type of tools and methods used inform each other and develop concurrently. Such feedback loops might be understood through Hodder’s ‘entanglement’, which theorises and emphasises the relationships and dependences between people and things.⁶⁴

Another significant aspect of a tattoo practice might be exclusivity or specificity requirements. A tattoo practice might require that only individuals of particular social categories are allowed to be tattooed, or there might be restricted designs and placements available on the basis of gender, age, status, occupation, or other demographic and social factors particular to the cultural context. This aspect of a tattoo practice is indicative of, and situated within, broader social structures of the community in which the tattooing is undertaken. Such a community constitutes a ‘community of practice’,⁶⁵ defined as a group of people with “a shared domain of interest and sustained interaction”, who generate, acquire, and circulate knowledge about their practice, and thereby both perpetuate and develop it, through their social relations.⁶⁶ The concept of ‘communities of practice’ is situated within Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which defines *habitus* as “a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class”,⁶⁷ which “produces individual and collective practices”.⁶⁸ This might be reflected in the archaeological record as

⁶² Wiessner 1983, 259.

⁶³ Wiessner 1983, 259.

⁶⁴ Hodder 2012

⁶⁵ Wenger 1998.

⁶⁶ Näser 2017, 566.

⁶⁷ Bourdieu 1977, 86.

⁶⁸ Bourdieu 1977, 82.

“groups of individuals who exercised comparable behaviours or practices,”⁶⁹ which might be observable through their material culture, including embodied practices such as tattooing.⁷⁰

2.2. Gender and sex

While the focus of this study is the possible connections between tattooing and ethnic identities, the gender and sex of tattooed individuals is significant. As discussed above, tattoo practices might be gendered in a way specific to the community in question (see § 3.3). Furthermore, interpretations of the gender and sex of the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari have influenced interpretations of their status and social roles, which in turn have contributed to constructions of their ethnic identities (see § 4.3.2). It is therefore necessary to delineate working definitions of the basic terminology and concepts associated with interpreting and constructing gender and sex.

The concepts of ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ have sometimes been constructed as a dichotomy between social categories and biological characteristics respectively.⁷¹ This framework has been criticised because it assumes “the existence of prediscursive sex that acts as the stable referent on top of which the cultural construction of gender proceeds”.⁷² Instead, it is argued that “those physical characteristics we use to designate one sex or the other may not be components of sexual identity cross-culturally”, and ‘sex’ should be understood as “a social construct formed by discursive practices”.⁷³ Therefore, “the fundamental concepts of sex and gender may in fact be similarly constituted, if not one and the same”,⁷⁴ in that they are both socially constructed.⁷⁵

Hill argues that scholars should “attempt to specify whether the reference is to biological sex (in the Western scientific sense of biological sex, i.e., primary and secondary sexual characteristics) or to socially constructed and inherently ambiguous cultural categories”.⁷⁶ Therefore, throughout this analysis, it will be specified where there is contextual information available about an individual, which contributes to interpretations of their gender and sex within their social context. Otherwise, references to individuals as ‘female’, ‘male’, or ‘indeterminate sex’, or

⁶⁹ de Souza 2022, 3.

⁷⁰ Fisher and Loren 2003, 228.

⁷¹ Geller 2009, 67; Hill 1998, 102.

⁷² Meskell 2000, 14. This builds upon earlier work by Butler (1993).

⁷³ Hill 1998, 102.

⁷⁴ Meskell 2000, 14.

⁷⁵ Butler 1993, 4.

⁷⁶ Hill 1998, 102.

to ‘women’ and ‘men’ are based on the observation of sex characteristics in their physiological features, by modern Western scientific standards of sex differentiation.

2.3. Ethnicity

2.3.1. Defining ethnicity

Traditional approaches in archaeology assumed that the past was populated by clearly bounded, homogeneous groups defined by the geographic span of material culture typologies, which were assumed to correlate directly with the territory of an associated group.⁷⁷ Ethnicity was therefore conceptualised as “an intrinsic characteristic of a group or individual, objectively definable and directly correlated to race, language, or material culture.”⁷⁸ However, this has been problematised as these factors have been observed not to necessarily coincide,⁷⁹ suggesting that the relationships to the construction of identities are more complex. A turning point in the conceptualisation and definition of ethnicity was Barth’s argument that ethnic groups are not defined purely by their culture;⁸⁰ instead, “ethnicity is fluid, in large part self-defined, and negotiated through social relations.”⁸¹ This understanding of ethnicity as socially constructed also suggests that ethnic groups and identities can be renegotiated depending on the situation, and that boundaries between them are permeable and subjective.⁸²

Smith identifies six characteristic features of ethnicity, which might be contributing factors in the construction of ethnic identities:⁸³

1. use of a common name for the group
2. a myth of common descent
3. shared histories of a (perceived) common past
4. one or more distinctive cultural elements (often religion or language)
5. a sense of having a territorial homeland (either current or ancestral)
6. a self-aware sense of membership among the group

⁷⁷ Lucy 2005, 86.

⁷⁸ Riggs and Baines 2012, 1.

⁷⁹ Lucy 2005, 86.

⁸⁰ Barth 1969.

⁸¹ Riggs and Baines 2012, 1.

⁸² Riggs and Baines 2012, 2.

⁸³ Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 6–7.

The same factors have been adopted into archaeological definitions of ethnicity, such as Jones': "Ethnic groups are culturally ascribed identity groups, which are based on the expression of a real or assumed shared culture and common descent (usually through the objectification of cultural, linguistic, religious, historical and/or physical characteristics)."⁸⁴ This is also similar to Chandra's definition of ethnic identities as "a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with, or believed to be associated with, descent".⁸⁵ Crucially, it is argued that ethnicity is fundamentally based on a "consciousness of difference",⁸⁶ in the sense that the perception of shared characteristics is negotiated by comparison to others outside the group.⁸⁷

Some definitions of ethnicity include a stipulation that it is sometimes ascribed to groups or individuals by others, especially in the context of conflict or colonialism where the dominant group defines other groups.⁸⁸ These constructions should not be included in the definition of ethnicity, but instead recognised as the separate but related phenomenon of ethnic stereotypes: "ethnicity is different from an ethnic stereotype because it is how an individual identifies him/herself."⁸⁹ Ethnic stereotypes do not define the ethnicity of the groups or individuals they depict. However, they do contribute to the construction of ethnicity of those who produce them, in that they are indicative of their 'consciousness of difference' from others. It must also be noted that perceptions and depictions of ethnic stereotypes are frequently associated with other phenomena such as political and social propaganda and therefore serve an explicit purpose beyond the definition of ethnic boundaries and identities.

2.3.2. Ethnicity in the ancient Nile Valley

Ethnic stereotypes around 'foreigners' in Egyptian monumental art in particular have previously been taken by Egyptologists as representative of the reality of ethnic groups.⁹⁰ In response, some studies have drawn a dichotomy between ideology and reality, which might be conceptualised through Loprieno's *topos* and *mimesis*.⁹¹ Such studies define a *topos*, "a society's official and

⁸⁴ Jones 1997, 84.

⁸⁵ Chandra 2006, 398.

⁸⁶ Jones 1997, 94.

⁸⁷ The same idea is defined by Bahrani (2006, 49) as "a relationship of alterity".

⁸⁸ For example, Bahrani 2006, 49; Smith 2003, 1.

⁸⁹ Liszka 2018, 186.

⁹⁰ Schneider 2010, 144; Riggs and Baines 2012, 2.

⁹¹ Loprieno 1988.

normative perception”,⁹² wherein Egypt is presented as idealised, homogeneous, and in contrast to a set of defined ‘foreign’ groups, and a *mimesis*, representations of reality, in the ample evidence for “political alliances, economic trade, immigration, and intermarriage with these same groups” as well as diverse ethnicities within Egypt.⁹³ These ethnic stereotypes in depictions of foreign groups do not define the ethnic groups on which they are presumably based, but are indicative of the Egyptian conception of their own ethnic and national identity and how it is constructed on the basis of difference from other groups in the region.⁹⁴

The artistic conventions used to depict these ethnic stereotypes may have also been employed by individuals to communicate their affiliation with a particular ethnicity.⁹⁵ Riggs and Baines point out that such depictions have frequently been interpreted as representing immigrants to Egypt from foreign places, rather than as “people displaying an ethnicity within Egyptian culture”.⁹⁶ For example, an individual named Maiherperi held a privileged role in the Eighteenth Dynasty, probably under Thutmose III, and was depicted in his tomb “with a dark brown skin color and, in one case, tightly curled, chin-length hair that conforms to the Egyptian topos for representing Nubians”.⁹⁷ Riggs and Baines suggest that Maiherperi may have had some agency in directing how he was depicted, and utilised this ethnic stereotype to depict his ethnic identity “within the bounds of decorum and the Egyptian representational system”.⁹⁸ Riggs and Baines also refer to other examples in which individuals are depicted in stelae with hair and clothing styles associated with particular ethnic stereotypes, or referred to by ethnonyms, which may similarly have been ways for those individuals to connect to and display their ethnic identities within the bounds of Egyptian art and language.⁹⁹

Similarly, Liszka undertakes a detailed analysis of identity in the sarcophagus of Aashyet, a woman buried on the temple platform within the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II early in his reign.¹⁰⁰ She considers multiple interconnected factors including: the juxtaposition of skin colours and hair styles used to depict individuals in the same scenes;¹⁰¹ the prevalence of friends and household members in contrast to the absence of identified family members;¹⁰² the linguistic

⁹² Schneider 2010, 147.

⁹³ Riggs and Baines 2012, 2.

⁹⁴ Liszka 2018, 189.

⁹⁵ Riggs and Baines 2012, 3.

⁹⁶ Riggs and Baines 2012, 3.

⁹⁷ Riggs and Baines 2012, 3. The same argument is made by Liszka (2018, 189), Schneider (2010, 155)

⁹⁸ Riggs and Baines 2012, 3.

⁹⁹ Riggs and Baines 2012, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Liszka 2018, 191

¹⁰¹ Liszka 2018, 202.

¹⁰² Liszka 2018, 201–202.

origins of some names including ‘Aashyet’;¹⁰³ and the use of the term ‘Medjay’ to refer to some individuals.¹⁰⁴ Taking all of these in combination, she suggests that Aashyet was “a Nubian who celebrated her non-Egyptian origins”.¹⁰⁵ The high level of cultural prescription which usually operated in mortuary contexts makes deliberate performance of such identities particularly significant,¹⁰⁶ as does the choice to represent an individual in a particular way for perpetuity.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, there is evidence for communities of people within what was traditionally considered ‘Egyptian’ territory who were actively practicing C-Group and Pan-Grave cultural traditions, at least in mortuary contexts.¹⁰⁸ This might suggest that these populations had immigrated to Egypt *en masse* and continued practicing their distinct cultures, or that they were longstanding residents of the region.¹⁰⁹ In either case, it seems that these communities practiced distinct cultural traditions despite being resident within the boundaries of the Pharaonic Egyptian territory, which might suggest a deliberate effort to maintain their culture and express their ethnic identities in their burials, and probably in their cultural practices in life as well.

The Nubian cultures that fall within the scope of this study include the A-Group, C-Group, Pan-Grave, and Kerma. The A-Group (c. 3800–2900 BCE)¹¹⁰ are approximately contemporaneous with the later part of the Predynastic Period in Egypt (c. 5300–3000 BCE).¹¹¹ Kerma in its broadest chronological sense (i.e., from *Kerma ancien* through to *Kerma classique*, c. 2500–1480 BCE)¹¹² overlaps temporally with the Old Kingdom to early New Kingdom and encompasses the entire temporal span of both the C-Group and Pan-Grave (see **Figure 1**).

Previously, C-Group chronology and typologies were constructed with three phases of the culture, the latest of which had a chronological overlap with the Pan-Grave and *Kerma classique* (see **Figure 1**). Recent reviews of C-Group Phase III, as originally defined by Bietak,¹¹³ have called its categorisation into question, suggesting that some or all of the material ascribed to this Phase should actually be attributed to either the Pan-Grave or Egyptian material culture

¹⁰³ Liszka 2018, 202.

¹⁰⁴ Liszka 2018, 202–203. See Liszka and de Souza 2021 regarding the possible use of ‘Medjay’ as an ethnonym.

¹⁰⁵ Liszka 2018, 185.

¹⁰⁶ Liszka 2018, 186–187.

¹⁰⁷ Liszka 2018, 188.

¹⁰⁸ Friedman 2001a; b. As Buzon (2011, 19–21) points out, this is in contrast to previous scholarship which suggested the C-Group was a “discrete bounded regional culture exclusive to Lower Nubia”. See de Souza 2021a; Meurer 1996; Raue 2019b for further discussions regarding Nubians in Egypt.

¹⁰⁹ Riggs and Baines 2012, 2.

¹¹⁰ Gatto 2021, 139.

¹¹¹ Shaw 2000, 479.

¹¹² Honegger 2021, 143.

¹¹³ Bietak 1968.

traditions.¹¹⁴ A recent chronological review of the C-Group has determined that the latest archaeological material attributable to this culture dates to approximately 1800 BCE, which predates the earliest Pan-Grave material, thereby eliminating C-Group Phase III and any overlap between the C-Group and Pan-Grave.¹¹⁵ The C-Group is therefore contemporaneous with the late Old Kingdom to Middle Kingdom in Egypt and overlaps with the *Kerma ancien* and *Kerma moyen* phases. It is noteworthy that analyses of material culture suggest a common cultural origin for the C-Group and Kerma.¹¹⁶ Bioarchaeological analyses of craniometrics also suggest a common ancestry between populations associated with C-Group and Kerma contexts.¹¹⁷ However, Kerma crania tended to be larger, possibly indicating environmental or social factors which allowed Kerma populations better access to resources, indicating social distinction.¹¹⁸

The Pan-Grave culture (c. 1800–1550 BCE),¹¹⁹ is contemporaneous with the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt and *Kerma classique*. The Pan-Grave archaeological culture has frequently been conflated with the ‘Medjay’, a term which itself has variously been interpreted as an ethnonym, occupational title, or some combination thereof.¹²⁰ The term ‘Medjay’ may have had multiple meanings depending on the time period, who was using the term and in what context, and other complex factors.¹²¹ Furthermore, the people referred to by the term may or may not have correlated with the people who produced the Pan-Grave material culture, as defined by modern archaeologists. Certainly, the two labels are not directly interchangeable and while one or both terms may be associated with an ethnic group that existed in the ancient Nile Valley at some time, it is not possible to define the scope of such a group. Archaeological material attributed to the Pan-Grave culture is dispersed throughout the ancient Nile Valley,¹²² from Middle Egypt to at least the Second Cataract, including in Egyptian settlement contexts, suggesting that communities associated with it “may have integrated into Egyptian society”.¹²³

Recent work calls into question the boundaries between these entities, suggesting that “Nubian cultures and communities were more interconnected than the existing cultural divisions imply.”¹²⁴ It is important to reiterate that archaeological cultures, as defined and identified by

¹¹⁴ de Souza 2018, 233.

¹¹⁵ Schröder 2021.

¹¹⁶ de Souza and Ownby 2022, 38.

¹¹⁷ Buzon 2011, 29; 2021, 1061.

¹¹⁸ Buzon 2011, 33; 2021, 1061.

¹¹⁹ de Souza 2022, 2.

¹²⁰ Liszka and de Souza 2021, 231.

¹²¹ Liszka and de Souza 2021, 231.

¹²² de Souza 2022, 2.

¹²³ Liszka and de Souza 2021, 229.

¹²⁴ de Souza 2021a, 230. See also Raue 2019a.

distinct features of material culture, do not necessary correspond directly to ethnic groups and that the interactions and distinctions between the groups of people who produced these archaeological cultures are the subject of ongoing revision.¹²⁵ However, recent studies which employ practice-based perspectives on material culture technologies, such as pottery production, indicate that the existing archaeological cultures may correlate with distinct approaches to resource acquisition and pottery processing.¹²⁶ Similarly, in some instances there are observable biological differences between the populations associated with the different cultures. Factors such as these might suggest that the archaeological cultures do correlate with communities who had distinct cultural practices and common genetic origins, which, as described above, are factors by which ethnic groups can be defined. It is impossible to define these more clearly at present; hopefully ongoing work on these topics will elucidate the distinctions and connections between the communities and cultures of the ancient Nile Valley. Studying tattoo practices in this context might be one avenue by which to further this research; as delineated above, tattoo practices are frequently observed to be culturally specific and communicative of identities including ethnic identities.

While it is impossible to conclusively define the ethnic groups operating within the ancient Nile Valley from the archaeological data, the available material is sufficient to indicate that ancient Egypt and Nubia were multicultural and ethnically complex. It is almost certain that multiple ethnic groups operated in Nubia based on the identification of distinct archaeological cultures, in combination with biological distinctions between some of the associated populations.¹²⁷ Similarly, beyond the ethnic stereotypes prevalent in Egyptian monumental art, evidence indicates that groups and individuals within Egyptian society actively practiced diverse cultures and deliberately expressed their ethnic identities through depictions in mortuary contexts.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ de Souza and Ownby 2022, 55.

¹²⁶ de Souza and Ownby 2022, 35.

¹²⁷ Riggs and Baines 2012, 5.

¹²⁸ See Matić 2020 for a general volume which presents an overview of concepts relating to ethnicity and identity in the ancient Nile Valley; and see also de Souza 2021b, the recent critical review of the volume.

	EGYPT		LOWER NUBIA	UPPER NUBIA		
2550	Old Kingdom	Dyn 4	C-Group Ia	Kerma ancien		
2500						
2450		Dyn 5				
2400						
2350		Dyn 6				
2300						
2250						
2200	1st Int. Period	Dyn 7/8			C-Group Ib	Kerma moyen
2100		Dyn 9				
2050		Dyn 10				
2000		Dyn 11				
1950	Middle Kingdom	Dyn 12	C-Group IIa	Kerma classique		
1900			C-Group IIb			
1850			Pan-Grave			
1800						
1750	2nd Int. Period	Dyn 13	Pan-Grave			
1700						
1650		Dyn 15 / 17				
1600						
1550	New Kingdom	Dyn 18	Pan-Grave			
1500						
1450						
1400						

Figure 1: Comparative chronologies of Pharaonic Egypt and contemporary cultures active in Upper and Lower Nubia (de Souza, forthcoming (adapted from Schröder 2021)).

3. Tattoo practices in the ancient Nile Valley

This chapter reviews the available evidence for tattooing in the ancient Nile Valley in order to evaluate the purported connections between tattoos and ethnicity on a broad scale. While this analysis endeavours to review as much of the potential evidence as possible, it is focused primarily on the direct evidence for tattooing; that is, tattoos preserved on mummified human remains. The indirect evidence, which is also considered herein, comprises two main categories: possible artistic depictions of tattooed individuals, and artefacts which might have been connected to the process of making tattoos.¹²⁹ This evidence can be tenuous because it is difficult to determine whether an artistic representation depicts tattoos or other forms of body adornment such as scarification, body paint, jewellery, or clothing; or decorative elements intended to embellish the artwork itself without representing any form of actual body adornment.¹³⁰ Similarly, it is difficult to differentiate artefacts which might have functioned as tattooing implements and related material from items with other functions.¹³¹ For this reason, the direct evidence is the focus of the following discussion in which the previous frameworks for differentiating distinct tattoo practices will be reviewed. Further to this, new interpretations of the variation in tattoo practices, and possible associations to ethnicity, will be proposed.

3.1. Mummified individuals with tattoos

3.1.1. Tattoos from Egyptian contexts

The earliest tattoos from an Egyptian context come from Gebelein and date to the Predynastic Period (c. 5300–3000 BCE).¹³² Recent re-examinations of seven naturally mummified individuals curated by the British Museum have identified that at least five of the individuals are tattooed.¹³³ The three earliest individuals, for which specific dates are currently being finalised by radiocarbon dating, are thought to represent the oldest preserved tattoos in the world.¹³⁴ These include two male individuals and one likely female individual and they bear a range of tattoos including both geometric and figural designs across placements including their abdomens, backs,

¹²⁹ Deter-Wolf et al. 2016, 19–20.

¹³⁰ Austin and Arnette 2022, 2; Deter-Wolf et al. 2016, 20; Friedman 2017, 21.

¹³¹ Deter-Wolf et al. 2016, 20; Tassie 2003, 99.

¹³² Shaw 2000, 479.

¹³³ Despite being in the museum collection for over a century, the tattoos were not noticed at the point of excavation or in the course of previous examinations of the bodies (Antoine & Ambers 2014, 25–27; Budge 1920, 359–361; Dawson and Gray 1968, 1–4, pl. I, II, XXII).

¹³⁴ Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th of October 2022. Prior to the observation of these tattoos, the individual known as Ötzi (3370–3100 BCE) was the oldest preserved tattooed individual (Deter-Wolf et al. 2016; Friedman et al. 2018, 116; Samadelli et al. 2015).

and arms.¹³⁵ No tattoos have been observed on their legs despite a high level of skin preservation in those areas, and no more than two small tattoos have been identified on any one individual. More specific descriptions and images of the tattoos are not available as these individuals have not yet been published.¹³⁶ The two other tattooed individuals date to later in the Predynastic Period.¹³⁷ A female individual (BM EA32752) of C¹⁴ age 4497 ± 32 BP bears two tattooed motifs on her right shoulder and upper arm.¹³⁸ The motifs are not clearly identifiable; one may represent a crooked staff, throw-stick, baton, or clapper (**Figure 2**), while the other (**Figure 3**) may be “an abstract element used to emphasize or connect different aspects of the composition”.¹³⁹ A young adult male individual (BM EA32751) of C¹⁴ age 4461 ± 36 BP bears two tattooed animal figures on his upper right arm (**Figure 4**).¹⁴⁰ The figures can be tentatively identified as a Barbary sheep and a wild bull.¹⁴¹ It might be significant that the two individuals have different types of images represented in their tattoos;¹⁴² the male’s depict animals that can be identified to species level and the female’s represent symbols requiring further interpretation.¹⁴³ It is interesting to note that both individuals are tattooed on the upper right arm, although it is certainly possible that tattoos on other areas of the body are inaccessible, not preserved, or were not detected for another reason.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁵ These individuals have been examined under infrared light conditions previously, but their tattoos were not observed, perhaps due to the “limited accessibility” to some areas of their bodies when those examinations were undertaken (Friedman et al. 2018, Table 1).

¹³⁶ Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th of October 2022.

¹³⁷ Friedman 2017, 12–17; Friedman et al. 2018. These individuals are therefore approximately contemporary with Ötzi (Friedman et al. 2018, 122).

¹³⁸ Friedman 2017, 14, Fig. 1.1. This radiocarbon date corresponds to a calibrated date range of 3351–3092 BCE with a 95.4% confidence (Friedman et al. 2018, 118, Table 2).

¹³⁹ Friedman et al. 2018, 121.

¹⁴⁰ Friedman 2017, 14, Fig. 1.2. This radiocarbon date corresponds to a calibrated date range of 3341–3017 BCE with a 95.4% confidence (Friedman et al. 2018, 118, Table 2).

¹⁴¹ Friedman et al. 2018, 119.

¹⁴² Friedman 2017, 22.

¹⁴³ Friedman 2017, 16–17.

¹⁴⁴ Although skin preservation for both of these individuals is estimated to be 95%, some parts of their bodies were not accessible in the course of the examinations due to their positioning (Friedman et al. 2018, Table 1).



Figure 2: Photograph of one of the tattoos on the right shoulder of an adult female individual from Gebelein dating to the Predynastic Period (BM EA32752), observed under infrared light conditions (Friedman et al. 2018, Fig. 2).

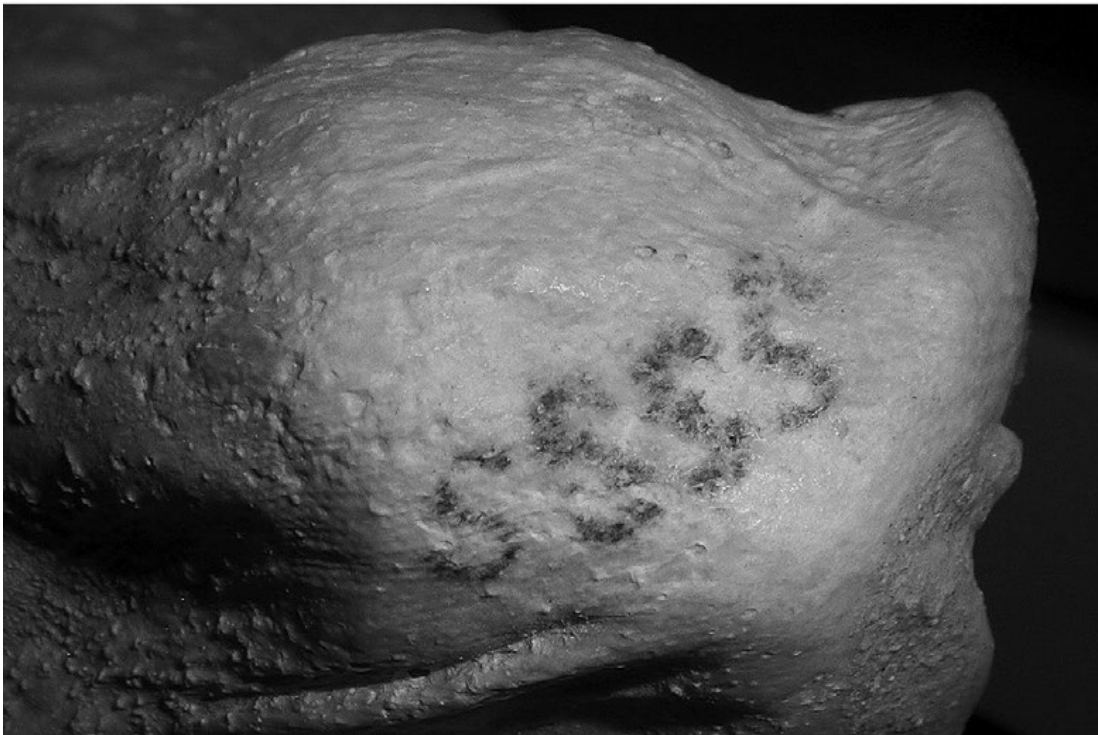


Figure 3: Photograph of one of the tattoos on the shoulder of an adult female individual from Gebelein dating to the Predynastic Period (BM EA32752), observed under infrared light conditions (Friedman et al. 2018, Fig. 2).



Figure 4: Photograph of the tattoos on the upper right arm of an adult male individual from Gebelein dating to the Predynastic Period (BM EA32751), observed under infrared light conditions (Friedman et al. 2018, Fig. 1).

Another recent discovery confirms that tattooing was practiced in Egypt during the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2160 BCE). A male individual of unknown provenance dating to approximately the middle of this period bears a tattoo of a *wadjet* eye on the back of the shoulder.¹⁴⁵ The remainder of his body is covered by matting and could not be observed in the course of the investigations undertaken so far, so it is possible that he bears more tattoos on other areas of his body. It is hoped that future research on this individual might be able to identify any further tattoos, as well as the publication of images and further details pertaining to this tattoo.

At least four tattooed individuals date to the Middle Kingdom. Three individuals, referred to as Amunet, Individual 1 and Individual 2 for this study, date to the reign of Mentuhotep II (c.

¹⁴⁵ Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th of October 2022. Dating of this individual is complicated by poor C14 calibration for the time period to which he likely dates.

2055–2004 BCE)¹⁴⁶ at the beginning of the Eleventh Dynasty and were buried in pit tombs associated with his mortuary temple complex at Deir el Bahari. These three tattooed individuals form the case study for this thesis and will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter. The fourth tattooed individual from the Middle Kingdom, a female individual from Asasif (Asasif 1008) bears a tattoo of two facing birds on her upper right arm (**Figure 5**); she is tentatively dated to the reign of Amenemhet I (c. 1985–1955 BCE) in the Twelfth Dynasty.¹⁴⁷



Figure 5: Photograph of the tattoo on a female individual from the Middle Kingdom (Asasif 1008) observed under infrared light conditions (Morris 2011, Fig. 5).

¹⁴⁶ Shaw 2000, 480.

¹⁴⁷ Friedman 2017, Table 1.1. This date is uncertain because the excavators originally dated the tomb assemblage to the Second Intermediate Period and early Eighteenth Dynasty. The temple platform on which the grave is constructed has been dated to the reign of Amenemhet I, and Morris (2011, 82) argues that some of the material in the burial is indicative of a Middle Kingdom date, suggesting that “the later cultural material may have been mixed in with material from a burial contemporary with the platform”.

Finally, tattoos have been observed on three mummified individuals from Deir el Medina, dating to the late New Kingdom (c. 1550–1069 BCE) or early Third Intermediate Period (c. 1069–664 BCE).¹⁴⁸ The first of these is an female individual aged twenty five to thirty four (DEM 290.15.001) likely dating to the Ramesside period (c. 1295–1069 BCE).¹⁴⁹ She bears at least thirty tattooed motifs across her neck, shoulders, back, and arms (**Figure 6**).¹⁵⁰ Her head, legs, and hands are not preserved, so it is possible her tattoos were even more extensive than can now be observed and documented. The tattoos include animals and symbols common in Pharaonic Egyptian imagery, many of which can be identified with specific hieroglyphs.¹⁵¹

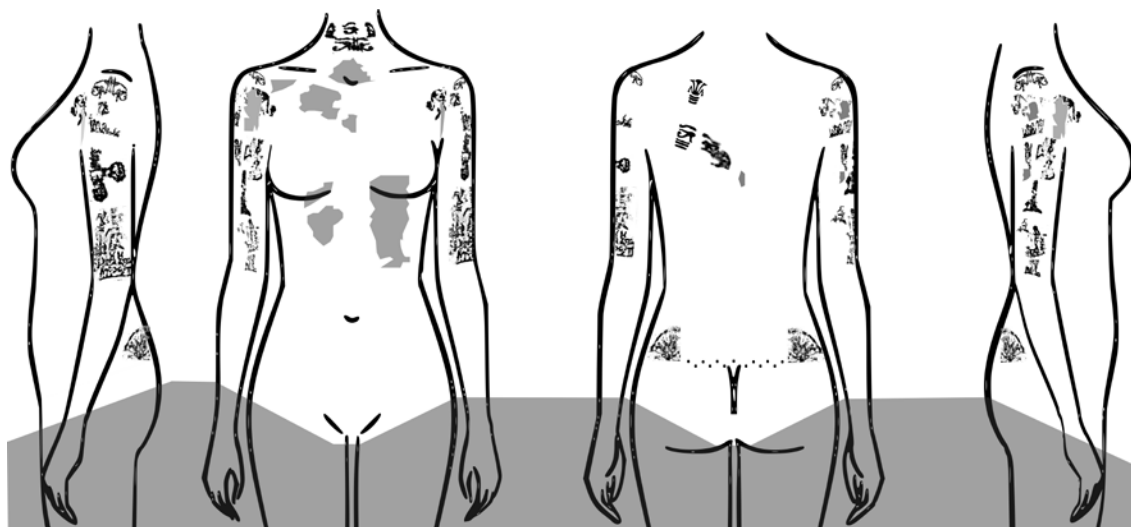


Figure 6: Diagram of tattoos observed on an adult female individual from New Kingdom Deir el Medina (DEM 290.15.001) based on photographs taken under visible light and infrared conditions; grey shading indicates areas of the skin that are damaged or missing (Austin and Gobeil 2016, Fig. 2).

Two further adult female individuals with tattoos from Deir el Medina have recently been identified; these remains are even more fragmentary than DEM 290.15.001.¹⁵² The first (DEM 298.19.004) is a partially complete left os coxa approximately dating to the Nineteenth to Twenty First Dynasties (1295–945 BCE).¹⁵³ The os coxa was found “sitting on top of other commingled human remains with no associated bandages or other articulated elements”,¹⁵⁴ and

¹⁴⁸ Dates for all three tattooed individuals from Deir el Medina are based on material culture typologies of grave goods and mummification styles (Austin and Gobeil 2016, 25; Austin and Arnette 2022, 3, 5); approximate dynastic ranges were thereby obtained and dates for these periods follow Shaw (2000, 481). See Watson 2016.

¹⁴⁹ Austin and Arnette 2022, 2; Austin and Gobeil 2016; Friedman 2017, Table 1.1. The material in the assemblage in which this individual was found dates primarily to the Ramesside Period, with some material also aligning with the early Twenty First Dynasty. Therefore, the date of this individual’s burial cannot be determined with more certainty (Austin and Gobeil 2016, 25).

¹⁵⁰ Austin and Gobeil 2016, 25.

¹⁵¹ Austin and Gobeil 2016, Table 1.

¹⁵² Austin and Arnette 2022.

¹⁵³ Austin and Arnette 2022, 3; Shaw 2000, 481.

¹⁵⁴ Austin and Arnette 2022, 2.

is thought to belong to a woman aged twenty nine or older.¹⁵⁵ A skin fragment adhering to the lateral surface, corresponding to the back of the left hip, was observed to be tattooed (**Figure 7**). The tattoo design has been reconstructed by Austin and Arnette (2022; **Figure 8**) as symmetrical, on the basis that the other two tattooed individuals from New Kingdom Deir el Medina bear symmetrical tattoos in this placement (**Figures 6 and 10**).¹⁵⁶



Figure 7: Photograph of a partially complete left os coxa thought to belong to an adult female from New Kingdom Deir el Medina (DEM 298.19.004) with tattooed skin fragment preserved (left); the same os coxa imaged under infrared light conditions (right) to enhance the visibility of the tattoo (Austin and Arnette 2022, Fig. 1).

¹⁵⁵ Austin and Arnette 2022, 3

¹⁵⁶ Austin and Arnette 2022, 4.



Figure 8: Speculative reconstruction of the tattoos on DEM 298.19.004, assuming the composition was originally symmetrical; the preserved parts of the tattoos are indicated in black (Austin and Arnette 2022, Fig. 2).

The third tattooed individual from Deir el Medina (DEM 356.19.001) consists of a partially preserved lower torso and upper legs thought to belong to a woman aged twenty nine or older, dating to the Eighteenth to Twenty First Dynasty.¹⁵⁷ Skin is preserved on the lower back and buttocks, partially deteriorated on the thighs, and unobservable on the abdomen and pelvis.¹⁵⁸ These tattoos, unlike the other two individuals, were not observable under visible light but were identified by the application of infrared photography (**Figure 9**).¹⁵⁹ There are some tattoo remnants on the right side which correspond to the preserved design on the left side; it is therefore assumed that the tattoo was symmetrical (**Figure 10**).

¹⁵⁷ Austin and Arnette 2022, 5–7.

¹⁵⁸ Austin and Arnette 2022, 6.

¹⁵⁹ Austin and Arnette 2022, 7.



Figure 9: Photograph of skin fragments thought to belong to an adult female individual from New Kingdom Deir el Medina (DEM 356.19.001) in which tattoos are not visible (top); the same remains photographed under infrared light conditions (bottom) revealing the preserved tattoos (Austin and Arnette 2022, Fig. 5).



Figure 10: Speculative reconstruction of the tattoos on DEM 356.19.001, assuming the composition was originally symmetrical; the preserved parts of the tattoos are indicated in black (Austin and Arnette 2022, Fig. 6).

3.1.2. Tattoos from Nubian contexts

The earliest examples of preserved tattoos from a Nubian context are those borne by three adult female individuals from cemetery HK27C at Hierakonpolis (Tombs 9, 10, and 36).¹⁶⁰ The cemetery has been attributed to a C-Group community based on material culture and burial practices and dates to c. 1985–1855 BCE, contemporary with the first half of the Twelfth Dynasty.¹⁶¹ Their tattoos are composed of many small dots or dashes, arranged into linear or “lozenge” (diamond) patterns over their torsos, arms, and hands (**Figures 11–13**).¹⁶² Their skin is not well preserved, so the placements and extent of the extant tattoos are likely incomplete.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Friedman 2004; 2017; Friedman & Paulson 2013; Paulson 2012; Pieri & Antoine 2014.

¹⁶¹ Friedman 2017, Table 1.1.

¹⁶² Friedman 2017, 26–31.

¹⁶³ Friedman 2017, 27.

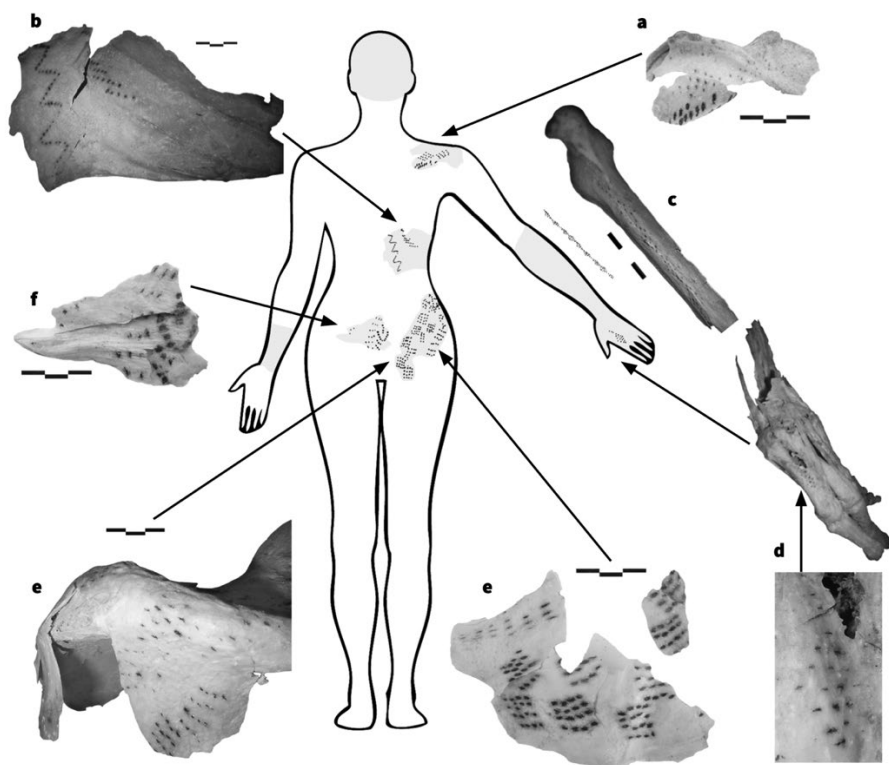


Figure 11: Diagram of tattoos on the adult female individual from Tomb 9, HK27C (1985–1855 BCE) showing tattooed skin fragments photographed under infrared light and a reconstruction of the tattoos; grey areas indicate skin preservation (Friedman 2017, Fig. 1.9).

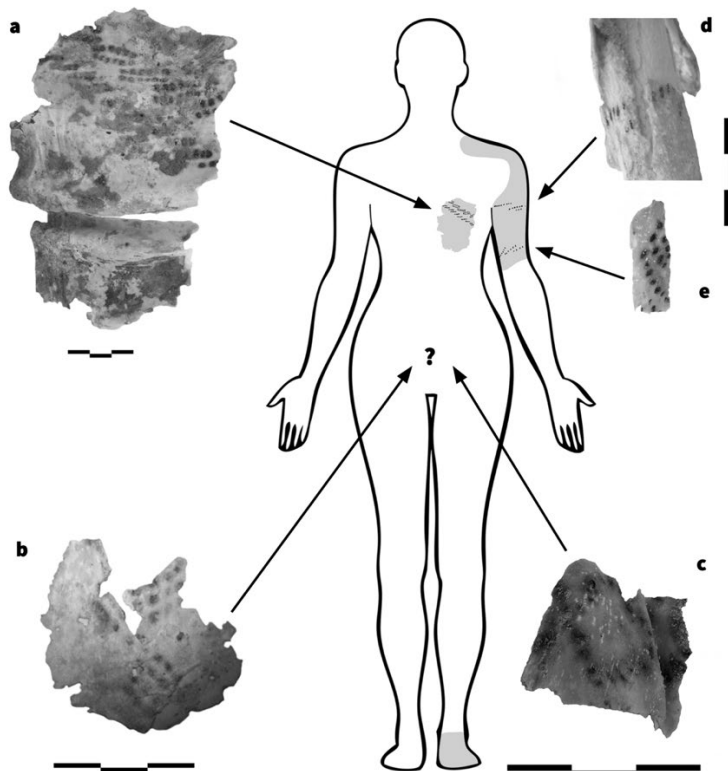


Figure 12: Diagram of tattoos on the adult female individual from Tomb 10, HK27C (1985–1855 BCE) showing tattooed skin fragments photographed under infrared light and a reconstruction of the tattoos; grey areas indicate skin preservation (Friedman 2017, Fig. 1.10).

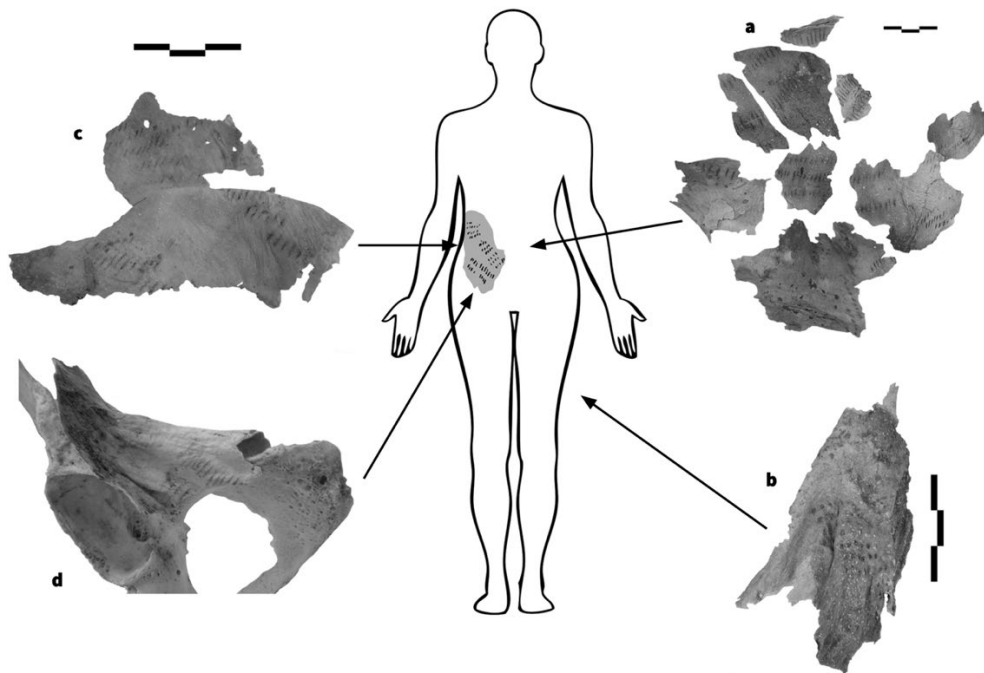


Figure 13: Diagram of tattoos on the adult female individual from Tomb 36, HK27C (1985–1855 BCE) showing tattooed skin fragments photographed under infrared light and a reconstruction of the tattoos; grey areas indicate skin preservation (Friedman 2017, Fig. 1.11).

Tattoos have also been identified on one young adult male individual from the Pan-Grave cemetery HK47 at Hierakonpolis (Burial 12), dated to c. 1750 BCE (early Thirteenth Dynasty).¹⁶⁴ His tattoos are composed of many small dots arranged into triangle patterns, as opposed to the linear and lozenge arrangements known from HK27C.¹⁶⁵ The skin fragments with tattoos are thought to have come from his shoulders and upper chest (Figure 14), but his skin is not well preserved and it cannot be determined whether or not he bore any other tattoos.¹⁶⁶

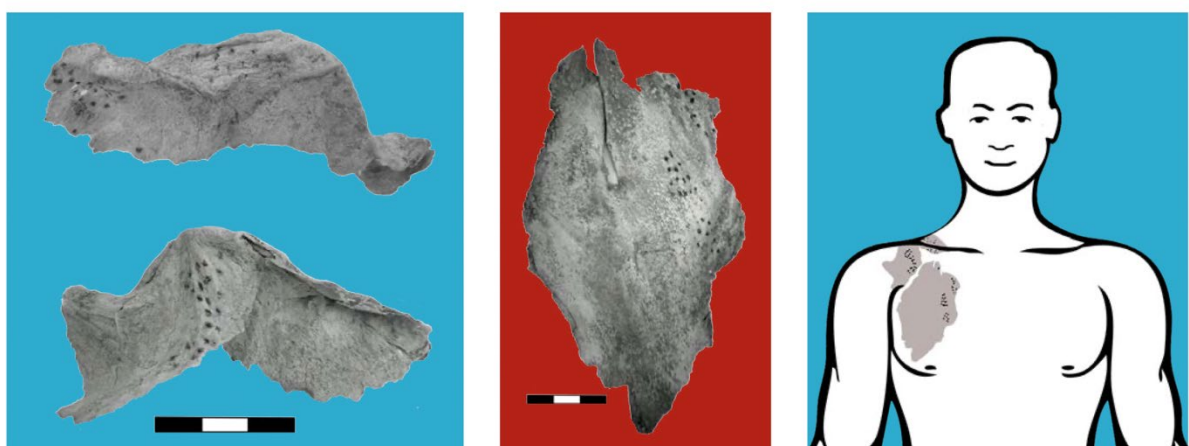


Figure 14: Photographs of tattooed skin fragments (left, middle) belonging to the adult male individual from Burial 12, HK47 (c. 1750 BCE); a reconstructive diagram showing the proposed placement on his shoulder (right) (Friedman 2016, 26).

¹⁶⁴ Friedman 2017, Table 1.1, 33.

¹⁶⁵ Friedman 2016.

¹⁶⁶ Friedman 2016.

A female individual from Cemetery 110 at Kubban (Grave 271) also bears tattoos.¹⁶⁷ The marks are arranged in a “cross hatched design” composed of small dashes and were observed on a skin fragment thought to have come from her abdomen (**Figure 15**).¹⁶⁸ It is not clear why the excavator attributed the tattooed skin fragment to the abdomen; it may be based on comparisons to figurines, such as the one photographed with the skin fragments (**Figure 15**). Alternatively, this may be an assumption based on the placements of tattoos on the individuals from Deir el Bahari, all of whom had been discovered and published prior to publication of this individual (see § 4.1). The pattern of the tattoos closely resembles a tattoo on a skin fragment belonging to the adult female individual from Tomb 10 at HK27C, which is also thought to have come from the abdomen (**Figure 12**).¹⁶⁹ In their initial publication, the excavators of Cemetery 110 attributed this portion of the cemetery to the C-Group on the basis that ‘pan graves’ were thought to be a terminal form of C-Group burial.¹⁷⁰ As a result, the burial of the individual with the tattooed skin fragments was attributed to the C-Group culture, and the tattoos have been identified this way in all subsequent analyses.¹⁷¹ As discussed in § 2.3.2 above, a recent chronological review of the C-Group has determined that the latest archaeological material attributable to this culture dates to approximately 1800 BCE, eliminating C-Group Phase III, to which this cemetery was originally attributed (see **Figure 1** in Chapter 2 above).¹⁷² This burial was previously dated to 1750–1500 BCE,¹⁷³ which therefore precludes a C-Group attribution. Further, a recent re-analysis of the material culture from Cemetery 110 demonstrates that some of the burials contain Pan-Grave pottery indicative of a date contemporary with the Seventeenth Dynasty (1580–1550 BCE).¹⁷⁴ In light of these new interpretations, it now seems more likely that Grave 271 should be attributed to the Pan-Grave culture, which would make this individual the only known example of tattoos on a woman from a Pan-Grave style burial.

¹⁶⁷ Firth 1927, 54, pl. 25d1.

¹⁶⁸ Firth 1927, 54; Friedman 2017, 29–30.

¹⁶⁹ Friedman 2017, 29–30.

¹⁷⁰ Firth 1927, 9, 23, 47. de Souza (2022, 7–8) describes how this idea had previously been proposed by Reisner (1910); at this time, it was also thought that the Pan-Grave culture was specific to Egypt (Steindorff 1935, 9–10) which enforced the idea that Pan-Grave material in Nubia was actually late C-Group (Steindorff 1935, 193–94).

¹⁷¹ Ashby 2018, 73; Austin 2022, 402; Austin and Gobeil 2016, 24; Bianchi 1988, 23; Friedman 2017, 26; Keimer 1948, 16; Renaut 2020, 70; Tassie 2003, 89.

¹⁷² Schröder 2021.

¹⁷³ Friedman 2017, Table 1.1.

¹⁷⁴ de Souza 2019, 71–72; Shaw 2000, 481.



Figure 15: Photograph of tattooed skin fragments (a) belonging to the female individual from Grave 271 at Cemetery 110, Kubban (1580–1550 BCE), as well as a figurine with decoration resembling the tattoos (b) (Keimer 1948, pl. X). This is a reproduction of the only photograph available of these tattoos (Firth 1927, pl. 25d).

Tattooed individuals dating to the Meroitic Period (c. 350 BCE–350 CE)¹⁷⁵ have been excavated in Sudanese Nubia. These include a left and right hand from the same individual (**Figures 17–18**) and a skin fragment from a left forearm (**Figure 16**) which may belong to a second

¹⁷⁵ Alvrus et al. 2001, 395.

individual from Semna South,¹⁷⁶ and fragmentary remains of ten individuals from Aksha.¹⁷⁷ Many of the tattoos are in linear and lozenge arrangements composed of small dots or dashes,¹⁷⁸ similar to the earlier Nubian tattoos (see **Figure 19**). However, some of them appear to be animal and anthropomorphic figures composed of dots,¹⁷⁹ unlike the purely geometric designs of earlier periods (see **Figure 20**).¹⁸⁰ Small facial tattoos and hand tattoos appear to be made of solid lines, not dots or dashes (such as those in **Figures 21–22**).¹⁸¹ While most of the Meroitic tattooed individuals seem to be adult and adolescent females, one of the adults has been identified as male and two individuals, one adult and one adolescent, are of indeterminate sex (see Appendix 1).¹⁸² Preserved tattoos from the X-Group (350–550 CE)¹⁸³ and Christian (500–1400 CE)¹⁸⁴ Periods in Nubia (**Figures 23–24**) no longer use dots or dashes but instead are made of solid lines representing patterns and symbols,¹⁸⁵ indicating significant changes to tattoo practices.

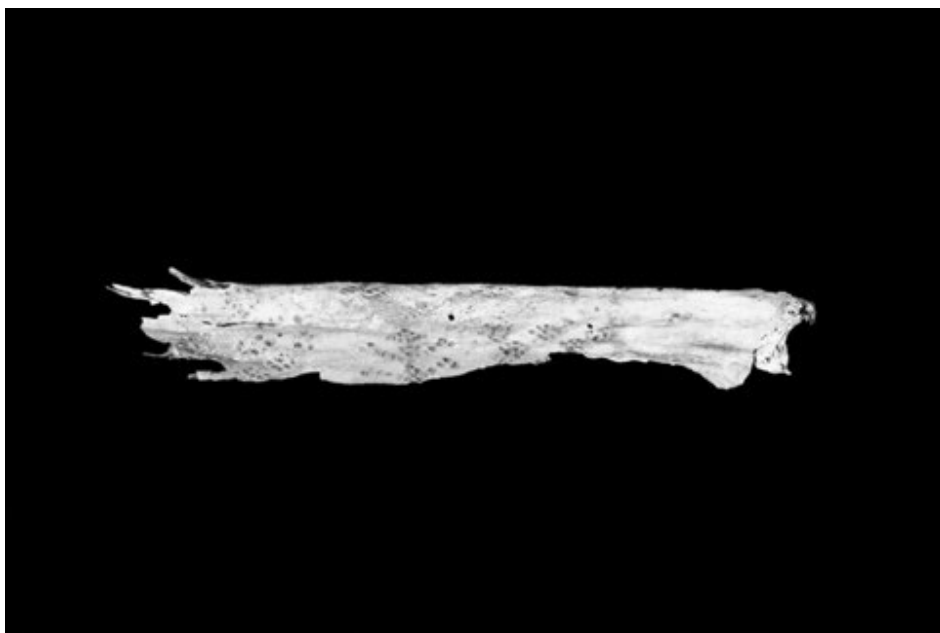


Figure 16: Photograph of tattoos on a skin fragment from a left arm thought to belong to an adult female from N-247 at Semna South (100 BCE–150 CE) (Alvrus et al. 2001, Fig. 7).

¹⁷⁶ Alvrus et al. 2001, 396–397. The tattooed remains were recovered from a burial apparently containing two adult females and seven subadults; it is thought that the tattooed remains belong to one or both of the adult females (Alvrus et al. 2001, 400).

¹⁷⁷ Vila 1967, 368–369, pl. XII–XIX.

¹⁷⁸ Vila 1967, pl. XIII–XIX.

¹⁷⁹ Alvrus et al. 2001, Fig. 7; Vila 1967, pl. XV–XVII.

¹⁸⁰ Reanut 2020, 69.

¹⁸¹ Alvrus et al. 2001, Figs. 2–6; Vila 1967 pl. XII.

¹⁸² Vila 1967, pl. XII–XIX.

¹⁸³ Alvrus et al. 2001, 395.

¹⁸⁴ Alvrus et al. 2001, 395.

¹⁸⁵ Antoine and Ambers 2014, 24, pl. 4; Armelagos 1969, Fig. 5; Vandenbeusch and Antoine 2015.



Figure 17a, b: Comparison between visible light photograph in which tattoos are not visible (a, left), and the same human remains photographed under infrared light conditions (b, right) showing the preserved tattoos on the dorsal surface of a left hand thought to belong to an adult female from N-247 at Semna South (100 BCE–150 CE) (Alvrus et al. 2011, Fig. 2–3).



Figure 18a, b: Comparison between visible light photograph in which tattoos are not visible (a, left), and the same human remains photographed under infrared light conditions (b, right) showing the preserved tattoos on the dorsal surface of a right hand thought to belong to an adult female from N-247 at Semna South (100 BCE–150 CE) (Alvrus et al. 2001, Fig. 4–5).

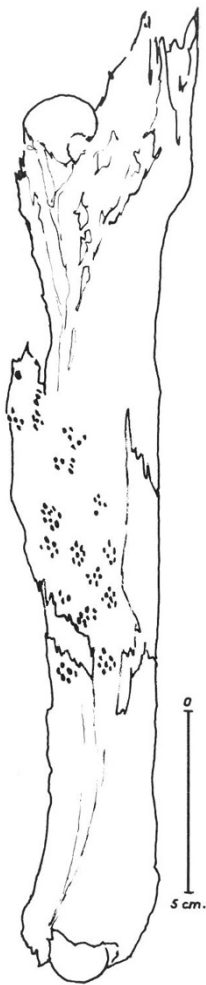


Figure 19: Diagram of tattoos observed on an adolescent female individual (AM XXXVI) from Aksha (100 BCE–150 CE) (Vila 1967, pl. XIII 2).

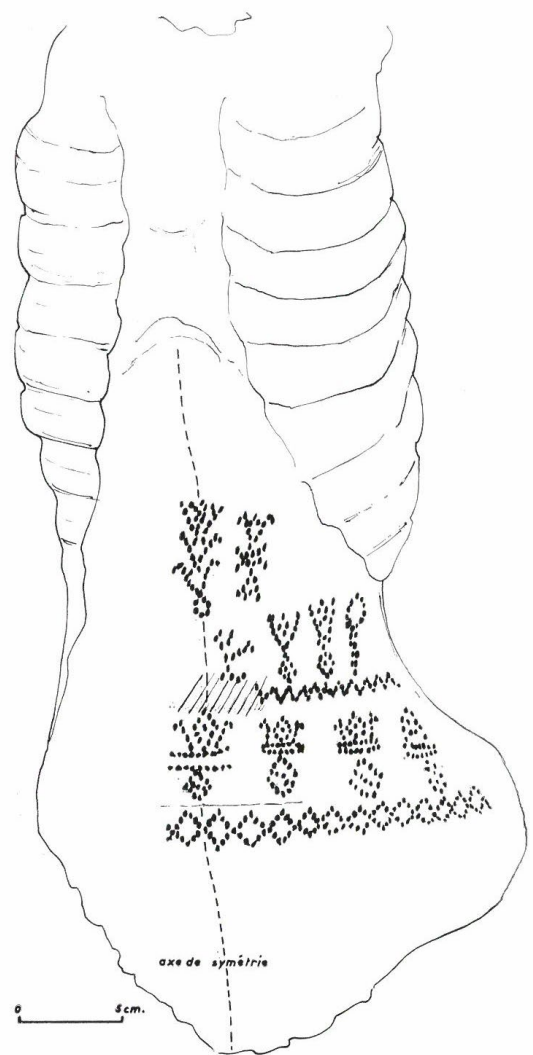


Figure 21: Diagram of tattoos observed on an adolescent individual of indeterminate sex (AM XXXVIII) from Aksha (100 BCE–150 CE) (Vila 1967, pl. XV).

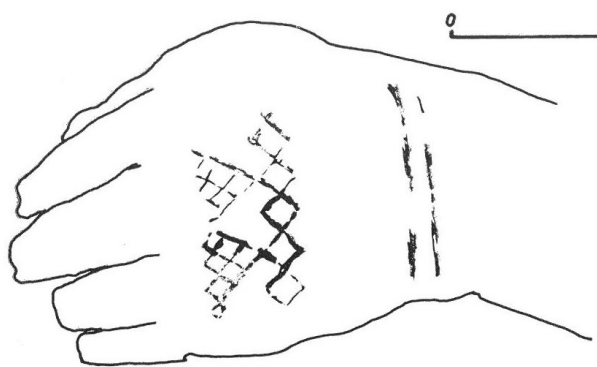


Figure 20: Diagram of hand tattoos observed on an adult female individual (AM XXXII) from Aksha (100 BCE–150 CE) (Vila 1967, pl. XIV).

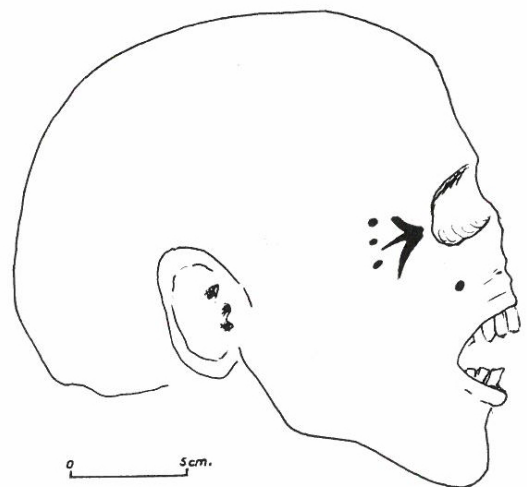


Figure 22: Diagram of facial tattoos on an adult male individual (AM LXXXI) from Aksha (100 BCE–150 CE) (Vila 1967, pl. XII 4).

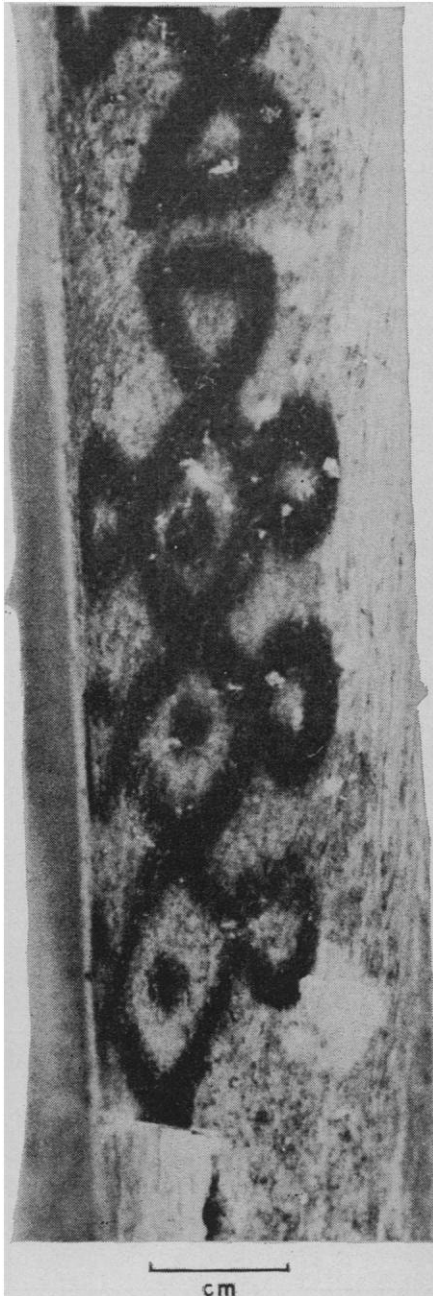


Figure 23: Infrared photograph of a tattoo observed on the upper leg of a male individual dating to the X-Group Period, Wadi Halfa (Armstrong 1969, Fig. 5).

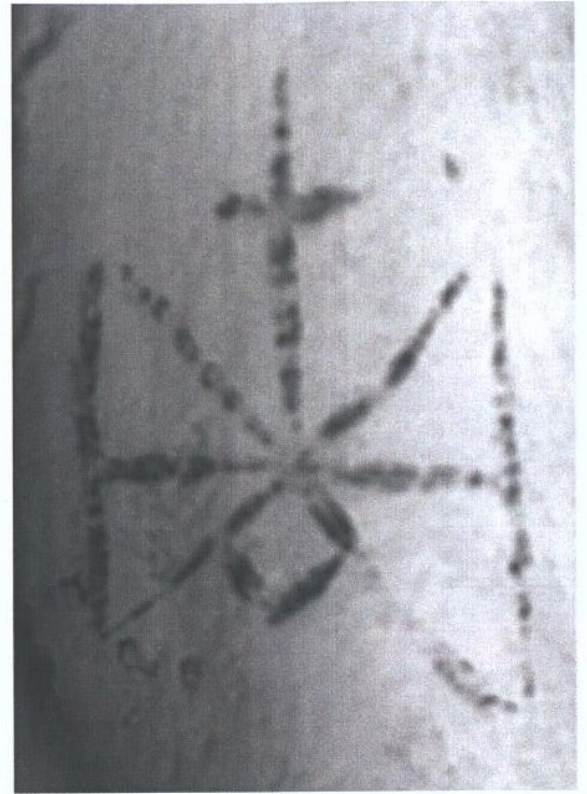


Figure 24: Infrared photograph of a tattoo observed on the upper leg of an adult female individual from et-Tereif, dating to c.700 CE, Christian Period (Antoine and Ambers 2014, pl. 4).

3.2. Indirect evidence for tattooing

While the direct evidence – from preserved tattoos on mummified human remains – provides the only definitive information about tattoo practices, indirect evidence from material culture may also be helpful for providing additional context and support for better understanding the lived experience of tattooed individuals. This discussion does not include textual evidence for

tattooing, because there is no known word for ‘tattoo’ in Egyptian,¹⁸⁶ and no definitive examples of references to tattooing in texts have been noted.¹⁸⁷ A full analysis of this category of evidence is not within the scope of this thesis, but here follows a brief summary.

3.2.1. Anthropomorphic figurines

Even prior to the first observations of tattoos on human remains from the Predynastic Period, it was thought that tattooing was practiced at this time due to a limited number of female anthropomorphic figurines with either incised (**Figure 25**) or painted (**Figure 26**) decoration.¹⁸⁸ Friedman reconsiders both types of figurines in comparison to the tattooed individuals from the Predynastic Period, arguing that the figurines with incised decoration are more likely to depict tattoos, and the figurines with painted decoration may depict body paint or other temporary forms of body adornment.¹⁸⁹ None of the tattooed individuals from the Predynastic Period (see § 3.1.1 above) bear more than two small tattoos, although it is possible that not all of their tattoos have been preserved or were observable during their examination. Nonetheless, it is evident that their tattoos are not as extensive as the decoration on the painted figurines. Conversely, the small motifs used to decorate the incised figurines are more consistent with those observed in the preserved tattoos.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁶ Karev 2022, 9.

¹⁸⁷ There is one purported reference to tattooing in a Ptolemaic period papyrus, the papyrus Bremner-Rhind, but the interpretation of the verb is ambiguous and the context in which it is used does not correlate with other evidence for tattooing from the ancient Nile Valley; see Faulkner 1936 for a translation of the text and Austin 2022, 417 fn.2; Bianchi 1988, 27; Keimer 1948, 52–53 for previous discussions of this possible reference to tattooing.

¹⁸⁸ For example, Bianchi 1988, 21, Fig. 1; Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928, 61, pl. XXXIV, 6, 100; Fletcher 2005, 11; Keimer 1948, 1–6, Figs. 1–5; Stevenson 2017, 71.

¹⁸⁹ Friedman 2017, 18–21. Hornblower (1929, 33, Fig. 1–4, pl. xii) interprets some of the decoration on two such figurines as representing beaded jewellery.

¹⁹⁰ Friedman 2017, 19.



Figure 25: Photograph of a Predynastic female anthropomorphic figurine from Badari (UC 9601) with incised decoration (Friedman 2017, Fig1.4b).



Figure 26: Photograph of a Predynastic female anthropomorphic figurine of unknown provenance (BM EA58064) with painted decoration, and diagrams of the painted motifs (Friedman 2017, Fig. 1.5).

Similarly, Middle Kingdom truncated faience figurines have repeatedly been proposed to depict tattooed women.¹⁹¹ Many of these figurines feature dotted lozenge designs on their thighs which may depict tattoos (see **Figures 27–28**); they seemingly correlate with the placements and designs observed on the tattooed individuals from HK27C and Deir el Bahari (see § 3.1.2 and § 4.2 respectively).¹⁹² Although the patterns used in the decoration on the figurines resemble the tattoo designs, they are much larger relative to the size of the figurines and their placement in symmetrical lines down the thighs is different than the known tattoo placements. Roehrig likens the decoration to “an apron of beads”;¹⁹³ it might be suggested that the depictions correlate with beaded jewellery or clothing rather than tattoos. It is worthwhile to draw a comparison to other faience figurines (see **Figure 27**) which seem to be depicted wearing jewellery or clothing. The example to which the tattooed individuals were immediately compared (**Figure 28**) is wearing beaded jewellery on her upper body and a shell girdle and the possible tattoo markings on her thighs are composed of the same size dots as the beads. These factors might support an interpretation of the decoration as depicting clothes or jewellery made of beads.



Figure 27: Photographs of four faience female anthropomorphic figurines from the tomb of Hepy at Lisht South, dating to the Twelfth Dynasty (Tooley 2017, Fig. 1). The figurine second from the left is decorated with marks resembling tattoos.

¹⁹¹ For example, Bianchi 1998, 22, Fig. 3; Tassie 2003, 93–94; Waraksa 2008, 2; Winlock 1923, 20, Fig. 15. See Tooley 2017 for detailed analysis of this type of figurines.

¹⁹² Austin and Gobeil 2016, 24; Friedman 2017, 24; Roehrig 2015, 530.

¹⁹³ Roehrig 2015, 530.



Figure 28: Photographs of a faience figurine of a woman (JE 47710) from the tomb of Neferhotep the Bowman (Asasif 518, Middle Kingdom), with decoration resembling the tattoos on the individuals from Deir el Bahari and HK27C (Morris 2011, 79–80, Fig. 3; Winlock 1923, Fig. 15).

Also dating to the Middle Kingdom, wooden paddle dolls have been interpreted as depicting tattooed women on the basis that they sometimes feature marks which resemble the tattoos on the individuals from Deir el Bahari and HK27C (**Figure 29**), or the tattoos on other individuals from Egyptian contexts, such as the individual from Asasif 1008 (**Figure 30**).¹⁹⁴ The use of different styles of decoration, which seemingly reflect the different styles of tattooing being practiced in this period, might support their interpretation as representing tattoos.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Morris 2011, 71; Tooley 1989, 324–325.

¹⁹⁵ Friedman 2017, 26. Morris' interpretations of these figurines and the ramifications for interpreting tattooed individuals from this period are discussed further in § 4.3.2 below.



Figure 29: Photograph of a paddle doll (JE 56274) from tomb 816 at Asasif, dating to the Middle Kingdom, with decoration composed of dotted lozenges on the chest which resembles the tattoos on the individuals from Deir el Bahari and HK27C (Morris 2011, Fig. 3).



Figure 30: Photographs of a paddle doll (MMA 31.3.43) from tomb 818 at Asasif, dating to the Middle Kingdom, with decoration in the form of a bird figure in areas corresponding to the thighs and the small of the back, which resembles the tattoo on the individual from Asasif (Morris 2011, Fig. 5).

Anthropomorphic figurines from Nubian contexts of various time periods have also been interpreted as representing tattooed individuals. While there are no preserved tattoos from A-Group Nubian contexts, the idea that tattooing was practiced in this period might be supported by some incised ceramic female figurines. The figurines are thought to depict tattooed individuals based on the similarity of their decoration to tattoos known from later Nubian contexts.¹⁹⁶ This interpretation is supported by the presence of possible tattooing tools in female burials of the same period (see § 3.2.3).

¹⁹⁶ Friedman 2017, 21; Haaland and Haaland 2017, 92, Fig. 5.3, 5.4; Nordström 1972, 127.

Figurines from C-Group contexts are thought to depict tattooed women due to the resemblance between their incised decoration and known tattoos (**Figure 31**).¹⁹⁷ The demonstrable similarity between the purported depictions of tattoos and the actual preserved tattoos might support the idea that the figurines represent tattooed individuals. The same types of decoration also appear on C-Group pottery, which some have theorised might mean that C-Group women were both the tattooists and the potters within the society and inscribed the same designs on their own bodies as they used to decorate their pottery.¹⁹⁸ It cannot be proven that either pottery production or tattooing were exclusively female activities. Further, the reuse of stylistic elements in multiple media within the same culture does not necessitate that the same subset of the community produced all of the material, however neither can this hypothesis be disproven on the available evidence.



Figure 31: Photographs of C-Group figurines with incised decoration possibly representing tattoos, provenance unknown (Friedman 2017, Fig. 1.8).

¹⁹⁷ Friedman 2017, 26, Fig. 1.8; Morris 2011, 80; Renaut 2020, 70; Tassie 2003, 89–90; Steffensen 2007, 141. See Butterworth 2016 for a detailed analysis of C-Group figurines.

¹⁹⁸ Hafaas 2006, 103; Steffensen 2007, 142, Fig. 6.

In summary, anthropomorphic figurines may depict tattoos, especially those types that have demonstrable parallels in tattoos preserved on human skin. However, as aforementioned, some types that have been purported to depict tattoos are seemingly more likely to represent body paint, jewellery, clothing, or other forms of body adornment.¹⁹⁹ It is also possible that the marks on these figurines are not intended to directly depict any form of human body modification or decoration, but to decorate the objects themselves.²⁰⁰

3.2.2. Other depictions of tattooed individuals

From the New Kingdom, there are several examples of girls and women depicted completely or partially unclothed with a figure of the god Bes on one or both of their thighs. They appear in various media including reliefs (**Figures 32–33**), statuettes, mirror handles, a wine bowl (**Figure 34**), and a cosmetic spoon.²⁰¹ On this basis it has long been theorised that this is a real tattoo design, although there were no definite parallels for it in preserved tattoos until recently.²⁰² Austin and Arnette interpret part of the tattoo composition observed on individual DEM 298.19.004 (**Figure 8**) as representing a Bes figure.²⁰³ This differs from the artistic depictions in both its placement on the lower back instead of the thigh and its combination with other tattoo marks to form a larger composition. However, this example confirms that Bes figures were used in tattoos in the New Kingdom, which might support the interpretation that the artistic material represents tattooed women.

¹⁹⁹ Deter-Wolf 2013, 16. See Keimer 1948, 17.

²⁰⁰ Austin and Arnette 2022, 2; Austin and Gobeil 2016, 23–24.

²⁰¹ Bianchi 1988, 24–26, Fig. 8–11; Friedman 2017, 33; Keimer 1948, 40–42, Fig. 39, pl. XX–XXII; Renaut 2020, 75–76, pl. VII.

²⁰² Bianchi (1988, 25, Fig. 4) suggests that one of the tattooed motifs on the abdomen of an adolescent individual of indeterminate sex (AM XXXVIII) from Aksha is an abstract Bes figure (Vila 1967, pl. XV; **Figure 21** above), but he presents the image of this individual upside down and does not specify which of the marks he means. Tassie (2003, 94–95) mistakenly interprets Bianchi's comments as referring to a Bes tattoo on the individual's thigh. Renaut (2020, 69–70) identifies these errors and suggests that, alternatively, the motif is an abstract composition with known parallels in Meroitic material culture.

²⁰³ Austin and Arnette 2022, 4.



Figure 32: A relief depicting two women from the tomb of Nakht-Amon at Thebes, Nineteenth Dynasty. The individual on the right has a Bes figure on her right thigh, visible within the red circle (Keimer 1948, pl. XXI 1).



Figure 33: A relief from Nineteenth Dynasty Deir el Medina depicting a female individual with Bes figures on both upper anterior thighs (Keimer 1948, pl. XX).



Figure 34: A wine bowl featuring a depiction of a female individual with a Bes figure on her right thigh, unknown provenance, thought to date to the Eighteenth or Early Nineteenth Dynasty (Keimer 1948, pl. XXI 2).

Finally, there is one possible depiction of a tattooed man, with dotted marks in linear arrangements on his upper chest, on a stele from Twelfth Dynasty Abydos (**Figure 32**).²⁰⁴ The placement of these marks is similar to the triangular dotted compositions observed on the skin fragments from cemetery HK47 at Hierakonpolis, which are thought to come from the chest and shoulders of an adult male individual. The use of dots arranged into linear compositions parallels tattoos from Deir el Bahari and HK27C. These similarities might lend some credence to the interpretation that the stele depicts a tattooed individual. While there are currently no tattooed men from Middle Kingdom or C-Group contexts, there are examples from Predynastic Period, Old Kingdom, and Pan-Grave contexts, and the possibility that men were tattooed in the Middle Kingdom or in C-Group communities remains open. Without additional context it is impossible to evaluate this depiction further. As more tattooed individuals are discovered, the credibility of this possible depiction will likely become clearer.

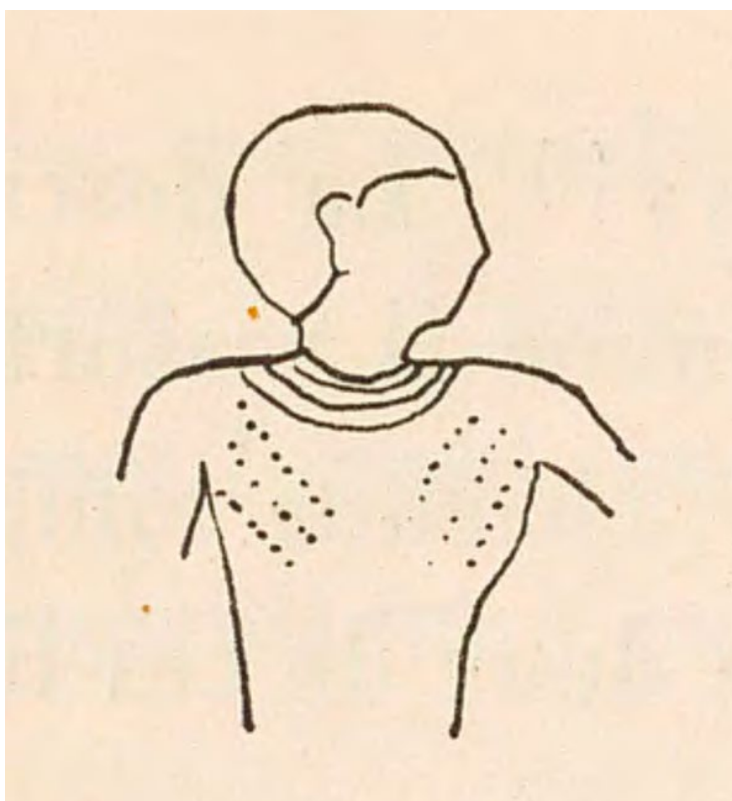


Figure 35: Drawing of a possible depiction of a tattooed man on a Twelfth Dynasty stele from Abydos (Keimer 1948, Fig. 7).

²⁰⁴ Keimer 1948, 10, Fig. 7; Lange and Schäfer 1902, pl. LXXXVI; Tassie 2003, 88. The exact date of this stele is not identified in the scholarship, possibly it cannot be dated with more specificity than the Twelfth Dynasty.

3.2.3. Tattoo toolkits

The other significant avenue of indirect evidence for tattooing are artefacts which might have been used for making tattoos.²⁰⁵ The earliest suggestion of a possible tattooing implement in the ancient Nile Valley was put forward by Petrie in 1901, who found “a microlith set in a wooden stick” dating to the late First Dynasty at Abydos.²⁰⁶ This has since been refuted on the basis that it is an example of “archaeologists working well outside the geographic boundaries of this tool type mistakenly identifying perpendicularly hafted tattoo implements in their collections”.²⁰⁷ Like the purported depictions of tattooed individuals, some of these indirect connections are tenuous. However, where such connections are substantiated within a robust analytical framework, this kind of evidence might provide compelling data about how, when, and where tattooing was practiced, and support interpretations based primarily on the direct evidence. Deter-Wolf proposes such a framework on the basis of data from multiple contexts; the resultant criteria are designed to be applicable to any archaeological context.²⁰⁸ The focus of the criteria is on the context of artefacts within assemblages. Deter-Wolf argues that the identification of tattooing implements requires an association with pigments and may be supported further by connexion with medicinal and ritual items appropriate to the particular cultural context, and the collation of the components in a container.²⁰⁹

Friedman applies Deter-Wolf’s criteria to an assemblage from the burial of a 40–50-year-old woman (Burial 333) from the Predynastic (c. 3600 BCE) cemetery HK43 at Hierakonpolis.²¹⁰ Within the grave, a basket was observed containing: mineral pigments, grinding pebbles, stone pendants, an amulet in the shape of a human head, an ivory comb, three flint bladelets and five bone awls, as well as some charred material wrapped in linen and a leather bag containing resin and plant material.²¹¹ Leaning against the basket was a cosmetic palette made of greywacke.²¹² The bladelets and awls would be suitable for tattooing, as would the mineral pigments which

²⁰⁵ Booth 2001; Friedman 2017, 21–22; Nordström 1972, 123; 2002; Pászik 2021; Tassie 2003, 96–99. It has been suggested that one of the registers at Medinet Habu, dating to the reign of Ramesses III, might depict tattooing, but branding and temporary marking have also been suggested. The latter is most likely given the administrative context and the appearance of the tools being used; therefore, this is not considered an example of a depiction of tattoos herein (Karev 2022, 8–9, Fig. 2–3; Lohwasser 2012, 532–533; Matić 2019, 302–304).

²⁰⁶ Petrie (1901, 24) states that: “The flint set in the wood did not seem capable of bearing any strain, but it was explained by my friend Prof. Giglioli as a tatuing instrument of the usual form. As tatuing was used in prehistoric times (as shown on figures then), and in the XIIIth Dynasty (as shown by the body of a priestess at Cairo), there is nothing surprising in finding such a tool.”

²⁰⁷ Deter-Wolf (2013, 16) points out that this category of tattooing implement is “limited to parts of India, South-east Asia, and the southwestern Pacific Rim”.

²⁰⁸ Deter-Wolf 2013, 19–20.

²⁰⁹ Deter-Wolf 2013, 15.

²¹⁰ Friedman 2017, 21–22.

²¹¹ Friedman 2017, 22.

²¹² Friedman 2017, 22.

would be prepared using the pebbles and palette. Some of the other items might be associated with rituality, and the plant remains have medicinal properties which might be applicable to tattooing.²¹³ It is noteworthy that this burial “was one of the richest in this nonelite cemetery”, and previous interpretations of this individual already suggested that she was an important person in her community and may have held a role as “a magico-medical practitioner”.²¹⁴ If the artefacts in her burial are associated with tattooing, this might suggest something about the kind of person who made tattoos, and therefore the significance of tattooing, in Predynastic society.

Nordström applies a similar contextual argument to his interpretation of copper awls and stone palettes used for grinding pigments in terminal Nubian A-Group (c. 3200–2900 BCE)²¹⁵ contexts.²¹⁶ He argues that the frequent cooccurrence of the two artefact types may indicate that they are connected to tattooing. They are consistently found together in adult female burials; therefore, he posits that some women with special social roles may have been making tattoos in these communities.²¹⁷

A set of copper rods from a Late Predynastic to Early Dynastic burial (3500–2686 BCE)²¹⁸ at Kafr Hassan Dawood and a set of bronze needles of uncertain date from Gurob have previously been proposed as possible tattooing needles.²¹⁹ However, neither of these satisfy a context-based interpretation. In the case of the former, consideration of the assemblage to which they belong suggests they are likely to be part of a leather-working kit or similar.²²⁰ The latter were not sharp enough to be used for tattooing,²²¹ and were flat whereas tattooing needles from traditional societies are usually “more needle or awl-like”.²²²

3.3. Discussion: delineating tattoo practices

Previous analyses have categorised the extant tattoos from the ancient Nile Valley into two types. The first, frequently referred to as the “dot-and-dash” type, includes tattoos in geometric

²¹³ Friedman 2017, 22.

²¹⁴ Friedman 2017, 21. These interpretations were originally suggested in an earlier publication (Friedman 2003).

²¹⁵ Gatto 2006, 67.

²¹⁶ Nordström 1972, 123; 2002.

²¹⁷ Nordström 2002, 367.

²¹⁸ Shaw 2000, 479–480.

²¹⁹ Booth 2001; Pászik 2021; Tassie 2003, 97–99.

²²⁰ Tassie 2003, 99.

²²¹ Pászik (2021) successfully uses reconstructions of these items to make tattoos, but only after sharpening the replicas, assuming without clear justification that the originals were once much sharper (Pászik 2021, 107).

²²² Tassie 2003, 97.

patterns composed of dots or dashes.²²³ A second type, termed “figural”, originally referred to the Bes figures thought to represent tattoos in New Kingdom artistic depictions;²²⁴ this definition has expanded as other figures of animals, objects, and symbols in solid lines have been observed in tattoos.²²⁵ The development of these categorisations is discussed further in § 4.3.3 with regard to the specific interpretation of the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari. The most recent analyses on the topic define these as two tattoo traditions and argue that they correlate with the “cultural areas” of Nubia and Egypt respectively.²²⁶ These rigid definitions and the direct association with cultural regions have multiple pitfalls. Firstly, tattoos which use figural designs composed of dots, or geometric patterns made with solid lines, do not fit into either definition, nor do the suggested categories allow for the possible co-occurrence of both styles, which requires further investigation. Secondly, this framework conflates tattoos from multiple different time periods and cultural contexts into one ‘tattoo tradition’ without adequately considering the stylistic differences between the tattoos from each context within the ‘cultural area’. Thirdly, as discussed in § 2.1.2, these definitions do not consider the social factors which might form an important part of how a community practices tattooing, including exclusivity or specificity on the basis of demographic factors and social roles. This discussion applies these considerations to the evidence outlined in this chapter to propose a new framework for defining tattoo practices in the ancient Nile Valley.

Preserved tattoos from the Predynastic Period and Pharaonic Period in Egypt are observed to feature the same general style of thick, dark, solid lines,²²⁷ which may suggest similarity, and therefore possibly some level of continuity, in the tools and methods used for making tattoos during this timespan. However, other stylistic features seem to have changed significantly between periods. All five examples of Predynastic tattoos are minimal – no individual bears more than two small tattoos, and although some tattoos might not have been observed, it is certain that none of these individuals are extensively tattooed. The individuals from the Old and Middle Kingdoms with tattoos in this general style are only known to have one small tattoo each, but this cannot be extrapolated as indicative of the extent of tattooing in these periods due to accessibility and preservation issues. By contrast, at least one of the tattooed individuals from the New Kingdom is extensively tattooed, bearing at least thirty individual motifs; the extent of the tattooing on the other two individuals cannot be determined due to their poor preservation. All

²²³ Bianchi 1988, 23; Friedman 2017; Tassie 2003, 96.

²²⁴ Bianchi 1988, 24–26; Tassie 2003, 94–96.

²²⁵ Renaut 2020, 73.

²²⁶ Friedman 2017, 21, 34; Renaut 2020, 67, 78.

²²⁷ With the notable exception of the three tattooed women from Middle Kingdom Deir el Bahari, discussed in detail in the following chapter.

three individuals from the New Kingdom bear large, symmetrical tattoo compositions with multiple elements in the same placement on their lower backs, which are not known from earlier periods, suggesting that this placement and style of design are specific to the New Kingdom. Similarly, the indirect evidence for Bes tattoos on women's thighs in the New Kingdom might suggest this placement and design were commonly used and specific to this period.

Furthermore, the exclusivity requirements for tattooing may have differed over the course of Egyptian history. There are currently three male individuals and probably two female individuals with tattoos from the Predynastic Period, indicating that tattooing was not exclusive to one gender. The two published individuals have notably different content in their tattoos; this might be attributable to gendered differences in tattooing practices, or to individual agency and variation in tattoo designs. As more tattooed individuals are published, these questions should be revisited. While there is currently only one male individual from the Old Kingdom known to bear tattoos, it seems likely that women were also tattooed in this period given the observation of tattoos on female individuals from both earlier and later periods. Only one female individual bears tattoos made in solid lines from the Middle Kingdom. In contrast to the Predynastic Period and Old Kingdom, there are currently no examples of tattooed males from the Middle and New Kingdoms. Furthermore, the artistic depictions of tattooed individuals from the Middle and New Kingdoms almost exclusively depict tattooed women, with the exception of one Middle Kingdom stele which possibly depicts a tattooed man with tattoos composed of dots (**Figure 35**). The scarcity of evidence from the Middle Kingdom makes it impossible to draw conclusions regarding gender exclusivity in this period. However, in the New Kingdom, the discovery of tattoos on multiple mummified adult female individuals, and the observation of multiple examples of tattooed women in artistic sources, highlights the absence of evidence for tattooed males in this period. It might therefore be suggested that the tattoo practice of the New Kingdom was exclusive to women or connected to particular social roles which were gendered. It must be noted that all the tattooed individuals from Egypt for which age has been determined are adults (see Appendix 1); there is no evidence of children being tattooed. This may indicate that tattoos were usually attained at a certain age, perhaps connected to socialisation as adults and the attainment of rites of passage.

In summary, the evidence from Egyptian contexts indicates that tattoo practices developed early in Egyptian history, and it seems likely that there was some degree of continuity, at least in the tools and methods used to produce these marks, considering the similarity in the style of linework employed throughout the Predynastic and Pharaonic Periods. However, even where

there is more than one example of tattooed individuals from a particular period, they frequently come from the same site.²²⁸ It is therefore impossible to determine whether regional variation is a factor in differences between tattoo practices. Further, much of the evidence for tattooing in Egyptian contexts comes from sites in the region of Thebes. This may be coincidence, but further research is required to determine whether it may be suggestive of a localisation of tattooing practices during the Pharaonic Period. The content and placement of tattoos differs in disparate time periods, and it is possible that tattoos were gender exclusive in some periods but not others. These differences suggest that the motivating factors for tattooing also differed depending on the period.

Although there are currently no examples of preserved tattoos from A-Group contexts, it has been suggested that tattooing was practiced in A-Group communities on the basis of decorated anthropomorphic female figurines and possible tattoo toolkits in adult female burials.²²⁹ This contextual data might suggest “a form of body modification that was practiced by females for females”.²³⁰ While the available lines of evidence for tattooing in A-Group contexts are associated with women, this does not necessitate that tattooing was an exclusively female practice. It is impossible to determine if, how, and why communities associated with A-Group contexts might have practiced tattooing without further evidence.

While the tattoos from C-Group and Pan-Grave contexts appear similar because they are all composed of dots and dashes, as opposed to the solid lines used in Egyptian tattoos, there are compositional differences. These might also be indicative of different tools and methods. Friedman argues that the lozenge compositions observed in tattoos on individuals from HK27C might have been made with a multi-pronged, perhaps comb-like implement, conducive to producing a particular number of evenly spaced dots, which could be repeated to construct lozenge shapes.²³¹ The linear compositions observed on these individuals could also have been made this way. However, the triangle compositions observed on the individual from HK47 could not have been made with such an implement, they must have been made with a single needle.²³² The purported distinction in the application methods between the two tattoo practices is tenuous

²²⁸ For example, the individuals from Predynastic Gebelein, Eleventh Dynasty Deir el Bahari, C-Group cemetery HK27C, and New Kingdom Deir el Medina.

²²⁹ Friedman 2017, 35 fn.11; Nordström 1972, 123; 2002, 361–372.

²³⁰ Dann 2021, 1039.

²³¹ Friedman 2004, 47; 2016; 2017, 27. Renaut (2020, 68 fn.10) argues that the dots and dashes do not always appear to be evenly spaced and of consistent number on the basis of his examination of the tattoos from photographs. Friedman confirms that these features are recognisable in her direct examination of the tattooed skin fragments (Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th October 2022).

²³² Friedman 2016.

because tattooing implements have not been identified in the archaeological record from either context, and the lozenge and linear tattoos may have also been produced with single needles. It might be suggested that bone needles found in burials at HK27C as well as other C-Group cemeteries might have fulfilled this function,²³³ but further research is required to determine whether these or any other artefacts satisfy the contextual criteria for identifying tattooing implements outlined above.

The tattoo practices associated with C-Group and Pan-Grave contexts may also have had different exclusivity requirements. The limited evidence from Pan-Grave contexts indicates that both male and female adults were tattooed. In contrast, evidence from C-Group contexts, including multiple tattooed individuals and purported depictions of tattoos on anthropomorphic figurines, are associated exclusively with women. Preserved skin was found in many burials at HK27C, including adults, juveniles, and infants, of male, female, and indeterminate sex,²³⁴ but the only individuals found to bear tattoos are all older women. It has been suggested that they may also have had special roles in their community, because: the individuals from Tombs 9 and 10 share the unusual feature of a sixth lumbar vertebra, which may suggest a familial link;²³⁵ the individuals from Tombs 9 and 36 had “outstanding” dental wear, caries, and ante-mortem tooth loss compared to others from their community, which may indicate an exclusive diet;²³⁶ and, the individuals from Tombs 9 and 36 were the only individuals from HK27C to have a leather loincloth and head covering.²³⁷ These factors might suggest that tattooing was exclusive to adult women with particular social roles in their community.

It must be noted that there is currently no direct or indirect evidence for tattooing from contexts associated with the Kerma culture of Upper Nubia. The lack of purported depictions of tattoos does not preclude the possibility that tattooing was practiced; as discussed above, such depictions are highly tenuous and do not necessarily align with actual preserved tattoos, even where they are observed. It is suggested that the application of infrared photography techniques to naturally mummified human remains from Kerma cemeteries will elucidate whether or not tattooing was practiced in these contexts.

²³³ Friedman 2007, 61.

²³⁴ Friedman 2017, 27, 31.

²³⁵ “This extra bone at the base of the spine is a non-metric variation present in about 4% of the population.” (Pieri and Antoine 2014, 29).

²³⁶ Friedman 2017, 27, 31, 36 fn.19; Pieri and Antoine 2014. The skull of the tattooed individual from Tomb 10 is not preserved so it cannot be determined if she had similar dental pathologies (Friedman 2017, 29).

²³⁷ Friedman 2017, 28, 31; Pieri and Antoine 2014, 29. Due to disturbance of her grave, leather preservation in Tomb 10 was poor and it cannot be determined which garments she was buried with (Friedman 2017, 30).

The tattoos from Meroitic contexts have been conflated with those from C-Group and Pan-Grave contexts in the construction of a general Nubian tattoo tradition supposedly based on purely geometric designs composed of dots and dashes.²³⁸ This is problematic because some of the Meroitic tattoos are demonstrably different from both the C-Group and Pan-Grave examples and do not fit the criteria for the purported general Nubian tradition. As identified above, many of the facial and hand tattoos from Meroitic contexts are composed of solid lines, not dots and dashes, and furthermore many of the abdominal and limb tattoos composed of dots are not purely geometric in design, but figural. Further, in defining the characteristics of the general Nubian tradition, Renaut asserts that, “with the exception of the face, all body parts can potentially be extensively tattooed: arms, legs, hands, feet, and torso.”²³⁹ The existence of Meroitic facial tattoos would appear to be at odds with this. These factors demonstrate that the Meroitic tattoos do not fit into the proposed framework for a general Nubian tattoo tradition; the significant temporal disparity between these and other tattoos also poses a problem for considering them together. Instead, the Meroitic tattoo practice should be considered as separate, which allows more nuanced consideration of the potential connections to earlier tattoo practices from both Nubian and Egyptian contexts.

The available evidence suggests that both male and female adults could have been tattooed on the face in Meroitic contexts.²⁴⁰ In contrast, tattoos on the abdomen and limbs have been observed on adult females and adolescents of female and indeterminate sex.²⁴¹ Vila therefore speculates that placements on the abdomen and limbs and the use of dots and dashes in geometric and figural arrangements might have been exclusive to women, while facial tattoos made in solid lines were not gender exclusive.²⁴²

Friedman argues that “tattoos were recognized as identifying markers of specific ethnic affinity between cultures”.²⁴³ It has been suggested that early tattoo practices in the ancient Nile Valley developed as a way for A-Group Nubians to distinguish themselves culturally and ethnically

²³⁸ Renaut 2020, 67–68.

²³⁹ Renaut 2020, 68.

²⁴⁰ There are currently two female individuals, one male, and one of indeterminate sex with facial tattoos from the Meroitic Period; they are all adults (Vila 1967). See Appendix 1.

²⁴¹ There is a total of either six or seven adult females with tattoos, depending on whether the fragmentary tattooed remains from Semna South belong to one or two individuals; and two adolescents, one female and one of indeterminate sex (Alvius et al. 2001; Vila 1967).

²⁴² Vila 1967, 368. In arguing that tattooing practices were monopolised by women in the ancient Nile Valley, Renaut (2020, 68) completely ignores the individual identified as male (AM LXXXI), argues that one individual of indeterminate sex (AM XVIII) must be female on the basis of them being tattooed, and identifies the other individual of indeterminate sex (AM XII) as female without justification.

²⁴³ Friedman 2017, 34.

from Predynastic Egyptians, or *vice versa*.²⁴⁴ The long concurrent history of distinct tattoo practices, associated with multiple periods of Egyptian history and at least two Nubian cultures, suggests, in a contextual sense, that tattoos might have been recognisable markers of ethnic affiliation in these contexts. Furthermore, tattoos might have been deliberately used to construct, define, and express ethnic identities.

²⁴⁴ Friedman 2017, 35 n.11.

4. Case study: three tattooed women from Deir el Bahari

4.1. Archaeological context

In 1891, a pit tomb containing two sarcophagi was discovered in the course of Grébaut's excavations at Deir el Bahari.²⁴⁵ One (CG 28025) contained oxen bones and the other (CG 28026) held the mummified body of a woman.²⁴⁶ Inscriptions inside both sarcophagi identify her as Amunet, Priestess of Hathor and “Chief Royal Ornament”.²⁴⁷ The exact location of her tomb was not recorded by the excavators, and later efforts to locate it were unsuccessful.²⁴⁸ It is still uncertain whether Amunet's tomb is one of the known pit burials found later.²⁴⁹ It is certain, however, that the tomb is somewhere in the vicinity of and associated with the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II.²⁵⁰ The association with Mentuhotep II and the relative date of the burial are confirmed by hieroglyphic and hieratic writing on linens found inside both sarcophagi: the names of several important figures in the court are recorded, as well as the name of the king and regnal years 28, 35, and 42.²⁵¹ On the 8th of October 1891, Amunet's body was unwrapped and examined, and her tattoos were noticed.²⁵² This was the first recorded instance of tattoos from the ancient Nile Valley.

Later excavations at Deir el Bahari revealed more burials within the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II. In the 1922/1923 season, ten pit tombs were found in the north court of the temple (see Appendix 2), two of which (Pits 23 and 26) contained the unwrapped bodies of mummified individuals with tattoos, hereafter Individual 1 and Individual 2 respectively.²⁵³ The

²⁴⁵ Daressy 1893, 166; 1913, 99; Fouquet 1898, 270.

²⁴⁶ Daressy 1893, 166; Lacau 1904, 65 fn.2. Some later sources refer to an inner and outer coffin, but the original publications clearly state that this is not the case and the two are separate (Daressy 1893, 166; 1913, 99; Lacau 1904, 61 fn.1).

²⁴⁷ Daressy 1893, 166–168.

²⁴⁸ Winlock 1924, 8–10.

²⁴⁹ Pit 25 in the north triangular court is frequently suggested, but excavation records of this tomb indicate it contained the burial of another individual from the Eleventh Dynasty (Roehrig 2015, 531 fn.20). Tombs 4 and 5 have also been suggested (Ashby 2018, 67 fn.19; Morris 2011, 78 fn.51, 79), although Tomb 5 contained the burial of a young girl named Myt (Morris 2011, 77 fn.46). It should be noted that Pits 19 and 21 were empty when found by Winlock's excavations in 1922/1923 (Roehrig 2015, 527–528); it is unclear if these have been evaluated as candidates or if there is any particular factor precluding one of them from belonging to Amunet – see Appendix 2.

²⁵⁰ Daressy 1913, 99.

²⁵¹ Daressy 1913, 99–100.

²⁵² Fouquet 1898, 271, Fig. 1.

²⁵³ Winlock 1923, 26. When the burials were excavated, large quantities of bandages were found alongside the bodies, suggesting the wrapping had been removed when the burials were disturbed in antiquity. This may have been motivated by a desire to remove the jewellery from the bodies, as was apparently the case in the looting of Aashyet's burial (Derry 1935, 491).

burials were heavily disturbed and no material bearing their names or titles was preserved.²⁵⁴ Pit 23 contained linens, two listing the regnal years 2 (MMA 25.3.264) and 40 (MMA 25.3.263), and another bearing the name and title of the treasurer Khety (MMA 25.3.261),²⁵⁵ an established historical figure in the court of Mentuhotep II.²⁵⁶ Pit 26 did not contain material with names or dates, but given its proximity and similarity to Pit 23 and Amunet's burial, it can be tentatively dated to the same period. The association of Individual 2 with Mentuhotep II is confirmed by her burial within the temple enclosure.

All three of the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari have been identified as adult women. This is based partly on their physiological features, including both skeletal morphology and preserved soft tissues showing primary sex characteristics.²⁵⁷ In Amunet's case, the name and titles used to refer to her in inscriptions inside her sarcophagi take feminine grammatical forms.

Amunet's tomb is described as having been intact when it was excavated,²⁵⁸ but the details of the burial and its contents were never published in full. As a result, limited information is available.²⁵⁹ Other than the two sarcophagi, the burial contained a mirror (CG 44035) and at least two stone vessels (CG 18502; CG 18505). Amunet was also buried with necklaces, a *menat* collar, rings, and bracelets, all of which were placed directly onto her body underneath the wrappings.²⁶⁰

More details are available regarding the contents of Pits 23 and 26, but due to the heavy disturbances of the burials by looters prior to the excavations, the grave goods found during the excavation are incomplete and fragmentary.²⁶¹ Other than the body of Individual 1, some discarded wrappings, and linen fragments, Pit 23 also contained: fragments of funerary models including a boat and a granary, fragments of a funerary mask, a wooden box (MMA 25.3.255a-c), a carnelian *seweret*-bead (MMA 25.3.252), and a *sa*-amulet made of silver and electrum

²⁵⁴ Roehrig 2015, 531; Winlock 1926, 7–8, Fig. 1–2. MMA tomb cards 89–103 (Pit 23) and 109–111 (Pit 26). The tomb cards are unpublished field notes in the archives of the Egyptian Department of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA); see Roehrig 2015.

²⁵⁵ Roehrig 2015, 527.

²⁵⁶ Allen 1996, 3.

²⁵⁷ Derry 1935, 493–494; Derry and Engelbach 1941, 249–254.

²⁵⁸ Daressy 1893, 166.

²⁵⁹ The only published information pertains to the texts written inside the sarcophagi (Daressy 1893, 166–168) and on linens deposited inside them (Daressy 1913, 99–100); Fouquet (1898, 271) and Keimer's (1948, 8–13) examinations of her tattoos, and a brief mention of her tattoos and the state of her body by Derry (Derry and Engelbach 1941, 249).

²⁶⁰ Keimer 1948, 8; Roehrig 2015, 531; Tassie 2003, 90. These were able to be observed by Keimer during his brief examination because they were retained in place after the body was unwrapped in 1891.

²⁶¹ Roehrig 2015, 527.

wires (MMA 25.3.253) (**Figure 36**).²⁶² Similarly, Pit 26 contained the remnants of a funerary mask and funerary models, perhaps including a granary, a piece of wood thought to have come from a coffin lid, and a bracelet or anklet made of tubular faience beads (MMA 25.3.251).²⁶³

Four of the other pit tombs excavated in the 1922/1923 season also contained fragments of grave goods including linens, gilded funerary masks, jewellery made of sheet-gold and faience beads, wooden coffins, funerary models, and statuettes.²⁶⁴ Roehrig argues that these grave goods indicate that the individuals buried in the north triangular court in Mentuhotep II's mortuary temple were high status members of the court, including the tattooed individuals.²⁶⁵ Further, a number of women who share Amunet's titles were buried in tombs on the temple platform, another area of Mentuhotep II's mortuary temple.²⁶⁶ The translation of these titles and interpretation of the associated roles are the subject of ongoing debate,²⁶⁷ but they were generally given to women who were of high status families and members of the court.²⁶⁸ Given that Amunet held these titles, and that all three tattooed individuals were buried within the mortuary temple of the king, among other high-ranking individuals, together with the quality of the remnants of their grave goods, it seems likely that the tattooed individuals were high-status members of the court and held important roles.²⁶⁹

Photographs of both Individual 1 and Amunet were taken in the 1920s and 1930s respectively and published by Keimer.²⁷⁰ As a result of the period in which they were taken, the images have two major drawbacks: firstly, the details of the tattoos are difficult to see; and secondly, the way in which the bodies are presented is graphic and confronting. For these reasons, and the ethical concerns they raise, the photographs are not reproduced in this analysis.²⁷¹ Instead, this study relies exclusively on detailed and sensitive drawings to convey the tattoo patterns.

²⁶² Roehrig 2015, 528, Fig. 3a, b. Photographs of the other grave goods have not been published.

²⁶³ Roehrig 2015, 528.

²⁶⁴ Roehrig 2015, 528. It is interesting to note that three of the four burials which contained human remains were seemingly only skeletal remains; some of these individuals, or others whose bodies were not found when their tombs were excavated, may also have been tattooed.

²⁶⁵ Roehrig 2015, 529. See Appendix 2.

²⁶⁶ Roehrig 2015, 531.

²⁶⁷ This debate falls outside the scope of this project; see Friedman 2017, 22; Gillam 1995; Liszka 2018, 195–196; Sabbahy 1997; Tooley 1989, 324–325; Ward 1986.

²⁶⁸ Liszka 2018, 195.

²⁶⁹ Roehrig 2015, 531. see § 4.3.2 below for further discussion of their roles as it relates to interpretations of their ethnicities.

²⁷⁰ Keimer 1948, pl. I–IX.

²⁷¹ See Gill-Frerkling 2021, 78–80; Harries et al. 2018 for in depth discussions of the ethics of taking, displaying, and reproducing photographs of human remains.



Figure 36: Photograph of grave goods from Pit 23, Eleventh Dynasty Deir el Bahari; electrum and silver sa-amulet (25.3.253), carnelian seweret bead (25.3.252), and wooden box (25.3.255a–c) (Austin 2022, Fig. 23.1).

4.2. The Tattoos

4.2.1. Amunet

Amunet's tattoos were not described in publication when they were observed in 1891. The first description and image of her tattoos are in Fouquet's 1898 study on medicinal tattooing in nineteenth century Egypt.²⁷² Fouquet's diagram of Amunet's tattoos (**Figure 37**) was criticised by Keimer in his 1948 review as "insufficient and even in several points erroneous" after he performed his own brief examination.²⁷³ However, Fouquet's image has been consistently reproduced in the literature as a result of errors,²⁷⁴ which has generated ongoing confusion about the extent, placements, and patterns of her tattoos.²⁷⁵ Some authors have mistakenly asserted that the image represents another tattooed individual,²⁷⁶ or even that a second individual was discovered in 1891,²⁷⁷ as a way to account for the inconsistencies between Fouquet's diagram and the images and descriptions of her tattoos produced by Keimer.²⁷⁸ Both Friedman and

²⁷² Fouquet 1898, 271–272, Fig. 1.

²⁷³ Keimer 1948, 9. All quotations from Keimer are translated from French into English by the author.

²⁷⁴ For example, Ashby 2018, Fig. 1; Bianchi 1988, Fig. 2; Poon and Quickenden 2006, Fig. 2; Tassie 2003, Fig. 2.

²⁷⁵ Friedman (2017, 23) identifies and corrects these errors.

²⁷⁶ Bianchi 1988, 22.

²⁷⁷ Graves-Brown 2010, 113–115; Poon and Quickenden 2006, 124.

²⁷⁸ Keimer 1948, 8–13, Figs. 6, 8–11, pl. I–V.

Renaut use the material from Keimer's monograph as the basis for new drawings of the tattoos,²⁷⁹ but they take different approaches; while Friedman endeavours to produce a direct record of the tattoos as they appear on her mummified body (**Figure 38**), Renaut attempts to reproduce how they might have looked in life (**Figure 39**).

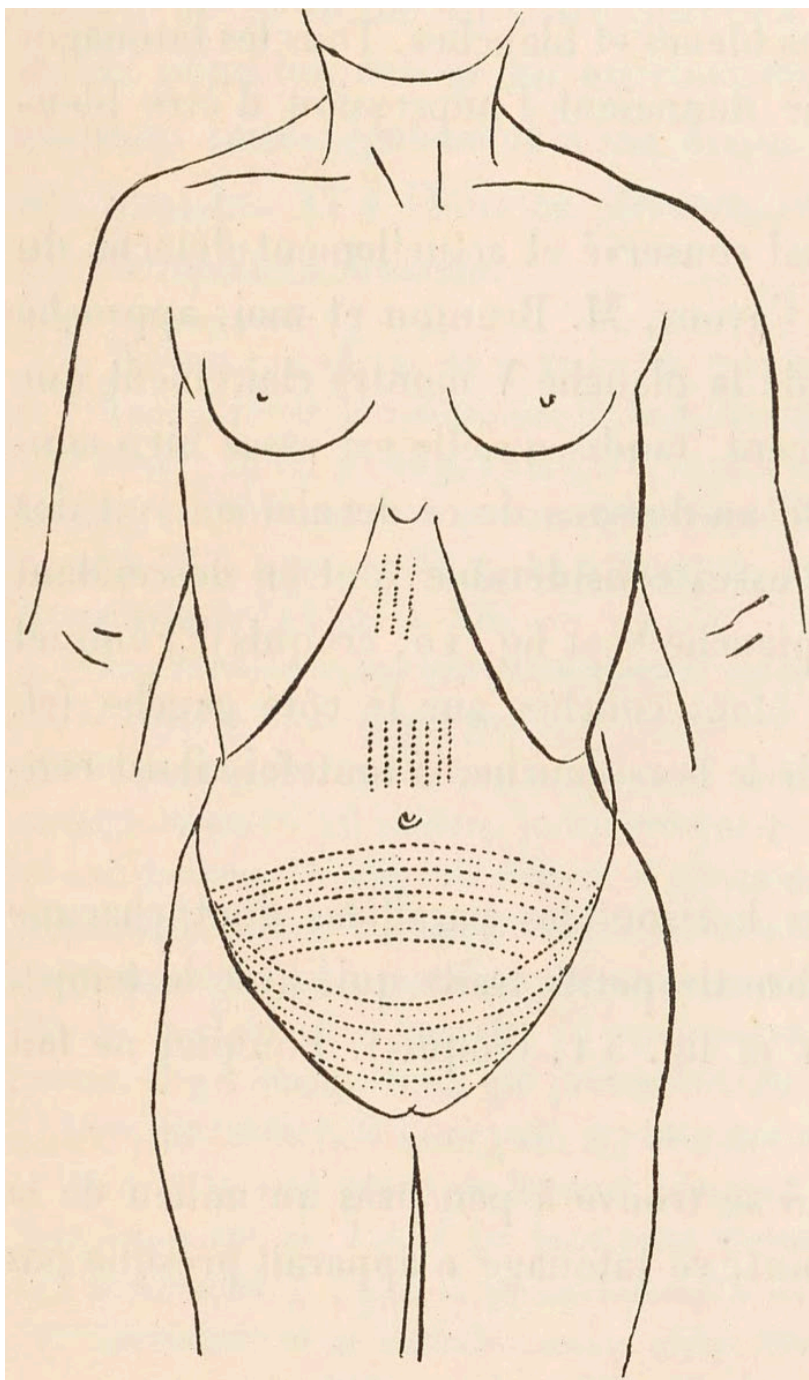


Figure 37: Fouquet's erroneous diagram of Amunet's tattoos as reproduced by Keimer (Fouquet 1898, Fig. 1; Keimer 1948, Fig. 9).

²⁷⁹ Friedman 2017, Fig. 1.7a; Renaut 2020, pl. 1.1.

The full extent of Amunet's tattooing is likely still unknown. Keimer explicitly noted that his brief examination and recording was not sufficient.²⁸⁰ When he examined her body, she was lying on her left side and Keimer and Guy Brunton were too afraid to move or turn her for fear of causing damage.²⁸¹ It seems likely that she may be tattooed on the left limbs, given the right arm and leg are tattooed and both Individual 1 and Individual 2 bear tattoos on both sides of their bodies. The right arm is disarticulated from the body and the skin of the upper right arm is not preserved.²⁸² Furthermore, infrared reflectography techniques used in recent studies of other individuals to detect and record tattoos undiscernible under visible light conditions were not available at the time.²⁸³ It is possible that Amunet bears tattoos not observed by Fouquet or Keimer during their examinations. The following passages detail the tattoos observed and recorded for Amunet thus far.

Upper Limbs: On the inner right forearm, just below the elbow, there is a rectangular array of dots. On the left shoulder or upper chest there is a series of dots between two parallel lines. Friedman records this tattoo on the chest as this is how it appears in the photographs and Keimer's description, but Renaut interprets the design as being intended to follow the curve of the shoulder.

Lower Limbs: Three parallel lines composed of small dashes appear on the upper right thigh.²⁸⁴ Lower down the right thigh there is another tattoo which is obscured by the skin being "altered at this point".²⁸⁵ Renaut interprets this tattoo as a checkerboard composition of lozenges made of dots; this is seemingly based on Keimer's speculation that the tattoo may be "in the form of multiple diamonds" based on comparison to the other tattooed individuals.²⁸⁶ While both Individual 1 and Individual 2 have tattoos in this pattern (see §§ 4.2.2 and 4.2.3), it does not necessitate that every tattooed individual from this time period and social context used the same designs. Particular tattoo patterns such as this one may have had specific meanings, but this is currently not well understood due to the limited number of published tattooed individuals. It is noteworthy that Amunet's tattoos are noticeably distinct from the other two tattooed individuals.

²⁸⁰ Keimer 1948, 9.

²⁸¹ Keimer 1948, 9. Brunton was a curator at the Cairo Museum at the time.

²⁸² Keimer 1948, 12.

²⁸³ Such techniques were pioneered later in Nubian and Arctic contexts; see Alvrus et al. 2001; Armelagos 1969; Kroman et al. 1989; Smith and Zimmerman 1975.

²⁸⁴ Keimer 1948, 12.

²⁸⁵ Keimer 1948, 12–13.

²⁸⁶ Keimer 1948, 13.

Upper Abdomen/Thorax: Amunet's most extensive tattooing is located on the anterior aspect of her abdomen, in a number of separate compositions. Above the navel, there are a series of vertical lines composed of small horizontal dashes.²⁸⁷ Friedman reproduces this tattoo as a series of lines which are not perfectly parallel, while Renault interprets their original placement as neatly rectangular. Above this are two small, approximately square compositions of dots; the first column of the left square features four dots, while the rest are columns of three (**Figure 39**).²⁸⁸

Lower Abdomen: Finally, the largest tattoo composition covers the lower abdomen below the navel. It features multitudinous vertical lines composed of horizontal dashes, with a line of dashes across the top connecting the far left and far right columns. Again, the appearance of this composition in Keimer's photographs is reproduced directly in Friedman's diagram, which preserves the uneven spacing and inconsistent length of the lines. Renault interprets the composition as originally being more even and suggests that the shape may have been more triangular in life.²⁸⁹ Amunet's abdomen is sunken inwards as a result of mummification, which might have impacted the appearance of the tattoo.

²⁸⁷ Keimer 1948, 10. The exact number of lines is uncertain; Keimer refutes the numbers suggested by Fouquet but is not confident that his sketch is accurate and some of the lines are obscured in Keimer's photographs.

²⁸⁸ Keimer 1948, 12.

²⁸⁹ Renault 2008, 8.

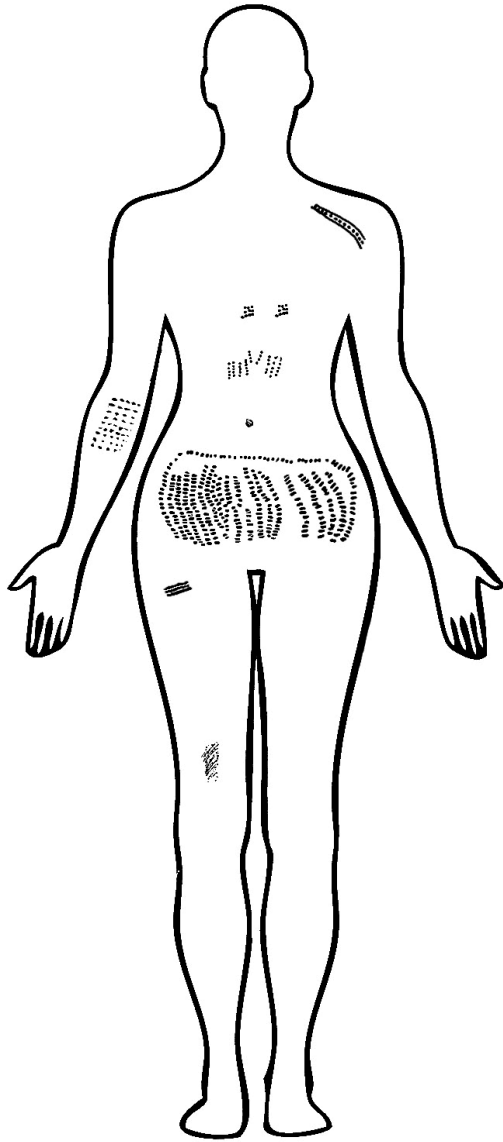


Figure 38: Diagram of Amunet's tattoos exactly as they appear on her mummified body (Friedman 2017, Fig. 1.7a).

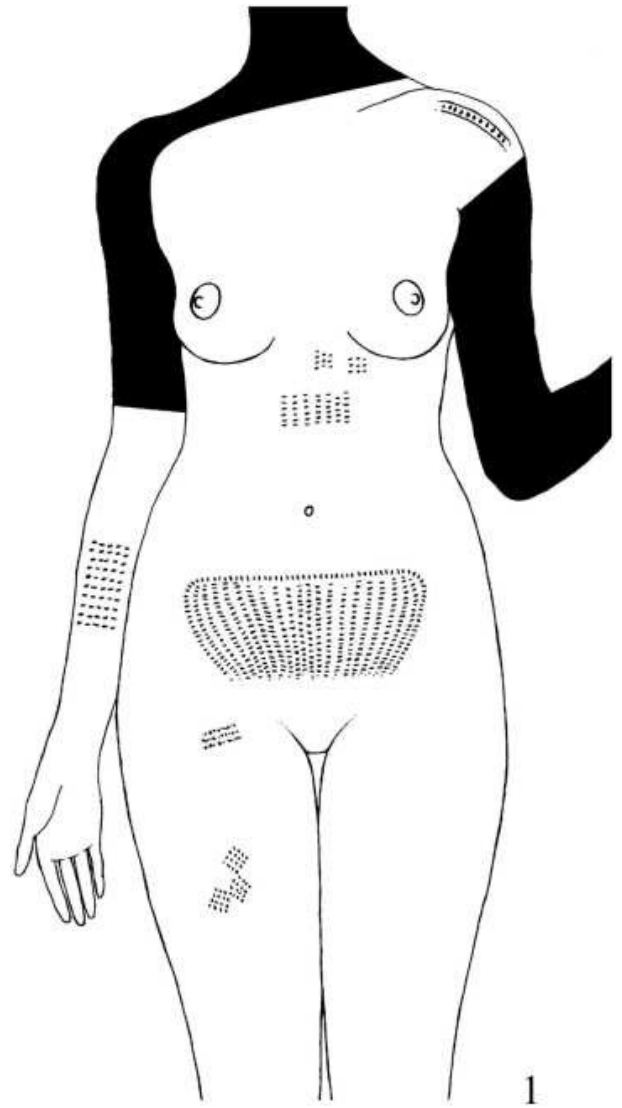


Figure 39: Drawing of Amunet's tattoos reconstructing how they may have looked in life. Areas of skin which are not preserved or were not visible when she was examined are indicated in solid black (Renaut 2020, pl. 1).

4.2.2. Individual 1 (Pit 23)

Although photographs of Individual 1 were made shortly after excavation,²⁹⁰ only one photograph of her right arm was initially published.²⁹¹ All the photographs were later provided to Keimer who published them in his monograph.²⁹² Derry examined Individual 1 and Individual 2 and wrote an analysis which remains unpublished,²⁹³ but a shorter note discussing their

²⁹⁰ Keimer 1948, 13; Roehrig 2015, 529; Winlock 1923, 26.

²⁹¹ Winlock 1923, Fig. 20.

²⁹² Keimer 1948, pl. IV–IX.

²⁹³ Roehrig 2015, 529 fn.10.

scarification was also provided to Keimer, who published it in full.²⁹⁴ As well as the photographs of Individual 1, detailed drawings reconstructing how the tattoos on Individual 1 and Individual 2 might have looked in life were made by Wilkinson in collaboration with Derry shortly after their excavation (**Figures 41–42**). These images were not published until they were rediscovered by Roehrig, who presents them along with some details from the unpublished excavation records.²⁹⁵

Wilkinson's drawing of Individual 1 also reconstructs her jewellery based on impressions on her skin and the remnants of some items of jewellery in her burial (see **Figure 41**).²⁹⁶ It is important to note that the jewellery does not seem to cover any of her tattoos or scarification.²⁹⁷ Friedman offers a new diagram of the tattoos on Individual 1 (**Figure 40**) which seeks to record the tattoos exactly as they appear on her body. The discrepancies between the two illustrations of Individual 1 might be attributed to this difference in approach; Wilkinson's drawings represent their tattoos as more symmetrical and evenly placed than they actually appear on their mummified skin, like Renaut's drawing of Amunet. Friedman works exclusively from images and descriptions of Individual 1's body, while Wilkinson and Derry were able to examine the body directly, which might also contribute to the differences between the two images.

Individual 1's tattoos are observed in two types of arrangements: 1) dots arranged into lozenge shapes, in turn arranged in lines or small checkerboard compositions; or 2) a series of parallel lines composed of individual dots. The tattoos on the top of each foot are the same, a small checkerboard of eight lozenges. Similarly, her chest tattoos are symmetrical, with six checkerboard patterns composed of six lozenges each: two above each breast and two in the centre of the chest.²⁹⁸ The right shoulder features a checkerboard of eight lozenges and there are several more lozenge compositions on the upper right arm, while the left shoulder and upper arm are not tattooed. Both forearms are tattooed with varying designs; parts of the left forearm are not preserved so some tattooing may have been lost on this side. Similarly, both legs are tattooed with different designs; she is tattooed more heavily on the thighs and less so on the lower legs. The string of lozenges across the lower abdomen does not extend around the sides of the body but the scar above does, ending in flat, leaf-shaped scars above the buttocks on both sides.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁴ Keimer 1948, 14–15.

²⁹⁵ Roehrig 2015, 527–528, Fig. 1–2.

²⁹⁶ Roehrig 2015, 529. Details of the jewellery remnants are recorded on MMA tomb card 91. See Grajetzki 2014 for an analysis of the types of jewellery found in Middle Kingdom burials and their meaning.

²⁹⁷ Future research could consider how different forms of body adornment including tattoos, scarification, jewellery, clothing, and body paint might have been used in combination.

²⁹⁸ Roehrig 2015, 529.

²⁹⁹ Derry 1935, 493; Roehrig 2015, 529. MMA tomb card 99.

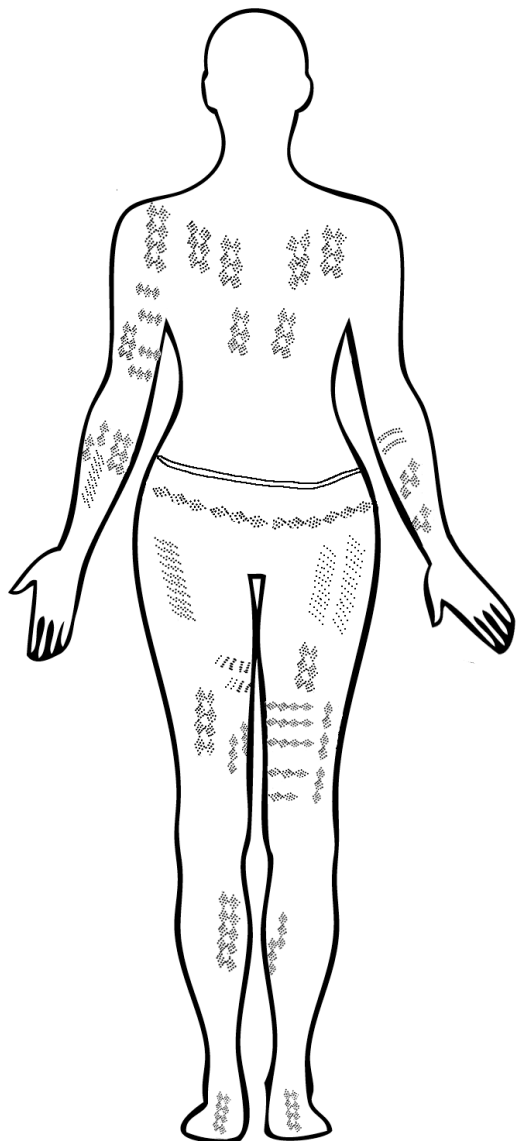


Figure 40: Diagram of the tattoos on Individual 1 exactly as they appear on the anterior aspect of her mummified body (Friedman 2017, Fig. 1.7b).

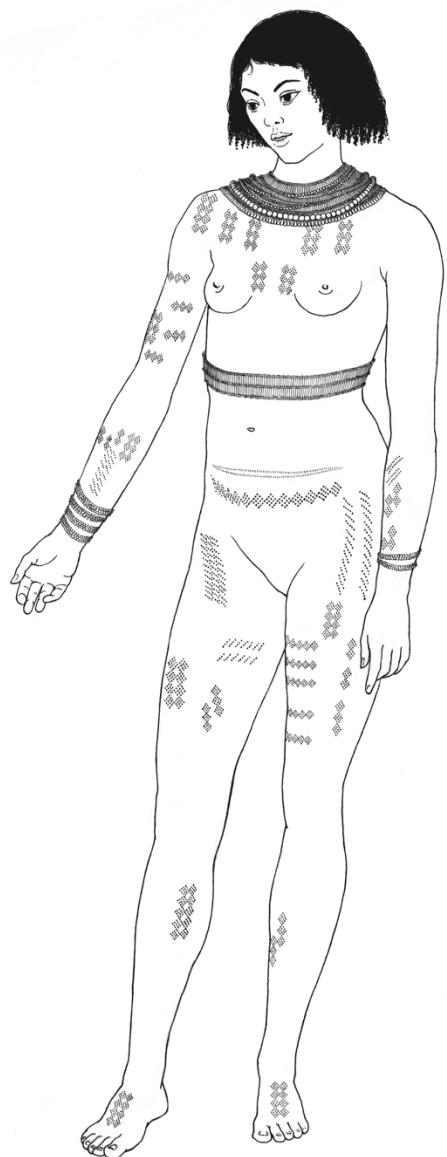


Figure 41: Drawing of tattoos on the anterior aspect of Individual 1's body reconstructing how they may have looked in life, and reconstructing her jewellery (Roehrig 2015, Fig. 1).

4.2.3. Individual 2 (Pit 26)

Unlike Amunet and Individual 1, there are no published photographs of Individual 2. The only available image is Wilkinson's drawing, which reconstructs her tattoos and scarification as they might have appeared in life (**Figure 42**). While there are no other images with which to compare

this drawing, it might be assumed that her tattoos are not as even and symmetrical in reality as they are depicted. Wilkinson and Derry likely adjusted the placements to account for the impact of mummification on the skin, as they seemingly did for Individual 1.

The lower legs and feet of Individual 2 are not preserved, so it cannot be ascertained whether or not she was tattooed in these areas.³⁰⁰ Both thighs are tattooed with different designs composed of dotted lozenges and lines, similar to Individual 1. Her chest tattoos are different from those on Individual 1 but are similarly symmetrical, composed of two rows of lozenges on each side of the upper chest, the lower row containing five and the upper row featuring six lozenges. It is interesting to note that for both Individual 1 and Individual 2, the right shoulder is tattooed but the left is not. The tattoos represented on the lower right arm in the drawing of Individual 2 are actually on the lower left arm; they are represented this way to allow all of the tattoos to be shown in the image.³⁰¹ Therefore only the upper right and lower left arm are tattooed while the lower right and upper left are bare.

The string of lozenges across her lower abdomen and the corresponding scar above are very similar to the ones on Individual 1, the main difference being that for Individual 2, the tattoo continues around the side of her body on the left side.³⁰² Like Individual 1, the scar extends to the back of the hips on both sides and terminates in flat, foliate shapes.³⁰³ Descriptions of Individual 2 mention other scarifications which are not represented in the drawing, including a number of scars in a line across the right buttock and a double line of small scars arranged in groups of five or six running down between the shoulder blades.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ Roehrig 2015, 529.

³⁰¹ Roehrig 2015, 529.

³⁰² Roehrig 2015, 529.

³⁰³ Derry 1935, 493; Roehrig 2015, 529. MMA tombs card 99–100.

³⁰⁴ Roehrig 2015, 529. MMA tomb card 100.

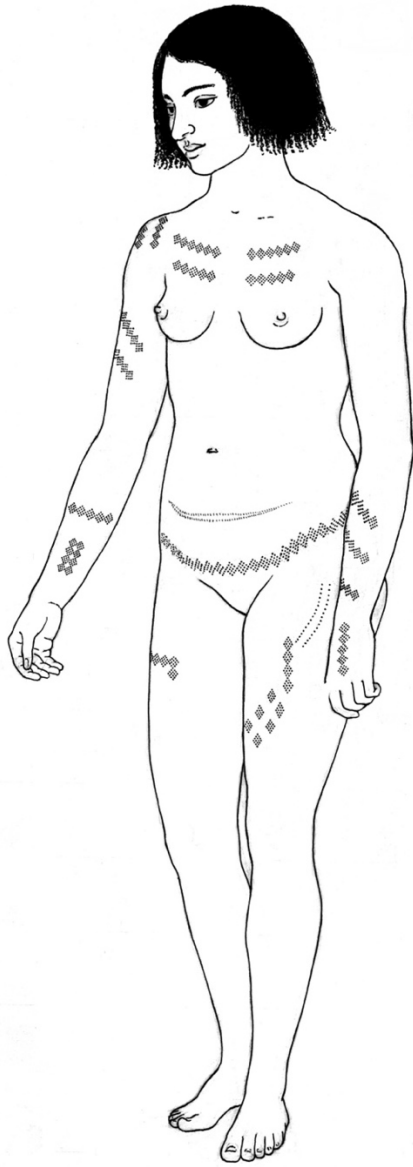


Figure 42: Drawing of tattoos on the anterior aspect of Individual 2's body reconstructing how they may have looked in life (Roehrig 2015, Fig. 2).

4.3. Previous interpretations of ethnicities

4.3.1. Physiological features and racial stereotypes

The argument that these three women were Nubian was implied in publications shortly after the excavation and examination of Individual 1 and Individual 2.³⁰⁵ Winlock states in a 1928 excavation report that “Derry had already noticed that the features of the tattooed dancing girls buried in Mentuhotep's Temple [Individuals 1 and 2] showed marked Nubian traits”.³⁰⁶ Precisely

³⁰⁵ Derry 1935; Derry 1938 in Keimer 1948, 14–15; Winlock 1928.

³⁰⁶ Winlock 1928, 10. The reference to “tattooed dancing girls” is a repetition of a previous argument that Individuals 1 and 2 held this role on the basis of comparison to a decorated figurine (Winlock 1923, 26). This

which features and on what basis they are distinguished as having Nubian traits is not elucidated in the publication. Derry's notes on his examinations of their bodies might contain further details regarding the basis of this assertion, but they remain unpublished and inaccessible.³⁰⁷ A later publication of Derry's from 1935 may provide insights into Winlock's statement.³⁰⁸ Derry states that "the facial features [of Individual 1] are of the Southern type, and her hair is wiry, and some of it was in tightly-coiled spirals. There is little doubt that she also was Nubian."³⁰⁹ Again, which facial features are meant by this and what distinguishes them as 'the Southern type' is not clear, but contextually these statements are indicative of Derry's implementation of eugenics and race theory.³¹⁰ For Individual 2, he asserts that "the face is definitely prognathous, and there is little doubt but that she is of the same racial origin [as Individual 1]".³¹¹ The attribution of Nubian traits to these vaguely defined physiological features is seemingly based on Derry's ideas about how Egyptian and Nubian women ought to look based on racial stereotypes, which were prevalent in archaeology and more broadly at the time in which he worked.³¹²

Derry's 1935 article is primarily concerned with identifying racial characteristics in the pelves of five women who were buried within the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II, including Individual 1 and Individual 2. While the morphological features of the women's pelves are measured and quantified,³¹³ these data are compared to average measurements for English and Egyptian populations to argue that their pelves are a "racial characteristic common to all five".³¹⁴ For one of the other individuals, named Henhenit, he states that her pelvis "approximates to that found in anthropoid apes", arguing that all five individuals belong to a phenotypical group which "embraces the lower racial groups, such as Negroes and Tasmanians."³¹⁵ It must be explicitly stated that the use of these racial categories, the assertion that African and Indigenous Australian

characterisation has since been challenged by Roehrig (2015, 530–532) who argues that they were high-status members of the royal court, as argued in § 4.1.

³⁰⁷ Roehrig (2015, 529 fn.10) refers to these notes, but the Metropolitan Museum of Art maintains a policy of not providing information which pertains to human remains and therefore does not allow access to them. Derry and Engelbach's 1941 publication pertains specifically to mummification and describes all three tattooed individuals; whether this is related to "his unpublished notes on mummification in the archives of the Egyptian Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art" referenced by Roehrig cannot be ascertained while the archive remains inaccessible. Austin has reviewed these unpublished notes and confirms that they do not contain any further detail regarding the tattoos (Anne Austin, *personal communication*, 4th January 2023). Further review is required to ascertain whether comments are made regarding the individuals' physiological features and interpretations of their ethnicities.

³⁰⁸ Derry 1935.

³⁰⁹ Derry 1935, 493. A similar comment is repeated in another publication concerned with mummification techniques used: "The hair was dark and coarse, with small, rather tightly-wound curls." (Derry and Engelbach 1941, 253).

³¹⁰ See Challis 2013 regarding these theories and their influence in archaeology in early periods.

³¹¹ Derry 1935, 494.

³¹² Bahrani 2006, 50; Challis 2013, 15–16.

³¹³ Derry 1935, 494.

³¹⁴ Derry 1935, 495.

³¹⁵ Derry 1935, 495.

peoples are “lower”, and the direct comparison of one of these individuals to apes, are offensive, problematic, and unscientific by modern standards, as are Derry’s references to “primitive peoples” and “higher races”.³¹⁶ His consequent assertion that “all of these women are of Southern origin, probably Nubian” must be viewed in light of the problematic data analysis and evident racial bias on which it is based.³¹⁷ Given Winlock’s reference to Derry in his frank statement that the tattooed individuals are Nubian, this assertion and all subsequent arguments in which it is referenced must also be reconsidered in light of these issues.

The skin colours of the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari have been the subject of some speculation and debate. As part of her argument that the tattooed individuals – and figurines with decoration resembling the tattoos – are not necessarily Nubian, Pinch asserts that the tattooed individuals are “light-skinned”.³¹⁸ Ashby, who argues that they are Nubian, rightly points out that “the melanin that provides skin color does not survive mummification and burial for 4,000 years undamaged and unchanged.”³¹⁹ Additionally, there is no basis for the idea that their skin even appears ‘light’ – the only photographs available are in greyscale and of low quality,³²⁰ and the only explicit description of any of their skin colours by someone who examined them is Fouquet’s, who states that Amunet’s skin is dark brown.³²¹ Fouquet does not attribute this colour to either melanisation or the impacts of mummification, nor does he extrapolate this to characterise her as Nubian. Tassie refers to a relief fragment which he believes depicts Amunet (**Figure 43**) and in which “she does not seem to be of the typical dark brown the Egyptians painted Nubians, or the light yellow reserved for depictions of elite Egyptian women.”³²² He suggests that “possibly she is painted in a tawny orange colour” but acknowledges it is unclear because the photograph of the relief is in black and white.³²³ Clearly, without being able to accurately determine which colour was used, it is impossible to analyse what the colour choice in her depiction might indicate about her appearance in life or the intentional representation of ethnic identity in the image.

³¹⁶ Derry 1935, 495.

³¹⁷ Derry 1935, 495.

³¹⁸ Pinch 1993, 212–213.

³¹⁹ Ashby 2018, 72.

³²⁰ Keimer 1948, pl. I–IX.

³²¹ Fouquet 1898, 271.

³²² Naville 1907, pl. XVII B; Tassie 2003, 92.

³²³ Tassie 2003, 92.



Figure 43: Black and white photograph of a relief from Eleventh Dynasty Deir el Bahari thought to depict Amunet (Naville 1907, pl. XVII b).

It must be stated that physiological features, where they are adequately quantified and compared to an appropriate population-level dataset, can be employed to determine possible genetic affinity.³²⁴ However, even where it can be determined that certain groups or individuals might be biologically related, this does not correlate directly with ethnicity. The consciousness of shared ancestry is one factor on which ethnicity might be constructed, in combination with others, and must be considered in this context (see § 2.3.1). In an ethnically heterogeneous and interconnected context like the ancient Nile Valley, it cannot be assumed that ethnic and cultural groups are sufficiently biologically distinct from each other for this type of analysis to be meaningful. Similarly, artistic depictions of individuals might provide some information about the ways in which they or those close to them chose to have them depicted in that particular representation, and what they intended to convey about the person's identity. However, they must also be taken in context and in conjunction with other factors in any attempt to infer identities.³²⁵

³²⁴ Such as the methodology employed by Buzon (2011) to investigate biological affinity based on cranial proportions of Kerma and C-Group populations.

³²⁵ Other women buried in the mortuary temple have also been interpreted as Nubian on the basis of skeletal morphological features and depictions of them in funerary material (Derry 1935, 491–493; Winlock 1928, 10). The

4.3.2. Ritual roles and associations with Nubia

Interpretations of the tattooed individuals' roles within the royal court have been employed to support the assertion that they are Nubian. This is based primarily on interpretations of Amunet's titles as well as the resemblance between the tattoos and decorations on anthropomorphic female figurines, which are thought to depict tattooed individuals and to represent women with specific social roles.³²⁶ Therefore, the tattooed individuals are attributed these roles as well. Again, the origin of this argument can be traced back to the earliest publications regarding these individuals from shortly after their excavation. Individual 1 and Individual 2 are introduced with the statement: "two nearly complete mummies turned out to be those of dancing girls tattooed exactly like the little faience figurine from the tomb of Neferhotep the Bowman".³²⁷ This figurine (see **Figure 28** in Chapter 3) is discussed earlier in the same excavation report and is characterised as "a little faience dancing girl, clad in a cowrie shell girdle and tattooing, to amuse him after the hunt".³²⁸ The sexual overtones of this interpretation of the figurine, and therefore of the tattooed individuals, are blatant. Winlock does not provide any further context or justification for his interpretation of the figurine and the tattooed individuals as dancing girls. It seems that Winlock interprets the figurine as inherently sexual due to his perception of her nudity and the prevailing attitudes to nudity in his own social context.³²⁹ He seemingly extrapolates this perception to the mummified individuals as well.

This characterisation is repeated by Derry in his note for Keimer regarding Individual 1 and Individual 2's scarification: "the two women which are the subject of this note are believed to have been dancing girls attached to the court".³³⁰ The sexual connotations of this interpretation are emphasised by his reference to Amunet, in the same note, as "a concubine of Mentuhotep II".³³¹ This idea about Amunet's role comes from various interpretations of her titles, which as mentioned above are still a point of controversy in the literature. Keimer takes her 'Priestess of Hathor' title to mean concubine,³³² but this has otherwise been interpreted literally as a ritual role in the cult of Hathor.³³³ Her second title, translated as 'Chief Royal Ornament' or similar, has

association between these women and the tattooed individuals implies that they ought to be considered together as multiple examples of Nubian women in the court of Mentuhotep II.

³²⁶ Friedman 2017, 25.

³²⁷ Winlock 1923, 26.

³²⁸ Winlock 1923, 20, Fig. 15.

³²⁹ Austin 2022, 405.

³³⁰ Derry 1938 in Keimer 1948, 14.

³³¹ Derry 1938 in Keimer 1948, 14.

³³² Keimer 1948, 8.

³³³ Bianchi 1988, 21–22; Friedman 2017, 22; Roehrig 2015, 531; Tassie 2003, 90.

more often been taken to mean concubine, although recent analyses have suggested that it may mean ‘Chief Lady in Waiting’ in service to the queen.³³⁴

Bianchi places a heavy emphasis on the purported sexual connotations of faience figurines and is a proponent of their characterisation as “Brides of the Dead”, describing them as “small in scale, easily fondled, and intentionally rendered physically helpless”.³³⁵ On this basis, and because both Amunet and the faience figurines are associated with Hathor, whom he calls “the most lascivious of all Egyptian goddesses”,³³⁶ he concludes that Amunet’s tattoos and the decorations on the figurines have “an undeniably carnal overtone”.³³⁷ This characterisation is representative of a trend in the early scholarship wherein tattooed women from ancient Egypt were overtly sexualised in a way which positioned them as sexually subservient to men, particularly but not necessarily exclusively to the king.³³⁸ This is also a feature of a broader trend as part of ‘Egyptomania’ to eroticise mummified females, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when these interpretations originated.³³⁹ In recent scholarship, interpretations of the tattooed individuals’ roles have shifted away from this overt sexualisation to suggest instead that they were ritual dancers and practitioners. For example, Tassie emphasises Amunet’s ‘Priestess of Hathor’ title, which he takes literally, and refers to Individual 1 and Individual 2 as “Hathoric dancers”,³⁴⁰ which begins to reframe these roles as primarily associated with ritual practice, rather than sexual entertainment as previous iterations imply.

Morris’s analysis of paddle dolls, a form of abstract female anthropomorphic figurines made of wood (see **Figures 29–30** in Chapter 3), develops this line of argument further and begins to connect it explicitly to the idea that these individuals are Nubian.³⁴¹ Morris argues that paddle dolls represent “specific living women, namely the Late Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom *khener*-dancers of Hathor at Deir el Bahari”.³⁴² Traditionally, it was thought that the *khener* were members of the king’s harem on the basis of the etymology of the word in Egyptian.³⁴³ However, *khener* troupes frequently included men and married women, who would seemingly not be appropriate for the role of “the hypothetical Egyptian concubine”.³⁴⁴ New interpretations

³³⁴ Friedman 2017, 22; Tooley 1989, 324.

³³⁵ Bianchi 1988, 22.

³³⁶ Bianchi 1988, 22.

³³⁷ Bianchi 1988, 22–23.

³³⁸ Austin 2022, 403, 406.

³³⁹ Austin 2022, 405.

³⁴⁰ Tassie 2003, 90.

³⁴¹ Morris 2011.

³⁴² Morris 2011, 71.

³⁴³ See Morris (2011, 73) for a discussion of the etymology and its interpretation.

³⁴⁴ Morris 2011, 73.

situate the *khener* as troupes of singers and dancers which were part of the formal structure of Egyptian administrative and ritual institutions, associated with the king, the cults of various gods and goddesses, and funerary contexts.³⁴⁵ Morris argues that the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari, and some of the other individuals buried within the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II, were members of the *khener* troupe associated with the cult of Hathor at Deir el Bahari,³⁴⁶ which he may have incorporated into his own mortuary cult.³⁴⁷

The association between the tattooed individuals and *khener*-women of Hathor is primarily based on the resemblance of the tattoos on Amunet, Individual 1, Individual 2, and the tattooed woman from Asasif (see § 3.1.1) to decorations on paddle dolls from Thebes dating to the same period.³⁴⁸ The burials within the mortuary temple do not contain paddle dolls, in contrast to other contemporaneous burials in the region; Morris attributes this to the dolls representing *khener*-women, which would not be necessary in burials of the *khener* themselves.³⁴⁹ Consequently, Morris references a mythological episode in ‘the Tale of the Sun’s Eye’, in the which the goddess returns to Egypt from Nubia,³⁵⁰ suggesting that “if the performances in the Hathor temple re-enacted this goddess’ return from Nubia and subsequent pacification, Nubian dancers would have been particularly appropriate performers.”³⁵¹ This suggestion is also based on the evident similarities between the tattoos on Amunet, Individual 1, and Individual 2, and other tattoos from Nubian cultural contexts at Hierakonpolis and Kubban (see § 3.1.2).³⁵² Roehrig refers to this work by Morris to explicitly reframe the roles attributed to the tattooed individuals as primarily ritual rather than sexual, arguing that “they may well have been dancers”, with the caveat that “it seems likely that they served the king not simply as harem dancing girls, but through their association with the cult of Hathor, whose connection with the site of Deir el-Bahari is well attested in the time of Mentuhotep II and in later periods.”³⁵³

Ashby develops this interpretation even further, arguing that the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari were Nubian, specifically associated with the C-Group culture, on the basis of their possible roles as dancers in the cult of Hathor.³⁵⁴ She refers to depictions of some of the other women who held these roles in which their skin is represented in dark brown, “in contrast to the

³⁴⁵ Morris 2011, 73–74.

³⁴⁶ Morris 2011, 83.

³⁴⁷ Morris 2011, 72.

³⁴⁸ Morris 2011, 79–80.

³⁴⁹ Morris 2011, 83.

³⁵⁰ See Ashby (2018, 66) for an account of this myth.

³⁵¹ Morris 2011, 81.

³⁵² This line of argument will be discussed further in the following section.

³⁵³ Roehrig 2015, 531–532.

³⁵⁴ Ashby 2018, 72.

standard Egyptian depiction of women with light brown/ yellow skin”, which she explicitly interprets as being indicative of “Nubian background”.³⁵⁵ The primary thesis of Ashby’s work is that ritual music and dance, which she approaches as central elements of traditional Nubian religious practices, were incorporated into the worship of Hathor in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom as a result of increased contact between Egyptians and the C-Group.³⁵⁶ Ashby builds upon Morris’s reference to Hathor’s return from Nubia in ‘the Tale of the Sun’s Eye’, to strengthen the suggestion that women from Nubia or of Nubian background were the most appropriate people to represent the goddess in ritual performances re-enacting this episode.³⁵⁷ Like Morris, Ashby bolsters this interpretation with the suggestion that their tattoos are Nubian in character.³⁵⁸ While Ashby explicitly argues that the tattooed individuals are Nubian women,³⁵⁹ she also stipulates that that is “no need to assume these Nubian women were not resident in Egypt. With a long history of immigration in both directions, both Nubia and Egypt were very heterogeneous societies.”³⁶⁰ This is certainly the case, and it is for this reason that further consideration of the complexity of the ethnic landscape, the construction of ethnic groups and identities, and the potential relevance of tattooing to these phenomena are necessary.

Renaut reiterates the argument put forward by Morris and Ashby that Nubian women would have been the most appropriate performers to re-enact Hathor’s return from Nubia.³⁶¹ He supports this argument further by drawing comparisons to “foreign dancers in native costumes [who] were a usual component of parades performed for other deities”.³⁶² Simultaneously, he reverts to the sexualisation of *khener* dancers as responsible for “celebrating, satisfying, and reviving the king through music, dance and, perhaps, sexual exhibition”, stating that the purpose of their representation in paddle dolls was “to delight and revive the deceased”.³⁶³ Scholars such as Morris, Roehrig, and Tassie have already directly addressed and refuted these characterisations and it is clear that, overall, the evidence does not support this interpretation of paddle dolls and *khener* dancers generally, nor the tattooed individuals in particular.³⁶⁴ Like Morris and Ashby, Renaut supports his arguments about the three tattooed individuals’ roles as

³⁵⁵ Ashby 2018, 64 fn.3.

³⁵⁶ Ashby 2018, 65.

³⁵⁷ Ashby 2018, 72.

³⁵⁸ Ashby 2018, 74.

³⁵⁹ Ashby 2018, 67 fn.17.

³⁶⁰ Ashby 2018, 64 fn.3.

³⁶¹ Renaut 2020, 72.

³⁶² Renaut 2020, 72.

³⁶³ Renaut 2020, 71.

³⁶⁴ Morris 2011; Roehrig 2015, 531–532; Tassie 2003, 90, 92.

dancers being indicative of Nubian ethnicity with the simultaneous assertion that their body modifications are distinctly Nubian.³⁶⁵

The idea that the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari held roles associated with dance began as an interpretation of their bodies and female figurines as inherently sexualised;³⁶⁶ the scholars who originated this uncritically and anachronistically applied their own perspectives on nudity, tattooing, and women to this historical context.³⁶⁷ The recent interpretation that these individuals were ritual dancers associated with the cult of Hathor, and that such roles might have been undertaken by individuals with a connection to Nubia, is supported by some contextual evidence including the association between Hathor and the region of Nubia;³⁶⁸ the prevalence of both Hathor worship and “Nubian styles” in the court of Mentuhotep II;³⁶⁹ and the use of dance and tattooing in C-Group cultural contexts.³⁷⁰ However, the extrapolation of these associations to the identification of a Nubian ethnicity for the tattooed individuals requires further interrogation.

4.3.3. Comparisons to tattooing and scarification from Nubian contexts

The primary point on which the controversy surrounding the ethnicities of the three individuals from Deir el Bahari is perpetuated into recent work is interpretations of the tattoos themselves.³⁷¹ In general, this argument is based on the premise that there are two distinct tattoo styles or traditions of tattooing, one for Egypt and one for Nubia (see § 3.3). Therefore, it is argued that because these individuals’ tattoos strongly resemble the tattoos from Nubian cultural contexts and are stylistically distinct from other tattoos from Egyptian cultural contexts, the individuals themselves must be Nubian. Like the other arguments about their ethnicity, this does not adequately take account of the ethnic heterogeneity across the ancient Nile Valley region, and specifically within Egyptian society (see § 2.3.2).

This argument, like the other two main lines of evidence, originated early in the publication history of these individuals. In Derry’s note for Keimer regarding the scarification observed on Individual 1 and Individual 2, he draws a series of comparisons between these marks and “scarifications such as are seen today in many of the inhabitants both of Nubia and the

³⁶⁵ Renault 2020, 71–72. Discussed in the following section.

³⁶⁶ Friedman 2017, 24.

³⁶⁷ Austin 2022, 403.

³⁶⁸ Ashby 2018, 63–64; Renault 2020, 72.

³⁶⁹ Morris 2011, 76–77, 80.

³⁷⁰ Ashby 2018, 74–76.

³⁷¹ Friedman 2017, 26.

Sudan”,³⁷² which might suggest that Derry thought their body modifications had a Nubian character. Winlock’s earlier comment about Derry’s observation of “Nubian traits” amongst their “features”,³⁷³ is so vague that it cannot be certain that this refers to their physiognomy;³⁷⁴ alternatively, it might refer to the features of their body modifications, or both.

Early analyses argue that tattooing practices were introduced to Egypt from Nubia and consider the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari as part of the possible mechanism of this introduction.³⁷⁵ Keimer draws comparisons between the individuals from Deir el Bahari and the tattooed skin fragments from Kubban, and between decorated figurines from both Egyptian and C-Group contexts.³⁷⁶ On the basis of his perception of similarities between the evidence from Egyptian and Nubian contexts, Keimer questions whether the individuals from Deir el Bahari might be Nubian women, and suggests that if this could be proven, it would indicate that tattooing practices were introduced to Egypt from foreign contexts.³⁷⁷

Bianchi further develops this suggestion by drawing comparisons between the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari, the skin fragments from Kubban, and Meroitic Period tattoos from Aksha which had been discovered since Keimer’s publication.³⁷⁸ Based on his perception of similarity between the tattoos from all three contexts, he argues that “Egyptian tattoo was imported from Nubia”.³⁷⁹ Further, Bianchi incorporates the indirect evidence for tattooing in New Kingdom Egypt, all of which indicates a figural tattoo style, and argues that this “developed during the course of the Middle Kingdom” in Egypt from the Nubian geometric dot-and-dash style.³⁸⁰ The implication of this argument is that the individuals from Deir el Bahari must have been among the earliest instances of tattooed Nubians present in Egypt. Bianchi further bolsters his claims by referring to Winlock to assert that “it has been demonstrated that Amunet and the other two female mummies from the Middle Kingdom are associated with Nubia”.³⁸¹ In this way, Winlock’s early comments and Derry’s problematic interpretations of their physiological features were incorporated into this argument.

³⁷² Derry 1938 in Keimer 1948, 15.

³⁷³ Winlock 1928, 10.

³⁷⁴ Derry 1935, 493–495; Winlock 1928, 10.

³⁷⁵ Bianchi 1988, 23–24; Keimer 1948, 106.

³⁷⁶ Keimer 1948, 106.

³⁷⁷ Keimer 1948, 106.

³⁷⁸ Bianchi 1988, 23–24; Vila 1967 368–377, pl. XIII–XIX.

³⁷⁹ Bianchi 1988, 24.

³⁸⁰ Bianchi 1988, 24.

³⁸¹ Bianchi 1988, 23.

The idea that “the C-Group people, whom the Egyptians colonized beginning in the early Middle Kingdom, introduced the practice of tattooing women into Egypt” is repeated by Ashby, who emphasises that the known tattooed individuals are “almost exclusively female and Nubian”.³⁸² This was the case prior to the observation of tattoos on male individuals from both Egyptian and Pan-Grave contexts,³⁸³ and multiple female individuals from Egyptian contexts.³⁸⁴ Ashby also reenforces Derry’s interpretations by reiterating “Winlock’s frank description of these priestesses as Nubian” and quoting Winlock’s comments from 1928.³⁸⁵

The discovery of figural tattoos dating to the Predynastic Period and the Old and Middle Kingdoms in Egypt disproves the theory that tattooing practices were introduced to Egypt from Nubia during the Middle Kingdom and that the figural style developed from the geometric style during the Middle and New Kingdoms. However, these discoveries have strengthened the hypothesis that two distinct styles, or traditions, of tattooing were practiced in the ancient Nile Valley; figural, associated with Egypt, and geometric, associated with Nubia. The tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari have been compared to the other known tattooed individuals from both Egyptian and Nubian cultural contexts, and the resemblance between their tattoos and ones from C-Group contexts in particular has been noted.³⁸⁶ Morris identifies similarities between the tattoos on the individuals from Deir el Bahari and the tattooed individuals from Kubban and Hierakonpolis, and on decorated C-Group figurines.³⁸⁷ While Morris asserts that these individuals were interred “in conjunction with typical C-Group assemblages”,³⁸⁸ it is necessary to reiterate here that the tattooed individual from Kubban can now be attributed to a Pan-Grave cultural context, and that it is not known how the C-Group and Pan-Grave cultures were related, including via their tattoo practices. Similarly, Ashby emphasises the idea that the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari “bore designs otherwise found only on contemporaneous C-Group women of Lower Nubia” to support her suggestion that they are Nubian.³⁸⁹ Both Morris and Ashby employ these arguments in which they compare Amunet, Individual 1, and Individual 2’s tattoos to tattooed individuals from Nubian cultural contexts in conjunction with their other arguments regarding their possible physiological features and ritual roles.

³⁸² Ashby 2018, 68.

³⁸³ Friedman 2016; Friedman et al. 2018; Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th October 2022.

³⁸⁴ Austin and Arnette 2022; Austin and Gobeil 2016; Friedman et al. 2018.

³⁸⁵ Ashby 2018, 72.

³⁸⁶ Ashby 2018, 64; Friedman 2017, 26; Morris 2011, 80.

³⁸⁷ Morris 2011, 80.

³⁸⁸ Morris 2011, 80.

³⁸⁹ Ashby 2018, 64.

Renaut proposes a framework based around two tattoo traditions which he correlates with the “cultural areas” of Nubia and Egypt respectively (see § 3.3):³⁹⁰ ‘type A’, geometric dot-and-dash; and ‘type B’, figural.³⁹¹ He argues that ‘type A’ persisted “uninterrupted” and “fairly consistent” in terms of the designs used, particularly lozenge arrangements, for more than two millennia.³⁹² As argued in § 3.3, there are in fact discernible differences in the tattoo practices known from C-Group, Pan-Grave, and Meroitic contexts. There is also nothing but speculation to indicate that Amunet has any tattoos in the lozenge arrangement (see § 4.2.1). Therefore, Renaut’s definition of a general Nubian tattoo tradition on this basis, and his conflation of the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari with the individuals from Hierakonpolis, Kubban, Semna South, and Aksha, is questionable. Renaut also argues in detail that the abdominal scarification observed on Individual 1 and Individual 2 (§§ 4.2.2–4.2.3) is a definitively Nubian practice on the basis that markings on C-Group figurines, previously thought to represent belts, may actually depict these scars, and they are never depicted on Egyptian figurines.³⁹³ He therefore concludes that “this particular mutilation” is not Egyptian but a “foreign” practice, and that Individual 1 and Individual 2 received their scarification either in Nubia or in the context of a Nubian community living within Egypt.³⁹⁴ He concludes this argument with the following statement: “If this [scarification] practice had been Egyptian, and especially if it had concerned women of the Egyptian royal court, it would be known to us by Egyptian images and texts. The same thing can be said about the tattoos.”³⁹⁵

It has already been demonstrated that the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari were ‘women of the Egyptian royal court’ and likely held positions of privilege and important ritual roles. Renaut’s attempt to characterise them as foreigners on the basis that their body modification is not attested in Egyptian sources does not align with the previous scholarship on these points, nor does it adequately reflect the available evidence. There are no definitive references to tattooing in Egyptian texts from any period,³⁹⁶ and most of the iconographic evidence comes from the New Kingdom (see § 3.2.2), however there is ample evidence for Egyptians being tattooed throughout Predynastic and Pharaonic Egyptian history (§ 3.1.1). Further, the artistic sources almost exclusively depict tattooed women with a limited range of tattoo designs (§§ 3.2.1–3.2.2), but it is now known that men were tattooed as well,³⁹⁷ and some tattoos which have no parallels

³⁹⁰ Renaut 2020, 78.

³⁹¹ Renaut 2020, 67.

³⁹² Renaut 2014, 22–24; 2020, 68.

³⁹³ Renaut 2014, 24; 2020, 71–72.

³⁹⁴ Renaut 2020, 72.

³⁹⁵ Renaut 2020, 72.

³⁹⁶ See § 3.2 regarding the possible reference to tattooing in a Ptolemaic period papyrus.

³⁹⁷ Friedman et al. 2018; Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th October 2022.

in artistic sources have been observed on mummified individuals.³⁹⁸ Overall, there is no reason to think that ‘Egyptian images and texts’ contain a complete and accurate record of tattooing and scarification practices within Egypt in the Pharaonic period. Decoration resembling the tattoos has repeatedly been observed on Egyptian figurines, which Renault acknowledges, but attributes to Egyptians being motivated to “make and manipulate female effigies tattooed in the Nubian fashion” because they thought that Nubian women had “special values and powers”.³⁹⁹ It is not clear that there is any reason why they could not depict women who belonged to and participated in Egyptian society. Renault explicitly characterises the three individuals from Deir el Bahari as being of Nubian origin and asserts that they were tattooed “in their original culture” before they took their roles in the court.⁴⁰⁰ He offers a few possible explanations for how these individuals came to be in Egypt:

Thus, the three women of Deir el-Bahari, assuming they were Nubian, could have been either forcibly taken as war booty, offered to the king by a Nubian ally, or lastly, born on Egyptian soil in Nubian families settled there to work, to trade, or to fight in the Egyptian army.⁴⁰¹

There is no evidence that these individuals were taken or traded from Nubia in the context of conflict. The idea that they came from a community of ethnic Nubians living and working within Egypt, such as the communities associated with the C-Group and Pan-Grave cemeteries at Hierakonpolis,⁴⁰² is justifiable on the available evidence. However, Renault’s apparent aversion to the idea that these individuals belonged to the Egyptian court does not account for their evident status as demonstrated by their valuable grave goods, privileged burial location, and Amunet’s titles.⁴⁰³ Further, none of Renault’s suggestions take any account of the agency of the tattooed women; in each scenario, they are subject to some form of patriarchal dominance and their corporeal and social autonomy are appropriated by vaguely defined male figures, in the absence of supporting evidence.

Friedman similarly argues that the “cultural areas” of Egypt and Nubia had their own tattoo traditions, which were figural and pattern-based respectively.⁴⁰⁴ She further suggests that tattoos

³⁹⁸ Such as the extensively tattooed individual from Deir el Medina (Austin and Gobeil 2016).

³⁹⁹ Renault 2020, 73.

⁴⁰⁰ Renault 2020, 71.

⁴⁰¹ Renault 2020, 72.

⁴⁰² Renault 2020, 72.

⁴⁰³ Friedman 2017, 36 fn.16.

⁴⁰⁴ Friedman 2017, 34.

would have been recognised between people of different cultures as specific ethnic markers.⁴⁰⁵ Regarding the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari, she acknowledges the contentiousness of their identification as Nubian on the basis of their tattoos, while also referring to the dot-and-dash style of tattoos as having an “un-Egyptian nature”.⁴⁰⁶ Friedman draws extensive comparisons between the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari and the three tattooed individuals from the C-Group cemetery HK27C at Hierakonpolis, which also dates to the Middle Kingdom. She emphasises the similarities between the two groups of tattooed women in terms of the designs, placements, and possible application methods of their tattoos. While Friedman stops short of explicitly arguing that the individuals from Deir el Bahari are Nubian she refers to “the presence of real Nubian dancers at Deir el Bahari and Hierakonpolis”,⁴⁰⁷ implying that both groups of tattooed women were of Nubian ethnicity. The individuals from Hierakonpolis are identified as such on the basis of their burial assemblages which are characteristically C-Group,⁴⁰⁸ and the individuals from Deir el Bahari by comparison based on their tattoos.

The resemblance between Amunet, Individual 1, and Individual 2’s tattoos and those known from Nubian cultural contexts, including the skin fragments from Kubban, the three tattooed women from HK27C, the tattooed man from HK47, and C-Group female anthropomorphic figurines, is undeniable. However, the previous studies reviewed herein have extrapolated directly from the observation of this aesthetic and stylistic resemblance to ascribing the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari a Nubian ethnicity. This is problematic because these individuals clearly belong to a high-status Egyptian mortuary and social context, based on the limited data obtained from their burials. There are myriad possible explanations for why three women in the court of Mentuhotep II might have chosen to attain tattoos in a ‘Nubian style’, which do not necessitate a foreign origin or a particular ethnic identity.

4.4. Discussion: interpreting tattoos and ethnic identities

Interpretations of these individuals, particularly with respect to their ethnicities, remain controversial due to limited data and the application of competing interpretive frameworks. It has been variously argued that these individuals or their ancestors were from Lower Nubia; that they came from a community which was resident in Egypt but practiced C-Group culture; or that they

⁴⁰⁵ Friedman 2017, 26, 34.

⁴⁰⁶ Friedman 2017, 26.

⁴⁰⁷ Friedman 2017, 33.

⁴⁰⁸ Friedman 2017, 26.

were socially and ethnically Egyptian. It is impossible to conclusively identify these individuals as either Egyptian or Nubian, partly because the identity of any ancient individual cannot be definitively reconstructed. The idea that they must be either Egyptian *or* Nubian should also be questioned; ethnic identities are certainly more complex than reductive dualisms, especially in the context of the multicultural and ethnically heterogeneous ancient Nile Valley. As argued by Tassie:

Although the Hathoric dancers of the Middle Kingdom may have had some Nubian origins, they could have been born in Egypt and been thoroughly Egyptian in their ideology, manners and customs. It is impossible to tell in which region the tattoos were applied to them and the ethnic origin of the tattoo artists. Thus, the evidence does not allow a conclusive identification of the Deir el-Bahari mummies as either Egyptians or Nubians.⁴⁰⁹

While the corpus of evidence for tattooing has been expanded since the publication of Tassie's analysis, it is still the case that there is very little evidence to indicate where, when, how, or by whom the tattoos were made. As suggested by Tassie, it is very possible that these individuals might have been socially Egyptian. This might be evidenced by Amunet's name, which is seemingly typically Egyptian, in combination with her titles and their presence within the mortuary temple of the king which are indicative of their roles in the Egyptian court. None of this precludes them from experiencing a Nubian ethnicity. If the tattooed individuals or their ancestors were from Nubia, or belonged to communities of ethnic Nubians within Egypt, they might have chosen to attain their cultural tattoos in a deliberate effort to connect to these ethnic identities and cultural practices. This might be compared to the examples in § 2.3.2 of individuals depicted in their tombs with certain physiological features or wearing dress, hair, and jewellery styles which were associated with ethnic stereotypes in Egyptian artistic conventions. Such depictions seem to represent a deliberate desire to express an ethnic identity and participation in cultural practices which are distinct from the stereotypical Egyptian ones. It is necessary to reiterate that there is currently no evidence available which would allow scholars to determine the tattooed individuals' places of birth or genetic ancestry.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁹ Tassie 2003, 92.

⁴¹⁰ See § 5.2 below for recommendations for future study which might be able to generate this evidence and provide additional context to these arguments.

There is evidence that at least two distinct tattoo practices were present in the ancient Nile Valley during the Middle Kingdom.⁴¹¹ The tattooed woman from Asasif bears a figural tattoo in solid lines, consistent with the style of Egyptian tattooing known from earlier periods. The tattooed women from HK27C at Hierakonpolis seemingly represent a C-Group tattoo tradition, which may have been practiced across the geographic span of the C-Group culture and the associated communities, assuming that decorated C-Group figurines depict tattooed individuals, as has been repeatedly suggested. It has also been suggested that these two tattoo practices might have involved different tattooing methods, although there is no definitive evidence for tattooing tools in the archaeological record.

As discussed in § 3.3, Friedman suggests that the tattoos observed on three women from HK27C may have been made with a multipronged implement conducive to producing evenly spaced arrays of dots,⁴¹² although this hypothesis is currently based solely on the appearance of the tattoos and other possibilities cannot be discounted. The figural tattoo from Asasif could not have been made by this method and was likely made with either single needles or clusters of needles to produce the characteristic thick, dark, solid lines.⁴¹³ If the two styles of tattooing from this period were made with different tools, it might have been possible to emulate the C-Group Nubian style of tattooing using Egyptian methods by poking dots individually rather than in groups. None of the previous examinations of the individuals from Deir el Bahari address this point, but it might be possible under further examination to observe uneven spacing in the dots which would suggest that they were made with single needles rather than combs. If it could be demonstrated that the methods used to produce their tattoos were consistent with the ones used in C-Group contexts, this might favour the interpretation that they were tattooed in such a context and therefore had a cultural and ethnic connection to the C-Group. Alternatively, if the application methods align with the methods used for other Egyptian tattoos, this might suggest that these individuals did not necessarily have a personal connection to C-Group culture, but attained their tattoos in an Egyptian cultural context, perhaps to connect to their ritual roles.

Some scholars have argued that Amunet, Individual 1, and Individual 2 might have been members of the *khener* troupe of singers and dancers attached to the cult of Hathor at Deir el Bahari (see § 4.3.2). The goddess Hathor has mythological links to the region of Nubia, dance and tattooing are likely to have been a part of C-Group ritual practices, and the tattoos have

⁴¹¹ Friedman 2017, 26.

⁴¹² Friedman 2004, 47; 2017, 27.

⁴¹³ Akin to modern tattoos made with either stick-and-poke methods or tattooing machines to produce these types of lines.

parallels in tattoos and material culture including decorated figurines and pottery from Nubian cultural contexts. These factors have been interpreted as evidence that the tattooed individuals came to Egypt from Nubia, had a Nubian background, or were from Nubian communities living in Egypt and practicing their distinct cultures. Whether or not these individuals were ritual dancers, they might have chosen to attain their tattoos in a deliberate effort to express their ethnic identities and connect to their cultural practices. However, the following passage from Ashby hints at an alternative interpretation:

Tattooing may well have served as a cultural marker for many Nubian tribes, which was incorporated later into the attire of Egyptian Hathoric dancers. Employing the Nubian tradition of tattooing effectively linked Hathoric dancers with the goddess because Hathor was so closely associated with Nubia, as a goddess who originated/sojourned in Nubia and returned to Egypt with a retinue of worshippers from the many tribes of Nubia.⁴¹⁴

Ashby suggests that the tattooed individuals from Deir el Bahari were Nubian themselves, but the tattooing practices in which they participated were incorporated into Egyptian Hathoric ritual practices later, which is possible. Alternatively, it might be suggested that this occurred earlier, and these individuals did not necessarily have personal connections to the C-Group. Instead, they might have been practicing a form of tattooing which resembles and is based upon C-Group tattooing practices, for the purpose of embodying the goddess and her link to Nubia.

In summary, the observation of stylistic similarities between the tattoos on the individuals from Deir el Bahari and those from Nubian contexts might suggest a connection to the C-Group tattoo practice. However, this is not sufficient evidence to infer the individuals' places of birth, ancestry, or ethnic identities. It has been suggested that C-Group tattooing practices were appropriated into Hathoric ritual practices in the Middle Kingdom; if so, these individuals might have been Nubian, or of Nubian descent, or ethnically Egyptian. If not, it may be more likely that these individuals had some cultural and ethnic connection to C-Group communities and cultural practices, but the nature of this connection and how these individuals experienced that as part of their personal identity is indeterminable. All three individuals clearly lived and held high-status occupations in Egypt, and even if they were from Nubia or belonged to a resident ethnic group in Egypt, their ethnic identities would almost certainly have comprised multiple facets including both 'Nubian' and 'Egyptian' aspects.

⁴¹⁴ Ashby 2018, 74.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusions

This primary aim of this thesis was to re-evaluate the potential connections between tattoos and ethnic identities in the ancient Nile Valley. This was fulfilled by reviewing the evidence for tattoo practices, including tattooed individuals and material culture, through a novel interpretive framework grounded in style and practice theory. This framework considers not only the aesthetic stylistic features of tattooing, but also placements, extent, tools, and methods; and, centrally, the exclusivity and specificity of tattooing on the basis of social factors. It was determined that tattoo practices from different time periods and cultural contexts within the broadly defined ‘cultural areas’ of Egypt and Nubia have demonstrably different stylistic and social features, even where the aesthetic character of the tattoos is similar. This represents a development in the understanding of tattoo practices in these contexts, which have previously been constructed as two broad and longstanding tattoo traditions. In particular, the Meroitic Nubian tattoo practice has previously been considered as a continuation of earlier practices in C-Group and Pan-Grave contexts, but the stylistic features of the tattoos and the demography of tattooed individuals are in fact distinct. Further, it was determined that the tattooed individual from Cemetery 110 at Kubban has been mistakenly attributed to a C-Group cultural context, and it is more likely that the burial should be attributed to the Pan-Grave culture, making this individual the first known woman with tattoos from a Pan-Grave context. Considering tattoo practices separately and within their social context is conducive to consideration of the social messages they might convey within a particular society, and more nuanced understandings of the relationships between tattoo practices. The distinct stylistic and social features of tattoo practices from different cultural contexts, including, in some instances, contemporaneous tattoo practices from Egyptian and Nubian contexts, suggest that tattoos might have been recognisable as markers of cultural and ethnic affiliation in those periods. It is possible that tattoos were deliberately employed as visual indicators of ethnic identity.

This thesis focused on a case study of three tattooed women from the temple of Mentuhotep II at Deir el Bahari, whose tattoos and ethnic identities have been subject to much debate. The primary point of contention is the apparent disconnect between their high-status Egyptian mortuary context and the resemblance of their tattoos to those from Nubian contexts. In critically reviewing the apocryphal interpretations of these individuals as Nubian, this analysis has uncovered the anachronistic origins of each argument, which are repeated even in recent

scholarship. These include their purported physiological features, their possible roles in the cult of Hathor at Deir el Bahari, and the resemblance of their tattoos and scarification to other examples known from Nubian contexts. This analysis has determined that there is insufficient data available to determine their physiological features and genetic affinities; even if this were possible, these factors do not correlate directly with ethnic identity. Furthermore, although the contextual evidence indicates that these individuals held roles within the cult of Hathor and that these might have been connected to Nubia through mythology, this does not necessitate that the individuals are Nubian or attained their tattoos in a Nubian context. The similarities between their tattoos and those of, in particular, the tattooed women from HK27C at Hierakonpolis, in contrast to the individual from Asasif, supports the idea that their tattoos are connected to the C-Group tattoo practice, but the nature of this connection is not elucidated.

This thesis does not propose a conclusive interpretation of these individuals' tattoos and ethnic identities; it is instead suggested that there are myriad possibilities that might be supported by the available evidence and that the reality is undoubtedly complex. They may have moved into Egyptian territory from Nubia after having attained their tattoos. Alternatively, they may have been descended from people who moved to Egypt or belong to communities of ethnic Nubians resident in Egyptian territory and attained their tattoos within a C-Group cultural context in Egypt as part of cultural practices or as a deliberate effort to express and connect to a Nubian ethnic identity. They may otherwise have attained their tattoos exclusively for reasons related to their roles in Hathoric ritual practices, which may have required a connection to Nubia and an emulation of Nubian tattooing for the re-enactment of mythological episodes. At this stage, there is insufficient evidence to eliminate any of these possibilities, and in any case, it seems likely that their identities encompassed both Egyptian and Nubian aspects. These individuals are representative of the complexity of ethnic identities in the ancient Nile Valley and the challenges of reconstructing the identities of individuals in archaeological contexts.

5.2. Recommendations for future research

The primary limitation on this study was the small number of known and published tattooed individuals, which represent the only definitive evidence for tattoo practices. The corpus of evidence has expanded in recent years as infrared photography techniques have been applied to individuals from the British Museum collections, excavations at Hierakonpolis, and tombs at Deir el Medina, all of which have identified multiple previously unknown tattooed individuals. The success of this non-invasive method makes it a fruitful avenue for analysing human remains

from new excavations and in museum collections. Infrared cameras are portable and relatively low-cost, making them a viable tool for fieldwork and museum research, and such analyses could be undertaken at the same time as other techniques for recording and examining human remains. In particular, the application of infrared techniques in examinations of human remains from Kerma contexts might reveal whether or not tattooing was practiced among those communities. This would make a significant contribution to the ongoing effort to define the relationships between different Nubian cultures, and potentially elucidate the connections between Nubian tattoo practices.

A new physical examination of the three individuals from Deir el Bahari would have great potential to yield fresh observations. As this thesis has demonstrated, past studies have identified certain problems that could be clarified through direct study of the bodies themselves. Firstly, it is not certain that all of their tattoos have been observed and recorded accurately or completely due to the brevity of the examinations of Amunet and the fact that all three individuals were examined prior to the advent of infrared photography techniques. Additionally, it might be possible to generate data about their genetic affinities through craniometric analyses or aDNA techniques, or about their geographic origins through isotope analyses. Such information would be of great value in reconstructing the lived experiences of these individuals and therefore inferring the factors which might have contributed to the construction of their ethnic identities.

Finally, this thesis focused on the possible connections between tattoos and ethnic identity in the ancient Nile Valley and for the three individuals from Deir el Bahari specifically. There is potential to expand the theorisation of tattoos applied here to other tattooed individuals, and to integrate other aspects of identity including but not limited to gender, age, familial links, status, and occupation. Further questions regarding agency, or lack thereof, in tattoo practices should be considered, particularly in the context of broader gendered power structures. To this end, further comparison to anthropological studies of tattooing might provide valuable insight into how such structures manifest in tattoo practices. In addition to potential interconnections with multiple aspects of identity, tattooing may also have been integrated with other forms of body adornment and modification for identity construction and social messaging. The potential use of tattooing, scarification, jewellery, clothing, body paint, piercing, and more in combination, for the construction and expression of identities, is an exciting topic that has yet to be explored. Such body adornments and modifications represent a physical manifestation of an individual's personal preferences, as well as an expression of their place within their community with regard to social and demographic factors. Tattoos, in particular, can be connected to multiple aspects of

cultural expression and provide a unique source through which to access this data, which might otherwise be intangible and inaccessible to archaeology.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary table of tattooed mummified individuals from the ancient Nile Valley.⁴¹⁵

Date	Period/ culture	Location	Identifier/s	Sex ⁴¹⁶	Age	Source/s
Unconfirmed ⁴¹⁷	Predynastic	Gebelein, Egypt	Unconfirmed ⁴¹⁸	M	Unconfirmed	Renée Friedman <i>pers.comm.</i> 6 th October 2022.
Unconfirmed ⁴¹⁷	Predynastic	Gebelein, Egypt	Unconfirmed ⁴¹⁸	M	Unconfirmed	Renée Friedman <i>pers.comm.</i> 6 th October 2022.
Unconfirmed ⁴¹⁷	Predynastic	Gebelein, Egypt	Unconfirmed ⁴¹⁸	F?	Unconfirmed	Renée Friedman <i>pers.comm.</i> 6 th October 2022.
3351–3092 BCE	Predynastic (Naqada IID–IIIB)	Gebelein, Egypt	BM EA32752	F	Adult ⁴¹⁹	Friedman 2017; Friedman et al. 2018.
3341–3017 BCE	Predynastic (Naqada IID–IIIB)	Gebelein, Egypt	BM EA32751	M	18–21	Antoine and Ambers 2014, 26; Friedman 2017; Friedman et al. 2018.
Unconfirmed ⁴²⁰	Old Kingdom	Unprovenanced	Unconfirmed	M	Unconfirmed	Renée Friedman <i>pers.comm.</i> 6 th October 2022.
2055–2004 BCE	Dynasty XI	Deir el Bahari, Thebes, Egypt	Amunet	F	Adult ⁴²¹	Fouquet 1898; Keimer 1948.
2055–2004 BCE	Dynasty XI	Deir el Bahari, Thebes, Egypt	Individual 1 (Pit 23)	F	Young adult	Keimer 1948; Winlock 1923; MMA tomb cards 89–103.

⁴¹⁵ Adapted and expanded from Friedman 2017, Table 1.1. Two entries referring to possible tattoos from the Late Period and Graeco-Roman Period in Egypt are not included in this table because they refer to unsubstantiated indirect evidence for tattooing from markings on body wrappings and “mummy masks” respectively.

⁴¹⁶ As determined by primary sex characteristics in preserved soft tissues or skeletal morphological features (see respective sources) – F refers to female; M to male; where a ‘?’ is added, this signifies a probable sex; U refers to undetermined or uncertain.

⁴¹⁷ Radiocarbon dating is currently being undertaken to confirm the date ranges for these individuals, but it is thought that they predate the other two tattooed individuals from the Predynastic period (Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th October 2022). See Friedman et al. 2018, Table 2 for previous work on this point.

⁴¹⁸ These individuals belong to the group of seven naturally mummified individuals from Predynastic Gebelein in the British Museum, all of whom have assigned identifiers – the applicable identifiers will no doubt be confirmed upon publication.

⁴¹⁹ Although this individual has been CT scanned along with Gebelein Man A (EA 32751) and Gebelein Man B (EA 32754), only the males’ ages were determined with more specificity (Antoine and Vandenbeusch 2021, 590).

⁴²⁰ Radiocarbon dating is currently being undertaken to confirm the date range for this individual, but it is thought that he dates to approximately the middle of the Old Kingdom period (Renée Friedman, *personal communication*, 6th October 2022).

⁴²¹ While Roehrig (2015, 531) refers to her as “middle-aged”, the reference is to inaccessible records; by contrast Fouquet (1898, 271) asserts that she is “still young”.

Date	Period/ culture	Location	Identifier/s	Sex	Age	Source/s
2055–2004 BCE	Dynasty XI	Deir el Bahari, Thebes, Egypt	Individual 2 (Pit 26)	F	Middle aged, ~40	Keimer 1948; Winlock 1923; MMA tomb cards 109–111.
1985–1955 BCE	Dynasty XII	Asasif, Thebes, Egypt	Asasif 1008	F	Unknown	Morris 2011.
1985–1855 BCE	C-Group	Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis, Egypt	Tomb 9	F	>50	Friedman 2004; 2017; Paulson 2012; Pieri and Antoine 2014.
1985–1855 BCE	C-Group	Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis, Egypt	Tomb 10	F	35–50	Friedman and Paulson 2013; Friedman 2017; Pieri and Antoine 2014.
1985–1855 BCE	C-Group	Cemetery HK27C, Hierakonpolis, Egypt	Tomb 36	F	>50	Friedman 2017; Pieri and Antoine 2014.
c. 1750 BCE	Pan-Grave	Cemetery HK47, Hierakonpolis, Egypt	Burial 12	M	18–23	Friedman 2016; 2017.
1580–1550 BCE ⁴²²	Pan-Grave?	Cemetery 110, Kubban, Nubia	Grave 271	F	Unknown	Firth 1927.
1550–1069 BCE	Dynasty XVIII–XX	Deir el Medina, Thebes, Egypt	DEM 356.19.001	F	≥29	Austin and Arnette 2022.
1295–1069 BCE	Ramesside (Dynasty XIX–XX)	Deir el Medina, Thebes, Egypt	DEM 290.15.001	F	25–34	Austin and Gobeil 2016; Austin and Arnette 2022.
1295–945 BCE	Dynasty XIX–XXI	Deir el Medina, Thebes, Egypt	DEM 298.19.004	F	≥29	Austin and Arnette 2022.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Semna South, Sudan	N-247	F (2?) ⁴²³	Adult	Alvrus et al. 2001.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMIV	F	Adult	Vila 1967.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMXII	U	Adult	Vila 1967.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMXXXII	F	Adult	Vila 1967.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMXXXVI	F	Adolescent	Vila 1967.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMXXXVIII west	U	Adolescent	Vila 1967.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMXLIII	F	Adult	Vila 1967.

⁴²² The date range for this individual has been revised for this study – see § 3.1.2.

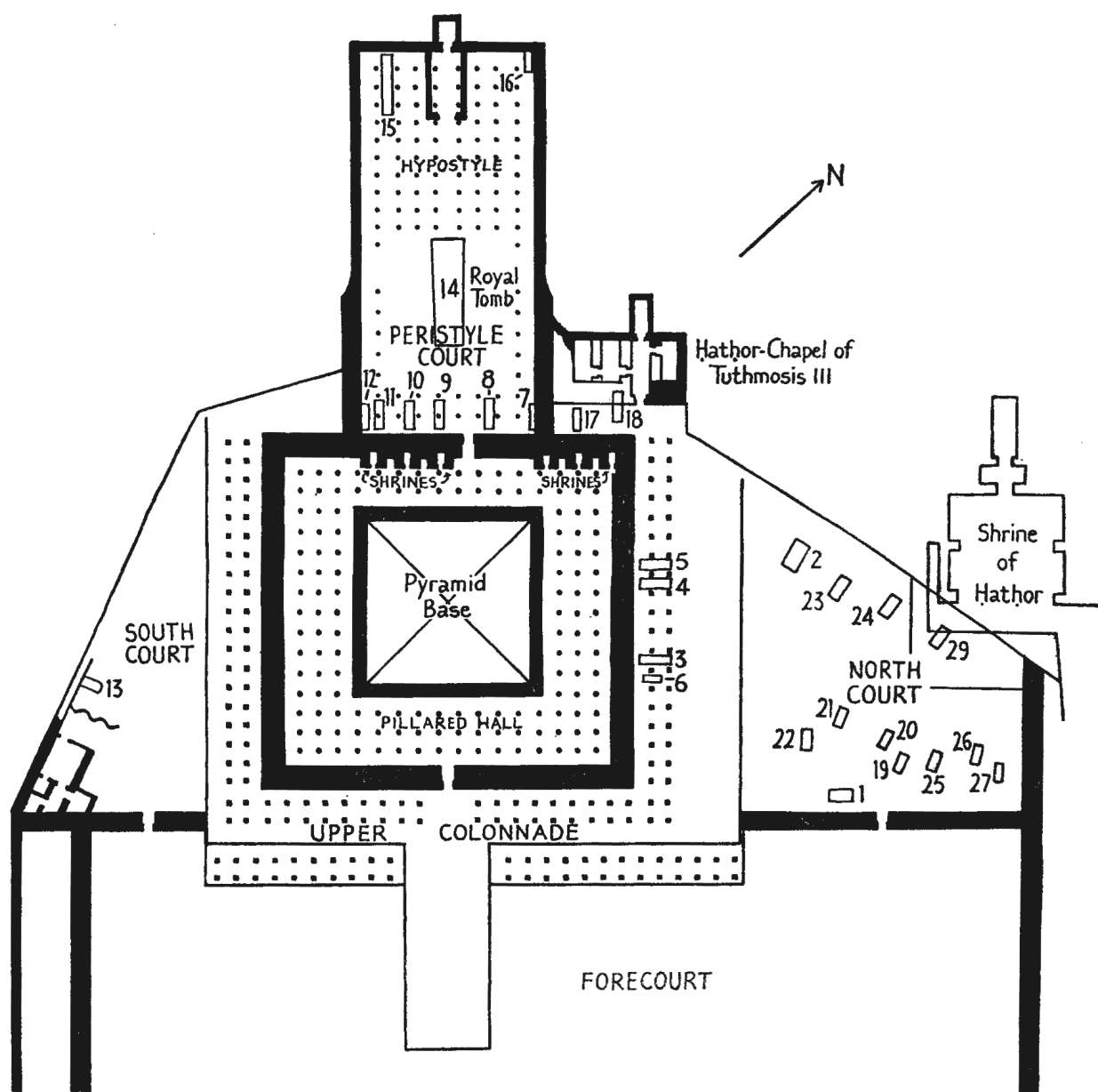
⁴²³ These tattoos are thought to belong to either one or two adult females as discussed in § 3.1.2.

100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMLXII	F	Adolescent	Vila 1967.
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Date	Period/ culture	Location	Identifier/s	Sex	Age	Source/s
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMLXV	F	Adult	Vila 1967.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMLXXVII	F	Adult	Vila 1967.
100 BCE–150 CE	Meroitic	Aksha, Sudan	AMLXXXI west	M	Adult	Vila 1967.
350–550 CE	X-Group	Wadi Halfa, Sudan ⁴²⁴	Unknown	M	Unknown	Armelagos 1969.
655–775 CE	Christian	Site 3-J-23, et-Tereif, Sudan	Grave 50 EA	F	20–35	Antoine and Ambers 2014; Vandenbeusch and Antoine 2015.

⁴²⁴ The study in which this tattooed individual is presented includes individuals from two X-Group cemeteries in the Wadi Halfa area, 24I3 and North Argin X-Group (NAX), but the publication does not specify which cemetery this individual is from or provide an identifier or age range for him (Armelagos 1969, Table 1).

Appendix 2: Map of the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II at Deir el Bahari.⁴²⁵



⁴²⁵ Porter et al. pl. IX.