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Of bird ladies and bee-eaters

Hypothetical meaning of the bird-headed figurines of the Naqada II period

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During the 4th millennium BC, the Egyptian Chalcolithic, unique bird-headed[2] figurines were produced in southern Upper Egypt. They were mainly found in the necropolises of Abydos (Umm el-Qaab), Naqada and Nag el-Ma'mariya (6 km downstream from Hierakonpolis). The figurines were nicknamed "bird ladies". However, male figurines of this type have also been found. They exist in an upright position, in a seated position, and as a decoration on the rim of a bowl[3] (Fig. 1 a–f). The upright figurines have no feet; they were probably intended to be held in one hand or to be placed in a holder.

Much has already been written about the bird-headed figurines and their possible purpose; it will not be repeated here.[4] However, the painting deserves a second look. The hair is either dark organic material (e.g. in Fig. 1 a, arrow),[5] or painted on as long hair hanging over both shoulders, similar to the three-part wig of the Egyptian gods (Fig. 1 b–d).[6] In the case of the seated figurine MMA 07.228.71, a wig made of greased

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2 It is disputed whether the facial protrusion is actually a beak. See also note 15.

3 The fragment of a male figurine reported by Petrie and Quibell (W. M. F. Petrie and J. E. Quibell, *Naqada and Ballas* [London, 1896], plate 36 [no. 96]) is also said to have been the decoration of a bowl. D. Craig Patch, *Dawn of Egyptian Art* (New York, 2011), 230, note 66.

4 Comprehensive reviews: S. U. Christiansen, "What do the figurines of 'Bird Ladies' in Predynastic Egypt represent?", *OAJAA* 4 (2023), OAJAA.MS.ID.000584; R. Ordynant (= I. Ordynant, I. Sharp), *Predynastic Female Figurines: A Re-appraisal of the El-Ma'mariya Corpus* (Monash University Conference, no date), 1–19, available at https://www.academia.edu/7025047/ (accessed October 18, 2024); I. Ordynant, *The Female Form: Examining the Function of Predynastic Female Figurines from the Badarian to the Late Naqada II Periods* (Thesis, Monash University; Melbourne, 2013), 22–30, available at https://www.academia.edu/6489974/ (accessed October 18, 2024).

5 Craig Patch, *Dawn,* 113; U. Rummel (ed.), *Meeting the past: 100 years in Egypt* (Cairo, 2007), 60 (no. 40); Brooklyn Museum, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4225 (accessed October 15, 2024). Unfortunately, the heads of some of the figures are missing.

6 The paint may have been used as an adhesive substance for a wig.

plant fibers is completely preserved (Fig. 2 a, b).[7] The typical terracotta figurines are painted with a long white skirt; male figurines wear penis sheaths. Two female figurines with a light base color due to the material (limestone, marl clay), are unclothed and have symbols painted on their bodies – jewelry, plant-like forms, rectangles reminiscent of later representations of a pond, and animals, including an animal that I interpret as a dog because of its upwardly curled tail, a sitting crested bird, and a flying bird with a forked tail (Fig. 2 a–c, arrows).[8] This suggests that the figurines were related to nature and farming.[9]

The present article focuses in particular on the painting in the area of the eyes, which is still visible on some figurines - a light turquoise stripe above the eye, a black eye stripe, and a light turquoise stripe below the eye (Fig. 3 a, b).[10] The light turquoise paint contains malachite powder (copper carbonate),[11] so the right hue was important.

[7] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547202 (accessed October 15, 2024).

Detached wigs were also found. J. Crowfoot Payne, *Catalogue of the Predynastic Egyptian Collection in the Ashmolean Museum* (2nd revised edition; Oxford, 2000), 19 (no. 45).

[8] In some ways, these elements are reminiscent of early hieroglyphs.

[9] Cf. Craig Patch, *Dawn*, 122.

[10] In the seated figurine MMA 07.228.71, the over-eye stripe on the right has peeled off down to traces (Fig. 3 b). See also U. Hartung, "Nile mud and clay objects from the predynastic cemetery U at Abydos (Umm el-Qa'ab)," in R. F. Friedman and P. N. Fiske (eds), *Egypt at its origins 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference 'Origin of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt', London, 27th July – 1st August 2007* (Leuven, 2011), 469.

[11] Craig Patch, *Dawn*, 127–128.

Fig. 1: Bird-headed terracotta figurines of the Naqada II period.
a) Female figurine from Nag el-Ma'mariya, Naqada IIa, 3500–3400 BC, painted, height 29.2 cm, Brooklyn Museum 07.447.505; b) Male figurine, reportedly from Naqada, early Naqada II, 3500–3300 BC, painted, height 15.7 cm, Brooklyn Museum 35.1269; c–e) Male figurines, reportedly from El-Bisaliya Bahari, Naqada II, 3650–3300 BC, painted, height 17–18 cm, MFA 04.1802, MFA 04.1804; f) Bowl from tomb U-502 at Abydos (Umm el-Qa'ab), late Naqada I, approx. 3700 BC, painted, height 19.8 cm, diameter 16.5 cm, Egyptian Museum Cairo U-502/1, Abydos R378 (restored, the white gypsum paint is original).[12]

[12] See page 9 for photo credits.

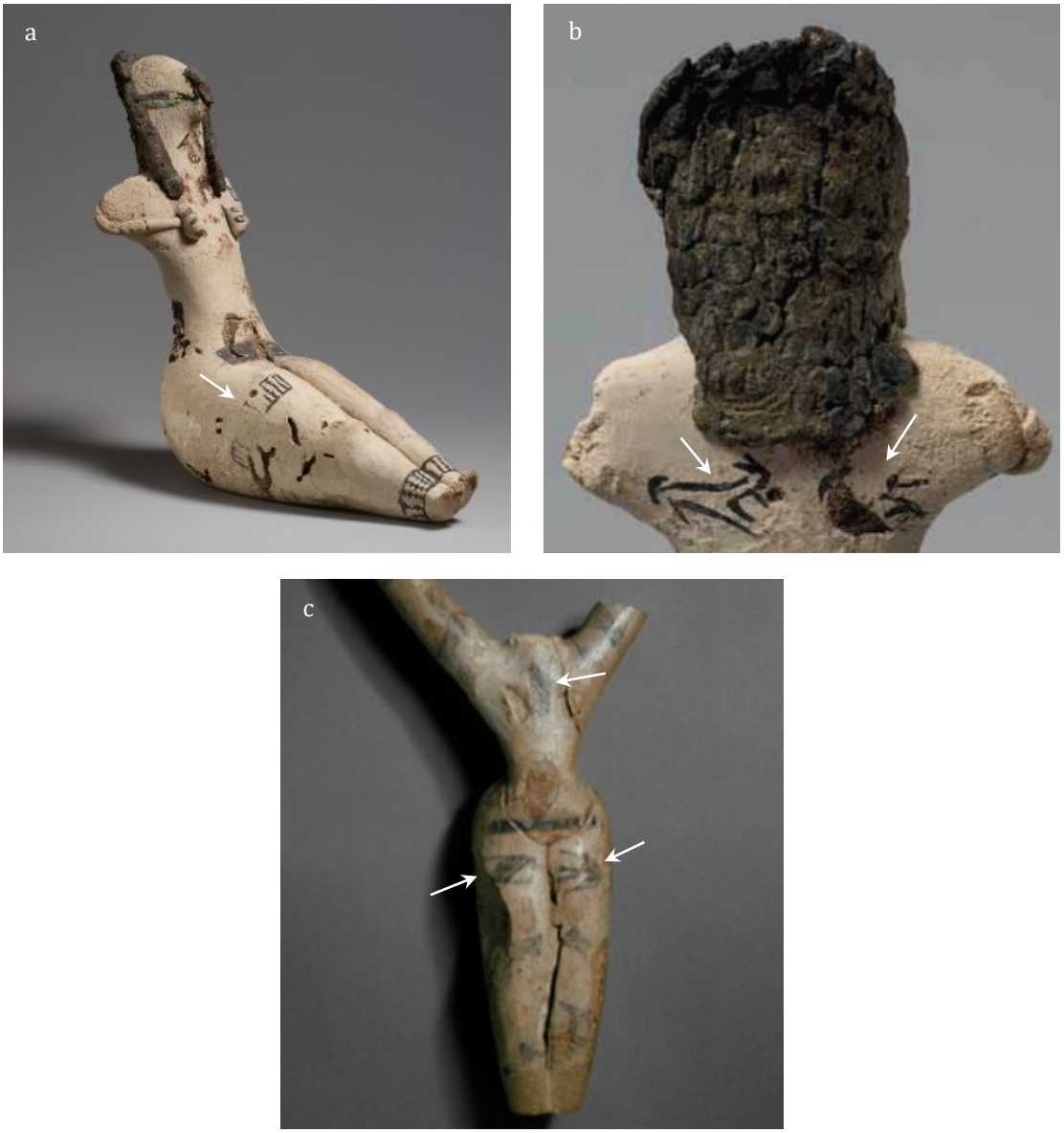

Fig. 2: a, b) Seated female figurine from Naqada or Ombos, late Naqada II, 3450–3300 BC, limestone, height 19.8 cm, MMA 07.228.71; c) Headless female figurine from Naqada, Naqada II, 3800-3450 BC, marl clay, Ashmolean Museum AN1895.127.[13]

The bee-eater as a possible natural model

In the search for a bird species that could have served as a model for the bird-headed figurines, one comes across the family of bee-eaters (*Meropidae*). Bee-eaters are about 20–30 cm long, woodpecker-like gregarious birds that feed on all kinds of flying insects. They breed in colonies in open loess walls, disused quarries and steep riverbanks, where

[13] A drawing of AN1895.127 can be found in Ordynant, *Female Form*, 63 (fig. 12), available at https://www.academia.edu/6489974 (accessed October 18, 2024).

they dig long nesting tubes.[14] The landscape of Egypt from the eighth to the early fourth millennium BC, with open savannas and numerous tributaries of the Nile (where there are now deserts and dried up wadis), and steep slopes of relatively soft sedimentary rock,[15] was the ideal habitat for these birds.

Today, there are essentially three species of bee-eaters in Egypt. According to my hypothesis, the European Bee-eater was the natural model for the eye painting of the bird-headed figurines (Fig. 4 a–c). It shows the turquoise-black-turquoise stripe pattern in the eye area, with the stripes above the eyes (supercilia) merging into a white spot above the beak (Fig. 4 c; this white spot is also present on the figurines on the bowl U-502/1 from Abydos, Fig. 1 f). The rust-red plumage on the back of the head and upper back is reminiscent of the shape of a three-part wig (Fig. 4 a, b). Overall, the bird is very colorful in rust-red, yellow and various shades of blue and turquoise (Fig. 4 a–c). In the Egyptian Nile valley, it is found only twice a year during a stopover on its migration between the breeding grounds in Europe and Central Asia and the wintering grounds in southern Africa.[16] The other two bee-eater species are less suitable candidates for our question. The Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (*Merops persicus persicus*) also has the aforementioned stripe pattern in the eye area, but in Egypt it is found mainly in the Nile Delta and along the Red Sea coast (Fig. 5 a). In the African Green Bee-eater subspecies found year-round in Egypt (*Merops viridissimus cleopatra*), the supercilia are barely visible (Fig. 5 b).[17]

The plump beaks of the bird-headed figurines bear little resemblance to the long, pointed beaks of bee-eaters. Some authors doubt that these are bird beaks at all. Suggestions include an exaggerated nose (source of the breath of life), a mask, or that the figurines represent a supernatural being.[18] However, the predominantly pointed shape, the extension of the eye stripe almost to the tip, and the occasional discoloration (Fig. 1 e) argue against a nose. The actual beak may have been made of a different material and has been lost. For example, on the back of the facial projection of MMA 07.228.71 there is a structure made of a dark organic material that somewhat resembles the beak of a bee-

[14] J. A. Sánchez Iglesias, Bee-eaters, have you seen them passing? https://www.discoveringdonana.com/bee-eater/ (accessed October 17, 2024).

[15] R. Kuper and S. Kröpelin, "Climate-Controlled Holocene Occupation in the Sahara: Motor of Africa's Evolution," *Science* 313 (2006), 803–807; R. Said, *The River Nile: Geology, Hydrology and Utilization* (London, 1993).

[16] Xeno-canto Foundation, https://xeno-canto.org/species/Merops-apiaster (accessed October 17, 2024).

[17] For more information, visit Avibase – The World Bird Database, https://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/avibase.jsp?lang=EN.

[18] Craig Patch, Dawn, 113; Edward Bleiberg, video interview on https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4225 (accessed October 15, 2024); Christiansen, *OAJAA* 4, 8–9.

eater (Figs. 2 a, 3 b).

Fig. 3: a) Brooklyn Museum 35.1269, description in Fig. 1 b; b) MMA 07.228.71, description in Fig. 2 a, b.

Fig. 4: European Bee-eaters (*Merops apiaster*), in Egypt twice a year on migration;
a, b) © Frank Derer; c) © Christoph Bosch.

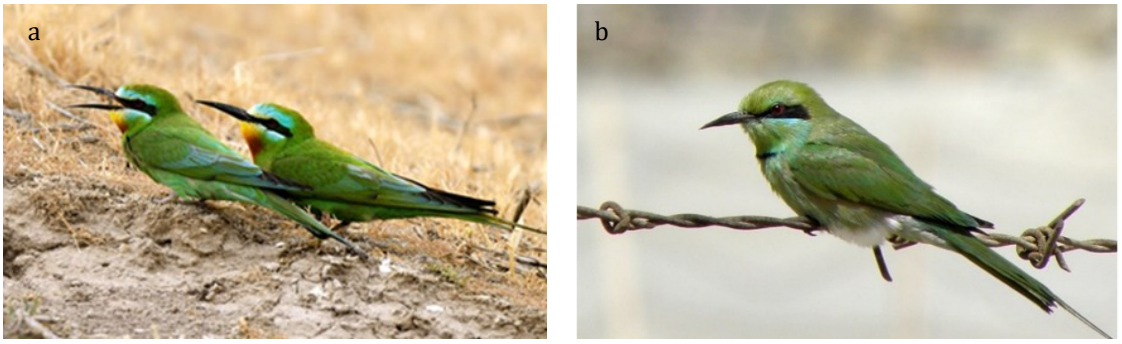

Fig. 5: a) Pair of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters (*Merops persicus persicus*), in Egypt mainly in the Nile delta; © Dûrzan Cîrano; b) African Green Bee-eater (*Merops viridissimus cleopatra;* formerly *Merops orientalis cleopatra*), year-round in Egypt; © Claudia Ali.

A rural bee-eater cult?

After a temporary humid phase ("green Sahara"), the same climatic conditions as seen today prevailed in Egypt from the middle of the 4th millennium BC onwards.[19] This justifies the assumption that at that time, the European Bee-eater could only be observed in Upper Egypt during its migration, as it can be observed today. The arrival of the European Bee-eaters in late October and early November (on their way to southern Africa) coincided with the time when the waters of the Nile receded from the floodplains. The swampy floodplains were a breeding ground for mosquitoes. The striking, colorful birds flying low over the fields (they catch their prey in flight and emit flight calls) could not have gone unnoticed by the farmers who were plowing the deposited Nile mud.[20] The second arrival in late March and early April (on their way back to the breeding grounds) coincided with the Egyptian harvest season. The winter rains[21] had again provided for an abundance of insects. Farmers were bringing the grain harvest into the granaries.[22] Thus, the appearance of the colorful bee-eaters accompanied the beginning and the end of the field work, which the Egyptians celebrated with festivals.[23] The figurines with the bee-

[19] Kuper and Kröpelin, *Science* 313, 805–807.

[20] Cf. Sánchez Iglesias, https://www.discoveringdonana.com/bee-eater/ (with link to sound recordings; accessed October 17, 2024).

[21] In the terminal phase of the Middle Holocene climatic transition in Egypt, winter rains replaced summer monsoon rains. N. Brooks, "Cultural responses to aridity in the Middle Holocene and increased social complexity", *Quater. Int*. 151 (2006), 36.

[22] J. C. Moreno García, "Chapter Nine: Egyptian Agriculture in the Bronze Age" in D. Hollander and T. Howe (eds), *A Companion to Ancient Agriculture* (Hoboken, 2021), 175–178, 179.

[23] These peasant festivals were later reinterpreted as religious festivals for Hathor, Amun, Sokar, Nehebkau (at the time of plowing) and Renenutet (harvest sacrifice). W. Grajetzki, *Festivals in the ancient Egyptian calendar*, University College London (2003), https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/ideology/festivaldates.html (accessed October 17, 2024).

eater's face and raised arms[24] may have played a role in these festivals, even though they were found as grave goods (including in children's graves).

One might almost think that the European Bee-eater had a wider influence on ancient Egyptian art and culture. Its plumage has the preferred color spectrum of the wall paintings (rust-red, golden yellow and various shades of blue). The only eye makeup used was black (galena) and green (malachite). A cult figure with a bird's head and a human body is entirely in the tradition of those Egyptian gods, who were depicted with an animal head and a body that was completely human in shape and clothing. Of these, however, only Horus (falcon) and Thoth (ibis) had a bird's head. Moreover, there was no deity or cult figure modeled on a bee-eater during the Pharaonic period, and this bird did not play a special role in art at that time.[25]

The bird-headed figurines of the Naqada II period seem to have been used only in the area from Abydos (Thinis) to Aswan. The hypothetical bee-eater cult goes back to the tradition of an Early Chalcolithic population in this region. The cult probably disappeared at the beginning of the Egyptian Bronze Age (about 2800 BC), when an astronomical calendar came into use.[26] Then, with the exception of the Nile flood, the recurrence of natural events on Earth lost much of its significance as a seasonal clock.

[24] Interpretations of the posture include dance, ritual gesture, gesture of praise or mourning, and bull horn symbolism. Craig Patch, *Dawn*, 112, 113; Ordynant, *Female Form,* 26–28; Christiansen, *OAJAA* 4, 7; S. Hendrickx, "Bovines in Egyptian Predynastic and Early Dynastic Iconography", in F. Hassan (ed.), *Droughts, Food and Culture: Ecological Change and Food Security in Africa's Later Prehistory* (New York, 2002), 275, 287.

[25] R. Bailleul-LeSuer (ed.), *Between heaven and earth: birds in ancient Egypt* (OIMP 35; Chicago, 2013).

[26] From then on, the year was divided into three seasons of four months each, according to the cycles of the moon, sun and Sirius: Peret, the time of plant growth, Shemu, the dry season, and Akhet, the time of the Nile flood. R. A. Parker, *The calendars of ancient Egypt* (SAOC 26; Chicago, 1950).

Abbreviations:

BC: Before Christian era; Camb. Archaeol. J.: Cambridge Archaeological Journal; cat.: catalogue; Cf.: compare; ed./eds: editor(s); MFA: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; MMA: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; OAJAA: Open Access Journal of Archaeology and Anthropology; OIMP: Oriental Institute Museum Publications; Quater. Int.: Quaternary International; SAOC: Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization.

Photo credits:

Fig. 1: a) Brooklyn Museum 07.447.505. Photo: Brooklyn Museum, New York, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4225 (accessed October 15, 2024; CC BY).

b) Brooklyn Museum 35.1269. Photo: Brooklyn Museum, New York, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/44886 (accessed October 15, 2024; CC BY).

c, d) MFA 04.1802. Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, https://collections.mfa.org/objects/130727 (accessed October 15, 2024; CC BY-ND-NC 4.0).

e) MFA 04.1804. Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, https://collections.mfa.org/objects/130729 (accessed October 15, 2024; CC BY-ND-NC 4.0).

f) Egyptian Museum Cairo U-502/1, Abydos R378. Photo from Diana Craig Patch, *Dawn of Egyptian Art* (New York, 2011), 115 (fig. 34) (CC 0).

Fig. 2: a, b) MMA 07.228.71. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547202 (accessed October 14, 2024; CC 0).

c) Ashmolean Museum AN1895.127. Photo: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, https://collections.ashmolean.org/object/486762 (accessed October 14, 2024; CC BY-ND-NC 4.0).

Fig. 3: a) = Fig. 1 b cut to size.

b) MMA 07.228.71. Photo from Diana Craig Patch, *Dawn of Egyptian Art* (New York, 2011), 122 (cat. 102) (CC 0).

Fig. 4: a) European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*). Photo: Frank Derer, https://www.nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/voegel/portraets/bienenfresser (accessed October 14, 2024; courtesy of Frank Derer).

b) European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*). Photo: Frank Derer, https://www.nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/voegel/portraets/bienenfresser (accessed October 14, 2024; courtesy of Frank Derer).

c) European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*). Photo: Christoph Bosch, https://www.nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/voegel/portraets/bienenfresser (accessed October 14, 2024; courtesy of Christoph Bosch).

Fig. 5: a) Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (*Merops persicus persicus*). Photo: Dûrzan Cîrano, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blauwangenspint#/media/File:%C5%9Eahl%C3%BBr%C3%AA_kesk_(Merops_persicus).jpg (accessed October 14, 2024; CC BY-SA 4.0).

b) African Green Bee-eater (*Merops viridissimus cleopatra*, formerly *Merops orientalis cleopatra*). Photo: "Leben in Luxor", https://www.leben-in-luxor.de/luxor_freizeit_voegel_smaragdspint.html (accessed October 15, 2024; courtesy of Claudia Ali).