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# Embodying the Divine: A Tattooed Female Mummy from Deir el-Medina

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# Embodying the Divine: A Tattooed Female Mummy from Deir el-Medina

ANNE AUSTIN*, CÉDRIC GOBEIL**

During the Ifao mission at Deir el-Medina in 2014, we identified the torso of a female mummy that was heavily tattooed along the arms, shoulders, neck, and back. This article presents this tattooed mummy by first contextualizing the discovery within broader research on tattooing in ancient Egypt. We then describe the nature of this mummy and her tattoos through a detailed discussion of their placement and symbolism. Finally, we discuss the potential implications this woman has not only for the history of tattooing in Egypt, but also women's roles in Egyptian magic, medicine, and religion during the New Kingdom.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON TATTOOING IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Until now, research on Egyptian tattooing has been extremely limited owing to the very few human remains exhibiting tattoos from a Pharaonic burial. The most comprehensive study on the topic was conducted by Keimer,[1] who used evidence from figurines, mummies, and ethnography to document tattooing in Egypt and Nubia. Since Keimer's original publication, several other scholars have attempted to address the topic,[2] but with minimal new evidence, little more can be said about the practice of tattooing in Egypt.

The earliest circumstantial evidence for tattooing in Egypt comes from predynastic figurines bearing geometric patterns on their arms and legs.[3] While these geometric patterns have been interpreted as tattoos, it is impossible to differentiate markings intended as tattoos from those

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1 Keimer 1948.
2 Bianchi 1988; Tassie 2003; Poon, Quickenden 2006.
3 As an example, see MMA 07.228.71, a late Naqada II limestone figurine.



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used as decoration. Indeed, these markings are also shown on Naqada pottery, suggesting that without corroborating evidence from human remains, artistic depictions resembling tattoos are not conclusive.[4]

It is only in the Middle Kingdom that we find evidence in both art and human remains for tattooing. Specifically, truncated female figurines and paddle dolls were sometimes decorated with geometrically-patterned dots on the arms, thighs, and abdomen that resemble the tattoos identified on three female Middle Kingdom mummies from Deir el-Bahri.[5] The first of these women and the most well-known is the priestess of Hathor Amunet. She was buried inside a wooden coffin in an intact 11th or 12th Dynasty tomb south of the temple at Deir el-Bahri where she was listed with the titles "Priestess of Hathor" and "King's Favorite Ornament."[6] Her tattoos consist of series of pinpricks and lines placed along her arms, legs, and abdomen. Nearby, two other female mummies were identified with similar tattoos and scarification marks during the excavations of the Metropolitan Museum of Art at Deir el-Bahri.[7]

Aside from these three mummies, evidence for tattooing in Pharaonic burials is almost non-existent,[8] though evidence for tattooing in Nubian cemeteries is more abundant. Several mummies from Nubian C-group cemeteries have been identified with tattoos at Kubban,[9] Aksha,[10] and, most recently, at Hierakonpolis.[11] In each case, tattoos were found primarily on female mummies and the motifs generally consisted of lines or dots used to create geometric patterns along the hands, arms, thighs, and/or torso, leading most scholars to assume that the tattoos present in the three mummies from Deir el-Bahri represent a Nubian tradition of tattooing.[12]

However, artistic depictions from both the Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom suggest that tattooing began to incorporate figures from Egyptian iconography. Keimer identified five examples of tattoos of Bes depicted on the thighs of women, several of which come from Deir el-Medina.[13] Additionally, a Nubian mummy from Aksha has an abstract tattoo of Bes on the thigh.[14] Consequently, there is a visible shift in the artistic display of tattoos that suggests that by the New Kingdom, tattooing may have taken on a specifically Egyptian tradition with symbolism linked with religious practice. Bes, as a god worshipped in both Egypt and Nubia, may have acted as a natural link between Nubian tattooing and the development of an Egyptian practice visible in tattoos depicted in pottery and art at Deir el-Medina.

When considering multiple lines of evidence for tattooing on mummies, figurines, and in artistic depictions, scholars have suggested a correlation between the cult of Hathor and evidence for tattooing. Bianchi connects the tattooed mummies at Deir el-Bahri with Hathoric female figurines from the same context as evidence that tattooing was specifically associated with the sensuality

4 This is also argued by R. Bianchi (1988, p. 21).

5 For a more extensive review of evidence linking these tattooed mummies with paddle dolls, truncated female figurines, and the cult of Hathor, see E. Morris (2011).

6 Daressy 1893.

7 These two mummies were first mentioned by H. Winlock (1942, p. 74). They have been most recently revisited by C. Roehrig (forthcoming).

8 There is a photograph from the MMA excavations of a possible tattoo of a bird from a mummy found in Asasif 1008 (Morris 2011, fig. 5). Otherwise, the authors know of no other tattooed bodies excepting those Nubian cemeteries discussed below. C. Graves-Brown (2010, p. 114) and K. Poon and T. Quickenden (2006, p. 124) mistakenly suggest that there are four tattooed mummies at Deir el-Bahri, however, their inference misreads the comments made by R. Bianchi (1988, p. 22) who indicates that another tattooed woman has been mistaken for Amunet. This other tattooed body is, in fact, one of the two found in Winlock's excavations.

9 Firth 1927.

10 Vila 1967, pp. 368–378.

11 Irish, Friedman 2010.

12 Keimer 1948, p. 106.

13 Keimer 1948, pp. 40–42.

14 Vila 1967, pl. XV.


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of female musicians and dancers for Hathor during the Middle Kingdom.[15] Morris suggests that several paddle dolls from Deir el-Bahri are physical representations of the tattooed Khener dancers buried there, and links assemblages of instruments of the Khener troop such as clappers, mirrors, and Menat necklaces with the tattooed paddle dolls, truncated figurines, and the three tattooed mummies.[16] However, as Pinch notes, "it is tempting to see such tattoos as the mark of a devotee of Hathor, but there is no definitive evidence for this."[17] The geometric patterning of the tattoos themselves does not allow for a direct connection with devotion to Hathor, and evidence for figural tattoos in the New Kingdom is limited to artistic depictions which make no clear connection between tattooing and the worship of Hathor. This lack of definitive evidence for the meaning of tattoos extends beyond Hathor to general limitations in our ability to interpret the symbolism and meaning of tattoos in Pharaonic contexts because of the lack of figural tattoos identified on human remains. Previous research, therefore, has been limited by the lack of strongly contextualized figural tattoos to help explain the potential meanings and uses of tattooing in ancient Egypt.

## THE TATTOOED MUMMY FROM THE TT 290 ASSEMBLAGE

In 2014, research at Deir el-Medina was conducted in TT 291 in order to inventory and study the human remains stored there, which were originally found in the tomb chamber of TT 290.[18] This assemblage has been heavily plundered, leading to extensive commingling of the human remains. Artifacts and mummification techniques in the assemblage suggest that the material dates primarily to the Ramesside Period with some early 21st Dynasty burials as well.[19] During this work, we identified at least thirty tattoos on the neck, shoulders, back, and arms of a mummified torso of a woman.[20] Unlike the previous examples of tattooed mummies in Egypt, the tattoos found on this mummy are figural and represent Pharaonic Egyptian imagery.

The torso, measuring 64 cm × 27 cm × 14 cm, was found unwrapped (fig. 1), except for the presence of one layer of bandaging on the right forearm. The head, hands, and legs are no longer present. The mummy was eviscerated, though no visceral cut is present. Instead, this appears to be an example of transvaginal or transperineal evisceration, a practice recently documented in other New Kingdom mummies.[21]

Traditional skeletal age estimation techniques are not possible for this mummy owing to the lack of a cranium and no visibility of the pubic symphysis. Instead, we used epiphyseal fusion;[22] radiolucency of the clavicle;[23] radiolucency of the humerus;[24] and osteophyte

15 Bianchi 1988.
16 Morris 2011.
17 Pinch 1993, p. 213.
18 Austin forthcoming.
19 Austin forthcoming.
20 Sex is determined from the presence of soft-tissue in the pelvis.
21 Wade, Nelson 2013.
22 Full epiphyseal fusion of the clavicle indicates this individual must be at least 22 years old (Scheuer, Black 2004, p. 252).
23 Walker, Lovejoy 1985. The left and right clavicles of 15001 has some evacuation of the metaphyses, but no scalloping in the posterior cortex. The medullary canal is filled with dense, parallel, plate-like patterning. These qualities are most similar to Walker and Lovejoy's phase 2 and/or phase 3, with an estimated age range of 25–34.
24 Though radiographic techniques for aging the humeral head in archaeological settings have not been explicitly published, clinical research by F. Barvencik et al. (2010) demonstrates clear structural changes visible in radiographs in the humeral head due to osteoporosis. In this case, consistent structure in the humeral head further corroborate that this woman died as a young adult (20–34 years old).

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formation[25] to estimate that this woman was 25–34 years old at death.[26] As the torso was found commingled with the rest of the TT 290 assemblage, it was impossible to ascertain whether any burial equipment is affiliated with this individual, and we furthermore could not rearticulate the head, legs, or hands if they are still present. Consequently, our interpretations of the mummy are based almost exclusively on the tattoos.

## THE PLACEMENT OF THE TATTOOS

In order to identify the tattoos, we used a combination of traditional photography, photo enhancement techniques, and infrared photography of the mummy. A photo enhancement technique called decorrelation stretch was applied to photos of the mummy using DStretch, a plugin for the software ImageJ that was originally intended to enhance pictographs.[27] These images were also stretched so as to imitate the appearance of the skin prior to mummification. In 2016, we used an infrared sensor[28] to identify tattoos otherwise undetectable in visible light, as infrared has been previously demonstrated to be particularly effective at contrasting the pigment of tattoos on mummified skin.[29]

Through combining these techniques, we identified at least 30 tattoos on the neck, shoulders, arms, and back of the mummy. Fig. 2 is a reconstruction of the approximate distribution and location of the tattoos from the anterior, posterior, and lateral views of the body. The tattoos appear on the neck and top of the arms, but are not present between them or along the clavicle. The tattoos extend along the outside of both arms down to the elbow, below which we find no tattoos, though we could not observe the wrist or hands. There are also tattoos on the back of the mummy including three tattoos near the left shoulder blade. Finally, a pair of lotus blossom tattoos with a dotted line connecting them appears on the hips of the mummy near the lower back.

Several observations should be noted based on the appearance and distribution of the tattoos. The tattoos were made prior to mummification, as the designs are now clearly distorted from the shrinking of skin during the mummification process. The placement of the tattoos suggests a departure from or variation on the tattooing previously attested in Egypt. The tattoos are generally placed in public and visible areas of the body. Tattoos were found at the neck and along the arms, but not on the abdomen or the inside shoulder where straps for a dress would lie. Tattoos were not identified in the regions where previous examples of tattoos have been found, namely, the abdomen or inner thigh. Previous research has outlined the erotic overtones of tattoos in these regions of the body,[30] but in this case, the placement of the tattoos avoids areas traditionally associated with either eroticism or fertility. The only exception to this is the lotus blossom motif found on the lower back, which would not have been visible in a dress and may evoke erotic undertones as it would only be visible if she were nude, wearing a girdle, or shirtless.

25 Prescher 1998; Watanabe, Terazawa 2006; Listi, Manhein 2012. In this case, minimal lipping further suggests she is a young adult (20–34 years old).

26 This was possible as Salima Ikram took radiographs of the mummified torso in 2015.

27 Harman 2015.

28 We used the infrared camera of the Occipital Structure Sensor, though an infrared DSLR camera is recommended for future research.

29 Alvrus et al. 2001.

30 Bianchi 1988.


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Many of the tattoos were also placed in areas that would have required someone else to apply them, such as those on the upper back or neck. This suggests that the tattoos were made by one or more members of the broader community, and their intentional public placement indicates that they were meant to be seen by the broader community as well.

Sensitive areas were not avoided when determining where to place tattoos as some tattoos were placed in extremely sensitive regions of the body, such as the neck. A more important driving principle appears to have been symmetry, as identical tattoos are symmetrically placed on the neck, lower back, and upper arms. Tattoos on the upper back and tattoos just above the elbow, however, are asymmetrical and show more complex designs.

There was considerable variation in the darkness of the tattoos and the definition of the margins of tattoo lines. This may be due to three factors. First, if the application of the tattoos was less effective in some cases, the ink may have been less defined. Second, tattoos naturally diffuse over time and ink tends to fade, suggesting that the tattoos could have been made in different sessions over the course of several years. Third, post-depositional processes could also lead to different levels of fading in different regions of the body, though this could not explain variation in the definition between individual tattoos that are juxtaposed. For such differences, the first two reasons suggest that the tattoos were either applied by different individuals and/or at different times.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE TATTOOS

A full and complete list of the tattoos identified on this mummy with accompanying images and numerical identifiers (*e.g.*, T1) is provided in tab. 1. Fading and distortion of the skin made it difficult to positively identify all of the tattoos. Several tattoos on the shoulders (T9–T11) and some on the arm (T19 and T23) were too faded to be discerned. The following discussion focuses on those tattoos that can be positively and tentatively identified. While the symbolism and value of each tattoo could be considered individually, the symmetrical placement of tattoos and recurring motifs suggest that we should instead interpret the tattoos as a whole.

The tattoos on the neck can be seen as the central part of the whole logical display (fig. 3), especially as the themes on the neck are repeated on the shoulders and back. The tattoos appear in two rows and look like a group of amulets that had been placed on the lady's throat. The top row shows a *wadjet*-eye (T3) surrounded by two seated baboons (T1–T2). The bottom row contains a pair of *wadjet*-eyes with two *nefer*-signs between them (T4). Indeed, the *wadjet*-eyes, the *nefer*-signs, and the seated baboons are all elsewhere attested as amulets or magical symbols;[31] some of them can even be found combined together as on her neck.[32] The question then arises why these tattoos have been drawn on the throat? Given that these tattoos were meant to be highly visible, could they be drawn amulets? Should this be the

31 See Müller-Winkler 1987, pp. 86–177 (*wadjet*-eye), pp. 235–237 (*nefer*-sign); *LÄ* VI, 1986, cols. 824-826, s.v. "Udjatauge" (*wadjet*-eye); Petrie 1914, p. 43, nos. 205–206, pl. XXXVII (seated baboon); Pinch 2006, p. 110 (*wadjet*-eye).

32 *Wadjet*-eye and *nefer*-sign: Müller-Winkler 1987, p. 104, 147; Petrie 1914, p. 33f, nos. 139f–139g, pl. XXIV; Reisner 1958, no. 5804, pl. V; Pier 1906, p. 14, pl. XIII, no. 2. Seated baboon and *wadjet*-eye: Pinch 2006, p. 111, fig. 57.


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case, then this group of tattoos would have had an important prophylactic function. For the Egyptians, the neck was indeed one of the most vulnerable parts of the body, thus explaining why amulets were so often placed around it.[33] In the present case, the act of fixing forever the image of an amulet could therefore have been interpreted as a way to attach permanently the magical power of an amulet on one person.[34]

One cannot discard the idea that these tattoos may have been drawn to ensure healing and/or protection against illness.[35] Magical spells sometimes ask that images should be drawn on the patient's hand and then licked off by him.[36] In other circumstances, spells could also be written on a small piece of papyrus or linen and then attached around the patient's neck or on the afflicted part of the body. Direct contact between a spell or a magical symbol and the person was usually part of the protective magic. On this woman, however, if the tattoos were marks connected to an attempt of being cured, it would mean that she would have been very sick over a certain period of time. As we earlier demonstrated, the tattoos were logically drawn following a symmetrical plan and, as far as we can judge by what is left of the mummy, they were only made on specific parts of her body. Radiographs do not suggest that the tattoos were placed over areas with joint fractures or other pathologies to bone, though we cannot assess soft-tissue pathologies. All these features give the impression that this tattooed lady was not an ill person benefiting from magic. Instead, evidence suggests that she was someone actively involved in healing and protecting people, in other words a magician.

The ability to cast spells was among the activities performed by magicians[37] and as such, it could have been a good thing for her to cover her throat with magical symbols in order to give magical powers to her speech. As the magical symbol "par excellence" for the Egyptians,[38] it is therefore not surprising to find the *wadjet*-eye among the tattoos on the woman's neck. Following this idea, the two-seated baboons could then be related to Thoth, a god well known for his use of *heka*.[39] Moreover, the combination of the seated Thoth-baboon with the *wadjet*-eye in a magical context is well attested since the Middle Kingdom when it started to be used on ivory apotropaic wands and other magical objects.[40] This image recalls the travel of Thoth in the desert seeking for the sun eye or his attempt to complete the lunar eye of Horus and underline consequently the concept of the body's unity.[41] The combination of the *nefer*-sign with the *wadjet*-eye could be explained following the same idea of unity, *nefer* meaning "perfect" or "good." These two signs traced together could also be understood as "seeing the beauties" like on the stele BM 101 where the same group appears.[42] The difference in the present case is that it would have been the beauty of the tattooed woman that people would have looked at.

Alternatively, the signs could be combined to create the votive formula *ir nfr, ir nfr* "do good, do good."[43] This formula is attested most commonly in Ramesside texts from Thebes, and more specifically, around Deir el-Bahri.[44] Several plaques from Deir el-Bahri bear the

33 Pinch 2006, p. 111, fig. 57, pp. 112, 116.
34 Pinch 2006, p. 70.
35 Pinch 2006, p. 70.
36 Pinch 2006, p. 70.
37 Pinch 2006, pp. 70–72.
38 Pinch 2006, p. 110.
39 Pinch 2006, p. 72.
40 Legge 1905, pl. IV, fig. 4; Altenmüller 1965; Hayes 1978, pp. 227, 228, fig. 143; Koenig 1994, pp. 90, 195–196; Pinch 2006, pp. 29, 42.
41 Koenig 1994, p. 194; Pinch 2006, p. 29.
42 Blackman 1935, pp. 1–9.
43 Marciniak 1968.
44 Marciniak 1968.


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combination of a set of either simple eyes or *wadjet*-eyes with a *nefer*-sign between them,[45] which Pinch suggests employ the *ir nfr, ir nfr* formula in a votive context.[46] In these cases, the repeated phrase is echoed by placing a *nefer*-sign between two simple eyes, allowing the formula to be read and repeated from the center to both the left and right, creating the repetition attested in hieratic texts. Though in some cases the *wadjet*-eye is used, it was commonly interchanged with the "simple" eye in votive offerings at Deir el-Bahri.[47] It is possible that using the *wadjet*-eye still maintained the grammatical structure of the formula, but empowered it with a divine essence. This formula is commonly attested as graffiti and votive offerings around Deir el-Bahri,[48] though it is also evidence in graffiti on the floor of the Hathor temple at Deir el-Medina.[49] The presence of a lone *wadjet*-eye may act as a protection for the woman, while the presence of two *wadjet*-eyes with two *nefer* symbols between them may empower her voice to "do good" in ritual speech or song. This motif also appears on her shoulders. Each front face of her shoulders is crowned with a pair of *wadjet*-eyes separated by three *nefer*-signs (T5–T6), almost like in a round-topped stela. These tattoos would have had the same magical function as for the neck, suggesting that her arms were also empowered with this formula "to do good" in their actions. It would then mean that besides her speech or song, her gestures were also involved in specific magical practices.[50]

Tattooing a pair of *wadjet*-eyes on the neck may have also implied the ability to be seen by the divine.[51] It is of particular note that the theme of paired *wadjet*-eyes reappears on the shoulders (T5–T6) and back (T28–T29), where the left *wadjet*-eye is supported by another seated baboon (T29). This means that from the front, back, or sides—any direction that you could look at this woman—there would be a pair of divine eyes looking back at you.

Below each pair of *wadjet*-eyes on the shoulders is traced one wavy snake with its head facing forward[52] (T12–T13). Snakes are often pictured on magical items: ivory apotropaic wands possess many figures of snakes,[53] and household objects (like headrests) were also decorated with such images in order to protect the owner[54].

Under the wavy snakes on both arms is a potentially cross-shaped drawing that also emphasizes the symmetrical display of the tattoos (T14–T15). These tattoos are placed near broken skin, making them difficult to interpret, but they have similar shapes with three to four rounded arms. The interior of the rounded endings as well as the linear parts of the crosses contains patterns that vary between the two tattoos (see images in tab. 1). The details can be seen in both drawings, but they are more visible on the left arm. Could they be interpreted as a flower? We can indeed assert that they look like the four leaves of a flower as in the Gardiner M42 hieroglyph () or, for example, like the one traced on a *menat* counterpoise from Deir el-Bahri.[55]

45 Naville 1913, p. 16.
46 Pinch 1993, p. 357.
47 Pinch 1993, p. 258.
48 Marciniak 1968; Marciniak 1974, p. 20.
49 Bruyère 1952, Rapport 1935–1940, II, pl. IX .
50 Egyptian magicians used to perform special actions with their hands, see Pinch 2006, pp. 83, 85, 115, 121.
51 This is suggested for votive offerings by Bruyère 1925, pp. 87–88; and Naville 1913, p. 16.
52 On the snakes as tattoos on this mummy, see *infra*.
53 Pinch 2006, pp. 40–43; Legge 1905, pp. 130–152, 297–303.
54 Pinch 2006, p. 43, fig. 21.
55 Pinch 1993, pl. 4 (middle left).


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In order to better discern the nature of the drawings, it may be relevant to compare them with other similar patterns found in the Egyptian iconography. Cross-shaped markings like T14–T15 can also be found on Hathor's cows.[56] On the particular look of the Hathor cow, Naville wrote:

> Her colour is a reddish brown, with spots which look like a four-leaved clover. These spots are found exactly in the same form in the pictures of Chapter CLXXXVI of the Book of the Dead, where the cow is seen coming out of the mountain. In some other texts these spots are replaced by stars. However, they must not be considered as conventional representations of stars, they are copied from nature. It seems that there are animals with this particular colour and spots. Probably it was the sign that they were the incarnation of the goddess […]. It is quite possible that the Egyptians valued that particular coat because the spots reminded them of stars, and could be considered as star-emblems, appropriate to the celestial goddess.[57]

Parallel examples of cross-shaped drawings or tattoos on women are spotted on small figurines of naked women[58] as well as on six women depicted in a scene from TT 218 belonging to Amennakht (xxi).[59] The interpretation of these sources indicates that all these female images were linked to the idea of life perpetuation (or afterlife revivification) with complex Hathoric and Osirian overtones.[60] However, even if the markings on the female figurines and on the women in TT 218 look similar, there is a chance they might not share the same purpose for they are not located on the exact same part of their body.[61] Following this idea, the women depicted in TT 218 would be closer to our mummy since their cross-shaped drawings are also located on the upper arms near the shoulder. If the cross-shaped tattoos from TT 218 are artistic depictions of similar cross-shaped tattoos found on this mummy, then it would be the first time that somebody has been found with these markings and, moreover, it would tend to show that these designs in the aforementioned parallels represent real tattoos.[62]

Despite a sense of symmetry in tattoos on the neck and upper arm, there are also asymmetrical tattoos placed on either arm that predominantly appear just above the elbow. On the right arm, just below the cross-shaped tattoo, there is another tattoo that may be a Hathor handle (T22).[63] This handle, probably one of a sistrum, is oriented upside-down on the right arm, facing away from the body, as if to mimic its position when held during use. If, like the tattoos on the neck, the ones on the arm were activated during dance or movement, then every movement of this woman's right arm would ritually shake the handle.

56 Examples of these markings are gathered in Pinch 1993, p. 171, pl. 11A, 13B, 18A-B, 24 and 25A. Some examples are also collected in Keimer 1956, p. 221, fig. 5, p. 225, figs. 9–10, p. 248, fig. 41, p. 253, fig. 47.

57 Naville 1907, p. 65.

58 Desroches Noblecourt 1953, p. 14, fig. 6, 34, fig. 14, 35, fig. 15, 38, fig. 17, pl. V; Bianchi 1988, p. 24, fig. 6.

59 Desroches Noblecourt 1953, pl. II-III.

60 Desroches Noblecourt 1953, pp. 7–47; Bianchi 1988, pp. 23, 27–28; Pinch 1993, pp. 211–225.

61 Bianchi 1988, p. 28, n. 8.

62 As previously noticed by Bianchi 1988, p. 24 and Yoyotte 2004, p. 140.

63 On the pattern of the Hathor handle, see Pinch 1993, pp. 135–139.

64 For example, BM 41062 (dual cows) or Naville 1913, pl. XIV; Pinch 1993, p. 164, pl. 2 (center) and pl. 37a. Even if this image should probably be regarded as a single deity shown twice (Pinch 1993, p. 172), it is also possible that this pair of cows could stand for the seven cows of Hathor (Pinch 1993, p. 174).


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Other Hathoric elements also appear on her left arm. Just above the elbow, there is a scene of two Hathoric cows facing each other wearing *menat* necklaces (T20). Similar depictions of Hathoric cows have appeared in votive plaques from Deir el-Bahri using singular cows or dual cows, as seen here.[64] On the left scapula of the mummy, we see the hieroglyph of a bent papyrus plant (Gardiner M15) with a *mw* hieroglyph beneath it (T27). In this context, could this clump of papyrus also be connected to Hathor? In his article on cows and snakes, Keimer[65] explains that Hathor was commonly illustrated together with papyrus as a reminder of where the sacred cows were living. This justifies why this image has been used as an important symbol connected to Hathor[66] and why it is also among the graffiti found on the floor of the front courtyard of the Hathor temple. Additionally, the clump of bent papyrus (Gardiner M15) is sometimes used to represent Chemmis or the delta marshes, alluding to the association that multiple female deities, including Hathor, have with raising Horus in the marshes.[67] The Heavenly Cow is also labelled, in some cases, the one of Chemmis.[68]

In addition to the two wavy snakes facing forward on the top part of her arms (T12–T13), our mummy also has other tattoos depicting snakes. Symmetrically displayed above each front side of her armpits is a drawing that looks like a cobra (uræus) hanging from a sun disk[69] (T7–T8). In both cases, the snake's head is facing the center of the body toward the face of the woman, while the tip of both tails is hanging on the other side of the disk. Without undermining the presence of both pendent uræi as a protective symbol,[70] a connection can nonetheless be established between them and Hathor: as the Eye of Re, Hathor is considered to be the daughter of the sun disk which she protects in the shape of a uræus curled around it.[71] The presence of the wavy snakes just a few centimeters away from each pendent uræus could furthermore reinforce this idea, which, of course, remains a hypothesis.

In addition, two other snakes can be identified with certainty on the woman, both located on her right arm. The first one (T21) is placed immediately to the left of the cross-shaped tattoo: it depicts the snake-goddess *Wadjet* wearing the red-crown[72] (the image is close to the sign I58). Her tail goes behind her head by making a single loop until it reaches the top part of her crown. It seems that something is attached to the bottom of the loop. A break in the skin makes it impossible to determine what was there, but could it be a hanging *ankh*-sign? Unlike all the other aforementioned tattoos, the snake does not look in the right direction: it looks backward. As intriguing as it can be, we cannot explain this without further information. This tattoo may be paralleled on the other arm with a corresponding uræus wearing a white crown, though this tattoo is more ambiguous (T16). Here again, a connection with Hathor can be made. *Wadjet* is indeed connected to Hathor by syncretism, when she appears in the

65 Keimer 1956, pp. 224–232.

66 In Keimer 1956, p. 225, fig. 10, a clump of papyrus with two buds bent down, as on the back of our tattooed mummy, is offered to the cow-goddess.

67 Hathor is called the Lady of Chemmis in chapel D of the Queens' Valley chapels, Bruyère 1930, pp. 37–39.

68 Ax-*bjt.t*, TLA #213 with two attestations

69 This drawing is an assumption because the skin at both places is damaged; it would be somehow similar to the examples found in Johnson 1990, p. 33, fig. 59, p. 217, figs. 411–412, p. 224, fig. 484.

70 Johnson 1990, pp. 5–6.

71 Bleeker 1973, pp. 48–50 ; Altenmüller 1975, p. 17; Daumas 1977, col. 1027; Martin 1985, cols. 865–866; Johnson 1990, p. 8.

72 Fischer-Elfert 1986, col. 906.


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shape of Hathor-Sekhmet[73] or when she is the incarnation of Hathor as a uræus on the forehead of Re,[74] and also in Aphroditopolis/Antaeopolis where she was assimilated with Hathor.[75]

The second snake tattoo (T26) constitutes the base of a larger composition. The snake is made from a single wavy line sitting on a horizontal stem of a papyrus or lotus. The flower head is curved up toward the head of the snake, which is itself facing forward toward the front of the mummy. The snake supports a basket filled with what may be a mix of flowers and plants (lotus or papyrus) of which at least 5 or 6 high stems are blooming[76] (T25), though the tattoo is faded and broken, making it difficult to interpret. Above these stems are two tattoos that remain until now unidentified (T23–T24), though one of these may be another snake sitting on a groundline (T24). Why would this woman have a tattoo depicting a lotus or papyrus offering carried by a snake? Can this be an allusion to the natural environment of where the Hathor's cows were living?[77] Can this be an allusion to the symbolic meaning of both plants, which are generally linked to rebirth and renaissance?[78] Based on the extent of our current knowledge, all options shall remain open. Additionally, a wavy tattoo on the left arm may be one other snake tattoo with a solar disc above it (T17), though extensive fading makes it difficult to determine.

Finally, a pair of lotus blossom tattoos were placed on the lower back with a dotted line connecting them (T30). Contrary to the other tattoos, these tattoos would not have been visible in normal dress. They would, however, be visible if the woman were costumed as a dancer. A lotus blossom tattoo also appears on the back of the neck of a female figurine from Lisht,[79] and graffiti on the floor of the Hathor temple at Deir el-Medina also feature lotus blossoms. These connections offer a means to link the tattoos on this mummy both with the previous tradition of tattooing documented in Middle Kingdom figurines, as well as the cult of Hathor, as noted previously.

Studying the tattoos present on this body also forces one to ask why among the tattoos is there no *ankh*-sign or *sa*-sign, these hieroglyphs meaning respectively "life" and "protection?" Since these signs are among the most powerful Egyptian protective symbols,[80] one would have expected to find them on the woman's body. This is not the case, though it is possible there were additional tattoos on her missing hands, legs, or even face. However, if we assume that the magical power of the tattoos would have worked as in the case of amulets, then it is possible these hieroglyphs would not have been used. Studies on amulets have shown that to the contrary of what one would think, individual *ankh* amulets are "surprisingly few"[81] and were obviously rarely used to protect people on a daily basis. Thus it is not surprising that this motif is absent on this mummy. The same thing applies to the *sa*-sign: curiously enough, *sa* amulets are very seldom and the rare examples are restricted to the Middle Kingdom.[82] For her own protection, she seems to have had preferred the *wadjet*-eye (tattooed on her at least 9 times), which was one of the most common protective symbols in ancient Egypt.[83]

73 Fischer-Elfert 1986, col. 908.
74 Vandier 1966, pp. 130–131; Altenmüller 1975, p. 35.
75 Fischer-Elfert 1986, col. 908.
76 For parallel iconographical examples to the plants allegedly drawn in this tattoo, see Keimer 1956, p. 254, fig. 48; Dittmar 1986, figs. 39–40, 120.
77 Keimer 1956, links the cobra and the papyrus together as being the two most distinctive elements of the marshes where the cows connected to Hathor were living. On the flower offerings made to Hathor, see Dittmar 1986, pp. 75–79. On a possible link with the *sšš wꜣḏ* offering to Hathor, see Dittmar 1986, pp. 151–157.
78 On the symbolic signification of the lotus, see Dittmar 1986, pp. 132–133, and on the symbolic signification of the papyrus, see Dittmar 1986, pp. 133–143.
79 Keimer 1956, pl. XIV, 2.
80 Andrews 1994, pp. 43, 86.
81 Andrews 1994, p. 86.
82 Andrews 1994, p. 43.
83 Andrews 1994, p. 43.


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All the other tattoos on her body seem to be connected to a kind of magic different from the idea of protection. Indeed, it seems her other tattoos are more closely associated with the idea of power[84] and divine action.[85] The placement of the permanent tattoos on her body would have not only linked her with the divine through Hathoric symbolism, but also empowered her to take on important cultic or magical roles. This suggests that the tattoos served a dual purpose: to protect as well as to help in the performance of actions that played a significant role in the life of the communities.

## INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ROLE OF THIS WOMAN

As discussed above, most of the scholars who have written about tattoos in ancient Egypt assert that these markings were somehow associated to Hathor, either because the tattooed women had a function linked to the goddess or because they were placing themselves under her divine and protective command.[86] The majority of the identified tattoos on this mummy evoke Hathoric designs, as demonstrated above, but the tattoos of this female mummy are more than just vaguely linked to Hathor. This woman clearly shared a connection with Hathor that allowed her to permanently embody worship of the goddess. A fact that supports this hypothesis is that some of the tattoos on the mummy are also found as votive graffiti on the pavement of the front courtyard of the Hathor temple of Ramesses II in Deir el-Medina.[87] Even if this shared image might be purely coincidental, or have some other meaning, the assemblage of these precise designs on the mummy as well as on the floor of the courtyard of the Hathor temple deserves some attention. While some graffiti in the temple clearly refer to workmen's names, some others are indeed understood as votive texts,[88] which are similar to what is found on the mummy. This is the case for the lone *wadjet*-eye, the *wadjet*-eye together with the *nefer*-sign, the clump of papyrus with buds bent down (Gardiner M15), and the Hathor cow. The presence of such drawings on the woman might suggest that she was involved in the activities performed in the Hathor temple. Even if we cannot assert without any doubt where she first had been buried,[89] we can allege that she was at least a member of the community of Deir el-Medina and that she had been buried in the Western necropolis of the site. Thanks to this and to the presence of a temple of Hathor in Deir el-Medina from at least the reign of Sethi I, the tattooed woman could easily have lived in the village of Deir el-Medina as a singer, a musician, or a musician-priestess of Hathor (*šmʿyt*).[90]

Given that one of the Middle Kingdom tattooed mummies was a priestess of Hathor,[91] could the tattooed woman from Deir el-Medina also have been a priestess? Scholars have

84 Andrews 1994, pp. 74–90.

85 Andrews 1994, pp. 14–15.

86 Bianchi 1988, pp. 22–23, 27–28; Roehrig, forthcoming; Robins 1996, p. 33; Tassie 2003, pp. 95–96; Yoyotte 2004, pp. 135–141; Pinch 2006, pp. 125–128; Poon, Quickenden 2006, p. 132.

87 Bruyère 1952, pl. IX.

88 Haring 2009, p. 155, fig. 4, p. 156.

89 On the practice of tomb plundering to get mummy powder, see Andrews 2004, pp. 88–90.

90 Valbelle 1985, p. 328, asserts that many women in Deir el-Medina bore the title "Great singer of Hathor," but its exact scope is not understood precisely. Onstine 2005, pp. 6–8, claims that it could have been more or less the same thing than a "chantress" or "singer" of Hathor, or a way to mean that they were "beloved of Hathor."

91 See *supra*.


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previously argued that by the New Kingdom, women could no longer hold the title "priestess of Hathor" nor any priestly titles because their bodies, through menstruation and childbirth, were perceived as too impure for the daily cult rituals.[92] Yet, in this case, the body is not only the actor of worship, but also the object of ritual. As an object, her tattooed body represents popular cult activity affiliated with votive graffiti and offerings found on Hathor temples at Deir el-Medina and Deir el-Bahri. As an actor, the permanence and public nature of the tattoos meant that this divine iconography was inextricably linked to her corporeality. As a living, breathing person, this woman was also in some sense participating in ritual unremittingly, with every word spoken or every movement of her arms. In a sense, she then transcends the need to be pure (*wʿb*) because she embodies the goddess, and takes on attributes directly associated with the divine.[93] While this does not necessarily mean she was given the title of priestess, it does strongly suggest that women could have important active and passive cult roles that did not necessitate a priest as an intermediary with the divine. This makes the question of whether or not she was a priestess moot because the tattoos signify her divine role as something that could be separate from—or even beyond—the priesthood.

In daily life, women could and obviously did act as direct conduits with the divine, not only evidenced here by our tattooed mummy, but elsewhere such as the recorded presence of the wise woman at Deir el-Medina. A few fragmentary texts coming from Deir el-Medina mention the existence of a wise woman called the *rḫyt*, literally "the knowing one" or "the knowledgeable one."[94] One of her main functions was to be consulted to determine the divine cause of an illness or death.[95] During the Late Period, this included illnesses caused by the bites of venomous animals.[96] In the Metternich stela, she was even capable of making these animals withdraw through the use of spells (*tp-r'*).[97] In this case, the protection and empowerment of her voice would be highly necessary. Regarding the wise woman, P. Lang concludes that she "should probably be seen as another part-time professional ritualist […] consulted frequently on situations involving illness and poison."[98]

This assumption leads us to assert that our tattooed woman was also perhaps one of these wise women or, at least, a kind of magician. If she was a wise woman or a magician, could have she been involved in preventing and curing poisonous snakebites, as was the case during the Late Period? We know from some titles and texts that the few people at Deir el-Medina (as elsewhere) specially implicated in this kind of work were men.[99] Is it possible that a woman might have played that role? Absence records from Deir el-Medina document several cases where scorpions stung a workman, and medical texts from the site include a series of protections from snakes and scorpions.[100] Even if none of the texts discussing the wise woman from Deir el-Medina mention poisonous animals, the fact that this tattooed woman has many snakes

92 Graves-Brown 2010, p. 27; Gillam 1995, pp. 211–212.

93 An idea also shared by Graves-Brown 2010, pp. 96–97.

94 On this woman, see Lang 2013, pp. 214–216; Karl 2000; Pinch 2006, p. 56; Toivari-Viitala 2001, pp. 228–231; Koenig 1994, pp. 34–35; Borghouts 1982, pp. 24–27; Letellier 1980, pp. 130–131, n. 5.

95 Pinch 2006, p. 140.

96 Lang 2013, p. 215.

97 Lang 2013, p. 215; Borghouts 1978, p. 61; Sander-Hansen 1956.

98 Lang 2013, p. 215.

99 Per example, the workmen Amenmose (i) was also a "scorpion charmer." On this title, see Janssen 1997, pp. 27–29. See also Pinch 2006, p. 55, fig. 26, p. 56. It is assumed that these people were associated to medicine doctors, see Sauneron 1966, p. 33, 59, n. 15. Also, see Austin 2014, pp. 93–96 for discussion of payments and responsibilities for the "scorpion charmer."

100 Pinch 2006, p. 144.


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depicted on her could mean that she was perhaps a kind of "scorpion charmer" (*ḫrp-Srq.t*). This title was given to practitioners who treated poisonous injuries from both scorpions and snakes. Moreover, the Thoth-baboons tattooed on her neck could also indicate that she was casting spells including, amongst others, some to dispel poisonous snakes. The Metternich stela mentions that Thoth recited a great litany of magical protection to drive the poison out of Horus and also that everything the god promised to do for Horus, he also promised to accomplish for any human sufferer.[101] Finally, Borghouts underlines the fact that the epithet *rḫyt* is often given to Hathor from the Ptolemaic time onwards and thus offers a direct connection between Hathor and wise women.[102] If we suppose this connection existed also during earlier periods, it could then explain why the tattoos include both Hathoric motifs and snakes.

If this woman was a wise woman, her knowledge did not necessarily come with old age. The anthropological analysis of the mummified woman has shown that she died when she was between 25–34 years old, far younger than other examples among the human remains at Deir el-Medina where men and women could live well beyond 50.[103] Scholars who have worked on the subject all agree that there was only one wise woman at any one time.[104] With this in mind, the wise woman in charge could have been educated or trained by the previous one, while she was still very young and serving an apprenticeship. At the death of the wise woman, the follower would then automatically take over, whatever her age was. Or, as mentioned by Toivari-Viitala, if the gift of seeing/knowing things was entirely or partially innate in a girl[105], it could also explain the access to this status at a relatively young age in adulthood. Of course, identifying this tattooed lady as either a "wise woman" or even a magician cannot be proven without any doubt, and therefore shall remain a hypothesis.

Following our previous interpretations and knowing that ancient Egyptian magic, religion, and medicine were highly interconnected,[106] could she have been a maker of protective amulets, or a *sȝw*? Compared to other titles, *sȝw* is distinctive in that it was a title used by women as well as men.[107] The presence of many tattoos that are so closely linked with protective amulets such as the *wadjet*-eye suggests that she could serve this function either by making amulets or by taking on the protective powers of an amulet directly. The *wadjet*-eyes on her body could have acted as a series of apotropaic amulets that would have not only protected herself, but also those in her presence whom she treated.

This leads us to consider this woman's possible role as a magico-medical healer. Before the Ptolemaic Period, few female doctors (*swnw)* left traces of their existence. The most prominent example is the Old Kingdom female physician named *Peseshet* who left a stela that recorded her position as Overseer of Female Physicians.[108] Ghalioungui questioned why we find no traces of this professional body of female physicians in subsequent periods.[109] It is possible that our data are insufficient, given that references to the title *swnw* are more frequent in the Old Kingdom than any other period.[110] However, it is also possible that women were excluded from the role of *swnw* at this time. Several doctors are attested at Deir el-Medina,[111] and all those that are named are men. If this tattooed woman did take on the role of being a magico-medical healer

101 Pinch 2006, p. 145.
102 Borghouts 1982, p. 26.
103 Austin 2014.
104 Graves-Brown 2010, p. 80; Toivari-Viitala 2001, p. 230.
105 Toivari-Viitala 2001, p. 228, n. 9.
106 Pinch 2006, p. 136.
107 Pinch 2006, p. 56.
108 Pinch 2006, p. 54; Ghalioungui 1981, p. 14; Ghalioungui 1975, pp. 159–164, pl. XXVII.
109 Ghalioungui 1975, pp. 163–164.
110 Graves-Brown 2010, p. 25.
111 Austin 2014, pp. 92–93.


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as a wise woman or amulet maker, then this suggests that despite a lack of titles for female physicians in the New Kingdom, women could still act as professional healers.

Among all the hypotheses put forth regarding the role of this tattooed woman in society, none can be definitely proven beyond a reasonable doubt, even if her connection with the goddess Hathor seems to be clear.

## CONCLUSION

The discovery of at least 30 tattoos on a female mummy from Deir el-Medina offers unprecedented insight into the practice of tattooing in Pharaonic Egypt. This mummy is the first published example of a Pharaonic mummy with figural tattoos and offers a significant contribution to the history of tattooing in ancient Egypt by demonstrating that permanent body art was not only practiced during the New Kingdom, but elaborated upon earlier traditions to signify what can be interpreted as multiple public and permanent cultic identities through the use of religious imagery.

The tattoos were placed in easily visible areas of her body, such as her neck, and included several clear symbols of Hathor that are mirrored in votive graffiti and offerings found in Hathor temples both at Deir el-Medina and nearby Deir el-Bahri. Whereas previous examples of tattooing were circumstantially linked to the cult of Hathor, this evidence demonstrates an undeniable connection between Hathor worship and tattooing.

Not all of the tattoos, however, can be linked exclusively to Hathor; the dominating presence of *wadjet*-eyes may have served as a connection to Hathor as well as the broader role of divine protection for this woman and her surrounding community. The combined presence of *wadjet*-eyes with *nefer*-symbols on her neck may have even connoted the phrase "to do good," charging her speech, song, and actions with a kind of divine power. The tattoos therefore not only served to link her to cult worship, but also to give her an active and empowered role within her community.

These tattoos suggest that she could have taken on several important roles within her community such as a wise woman, priestess, or healer, though none of these can be definitively proven. Whatever her role, she would have been an active participant in ritual that did not necessarily need a priest as a divine intermediary. In contrast, textual studies on titles in the New Kingdom indicate that women are excluded from serving in many important roles such as priestesses of Hathor. This mummy therefore further challenges the notion that women's religious roles in the cult of Hathor were passive or subsidiary.[112] Instead, the tattooed mummy from Deir el-Medina offers an alternative line of evidence to the textual evidence, emphasizing important and direct cultic roles for women in daily life during the New Kingdom.

112 Despite the fact that Blackman (1921) challenged existing notions of women as "inferior" practitioners of religion, he still suggested that women's priestly roles may have been "of secondary importance" (1921, pp. 159–160). Examples in more recent scholarship suggest that women were less active in temple contexts and held lower positions in the religious hierarchy due to the relative lack of priestly titles for women in the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period (e.g., Teeter 2011, p. 27).


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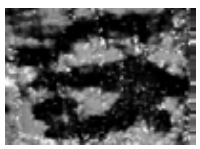
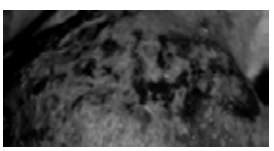
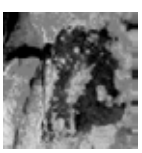

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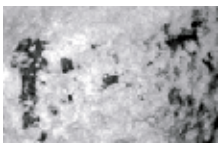
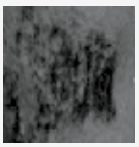
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| Tattoo # | Location | Description | Photo |
|---|---|---|---|
| T01 | Neck | Seated baboon |  |
| T02 | Neck | Seated baboon |  |
| T03 | Neck | *Wadjet*-eye |  |
| T04 | Neck | Two *Wadjet*-eyes around two *nefers* |  |
| T05 | Left shoulder | Two *Wadjet*-eyes around three *nefers* |  |
| T06 | Right shoulder | Two *Wadjet*-eyes around three *nefers* |  |
| T07 | Left shoulder | Uræus(?) |  |
| T08 | Right shoulder | Uræus(?) |  |
| T09 | Left shoulder | (?) |  |
| T10 | Right shoulder | (?) |  |

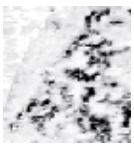
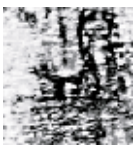
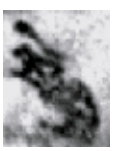
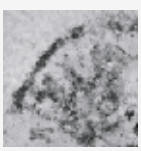
**Tab. 1.** Location and description of the tattoos.


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| Tattoo # | Location | Description | Photo |
|---|---|---|---|
| T11 | Right shoulder | S24 hieroglyph (?) |  |
| T12 | Left shoulder | Cobra |  |
| T13 | Right shoulder | Cobra |  |
| T14 | Left arm | Cross(?)-shaped tattoo |  |
| T15 | Right arm | Cross(?)-shaped tattoo |  |
| T16 | Left arm | Uræus(?) |  |
| T17 | Left arm | Snake with solar disc (?) |  |
| T18 | Left arm | Dual *khepri* beetles? Sistrum (?) |  |
| T19 | Left arm | Faded signs below snake (*mḥ* and *wʿb*?) |  |
| T20 | Left arm | Hathor cows |  |
| T21 | Right arm | Uræus |  |

TAB. 1 Location and description of the tattoos.


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| Tattoo # | Location | Description | Photo |
|---|---|---|---|
| T22 | Right arm | Hathor handle |  |
| T23 | Right arm | (?) |  |
| T24 | Right arm | Cobra on groundline |  |
| T25 | Right arm | Bouquet (?) |  |
| T26 | Right arm | Snake with basket |  |
| T27 | Back | Gardiner M15 with *mw* |  |
| T28 | Back | *Wadjet* with *mw* |  |
| T29 | Back | *Wadjet* presented by baboon |  |
| T30 | Back | Lotus blossoms on hips with belt of dots linking them |  |

**Tab. 1.** Location and description of the tattoos.


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**Fig 1.** Torso of mummy.


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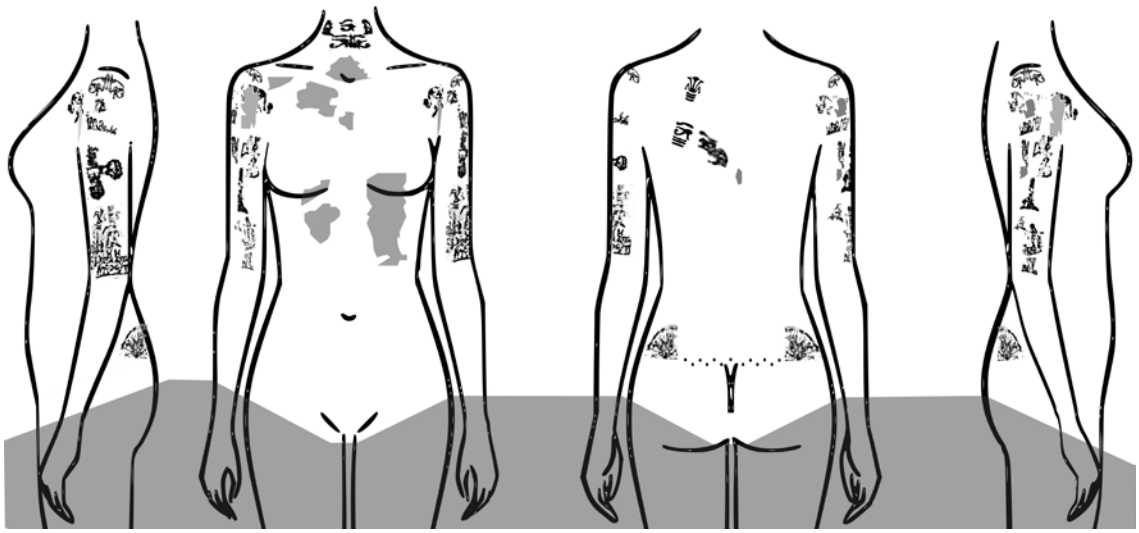

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**Fig 2.** Tattoo diagram (gray areas are damaged or missing).


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**Fig 3.** Neck tattoos.


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