'*Scènes de Gynécées*'

Figured Ostraca from New Kingdom Egypt: iconography and intent

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General Abbreviations

Berlin Museum: Ägyptisches Museum Berlin

BM: British Museum, London

Brussels Museum: Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels

Cairo: The Egyptian Museum Cairo

CE: Comparative Evidence

EAS: Egyptian Antiquities Service

EB: Elaborate Beds

F: Fragments

IFAO: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, Cairo

K: Kiosks

KV: Valley of the Kings

Leiden Museum: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

Louvre: Musée du Louvre

Manchester Museum: The Manchester Museum

Munich Museum: Staatliches Museum Ägyptische Kunst, Munich

Petrie UC: University College London – The Petrie Museum

SCA: Supreme Council of Antiquities

Stockholm: Medelhavsmuseet

TT: Theban Tomb

Turin Museum: Museo Egizio di Torino

VA: Vandier d'Abbadie (numbering commonly used for the figured ostraca as published by Vandier d'Abbadie)

WoB: Women on Beds

WP: Wall Painting

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Introduction

The aim of the study is to examine a particular set of images found only on ostraca from New Kingdom Egypt. These scenes show women, often with a child, sitting on a bed in a domestic environment; alternatively, they depict women with a child in a kiosk, in an outdoor setting. The purpose of this research is to examine why these images were drawn and to explore what these representations meant to their creators and viewers. The functionality of the ostraca will also be analysed, considering if they were objects in their own right or merely practice pieces for larger scale compositions.

This monograph has developed from research I undertook for my doctorate studies at the University of Liverpool. This examined '*Scènes de Gynécées*' Figured Ostraca: Their Relationship to the Material Culture of New Kingdom Egypt. Consequently, it had a wider remit than this publication. This consisted of two volumes. Firstly, the catalogue of the ostraca and associated discussion; secondly, a catalogue of so called 'ladies on beds' figurines from New Kingdom Egypt and discussion. Volume I, considering the ostraca, has been edited to form this publication. It is hoped Volume II, focusing on the 'ladies on beds' figurines, will be published at a later date.

Deir el-Medina has yielded over five thousand ostraca, most are fragments of limestone with a limited number of potsherds (Bruyère 1952a: 60). It is likely the fragments of limestone were collected from the foothills of the cliffs on the West Bank of Thebes, where they had accumulated from natural erosion, or they were collected from the debris of the tombs by the craftsmen. One ostracon, in the Fitzwilliam Museum (EGA 4324.1943: Brunner-Traut 1979: 40-41, Plate XII), depicts a stonemason at work in a tomb with a chisel and mallet, hacking out the tomb shaft, demonstrating vividly their access to the material. Therefore, they represent a resource readily available to the workmen. The ostraca were predominantly inscribed with hieratic text for administrative purposes, denoting lists of workers, materials, accounts and letters, with a small proportion containing hymns to the gods, cult rituals and love songs (Bruyère 1952a: 61). Thus, they provide valuable insights into daily life in ancient Egypt. The ostraca containing hieratic text were published extensively by Černý (1935), Posener (1938) and more recently by Gasse (2005) and Grandet (2011). In addition, a valuable bibliography of research on the hieratic ostraca is now maintained by the University of Leiden (https://dmd.wepwawet.nl/bibliography.htm).

A significant number of ostraca contain an image; these have been referred to as figured ostraca. Satirical scenes, depictions of animals and human figures are the most common subject matter. Images of kings and gods are to a lesser degree also part of the repertoire. Examples were published initially by Schäfer (1916), Davies (1917a) and Werbrouck (1953). They were later published and catalogued in detail by Vandier d'Abbadie (1937, 1959).

A number of figured ostraca display images of women sitting on beds, often with a child, while a smaller number depict women in kiosks, also with a child. They were identified as a coherent group and classified as '*Scènes de Gynécées*' by Vandier d'Abbadie (1937: 80). She suggested these scenes, taking place in what she described as the female part of the house, depicted the family life of 'women of quality' in Egyptian society (Vandier d'Abbadie 1937: 81). Fifty-nine such scenes are considered in this study. These images do not appear in the formal repertoire of Egyptian art; they are not represented in tombs, temples or on stelae. The scenes are noteworthy because it is the women who are the focus of the narrative. They are the main protagonists; they are not subsidiary figures, as is common in more formal Egyptian art, which often depicts women as wives, mothers or daughters of the primary male figure. By comparison, in the '*Scènes de Gynécées*' the only men who appear are servants. This makes the images a unique source of data from ancient Egypt.

The aim of this study is to understand the purpose and intent of these objects, why the images were drawn and what functions the ostraca served. To facilitate this, the '*Scènes de Gynécées*' figured ostraca have been catalogued in a series of related groups. The primary one being 'women on beds'; this includes images which show any part of a woman and a bed. Fifty-three 'women on beds' scenes are analysed in this study, referred to throughout as 'WoB'. The scenes may illustrate a woman sitting or lying on a bed; alternatively, it may show a female attendant approaching a bed. A complete image is defined as one in which both ends of the bed are visible. The 'women on beds' dataset includes a small sub-group of ostraca, referred to as 'elaborate beds' due to the highly decorative nature of the beds, which were possibly decked with floral garlands as suggested by Schäfer (1916: 30). Three 'elaborate beds' scenes are considered in this study; referred to throughout as 'EB'. This sub-group provides a link between the 'women on beds' and kiosk scenes. The latter is a small but significant group of images which show women with a

child in a kiosk; three examples are examined in this study, referred to throughout as 'K'. The kiosk scenes provide the strongest link to wall paintings found at Deir el-Medina. Fifteen figured ostraca referred to specifically as 'fragments' are also included in the study; they are denoted as 'F' throughout the work. Although all ostraca are fragments by definition; the objects drawn are now only partially visible. Scenes on the 'fragments' are incomplete and piecemeal. However, the remnants suggest that they were part of 'women on beds', 'elaborate beds' or kiosks scenes; although it is not always possible to determine which dataset the fragment would have belonged to.

Fourteen scenes of comparative evidence are also examined, in order to aid our understanding of the main corpus. These are referred to throughout the study as 'CE'. These include images of goddesses suckling a child, scenes of offering and presentation and servant girls. Uniquely, the comparative evidence includes two images of female figurines drawn on ostraca, graphically illustrating the link between figured ostraca and three-dimensional representations. This has been noted by previous scholars, for example Pinch (1983: 406-10).

In order to place the ostraca in the context of the society in which they were created, a brief overview of the nature and excavation history of Deir el-Medina is outlined. This will aid our understanding of the context of the ostraca and the material culture found at the site. In addition, a catalogue of the surviving wall paintings in the village allows for comparison between the figured ostraca and domestic decoration. This is essential for the progression of research, as much previous scholarship believed there to be a link between the wall paintings and the ostraca (Brunner-Traut 1956:64-5; Vandier d'Abbadie 1937:5). These are referred to as 'WP' throughout the study. With regard to the figured ostraca, the methods of representation, materials used, and nature of the scenes are analysed to provide an overview of the corpus. To gain an understanding of what the '*Scènes de Gynécées*' figured ostraca meant to their creators and viewers, the imagery will be deconstructed into individual components. Repeat motifs are identified and examined; furthermore, links between those themes are considered. Where relevant, contemporaneous material culture will be analysed, in order to understand the meanings attached to the images on the ostraca.

Chapter 1

Deir el-Medina: The History of Excavation and the Nature of the Site

1.1: History of Excavation

Early in the 19th Century objects from Deir el-Medina began to appear in Europe, primarily due to the work of European collectors such as Drovetti and Salt. This was a time of unsanctioned 'excavations' and exploration of the site; no scientific methods were employed, and no recording of the 'excavations' were carried out. Maspero described Deir el-Medina in 1886 as being strewn with the debris of statues, stelae, pottery and mummies shredded amongst open tombs, many of which had been partially demolished and burnt (Bruyère 1959: 1). This was the result of many years of uninhibited exploitation of the site.

The first organised excavations took place between 1905 and 1909 by Schiaparelli, working for the Museo Egizio (Turin). Although he did not publish full reports on his work, from an examination of artefacts in Museo Egizio, it is likely that he excavated tombs, votive chapels, and the rock-cut sanctuary of Meretseger and Ptah. Furthermore, before he left the site in 1909, he exposed some houses buried beneath the sand; this was the first discovery of the walled village. It is difficult to assign a context to the objects discovered by Schiaparelli as he was excavating the village and tombs concurrently (Weiss 2015: 227). Subsequently, Baraise was employed by the Egypt Antiquites Service to reconstruct the Ptolemaic temple; his short report included a list of Ramesside finds (Baraise 1914). The next scholar to excavate at the site was Möller, working for Berlin Museum, between 1911 and 1913. This included a small section of the village close to the Ptolemaic temple. Anthes (1943) later published a brief report based on Möller's notes. Due to the First World War, the concession for Deir el-Medina was transferred to the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) in 1914 and they began working at the site in 1915.

From 1922 until 1951 excavations were directed by Bruyère and reports were regularly published. The most significant publication, for this research, is the report on the 1934-35 season, which records the clearing of the village (Bruyère 1939). Due to the prevalent number of lootings taking place in Luxor at this time, the excavation was carried out in one season with a large number of local workers. There are a number of problems with the text, for example it is difficult to identify find spots as many artefacts were grouped together and listed according to a particular house or area (Weiss 2015: 24). Moreover, as Weiss notes, some objects published in the 1939 text were not found in the village. This can be confirmed when Bruyère's notebooks are consulted. Despite these qualifications Bruyère's (1939) text remains a key work in the history of settlement archaeology in Egypt. Also, of great value to this study are the reports on the Western Cemetery (Bruyère 1937a), the Eastern Cemetery (Bruyère 1937b) and the worship of Meretseger (Bruyère 1929, 1930). Bruyère ceased working at Deir el-Medina in 1951, but the site was re-opened by IFAO in 1969.

Bonnet and Valbelle had two short seasons at the site in 1975 and 1976. They wished to investigate the development of the village over time, particularly the pre-Ramesside occupation of the site (Bonnet and Valbelle 1975, 1976). This work formed the basis of the most substantial report on the village in recent times (Valbelle 1985). IFAO has continued working at the site and numerous reports have been published in recent years. An excellent overview of the work of IFAO at Deir el Medina, including conservation work, is provided by Gobeil (2015:16-19).

1.2: Nature of the Site

1.2a: Location and Development

Deir el-Medina is situated on the West Bank of Thebes, currently half a mile from the cultivated land of the Nile flood-plain. Located close to the necropoli of the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens, it was created to house the workers who constructed the royal tombs. The nexus of the site is a walled village, divided by a road with houses on either side. The earliest archaeological evidence is dated to Tuthmosis I, which consists of mud bricks stamped with his cartouche (Bonnet and Valbelle 1975: 436-440, Plate LXVI; Bruyère 1936: 329). However, the village was probably established by Amenhotep I, who along with his mother Ahmose Nefertari was venerated at the site (Černý 1927). Bonnet and Valbelle (1975: 442) identified at least 12 phases of construction. There was a period of expansion under Tuthmosis III, while during the Amarna period it is likely most, if not all, residents left the site to follow the royal court to Amarna. The village was reorganised and expanded under Horemheb, with a reconstruction of the village to the north and south (Bonnet and Valbelle 1975: 440). There was a further expansion under Rameses III and Rameses IV to the south of the village. The excavated

evidence dates predominantly to the 19th and 20th Dynasty, little remains of the earlier Eighteenth Dynasty settlement. Therefore, most objects recorded by Bruyère in the village are likely to be from the Ramesside period but can only be given a general date of the New Kingdom.

1.2b: The Walled Village

Sixty-eight compact houses were excavated by Bruyère, which vary in size between 40 and 120 sq. m. (Valbelle 1985:117). Constructed in a standard linear fashion, the houses are similar in terms of layout and spatial distribution, see Figure 1.1. The first room was entered directly from the road and the floor was below street level; this room often contained a structure Bruyère (1939: 57) referred to as a '*lit clos*', the significance of which is discussed in Section 1.4. Although no fragments of roof were found by Bruyère, he proposed the first room of the house was covered by trunks of palm trees, with the roof partially open to aid ventilation and lighting (Bruyère 1939: 54-55). However, Koltisa (2007: 22-24) has subsequently suggested that this room was unroofed, based on similar evidence from Amarna. Irrespective of the roofing, this was the most public part of the house. It opened directly into the second room of the house, which was at ground level, larger and more elevated than the first. It almost always contained a single column or two, to support the ceiling and was often decorated with small altars, false doors, niches and a divan, which was a low sofa without arms or a back; this room often had a cellar below. The second room led to a single room or two small rooms, with no decoration; these were most likely used as storerooms. From here a kitchen was situated which also included niches in the walls. From the kitchen, staircases were located, one towards the upper terrace and the other leading to the cellar.

The most noteworthy feature is the juxtaposition of secular and cultic elements of architecture. Bruyère (1939: 50) referred to the first two rooms as '*une salle d'apparat*'. The first room contained the '*lit clos*', significant for this study as it is upon this structure that all surviving painted decoration in the village was found. In the second room of the house niches, altars and false doors were common. In addition, the kitchen often contained a small shrine referred to as '*un laraire*', of which an almost complete example survives in the British Museum (EA 597; Bierbrier 1982b: Plate 66-67). There has been much discussion regarding 'sexed space' at Deir el-Medina. Meskell (1998: 219) suggested the first room of the house was female orientated and centred on married, fertile women of the household, due to the architectural features, objects and wall paintings found in the room. Meskell proposed the second room of the house was the sphere of high-status males and subsequent rooms were used for domestic chores. This echoes Bruyère's original assessment of the domestic space at Deir el-Medina (Bruyère 1939: 71).

However, the concept of 'sexed space' has been criticised. Both Harrington (2005: 80) and Kleinke 2007 (as cited in Weiss 2015: 30) question the separation of male and female zones as both rooms contain cultic features. Furthermore, no Egyptian terminology describes the purposes of the various rooms (Weiss 2015: 29). Given the limited space in the village it is likely the rooms were multi-functional to a degree. Nonetheless, the first room of the house was clearly

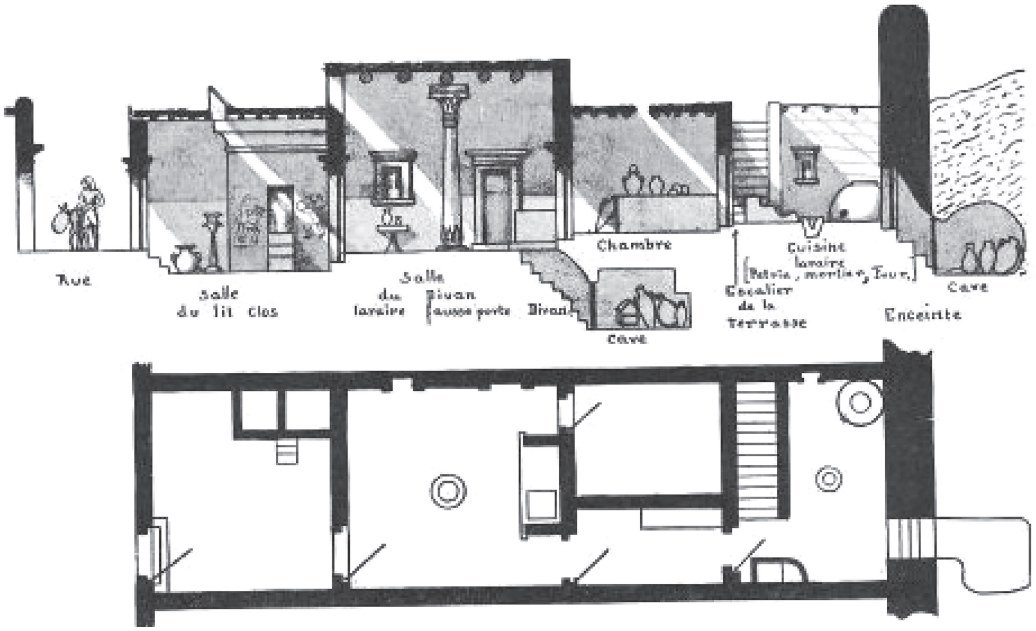

Figure 1.1: Linear design of houses at Deir el-Medina (Bruyère 1939: 50, Figure 15) © IFAO.

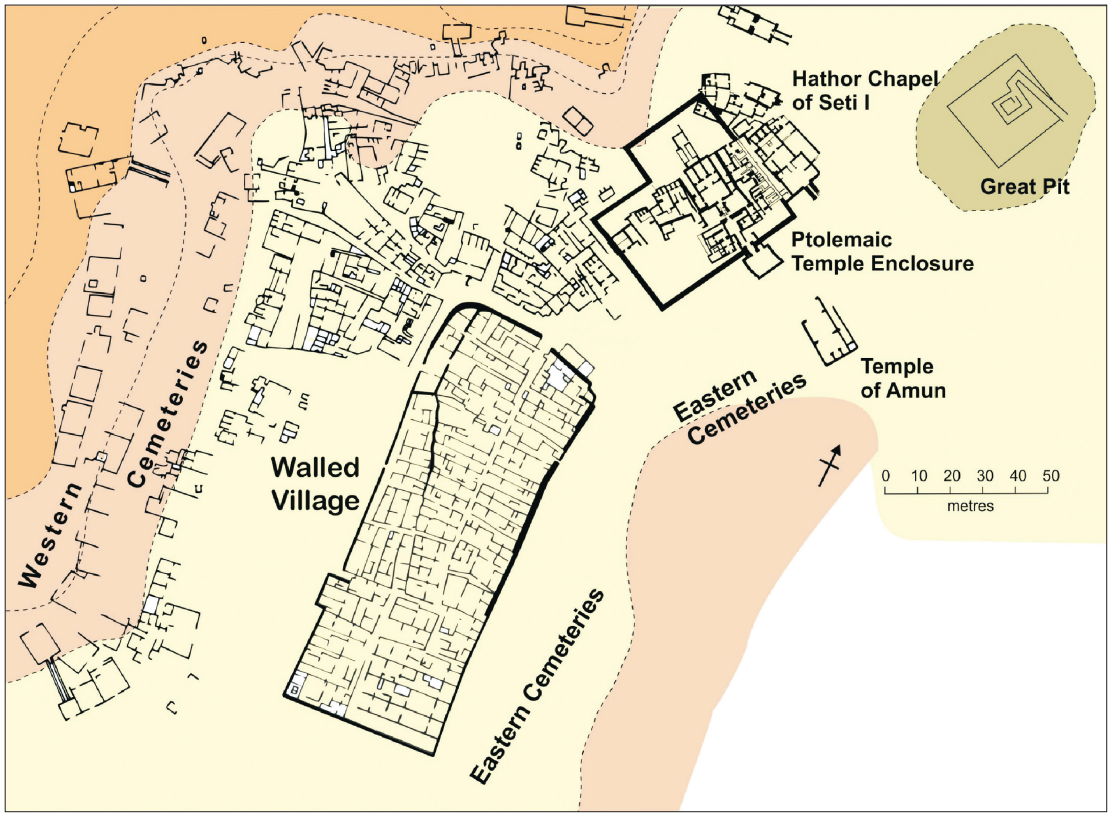

Figure 1.2: The site of Deir el-Medina (Image produced by Peter Robinson based on Bierbrier 1982a: 66-67).

the most public space, opening to the road and the most decorated; this accords with Kemp's (1979: 52-53) suggestion that the first room of the house was used to celebrate childbirth.

1.2c: The Eastern Cemetery

The walled village is flanked by rising ground to the east and west of the village, see Figure 1.2. The Eastern Cemetery is dated to the 18th Dynasty (Andreu 2002: 22). This contains simple burials with no superstructures; the cemetery here is stratified by age with neonates and the young at the bottom and adults at the top (Bruyère 1937b: 11). These burials were mainly simple shaft tombs with single vaults used for an individual or a small family.

1.2d: The Western Cemetery

The majority of tombs date to the 19th and 20th Dynasty and are more elaborate, with many consisting of full tomb complexes (Andreu 2002: 30). These are comprised of two elements: the chapel and burial chamber. The former was the visible superstructure, often topped with a brick pyramidion. Here family members could leave offerings and worship the cult of their dead ancestors. The subterranean burial chamber often contained multiple vaults which housed several generations; therefore, burials would have entailed repeat visits by the living to bury their dead relatives. It could be suggested these features created or perhaps reflected a strong sense of lineage and ancestry.

1.2e: Places of Worship

Bruyère identified at least 32 cult buildings at Deir el-Medina (Bomann 1991: 39). In addition to the temple of Hathor built by Seti I, which was probably the focal point of worship in the village. These buildings have been re-examined by Bomann (1991: 39-55) and are dispersed to the south, the southwest, the north and northeast of the later Ptolemaic temple. Due to their diversity Bruyère used a variety of terminology to describe these structures including *Chapelle Votive, Chapelles des Confrèries, Chapelle, Chapelle Religieuse* and *Temple*. Bomann's (1991: 73) re-analysis of the evidence found votive chapels focused principally on royal and private ancestor cults.

1.2f: Rock Cut Shrine

A shrine consisting of seven natural and manmade grottos was cut into a ravine on a path that lay between the Valley of the Queens and the village of Deir el-Medina. Bruyère (1929: 5) believed the shrine was sacred to Meretseger and Ptah and that many stelae dedicated to those deities once embedded in the rock had been taken to Museo Egizio by Schiaparelli. Possible

manifestations of the cult of Meretseger are discussed in Section 5.2c.

1.2h: Workmen's Huts and 'Le Chapelle du Col'

Also, on the outskirts of the settlement, on the path between the walled village and the Valley of the Kings, Bruyère excavated a group of 78 huts which he referred to as '*les huttes de la station de repos*' (Bruyère 1939: 347-348). He believed the huts provided a temporary settlement and he assumed, as they contained no kitchens, meals must have been brought up to the site by those residing in the village. However, more recent work has found evidence of fireplaces, both inside and outside of the huts, suggesting cooking could have been carried out in situ (Toivari-Viitala *et al.* 2010: 1). Pottery from the huts has been dated primarily to the late 19th Dynasty with a small amount from the mid-18th Dynasty and the later New Kingdom (Toivari-Viitala *et al.* 2012: 11).

1.3: The Working Week at Deir el-Medina

Although the huts are not a great distance from the walled village it is likely the workmen resided there during their workdays, possibly to alleviate the need to carry equipment to the site on a daily basis. The Egyptian calendar was divided into 12 months, each of 30 days, which were comprised of three, ten-day weeks. As demonstrated by Janssen (1980: 132) the last two days of a week were always free and, in most instances, the first day of the next week was also free. The weekend provided an opportunity for social and communal activities; as noted by Eyre (1987: 176) the workers had considerable free time, rarely working more than two-thirds of the available days and often working much less. However, for periods of the working week women and children may have been the primary residents of the village; this may account for the abundance of female orientated imagery and objects found at the site. However, it is difficult to determine if this is due to the exceptional levels of preservation at Deir el-Medina or the unique nature of the site.

1.4: '*Lit clos*'

The only surviving painted wall decoration in the village was found on the '*lit clos*'. Bruyère (1939: 57) so named these rectangular, mud brick structures as they reminded him of a type of boxed bed in Brittany. Contemporary scholars, for example Weiss (2009: 196), have suggested using a more neutral term, but for the sake of continuity with earlier scholarship this research will use the term '*lit clos*'. On average they were 1.70 m in length, 0.80 m wide and 0.75 m in height. They were fully or partially enclosed and had a small staircase of bricks, between three and five steps, situated on the most exterior wall (Bruyère 1939: 56-57). As Cherpion (2006: 12) notes the staircases are narrow, fragile and completely impractical. Bruyère identified three main types, see Figure 1.3. They were often constructed in the corner of the room, incorporating the exterior walls of the house. They were commonly plastered, white-washed and some had evidence of painted decoration still surviving. This is catalogued in Chapter 2, WP.1-10.

Bruyère (1939: 61) counted 28 '*lit clos*' but in Weiss' (2009: 197) re-analysis of the data, she records 29. They were most often found in the first room of the house but four were also discovered in the second room of the house and one in the third room of a house (Weiss 2009: 196, n. 4). There has been much debate regarding the function of these structures since Bruyère's publication (Cherpion 2006; Koltsida 2006; Weiss 2009). Bruyère (1939: 64) referred to these as '*lit-autel*' and he proposed a multi-functional use for them, as have many subsequent scholars. He suggested they may have been used as a subsidiary conjugal bed or a bed where the sleeper received prophecies and revelations from the divine. In conclusion, Bruyère (1939: 64) viewed '*la salle du lit clos*' as '*une sort de gynécées, de chambre de la naissance, analogue au sanctuaire de la déese dans un temple de triade.*' Most scholars now believe the '*lit clos*' functioned as altars; similar evidence of mud brick domestic altars has been found at Amarna (Stevens 2006: 234) and Lacovara (1997: 64) has suggested

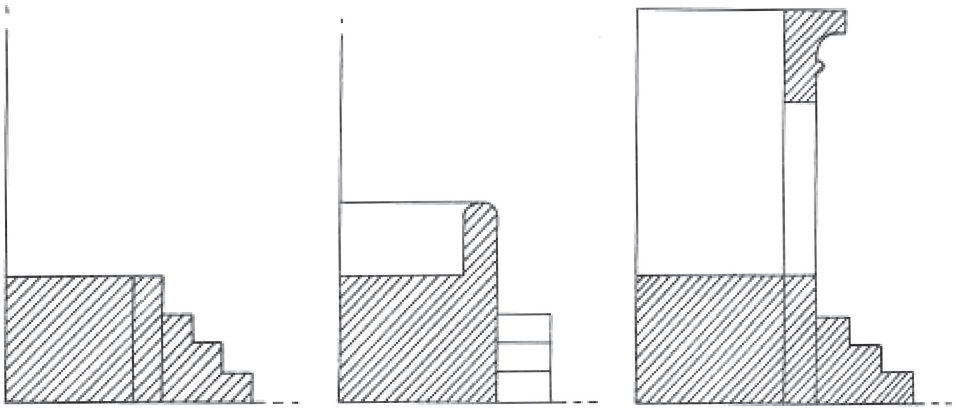

Figure 1.3: Types of '*lit clos*' found at Deir el-Medina, as identified by Bruyère (Bruyère 1939: 57, Figure 18) © IFAO.

comparable features were found in the houses in the north village at Malkata.

Weiss' (2009: 203) analysis of the limited number of artefacts found on the '*lit clos*' also suggests the structures were used as altars. For example, fragments of statues, most likely of Amenhotep I and his mother Ahmose Nefertari, who were worshipped in the village, were found on the '*lit clos*' in house N.E. XI. A damaged offering table was also found next to the '*lit clos*' (Bruyère 1939: 256-7). In addition, Weiss (2009: 205) cites two examples of figured ostraca which may depict a '*lit clos*'. One example, published by Keimer (1940-45: Plate XVIII, 59) shows the workman Hay before a table of offerings, behind which the god Thoth sits on an enclosed structure. This has five steps, a cavetto cornice and a small opening; it resembles the '*lit clos*' found at Deir el-Medina. The structure is depicted both in profile, for the staircase, and frontal view for the main edifice, a common practise in Egyptian art. The current location of this ostracon is unknown. The other example, in the Louvre, Figure 1.4, shows Meretseger on a baseline below which an enclosed structure is depicted. Keimer (1940-45:18) believed this to be a tomb or sanctuary. However, it is possible this is a '*lit clos*', given the similarity to the structure depicted on the example published by Keimer (1940-45: Plate XVIII, 59) as cited above.

Figure 1.4: Figured ostracon from Deir el-Medina showing Meretseger on a raised platform, before a table of offerings, Louvre E 25301 (Photograph Author's own).