

Two fragments of votive beds from the Ramesseum: new data on funerary practices in the Third Intermediate Period necropolis



Abstract: This article presents two fragments of votive beds found at the Ramesseum, discussing their findspot, iconography, and dating. Votive beds appeared solely in Thebes during the Third Intermediate Period, mainly in domestic contexts. Their decoration is related to female fertility, birth, and rebirth, but also to the life-giving properties of the flood. Thanks to new discoveries, votive beds have also been confirmed at the Ramesseum, specifically at the Third Intermediate Period necropolis, which reused the temple's storehouses. This paper is the first step in a comprehensive review of the data on votive beds, aiming to determine the number of fragments uncovered during past research, as well as to enhance the understanding of the context of their discovery and the meaning behind their presence in the area.

Keywords: votive beds, cult and religious practices, Ramesseum necropolis, Third Intermediate Period

The resumption of archaeological research in the north-east annexes of the Ramesseum [Fig. 1], corresponding to sectors STM, STL, and STG of the site,¹ yielded new data on the necropolis dated to the Third Intermediate Period. The burials occupied mudbrick chambers that had mainly been used as storehouses during the

Anna Consonni

Museo Archeologico Nazionale
di Firenze – “Museo Egizio”

¹ For the terminology used in the area, see Carlotti 2017.

Acknowledgments

The excavation in the north-eastern annexes of the Ramesseum, directed in the field by Tommaso Quirino, is carried out by the Mission Archéologique Française de Thèbes-Ouest (MAFTO), directed by Dr. Christian Leblanc and Dr. Hisham Elleithy, in partnership with the Association pour la Sauvegarde du Ramesseum (ASR) and with the Centre d'Étude et de Documentation sur l'Ancienne Égypte (CEDAE, Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities) and, from 2022, in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Culture, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze – “Museo Egizio” and Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la Città Metropolitana di Milano. The team now involved in the excavation comprises: the Author, Amany Abdel-Moneim Tantawy, Ossama Bassiouni El-Damanhour, Fiorenza Gulino, Margherita Malvaso, Paolo Marini, Flavio Redolfi Riva, and Martina Terzoli.

I express my sincere thanks to Christian Leblanc and Hisham Elleithy for giving me the opportunity to work at the Ramesseum and to present this research. I also thank all the members of the Mission and all the directors and inspectors of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Egypt for their constant support and assistance.

functioning of the temple (Leblanc 2019: 221–234; Quirino et al. 2019; 2023; Consonni and Quirino forthcoming).

Fifteen tombs have been identified so far in sectors STL and STG. Each consisted of a square vertical shaft, about 3–6 m in depth, sometimes shored up with mud-bricks in its upper part above the level of the compact conglomerate stratum. The

tombs consisted of only one fairly small chamber excavated in the compacted sand and usually oriented north–south. Most had been disturbed and/or excavated in the past and left almost entirely empty. In a number of cases, the tombs—apparently investigated only provisionally, or, surprisingly, still untouched—yielded important information on the funerary assemblages,

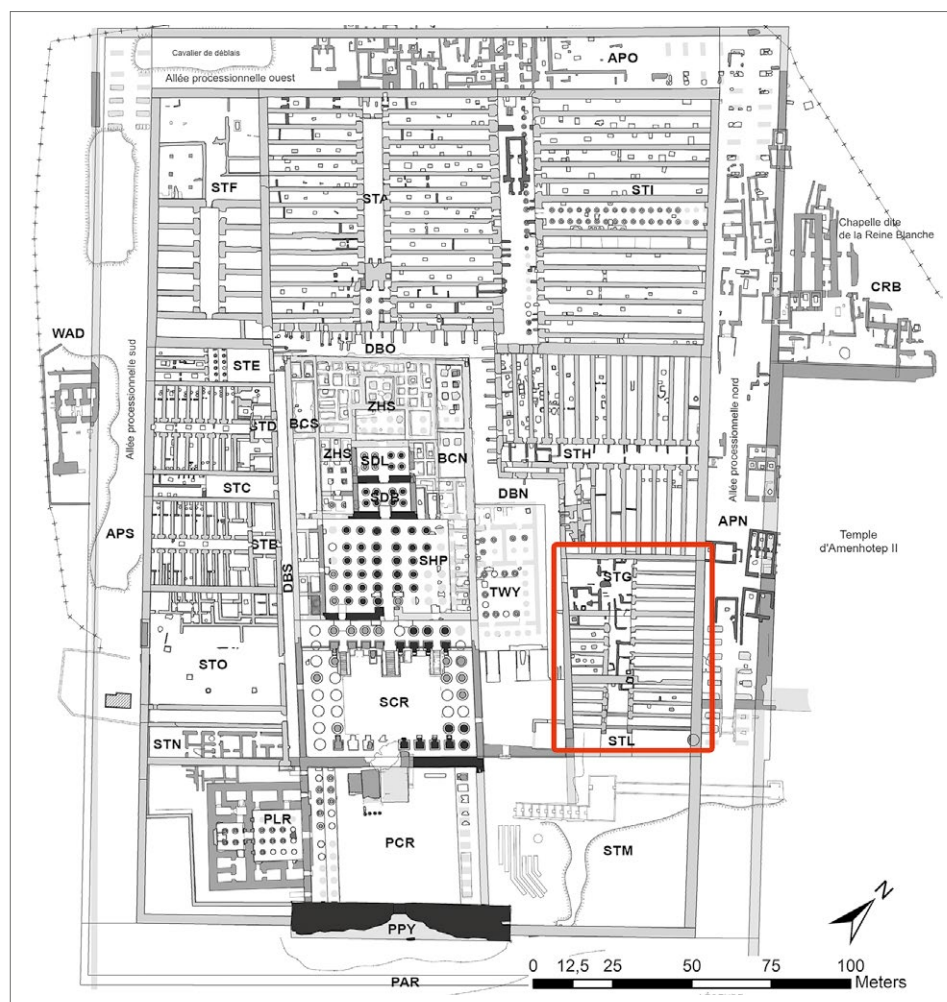


Fig. 1. Plan of the Ramessesum showing the northern annexes under excavation (Drawing CNRS-MAFTO/UMR 8220 – HALMA-IPEL/UMR 8164: Bocquet, Carlotti, Chalmel, Lecointe, Martinez, Roesch; modification T. Quirino)

allowing a more precise dating of this part of the necropolis to the period between the Twenty-second and the Twenty-fifth/early Twenty-sixth Dynasty. The newly obtained information includes also the number of the deceased in each tomb and, in some cases, even their names and roles. However, even sporadic finds or objects in secondary contexts² can be of interest,

as they contribute information on the composition of the funerary assemblages and shed new light on the funerary rituals. Two fragments of votive beds found in the fill of Tomb 2 in Room STG.SA12 are a case in point. Below, the context of these finds (sector, room, and the tomb itself) is presented to enable a discussion of their dating and original setting.

CONTEXT OF THE FINDS

The two fragments of votive beds were found during recent research in the north-eastern annexes of the Ramesseum, which has focused on sector STG (Quirino et al. 2023: 371–380). STG was separated from

sector STL by a thick retaining wall of mudbrick, which supported the layers filling STG, raising its floor about 1.5 m above the floor level in STL [Fig. 2]. While in the Ramesside period no passage linked

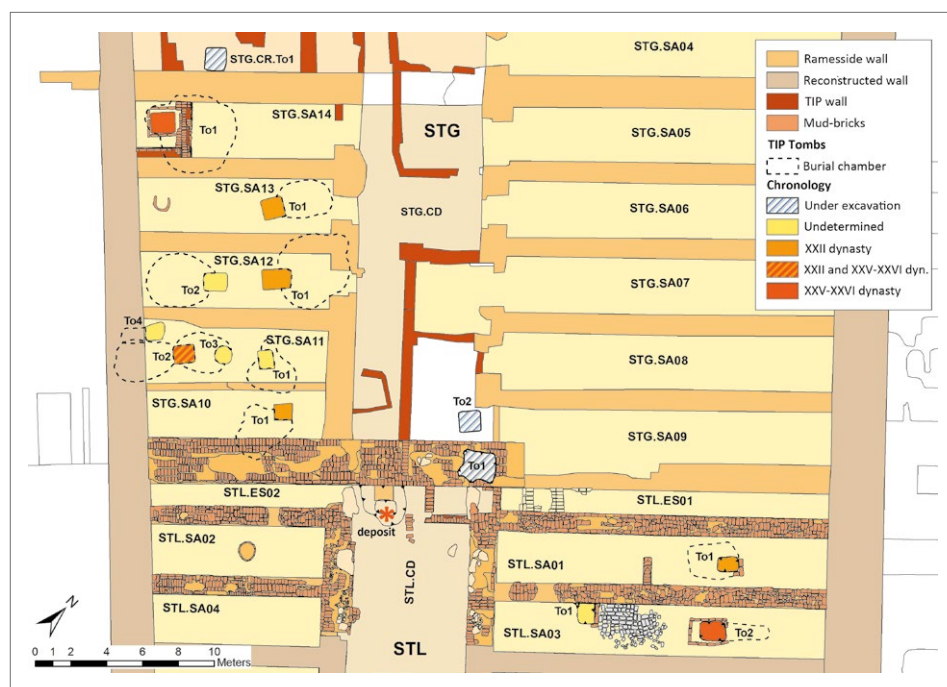


Fig. 2. Plan of sectors STL and STG, with the location of the Third Intermediate Period tombs excavated to date (Drawing T. Quirino)

² The excavation methodology adopted and described by Quibell (1898: 2, 8) justifies a hypothesis that these objects may have come from contexts located in the very room where they were found.

STL to STG, during the Third Intermediate Period the two sectors were probably connected (Quirino et al. 2019: 114–115).

Five rooms were explored in the south part of sector STG³ and code-named (from east to west) STG.SA10, STG.SA11, STG.SA12, STG.SA13, and STG.SA14. In addition, during the 2023 field season the excavation of corridor STG.CD and wide court STG.CR began. While these spaces have so far yielded scarce information on their Ramesside phase, they revealed 12 burial shafts of the Third Intermediate Period, which were subsequently excavated. Three

of them appeared untouched, although all the perishable materials (coffins, cartonnages, shabti boxes, etc.) had been severely damaged by humidity and white ants (for Tomb 1 in STG.SA14, see Quirino et al. 2022).

Room STG.SA12 (10.5 m by 3.10 m) no longer preserved original Ramesside floors, hindering a clear interpretation of its function when the temple was in use. Like the other rooms in the south part of sector STG, it was filled down to the bedrock with layers of grayish-brown fine sand. These deposits contained an abun-



Fig. 3. Shabtis Inv. No. 2019.STG.011 from the surface of STG.SA12, stratigraphic unit 95 (Photo T. Quirino – MiC/MAFTO; drawing P. Marini, ink A. Consonni)

3 We refer here, as in the remainder of this paper, to the conventional north following the course of the Nile and not to the geographical north indicated in the plans.

dance of ancient pottery,⁴ but also modern material, which was probably mixed into the backfill of archaeological excavations carried out in the past (Quirino et al. 2023: 372–373). Nine terracotta shabtis [Fig. 3] found scattered in this fill layer served as proof that the tombs in this chamber had already been excavated. In addition, they provide some indication of the chronology of the tombs in this area. Eight of them, only three of which were complete, represented the mummiform type — about 5 cm tall, blue-washed, with a tripartite wig, arms crossed on the chest, clutching a whip in the right, and a crook in the left hand. The latter two attributes are usually associated with *reis*-shabtis (Schneider 1977: 170). One of the shabtis

is very crudely made: its head, lappets of the tripartite wig, and hands are cursorily marked, bearing no traces of color. These shabtis can be dated only generally to the Third Intermediate Period, even though the traces of blue paint and a general resemblance to other shabtis found in STG suggest a Twenty-second Dynasty dating (Aston 2009: 358–359, 361–364; Budka 2010: 324, 538; Quirino et al. 2019: 118–119, Pl. XXIX-A, Inv. No. 2017.STG.045).

In room STG.SA12 two tombs came to light. One of them served as the secondary context for the fragments of votive beds, but both tombs and their assemblages are relevant for discussing the function and social role of these artifacts. The north tomb, STG.SA12.To1,



Fig. 4. STG.SA12.To1: remains of burials (Photo T. Quirino – MiC/MAFTO)

- 4 Pottery from STG.SA12, still under study, reveals features akin to the corpus from sector STL: a mix of unstratified pottery related to the functioning of the temple in the Ramesside period and to the subsequent phases of reuse of the area in the Third Intermediate Period and, less so, the Ptolemaic period (see Quirino et al. 2019: 132–138).

had a rectangular shaft (about 1.9 m by 1.5 m) cut into the conglomerate bedrock to a depth of about 6 m. It featured a single burial chamber (3.15 m by 2.6 m; about 3 m in height) oriented to the north. The floor of the chamber preserved barely visible remains of three anthropoid coffins and some traces of the white paste and golden foil of cartonnages [Fig. 4]. Only the lower parts of the skeletal remains

of three individuals —a woman of about 25–35 years and probably two men— were preserved.⁵

The chamber was almost completely devoid of finds except for several shabtis. Four of them were of the mummiform type, mold-made of light-green faïence. They were about 7.5 cm tall, featuring a tripartite wig and arms crossed on the chest [Fig. 5]. Four other fragments of the



Fig. 5. Shabtis Inv. Nos 2019.STG.029 and 2019.STG.030 from the burial chamber of STG.SA12.To1, stratigraphic unit 100 (Photo T. Quirino – MiC/MAFTO; drawing P. Marini, ink A. Consonni)



Fig. 6. Shabti Inv. No. 2019.STG.032 from the burial chamber of STG.SA12.To1, stratigraphic unit 100 (Photo T. Quirino – MiC/MAFTO; drawing P. Marini, ink A. Consonni)

5 Preliminary anthropological report by André Macke, with the collaboration of Michelle L'Homme.

lower parts of mummiform light-green faïence shabtis preserved the name of the deceased — a woman called N(y)-s-tA-nTrt [Fig. 6], whose burial might have been excavated by Quibell, as some of the shabtis found at the time bore her name (Quibell 1898: Pl. V). Quibell also found a set of canopic jars belonging to a N(y)-s-tA-nTrt, probably the same woman, dated to the Twenty-second Dynasty (Quibell 1898: 17, Pl. XIX; Ranke 1935: 179, no. 18; Elias 1993: 103 and also note 78 for the floral sprig. This typical element of the Libyan Period is written before the expression “justified” on the canopic jar with the jackal head; Aston 2009: 241, Tomb Group 948, associates the shabtis with the canopic jars, proposing a date after 850 BC). This tomb should therefore be dated broadly to the Twenty-second Dynasty.

The south tomb, STG.SA12.To2, had a rectangular shaft (1.30 m by 1 m and about 4.5 m in depth) and a single burial chamber (3.2 m by 2.43 m and 2.35 m in height) opening to the south. Preserved at the bottom of the shaft was a small part of a wall, built with mudbricks, closing off of the chamber. The chamber was almost completely devoid of finds. Nevertheless, the past excavators left some blue-washed terracotta shabtis, most of them fragments and only one complete (7.5 cm in height), with a tripartite wig and arms crossed [Fig. 7]. They find a sound parallel among shabtis uncovered in STL.SA01.To1, dated to the Twenty-second Dynasty (see 2017.STL.043, Quirino et al. 2019: 116–122, Fig. 4.3, Pl. XXIX.B). It was in the fill layers of tomb STG.SA12.To2 that the two fragments of the terracotta votive beds were found.

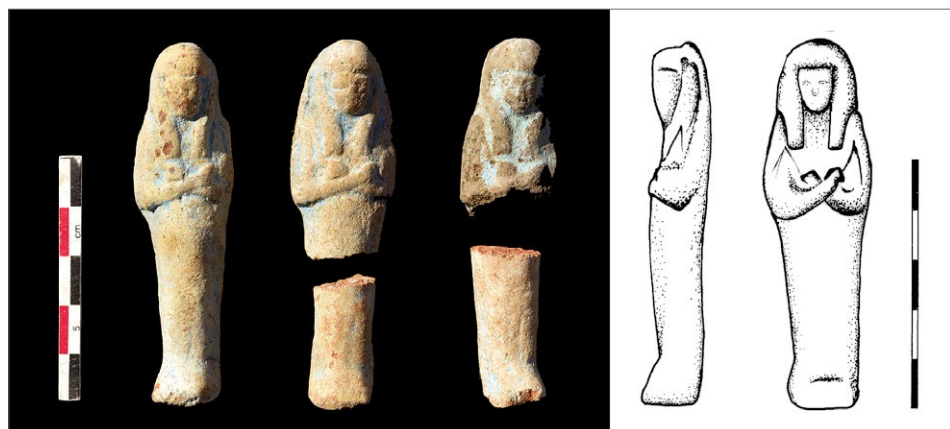


Fig. 7. Shabtis Inv. No. 2019.STG.031 from the burial chamber of STG.SA12.To2, stratigraphic unit 103 (Photo T. Quirino – MiC/MAFTO; drawing P. Marini, ink A. Consonni)

- 6 For the figures of the dwarf demons and their identification, see Del Vesco 2010: 36–37 and 139–144.
- 7 For the earlier dated item, found in TT 14 in Dra Abu el-Naga, the chronological framework is roughly estimated from the Twenty-first up to the beginning of the Twenty-second Dynasty (see also Betrò 2017: 65). Teeter (2010: 159, 166–167) prefers a date in the Twenty-second/Twenty-third Dynasties for the votive beds from Medinet Habu.

VOTIVE BEDS FROM TOMB STG.SA12.TO2

Votive beds are handmade terracotta box-shaped objects [Fig. 8] with a plain top and a decorated front panel on one of the long sides, open to the rear (Hölscher 1954: 11–12; Del Vesco 2010; Teeter 2010: 160–168). The panel may show either an openwork decorative motif or a molded scene representing one or more women in a boat flanked by standing Bes figures,⁶ or a combination of both. The decoration relates to female fertility, birth and rebirth, but also to the life-giving properties of the Nile flood and, thus, to the Egyptian New Year festival (Del Vesco 2010: 35–36, 138–168; Teeter 2010: 159–167).

The votive beds, attested only in Thebes, appeared during the Third Intermediate Period between the Twenty-first/early Twenty-second Dynasty and the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (Del Vesco 2010: 45–72).⁷ Given their findspots, it has been suggested that they originally functioned in domestic contexts and were

used for rituals associated with fertility and protection during childbirth, to commemorate a birth, or to celebrate fertility and sexuality (Del Vesco 2010: 138–136; Teeter 2010: 167–168). Some of them were secondarily used in funerary contexts, as daily-life objects following the deceased into the Afterlife (Del Vesco 2010: 67–68).

INV. NO. 2019.STG.025

Context: STG.SA12.To2, stratigraphic unit 101

Dimensions: height 7.4 cm; length 5.1 cm; thickness 3.5 cm

Fabric: rich in sand, fine limestone and fine and medium straw

Color: surface 2.5YR 5/6; section 10R 4/3 with core 10R 3/3

The first piece of a votive bed from STG.SA12.To2 [see Fig. 8] is a fragment of the left part of the front panel. The only visible figure is Bes, depicted with a plumed headdress in a dancing stance, with legs



Fig. 8. Fragment of votive bed Inv. No. 2019.STG.025 from STG.SA12.To2, stratigraphic unit 101 (Photo T. Quirino – MiC/MAFTO; drawing P. Marini, ink A. Consonni)

turned towards the outer edge of the scene, tail on his left. The mold-made piece preserves on both sides the white background and traces of a yellow pigment on the lower part of the Bes figure (for the use of yellow coloring on Bes images, see Teeter 2010: 160–161).

This fragment seems to belong to a bed attributable to Del Vesco Type A1, with openwork decoration featuring Bes figures and vegetal elements (Del Vesco 2010: 74). Votive beds of this type are not very common and are dated to the Twenty-first/early Twenty-second Dynasty (Del Vesco 2010: 60–68, 76, and 119, Nos 1–2; Betrò 2017: 65).

INV. NO. 2019.STG.027

Context: STG.SA12.To2, stratigraphic unit 101

Dimensions: height 15.9 cm; length 10.6 cm; thickness 2.4 cm

Fabric: rich in sand, fine limestone and fine straw

Color: surface 10R 4/6; section 10R 4/8 with core 10R 3/3

The other fragment of a votive bed [Fig. 9] is a part of the right side of the front panel. A figure of Bes wearing a flaring lotiform or plumed headdress is located on the right-hand side. Bes is depicted in a dancing stance, with legs turned towards the center of the scene, surmounting a conical support in the same manner as on parallel objects made of wood, specifically the “women’s beds” from Deir el-Medina (Raven 2014). On the left, the right side of a naked woman in frontal view was depicted. The figure is standing on a slender hull, with a duck-headed prow on the right, sailing in a marshland setting, as indicated by the plant motif (papyri) above the duck’s head. The woman holds papyrus stems in her left hand, below which there is a crouched animal identifiable as a recumbent calf, evoking pregnancy and childbirth or the regenerating power of the Nile flood (Del

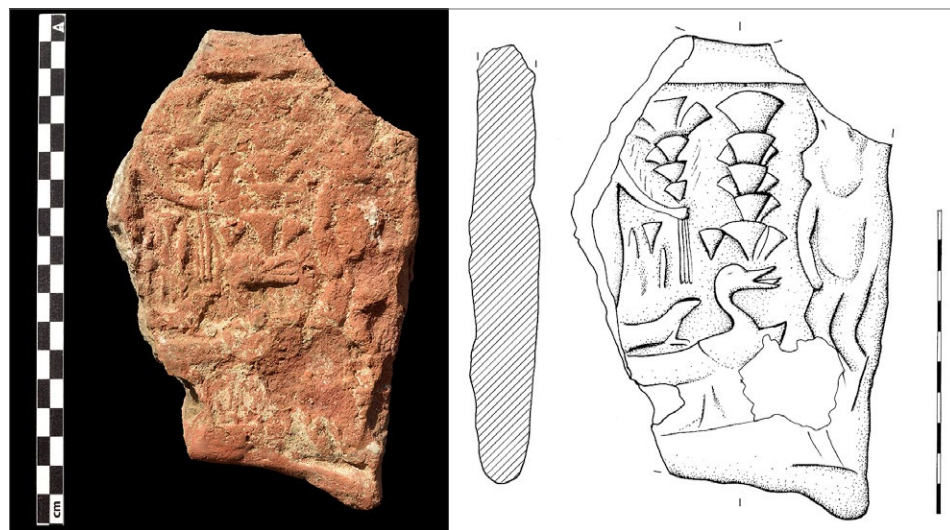


Fig. 9. Fragment of votive bed Inv. No. 2019.STG.027 from STG.SA12.To2, stratigraphic unit 101 (Photo T. Quirino – MiC/MAFTO; drawing P. Marini, ink A. Consonni)

Vesco 2010: 160–162; Teeter 2010: 160). The mold-made piece preserves the white background on both sides, but the pigment has worn off.⁸

The decoration of the front panel corresponds to the Del Vesco Type B1 (Del Vesco 2010: 74) and Teeter Type 2 (Teeter 2010: 160–161). The closest parallels are the votive beds now kept in the Cairo Museum (JE 25720, JE 30124, and JE 30125; Del Vesco 2010: 71, 80–81, 122, Nos 9–10 and 12),⁹ and an almost complete front panel in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London (UC 55181, Del Vesco 2007: 71, Pl. 19a; 2010: 69–70, 81, and 123, No. 11), probably found by Petrie during his 1895–1896 field season with Quibell at the “funerary temples” of West Thebes. The association of these four pieces has already been proposed by Paolo Del Vesco on the basis of their stylistic resemblance, to a point of suggest-

ing a common mold. Decoration of the same type is also present on two other fragments, one preserved in Florence (Del Vesco 2009) and the other found in the precinct of the Temple of Millions of Years of Seti I at Gurna, recovered from the debris related to domestic structures constructed within the remains of storehouses (Stadelmann 1985).¹⁰ Finally, an item bearing a similar decoration was found in the area of the Treasury of Thutmose I at Karnak. It probably came from the domestic structures that were built around the temple remains likely during the Twenty-fifth/Twenty-sixth Dynasties (Del Vesco 2009: 35; 2010: 66–67, 83, and 124, No. 15).

From a wider perspective, one sees parallels with the votive beds from Medinet Habu, dated to the Twenty-second/Twenty-third Dynasty (Teeter 2010: 178–181, OIM 14776 and OIM 14682, Nos 236 and 239, Pls 102 and 105).

DISCUSSION

Even though the fragments of votive beds from STG.SA12.T02 were likely out of their primary context, and came rather from the fill of a tomb already excavated in the past, still they merit several remarks.

Firstly, these finds testify to the presence of this type of objects at the Ramesseum, as already hypothesized (Del Vesco 2010: 56–59; Teeter 2010: 167). Important-

ly, they can be related, with some confidence, to the necropolis of the Third Intermediate Period, since no domestic structures from this time have so far been identified in this area of the Temple.

The remains of funerary assemblages, likely associated with the tombs excavated in STG.SA12, indicate that the finds were probably from the Twenty-second Dynasty. This conclusion is consistent

8 For the use of color, see Del Vesco 2010: 36–37.

9 The first one was acquired in 1884, and the other two with a provenance from “Upper Egypt” bear the museum accession date “1892”.

10 Stadelmann (1985) dates the fragment to the Twenty-second/Twenty-fourth Dynasty; Del Vesco (2010: 65–66 and 82, No. 13), in turn, suggests a date in the Twenty-sixth Dynasty.

with Del Vesco's suggestion that the use of votive beds in funerary contexts did not extend beyond the Twenty-second Dynasty (Del Vesco 2010: 68).

The presence of these objects at the Ramesseum is indeed telling if one remembers that the necropolis of the Third Intermediate Period served not only minor priests ("God's Fathers" and "Beloved of the God"), but, more importantly, their female relatives bearing the title of "House mistress", as well as a variety of musicians and singers (Elias 1993: 97–107; Leblanc 2019: 289–303). One of these women was the abovementioned N(y)-s-tA-nTrt, who, on her canopic jars, bears the title of "Sistrum player of Amun-Ra" (Elias 1993: 101, Tab. V and note 74). Should Del Vesco be correct in his assumption that the use of votive beds was associated with the world of temple women, musicians, and singers centered around the God's Wife of Amun (Del Vesco 2010: 174–176), then the presence of the two fragments at the Ramesseum can be seen as part of a coherent framework.

Since no votive bed has, to date, been published or mentioned as part of the numerous funerary assemblages excavated in the Third Intermediate Period necropolis at the Ramesseum (Aston 2009: 457–488), one might assume that

this category of objects was atypical in the burial equipment of the period and used only in special cases. Such was the suggestion regarding a votive bed, two small terracotta stelae, and a fragmentary female figure associated with a young, 40 weeks pregnant woman buried in chamber G of TT 14 in Dra Abu el-Naga (Betrò 2017; Del Vesco 2010: 60–63). Votive beds from sector STG could have been part of a burial assemblage, but we might also suppose that they could be linked to funerary chapels above the burials, where they perhaps served as small altars, as in domestic contexts (Teeter 2010: 168). This would render their correct identification more difficult, given the complex stratigraphy of the site.

It is also possible, however, that votive beds have been, for whatever reason, previously deemed unworthy of publication. During the most recent field season, a piece of a votive bed came to light in the corridor in sector STG, and yet another fragment was identified among the materials from chamber 13 (STG.SA13), close to STG.SA12. In addition, a preliminary review of the material has confirmed the presence of fragments of votive beds previously unrecognized as belonging to this class of objects in other sectors of the Temple.¹¹

CONCLUSIONS

While the two fragments of votive beds described in this paper do not allow to draw definitive conclusions, they still provoke interesting questions and open new avenues for future research.

It is clear that a comprehensive review of the data is necessary to better quantify the identifiable fragments, to deepen our understanding of their contexts of discovery, and to relate them to other

11 This preliminary examination was carried out in collaboration with Julián Sánchez.

classes of objects with which they are frequently associated, such as terracotta female figurines.¹²

Although the research is still in its early stages, further studies are hoped to

deepen the knowledge and highlight the funerary and ritual aspects connected to the presence of votive beds in the Third Intermediate Period necropolis at the Ramesseum.

Anna Consonni

Museo Archeologico Nazionale
di Firenze – “Museo Egizio”
anna.consonni@cultura.gov.it

How to cite this article: Consonni, A. (2025). Two fragments of votive beds from the Ramesseum: new data on funerary practices in the Third Intermediate Period necropolis. *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*, 34.3, 227–240. <https://doi.org/10.37343/uw.2083-537X.pam34.3.01>

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12 For a fragment of fertility figurine found in sector STG, see Quirino et al. 2019: 146–147.

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