

ADDRESSING THE GODS HOME AWAY FROM HOME: CASE STUDIES FROM NEW KINGDOM NUBIA

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Some religious practices in the domestic sphere of Egyptian sites located in Nubia are presented, by means of case studies dating to the New Kingdom. These examples fall into the category of so-called “private religion” and concentrate on aspects of the daily life, such as well-being and fertility. It is discussed whether differences are traceable between practises in Egypt proper or in the “home away from home” which Nubia represented for the Egyptian officials during the 18th Dynasty. Some aspects indicate that the role of the king was more important in daily life and private religion in regions outside of Egypt, especially in towns built on behalf of the living ruler within a “foreign” landscape. However, as will be highlighted in this paper, this could very well be an illusion because traditionally uninscribed objects have been neglected in favour of inscribed sources.

Keywords: Nubia; New Kingdom; settlement; private religion; deification of king; Thutmose III

INTRODUCTION

In Ancient Egypt, the transfer of gods from one site to the other is often associated with the mobility of officials.¹ Titles and references to specific deities are generally good indications whether someone is a long-time resident or a newcomer to a specific site. Gods addressed on stelae and other objects are primarily local deities, but gods associated with places other than the find spot of the monument are also attested, possibly hinting at the donor’s hometown or short-term residence.²

This paper aims to tackle aspects of the question of how officials sent into Nubia during the New Kingdom addressed gods in their new “home away from home”. We have to assume that in the early 18th Dynasty most of these Egyptian officials were newcomers to the newly built sites in Upper Nubia like Sai, Sedeinga, Sesebi and Tombos. A wealth of inscribed sources allows for tracing officials at more than one site – prominent examples are viceroys of Kush like Nehy (Thutmose III)³ and Setau (Ramesses II).⁴ It shall be discussed whether there is a difference in how Egyptian officials address gods in Egypt proper and in Nubia. During the New Kingdom, the latter was a region outside of Egypt, but under Egyptian administration.⁵ Selected examples from Sai Island south of the Batn el-Hagar presented here do not aim to reconstruct the complete picture, but to highlight several aspects worth of further consideration – food for thought that is hopefully of some interest for the distinguished colleague celebrating his jubilee.

PRIVATE RELIGION IN NEW KINGDOM NUBIA

With religious practices conducted “home away from home” I mean activities in the domestic sphere of Egyptian sites located in Nubia, commonly known as “private religion”.⁶ Rebirth and creative aspects formed especially important issues in daily life and thus evidence for practices

¹ See BOMMAS 1995, 3–5; cf. also BUDKA 2015b, 13.

² Cf. SPIEGELBERG 1918, 65–67; VALBELLE 1981, 126; BUDKA 2001, 62; BUDKA 2015b, 13–23.

³ See most recently LEBLANC 2009, 241–251.

⁴ Cf. RAEDLER 2003, 129–137.

⁵ Cf. VOGEL 2012, 151–166.

⁶ Cf. STEVENS 2006, *passim*.

associated with these themes is not attested only in funerary and cultic contexts.⁷ With awareness of both the “blurred boundaries between state and private religion”⁸ and severe problems of identifying relevant proof in settlement archaeology,⁹ social aspects of religion and piety in New Kingdom towns in Nubia shall be discussed.¹⁰ Prayers and votive objects to gods connected with the temple sphere will therefore not be the focus,¹¹ although they were of course also embedded in the day-to-day activities.

Speaking of deities, it is well known that the deification of Egyptian rulers was a common practice in Nubia. The most important personalities during the New Kingdom are Thutmose III, Amenhotep III and Ramses II.¹² The cult of Egyptian kings is almost exclusively discussed by evidence from temples, but as will be demonstrated in the following, there are also important sources from domestic quarters.¹³

Besides the possibility to address the question of the sense of home within the private cult, the New Kingdom sites in Nubia are perfect case studies for several other reasons. As was argued by some scholars, these sites seem to be important for understanding general Egyptian settlement patterns,¹⁴ first of all because they are much better preserved than their Egyptian counterparts. In addition, much recent fieldwork is concentrating on understanding the social stratification, the material culture and aspects of the daily life. An updated account with some fresh ideas seems therefore possible.

GODS PROTECTING THE DOMESTIC SPACE

Before presenting some case studies from Sai Island, general discussion of who were the most common gods in the domestic sphere seems useful. Whereas well-attested deities like Amun, Hathor, Thot and Ptah also held important roles in the state religion, Bes and Taweret were primarily associated with private religion.¹⁵ As essential protectors of women and fertility, these two gods are of course of major importance for daily life. The same holds true for Hathor as the protector of maternity. This goddess is closely associated with women, health-related issues, childbirth, and fertility; aspects of sexuality are also included through her role as the mistress of festivity and drunkenness.¹⁶ The strong association of the gods addressed in the domestic space with aspects encompassing regeneration, rebirth, fecundity, fertility and sexuality¹⁷ is typical for the 18th Dynasty. In Ramesside times, there was a major development, in this heyday of so-called “personal piety”, almost every deity could be addressed in the private sphere.¹⁸ References to gods of one’s hometown became now very common.¹⁹ Door jambs from Elephantine and Aniba attest that Theban officials made it very clear in their “home away from home” that they want to return to their hometown, to see the gods there and to participate in the local festivals.²⁰

⁷ BUDKA 2016a.

⁸ STEVENS 2006, 17.

⁹ Cf. STEVENS 2006, 17.

¹⁰ For religion and piety in general see the seminal studies by BAINES 1987; ASSMANN 1989.

¹¹ For an overview of the “official” religion in New Kingdom Nubia, the most common gods, temples and shrines see TÖRÖK 2009, 209–262.

¹² Cf. TÖRÖK 2009, 215–262.

¹³ See BUDKA 2001 with further literature.

¹⁴ See, e.g., KEMP 1972.

¹⁵ STEVENS 2006, 18.

¹⁶ See PINCH 1993; STEVENS 2006, 35–36, 40 and *passim*.

¹⁷ In Ancient Egypt, sexuality, childbirth, fecundity, regeneration and rebirth are merging with each other and there is no clear separation line, cf. MESKELL 2000, 260; BUDKA 2016a.

¹⁸ STEVENS 2006, 19. For a recent account of the ideas about “personal piety”, see LUISELLI 2008.

¹⁹ Cf. BUDKA 2008, 95 (with references); BUDKA 2015b.

²⁰ BUDKA 2001, 113; BOMMAS 2003, 42 (Aniba); BUDKA 2008, 96 (Elephantine).

Interestingly, several Nubian door lintels and jambs attest to the fact that officials wanted to see the king in his barque – thus, to participate in festivals in honor of the king.²¹ Furthermore, a barque and statue cult for the living king is also attested thanks to other documents in both Lower and Upper Nubia.²²

Thus, in addition to the official royal cult associated with temples and rock shrines in Nubia, the ruling king was also a deity addressed by various means in the domestic sphere, especially for general well-being. This is well illustrated by scenes of adoring the royal cartouches, found on lintels of private houses. The demonstration of loyalty by the officials to the king was of prime importance in the life of an Egyptian official in general, and especially on representative architecture in the settlement sphere. The earliest of such scenes can be traced back to Thutmose III, found at the Nubian site of Aniba.²³ That this first attestation is under the ruler who overthrew the Kingdom of Kerma and founded a large number of sites and temples is unlikely to be a coincidence.²⁴

From the late 18th Dynasty and Ramesside Nubia, a number of door lintels also show lower ranking officials behind viceroys of Kush, in adoration of the king. Here, the lower ranks of Egyptian officials profited from the direct link of their superior to the royal sphere and the king. Therefore, these lintels and stelae illustrate both the authority of the viceroy in Lower and Upper Nubia and the loyalty of the local potentates.²⁵

THE NEW KINGDOM TOWN OF SAI ISLAND

The case studies presented here are objects coming from the fortified Pharaonic town built on the eastern bank of the large island of Sai in the 18th Dynasty. At present, around two thirds of this town is still unexcavated and a detailed assessment of its evolution is therefore not possible.²⁶ Its southern part, with a temple and a residential quarter, was investigated by a French Mission in the 1950s and 1970s. This work included a small sandstone temple, Temple A²⁷ for which foundation deposits²⁸ confirm that Thutmose III built the earliest cella.²⁹ A building inscription of viceroy Nehy describes another building phase and enlargement of the temple in year 25.³⁰

Recent fieldwork in the Pharaonic town of Sai Island by the European Research Council Project AcrossBorders focuses both on living conditions and on the general layout of the town.³¹ The results of work from 2013 to 2015 in the areas SAV1 East and SAV1 West are also of relevance for the present topic – private religion at one of the key sites of New Kingdom Nubia.

ASPECTS OF THE STATE CULT IN THE NEW KINGDOM TOWN OF SAI

The official Egyptian cult and religious rituals for Egyptian gods can be traced at Sai within the context of Temple A, built in several stages by viceroy Nehy under the reign of Thutmose III, and dedicated to Amun-Ra.³² However, not only Amun-Ra, but also ‘Horus the Bull, Lord of Ta-Seti’³³ was adored within Temple A. The identity of ‘Horus the Bull, Lord of Ta-Seti’ has been discussed

²¹ See, e.g., BUDKA 2001, 187, Fig. 56 (Buhen).

²² See MÜLLER 2013, 61–62, 232–233 (general references in Nubia); BUDKA 2015a, 78 (for Sai).

²³ BUDKA 2001 with further references and examples.

²⁴ For activities of Thutmose III in Nubia cf. TÖRÖK 2009, 212–228.

²⁵ BUDKA 2001, 187 with further literature.

²⁶ See BUDKA–DOYEN 2012–2013, 181–182; BUDKA 2015c.

²⁷ See AZIM–CARLOTTI 2011–2012, 11–63.

²⁸ See THILL 1997, 105–117.

²⁹ AZIM–CARLOTTI 2011–2012, 39, 45.

³⁰ See most recently DAVIES 2014, 7–9.

³¹ BUDKA 2014; BUDKA 2015a; BUDKA 2015c.

³² AZIM–CARLOTTI 2011–2012; GABOLDE 2011–2012.

³³ See THILL 2016.



Fig. 1. Rudimentary female figurine from SAV1 West (SAV1W 1320), front and back side; unfired clay, 39x17x17mm (photo: Meg Gundlach and Kenneth Griffin)

by several scholars.³⁴ Following Thill, I believe that this deity is not a local Horus deity but a manifestation of Thutmose III,³⁵ therefore showing a close connection of the state cult on Sai to kingship and the ruler. The general invocation of divine royalty and the cult of royal ancestors are evident at Sai from the very beginning of the New Kingdom – Ahmose II and Amenhotep I both commissioned *heb-sed* statues in a predecessor of Temple A or maybe a *hwt-k3*.³⁶

As viceroy of Kush, Nehy was responsible for the religious building activity on Sai in the name of Thutmose III. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that several door lintels show Nehy in adoration before the cartouches of Thutmose III.³⁷ These lintels are coming from the southern part of the New Kingdom town, most probably from the magazine area in the western part of the site.

EXAMPLES OF DOMESTIC RITUALS AND PRIVATE RELIGION ON SAI ISLAND

Multi-faceted and variable private religious practices are to be expected in an Egyptian town of the New Kingdom, as was convincingly demonstrated for Amarna by Anna Stevens.³⁸ Objects from New Kingdom settlements in Nubia cover a large spectrum of functions, from personal items and tools to storage and food production and references to fertility and religious acts. This can be illustrated by the material unearth in the Pharaonic town at Sai Island.³⁹ Several groups of objects

³⁴ Cf. TÖRÖK 2009, 227, who mentions “Horus Lord of Nubia” and “Amun-Re” as the gods of the temple on Sai.

³⁵ THILL 2016, 294–297.

³⁶ BUDKA 2015a, 76–80.

³⁷ Well-comparable to lintels from Aniba, see BUDKA 2001, 109–113 ; THILL 2016, 267–269.

³⁸ STEVENS 2006.

³⁹ BUDKA 2017.

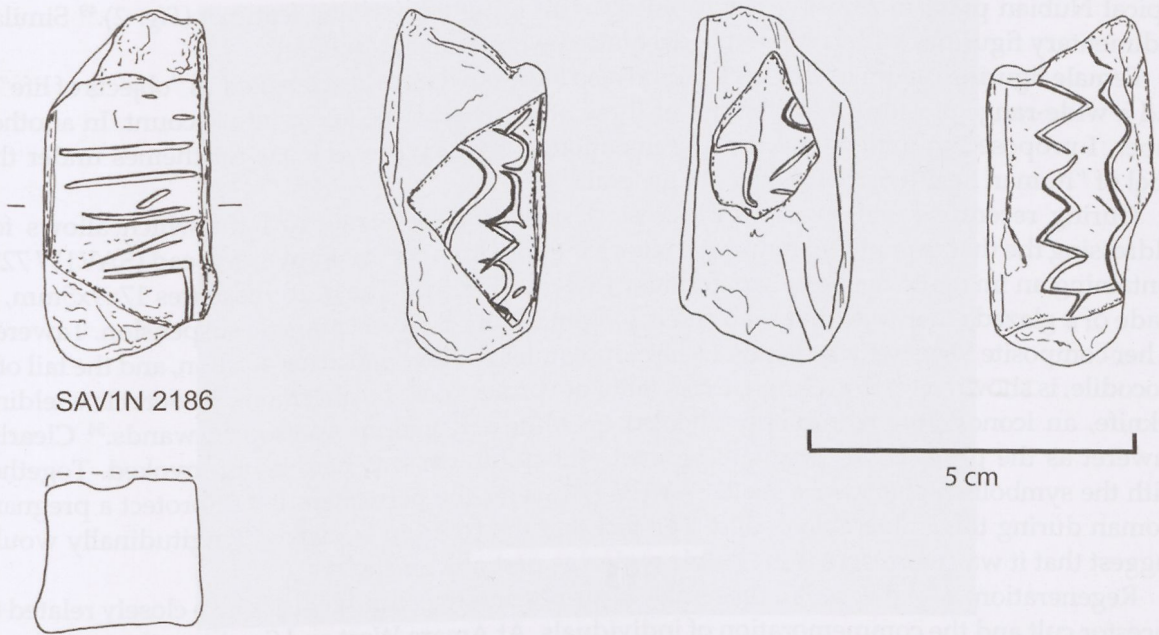


Fig. 2. Rudimentary female figurine from SAV1 North with Nubian style incised decoration (SAV1N 2186), unfired clay (original drawing: Florence Doyen; inked version: Julia Budka)

from Sai fall into the category of rebirth, fertility and well-being.⁴⁰ Firstly, rudimentary female figurines, faience Nun-bowls and also specific ceramic vessels like duck-bowls and feminoform vessels can be highlighted.⁴¹ All of these objects are known from domestic, as well as funerary and temple contexts.⁴² The domestic evidence nicely complements the findings in the cultic sphere. For example, from several domestic contexts of the 18th Dynasty (Memphis, Amarna, Elephantine and Sai Island), female figurines are archaeologically associated with Nun bowls.⁴³ Nude female figurines are not only connected with sexuality and childbearing, but with a more complex ideology that is somehow hard to grasp.⁴⁴

More than a dozen female figurines in low-fired clay or mud were found in the New Kingdom town of Sai, finding close parallels in Egypt and Nubia.⁴⁵ Rudimentary figures in the shape of simple sticks with an incised or dotted area representing the pubic region – and sometimes with dotted circles resembling breasts – as well as bed figurines are of a common Egyptian style (Fig. 1).⁴⁶ The simple hand-modelled clay sticks with representations of the female genitalia are already attested in the earliest level of the Egyptian town on Sai.⁴⁷ Interestingly, some of the figurines combine a

⁴⁰ BUDKA–DOYEN 2012–2013, 183–187.

⁴¹ See BUDKA 2017.

⁴² Cf. BUDKA 2016a.

⁴³ See GIDDY 1999, 28–31, 267, Pls 8–12; STEVENS 2006, 178–179.

⁴⁴ Cf. WARASKA 2009; DOYEN 2016.

⁴⁵ DOYEN 2016.

⁴⁶ Cf. Elephantine (KOPP 2005, 88–90); Amarna (STEVENS 2006, 85–91, Figs II.3.7, II.3.10–11); Memphis (GIDDY 1999, 28–31, Pls 8–12); Askut (SMITH 2003, 131–133). For more parallels and a typology of the figurines from SAV1N see DOYEN 2016.

⁴⁷ BUDKA–DOYEN 2012, 183.

typical Nubian pattern of wavy incised lines⁴⁸ with Egyptian stylistic features (*Fig. 2*).⁴⁹ Similar rudimentary figurines with comparable decoration were found at Buhen.⁵⁰

Female figurines, feminoform vessels, and also Nun-bowls, are best labelled as “objects of life”⁵¹ and a wide-range of settings for the use of these objects had to be taken into account. In another paper, I proposed to understand the aforementioned object types as icons for themes under the label of “human health or well-being” in general.⁵²

During recent excavation in SAV1 West, a specific object came to light which allows for addressing the theme of pregnancy in the New Kingdom town of Sai: a cowroid bead (SAV1W 723) containing an image of the Egyptian goddess Taweret (*Fig. 3*).⁵³ The bead measures 17x9x5mm, is made of a glazed composite material, and is longitudinally pierced to enable suspension. Taweret, in her composite form with the head of a hippopotamus, the legs and arms of a lion, and the tail of a crocodile, is shown next to a s3-sign, the symbol of “protection”. Furthermore, Taweret is wielding a knife, an iconography commonly attested on Middle Kingdom apotropaic wands.⁵⁴ Clearly, Taweret as the protector of pregnant women and childbirth was here being invoked. Together with the symbolism of a cowrie shell, SAV1W 723 seems the perfect amulet to protect a pregnant woman during this vulnerable period. The fact that the cowroid is pierced longitudinally would suggest that it was worn across the pelvic region as part of a girdle.

Regeneration, as expressed in the female figurines and the Nun-bowls, is also closely related to ancestor cult and the commemoration of individuals. At Amara West and Sesebi, anthropoid busts attest to the invocation of ancestors within the houses at Egyptian sites in Nubia⁵⁵, while domestic shrines have been identified at Askut and Mirgissa.⁵⁶ Interestingly, the shrine at Askut combines typical Egyptian cultic installations, such as a niche for a stela and a libation table, with votives of both Egyptian and Nubian type.⁵⁷

To date, no architectural remains of cultic installations have been identified in New Kingdom houses on Sai, but pot stands and footed bowls with a gypsum-coating⁵⁸ might represent material evidence.⁵⁹ Libation and the burning of incense are well attested in the Pharaonic town of Sai by means of ceramics.⁶⁰ Hand-modelled animal figurines found in all sectors of the town probably represent votive statues. Small ram statues may depict the god Amun,⁶¹ while clay figurines of bulls seem to attest the Nubian tradition of representations of cattle.⁶²

Another remarkable group of objects from the New Kingdom town of Sai are the small clay balls found in sector SAV1 North and the southern part of the town; thanks to exact parallels from Egyptian sites like Amarna, they are probably related to the ritual of the first haircut.⁶³ One example, SAV 003, has been sealed with a common finger ring giving the name of Thutmose III, possibly here for apotropaic reasons. As was mentioned above, this king was especially popular in

⁴⁸ See, e.g., a net weight found at Elephantine in Nubian fabric and with un-Egyptian incised decoration, see VON PILGRIM 1996, 276, Fig. 120b.

⁴⁹ BUDKA-DOYEN 2012, 183.

⁵⁰ E.g. MILLARD 1979, No. 747, Pl. 53.

⁵¹ WOODS 2009.

⁵² BUDKA 2016a.

⁵³ See GRIFFIN-GUNDLACH 2015.

⁵⁴ Cf., e.g., CAPEL-MARKOE 1996, 64, Cat. 12.

⁵⁵ SPENCER 2014, 49.

⁵⁶ Cf. SMITH 2003, 124–133.

⁵⁷ SMITH 2003, 132, Fig. 5.32.

⁵⁸ BUDKA-DOYEN 2012–2013, 201.

⁵⁹ Cf. SMITH 2003, 127, Fig. 5.25; STEVENS 2006, 193–194.

⁶⁰ BUDKA 2016b.

⁶¹ Cf. STEVENS 2006, 61, 110; BUDKA-DOYEN 2012–2013, 184.

⁶² Cf. SMITH 2003, 132, Fig. 5.32; BUDKA-DOYEN 2012–2013, 184.

⁶³ See ARNST 2006.



Fig. 3. *Cauroid* bead from SAV1 West (SAV1W 723), faience, 17x9x5mm
(photo: Meg Gundlach and Kenneth Griffin)

Nubia and godlike features were attributed to him – not only in the official temple cult, but also in domestic contexts.⁶⁴

This short survey of objects from the New Kingdom town of Sai is far from being complete. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that the evidence for private religion at Sai Island compares closely not only to the major New Kingdom sites in Egypt (Elephantine, Amarna and Memphis), but also to Egyptian sites in Nubia (Buhen, Askut and Amara West).

The group of objects presented here covers just a set of nuances of day-to-day activities, highlighting the fact that creative aspects were important issues in daily life.⁶⁵ All in all, it seems as if the inhabitants of New Kingdom Sai were equipped with everything required in an Egyptian settlement of considerable influence.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Living at Egyptian sites in Nubia, it seems to have been of importance to demonstrate on a high-ranking level one's Egyptian origin.⁶⁶ Besides the god Amun, the king himself was of prime importance for the occupants within their domestic surrounding.⁶⁷ Loyalty to the king was the key to general well-being and promotion.⁶⁸ Of course this comes as no surprise. After all, the Egyptians sent to Nubia in the 18th Dynasty were living in towns set up by the state authority, i.e. the king. It seems perfectly natural then that they were consequently also putting their faith hope in the king to arrange a safe burial, common health and most importantly, their return back to Egypt.

However, what was until now not considered in detail is the fact that, similar to Egyptian sites in Egypt, there are several levels of religious practices in the Egyptian towns in Nubia. Everything connected with text and inscriptions is creating a perfect image of a "home away from home"

⁶⁴ Cf. BUDKA 2001, 53–54; SPENCER 2014, 48.

⁶⁵ Cf. STEVENS 2006, 323–329.

⁶⁶ BUDKA 2001; BUDKA 2015b.

⁶⁷ Cf. BUDKA 2001, 62.

⁶⁸ BUDKA 2001, 99–101.

where the king was of prime importance, followed by the main state deities. However, if one takes a closer look at the less prominent evidence – the uninscribed objects and pottery vessels – it becomes evident that the situation is much more complex. For day-to-day affairs, people trusted gods like Bes, Hathor and Taweret for their well-being. This picture very closely compares to sites located in Egypt itself.⁶⁹ Similar to Amarna, there is a clear bias between high-ranking/elite references to the state religion and the anonymous finds evoking gods in the domestic sphere. However, there is also an element specific to private religion on sites like Sai: Egyptian votive objects appear side by side with Nubian style objects and sometimes also as hybrid-types, combining both traditions (cf. Fig. 2).⁷⁰

A complex mixture of lifestyles at Sai, well attested through the ceramic evidence, obviously also affected the private religion. Individual choices and group dynamics may sometimes be more significant than cultural identities,⁷¹ seen also when it comes to pious practices. With ongoing fieldwork conducted in Nubia, this picture will definitely emerge further – there seems to be several layers of religious activities, conduct and piety still buried in New Kingdom sites of modern Sudan.

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⁶⁹ See especially STEVENS 2006, *passim*.

⁷⁰ This can also be observed for the official cult in the Egyptian temples set up in Nubia, see TÖRÖK 2009, 228–229.

⁷¹ Cf. SPENCER 2014, 47.

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