THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT AT THE VILLAGE OF DEIR EL-MEDINA

EL CONTEXTO RELIGIOSO DEL POBLADO DE DEIR EL-MEDINA

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RESUMEN:

Este artículo pretende recopilar las principales evidencias de la comunidad de trabajadores de Deir el-Medina, en el antiguo Egipto, que permiten una mejor comprensión de las creencias y prácticas religiosas egipcias. Éstas se relacionan con la llamada 'piedad personal' o 'religión personal'. En este asentamiento se conservan en buen estado muchas de las pruebas arqueológicas acerca de dicho fenómeno religioso, especialmente para las dinastías XVIII, XIX y XX. Por tanto, los períodos aquí referidos se centrarán en el final de la dinastía XVIII y la época Ramésida. Se proporcionarán las definiciones actuales para este conjunto de creencias y prácticas englobadas como 'piedad personal'. Se resumirán las evidencias, y finalmente, se concluirá con la representatividad de Deir el-Medina.

ABSTRACT:

This paper will address the main evidence from the workmen community of Deir el-Medina in ancient Egypt, which allow a better understanding of the religious beliefs and practices, the so-called 'personal piety' or 'personal religion'. The Late Eighteenth dynasty and the Ramesside period are the main stages to focus on in this article. To begin with, several definitions for the religious practices: 'popular piety', 'personal piety', 'personal religion', 'religion of the poor' or 'practical religion', will be briefly summarised. Secondly, the history and the evidence from this village as an example of personal religion will be provided. Finally, the representativeness of Deir el-Medina for Egyptian religion will be presented.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Deir el-Medina, piedad personal, yacimiento, Imperio Nuevo, época Ramésida, religión.

KEY-WORDS: Deir el-medina, Personal piety, archaeological site, New Kingdom, Ramesside period, religion.

I. Introduction. Context, definition, and objectives

The village of Deir el-Medina is a very rich site in terms of providing archaeological artefacts, structures and epigraphy, among other evidences, for religious studies and

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archaeology. In this paper an insight into the main features of this settlement will be made, in order to approach a whole picture of religious life and funerary beliefs. Deir el-Medina has left a huge amount of information for reconstructing daily life in ancient Egypt. However, even though the tendency is comparing this site with Tell el-Amarna —due to the similarities in some aspects of the archaeological register such as chapels, altars, amulets and so on— experts are cautious about such a comparison because of the differences in the chronological register in both settlements. In addition, further studies about 'personal piety' include this archaeological site as an example —those of the *Institute Français d'archéologie Orientale*[2], for instance, or those of Dr. Emeritus John Baines and Dr. Elizabeth Frood of the University of Oxford[3] —.

As the ancient Egyptian language has no proper expressions to define 'religion' or 'piety', many experts tried to define what 'personal piety' is. Adolf Erman[4] created the term and Henry James Breasted invented in his paper *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt: Lectures Delivered on the Morse Foundation at Union Theological Seminary,* the title of 'The age of personal piety' to refer to the Late 18th Dynasty and the Ramesside Period[5]. Similarly, Battiscombe Gunn studied the stelae from Deir el-Medina, referring to 'the religion of the poor'[6]. All of these authors tried to include different manifestations of personal religious faith and its practices under a global concept. However, finding a precise definition for 'personal religion' or 'personal piety' is a hard task.

According to Michela Luiselli, the term 'personal piety' would involve 'religious practices and religious beliefs', '(…) deities hear prayers and answer according to the individuals' behaviour, participating in daily life[7], whereas Baines and Frood stress the 'personal election and the active participation between the deity and the individual'[8]. There are also Egyptologists such as Assmann who suggest a 'Theology of will' in which that deities intervene in daily life[9]. Furthermore, the relation between the individual and the god is a contract and through this contract, the individual must act according to the gods and their will. Anna Stevens uses the term 'private religion' to refer to archaeological investigations applied in order to worship complexes in domestic contexts in Tell-el-Amarna[10]. Luiselli claims that the German word created by Brunner and Assmann, *Gottesnähe*— which means 'proximity to divinity'—, would define a combination of ideas: the religious practice and the religious emotion or devotion[11]. Actually, Henry James Breasted defines 'personal piety': as the proof of 'a devotional spirit and a consciousness of a personal relationship with a god'[12]. In addition, Baines suggests that 'practical religion' can be referred to 'perspectives that include sources and cultural phenomena behind hymns and prayers', and Pinch distinguishes between 'personal piety' and 'popular piety'. The first one refers to 'individual piety more than to body piety, but focused on one or more official cult deities', and the second one to 'practices and religious beliefs that can be both physical or individual, in ordinary and daily ancient Egyptian life'[13].

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[2] *IFAO*.
[3] They study mainly the archaeological evidence combined with the texts from the Ramesside period. See: Baines, J. (ed.) Frood, E. (2007). *Biographical Texts from Ramesside Egypt,* Atlanta.
[4] Erman 1894, 259-305.
[5] Breasted 1912, 344.
[6] Gunn 1916.
[7] Luiselli 2014, 105.
[8] Baines & Frood 2008, 2.
[9] Assmann 2005, 310.
[10] Stevens 2015, 77-84.
[11] Luiselli 2008, 4-5. The author points out that the German term must be used carefully as 'proximity to divinity/the divine' and must not be translated as 'proximity to the god' because this would imply the election of a specific deity.
[12] Breasted 1912, 349.
[13] Luiselli 2008, 4 and Pinch 1993, 325.

II. Deir el-Medina: the site

I.1. Location and general data

This village is located in the West bank of Luxor. Its name was originally *St Mɜ't*, 'The Place of the Truth', *Pɜ Ḏr,* 'The Necropolis' or *Pɜ dmi,* 'the city' or 'the village'. The name 'Deir el-Medina' means literally 'Monastery of the Town' because of a Coptic settlement and the church the Copts built in the temple to Hathor[14]. It was occupied until the end of the New Kingdom but still used for burials and religious devotion. The earliest date of occupation was during the reign of Thutmose I (1504-1492 B.C.)—there is some evidence in cartouches stamped upon bricks in the enclosure wall—and it was abandoned under Ramesses IX[15]. Its religious relevance is due to the good conditions of preservation because of its location in the desert, which made possible finding houses, chapels, temples, tombs, utensils and texts in considerable amounts[16].

This Theban town was linked to the 18th Dynasty and particularly to Amenhotep I, who was worshipped there[17]. It was inhabited during the 18th, 19th and 20th Dynasties[18]. It was first excavated in the twentieth century by Italian and German expeditions. In 1917, Jaroslav Černý, from the French team, identified the workmen of Deir el-Medina as the builders of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings[19]. Under Horemheb, the village experienced a reorganisation increasing the number of houses from 12 to 40[20]. It is argued whether during the Amarna period the village was abandoned. The current city includes 68 houses surrounded by a wall[21] since the Ptolemaic period. It is believed that the village was occupied until the reign of Ramesses XI (1099-1069 BC), when the situation of insecurity forced the workers of the village to live in the Medinet Habu complex[22]. Egyptians often used the ancient settlements to build new ones or reoccupy the old ones. However, due to the spoilers, Deir el-medina was abandoned as a possible place to live in. Despite this, during the Ptolemaic period it was considered a sacred place for cult, as the Ptolemaic temple built for the goddess Hathor confirms.

The village had two different necropolis: one facing the West and the other one in the East. Only the Western one is best preserved due to the earth accumulated in the East because of previous excavations. In the lower part of the eastern necropolis, children burials in baskets, amphorae and so on have been found[23]. In total there are hundreds of tombs in the necropolis, the majority of them are from the 20th Dynasty[24] but there are some from the Middle Kingdom[25], as well.

This village is located in a small desert behind the Qurnet Murai hill[26]. In the low part of the hill is where the houses of the inhabitants are situated, flanked by an eastern and a western cemetery[27]. There are small temples and chapels from the New Kingdom, but also Ptolemaic and Roman tombs in the cliff slope north of the Ptolemaic temple to Hathor[28]. In addition, in this area some temples are best preserved such as: the temple of Amenhotep I and Ahmose-Nefertari; the Hathor chapel of Seti I; the Amun temple of Ramesses II and the Ptolemaic Hathor temple[29]. It is also very valuable to mention the so-called 'Great pit',

[14] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 1.
[15] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 1-2.
[16] Toivari-Viitala 2011. 3.
[17] Luiselli 2013, 27.
[18] Sadek 1988, 59.
[19] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 6 and Černy 2001, 59-65.
[20] Toivari-Viitala 2011. 4.
[21] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 6.
[22] *IFAO*
[23] Peacok 2018.
[24] Peacok 2018.
[25] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 4.
[26] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 1.
[27] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 1.
[28] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 2.
[29] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 7-10.

located 55 metres northeast of the enclosure[30]. The original purpose of building this pit of 52 metres deep is still unknown. It has descending stairs which are stick to the inner walls and it seems that this pit was used for throwing away the 'rubbish' of the inhabitants in later periods, as a lot of materials were found there (ostraca, stelae, statuettes…)[31].

II.2. The main deities worshipped at Deir el-Medina

Amun-Re, Hathor, Bes, Thoth, Ptah, Meretseger, Renenunet, Ahmose-Nefertari, Amehotep I, Mut, Horus, Osiris, Taweret and some new Eastern gods are the main divinities worshipped at Deir el-Medina. The main source for these evidences are the votive stelae—see fig. 1—, which mix anthropomorphic and zoomorphic deities. The majority of these stelae express devotion to divinity through hymns. There are also requests of benefits from the gods, offerings in return for divine intervention, stelae to reflect the guilt for a misdemeanor and very rare records of events[32].

The religious importance of this village stems from the fact that there are a lot of well-preserved structures and artefacts related to the so-called 'personal religion' such as: chapels, temples, tombs, houses, ancestors' busts, letters to the death, ostraca, domestic altars—their function is still debated—, female figurines, false doors, shrines, vertical niches, amulets, stelae and so on. These objects and buildings can be classified according to the two main parts of the village: the town and the eastern necropolis. The first one involves domestic religious practices and artefacts, whereas the second one would be related to the religious funerary context.

III. Evidence for domestic religious practices

III.1. The structure of the houses from Deir el-Medina

During his archaeological interventions at Deir el-Medina, Bruyère studied its houses. The pattern of the houses commonly consists of a 'front room', a second room known as the 'sitting room', where the inhabitants of the house sat and rest, and different back rooms, which would be the private rooms and the kitchen—see fig. 2—.

III.1.1. Domestic platforms

In the front room, the presence of platforms has caused some controversial debate as its function is not clear. Some scholars, such as Bruyère, described them[33]. They have a rectangular shape and their measurements are 1,70 m. of length, 0,80 m. of width and 0,75 m. of height. He named them as *lit clos* or 'elevated beds', and they might have been built with surrounding walls. Besides, the majority of the houses could have reached the roof level of the original front room because proof of staircases in the back rooms have led to the idea that the inhabitants of the house could have access the roof from these stairs[34]—See figure 3—. The front room has been generally considered as a roofed area because of its similarities with those of Amarna[35]. However, recent studies at the workmen's village of Amarna have shown that there is no trace of roof fragments for the front room in a house at Gate Street 8, so some experts have suggested that it could have been an open court for animals, for instance[36]. Bruyère suggested that they were built after Thutmose III[37]. Other

[30] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 2.
[31] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 6.
[32] Exell 2010, 29.
[33] Bruyère 1939, 56.
[34] Bruyère 1939, 56-57.
[35] Koltsida 2007, 122-123.
[36] Koltsida 2007, 122.
[37] Bruyère 1939, 61.

Egyptologists such as Kemp propose that they were constructed after the Amarna period[38]. In conclusion, there is no consensus about the origins of these platforms.

The material used for the platforms was brick, and they were normally located in the corners of the front room and enclosed by thin walls[39]. They were whitewashed or plastered and painted[40].

Meskell points out that it would be physically possible that one of the functions of the elevated beds was resting or sleeping[41]. The main support for this hypothesis is that the god Bes is depicted quite often on the *lit clos*, usually in the basement of the platforms which in some cases includes reliefs, and he was considered the protector god while individuals were sleeping. However, this function is not clear due to two facts:

1. The stone supports found in the benches did not appear in these platforms.
2. These structures are placed in the front room of the houses, whereas according to Bruyère, sleeping benches at Deir el-Medina were situated in their back rooms[42].

Koltsida suggests that these platforms could have had a gender role as domestic space in Deir el-Medina[43]. In this sense, she mentions them as birth beds[44] and also maintains that as these structures are in the front room, as a 'public space', they would probably have worked as ritual areas or as a space to celebrate fertility and childbirth instead[45]. However, nowadays it seems to be widely accepted that these platforms could have been religious altars, especially because it is really attractive to compare those found at Tell el-Amarna with them. As Stevens points out:

> 'It has been proposed that the Amarna altars and the Deir el-Medina 'lit clos' differed in terms of scale, the latter being larger, and in the sense that the 'lit clos' were enclosed to a greater degree, possessing more substantial perimeter walls (…) [but] f the interpretation of the latter as altars is correct, these parallels provide further evidence that the 'lits clos' also functioned as such[46]'. (Stevens, 2003: 149).

In addition, Bruyére claimed that altars might have had ancestors' busts in niches excavated inside these platforms[47].

III.1.2. 'False doors' or vertical niches

Anna Stevens named 'vertical niches' what Lara Weiss understands by 'false doors'[48]. This is a term used traditionally for niches that imitate the main elements of an Egyptian door, even though it does not offer a real access to an inner space[49].

Weiss is a supporter of being cautious with the use of the term 'false doors' for domestic contexts, as their function is not the same as the one they have in funerary contexts[50].

The purpose of these 'false doors' in domestic contexts is not clear during the New Kingdom, but some of their elements have been found at Deir el-Medina and Tell el-Amarna. It seems that their function could be identified with the ancestors' cult, as during the Amarna period, funerary beliefs experienced some changes: the deceased did not belong to the Afterlife, they also formed part of the living world[51].

[38] Kemp 1979, 51.
[39] Koltsida 2007, 123.
[40] Koltsida 2007, 123.
[41] Meskell 1999, 100.
[42] Bruyère 1939, 71-72.
[43] Koltsida 2007, 121-127.
[44] Koltsida 2007: 124.
[45] Koltsida 2007: 124.
[46] Stevens 2003, 149.
[47] Bruyère 1939, 308.
[48] Weiss 2010, 197.
[49] Wiebach-Köpe 2001, 498, quoted in Weiss 2010, 197.
[50] Weiss 2010, 197.
[51] Weiss 2010, 197.

Other purposes such as the ones mentioned by Meskell—who maintains that 'false doors' could have worked as contact points with the ancestors—have been considered. Weiss suggests that these doors could have allowed the deceased to enter the house through the false door and participated in the offerings or the daily cults[52].

These doors could have been situated in various rooms of the house, but the most standardised patron is that they are located in the second room walls or doorposts[53]. They were usually painted in yellow between two bands of red ochre[54].

Their decoration includes cult scenes to Ahmose-Nefertari and Amenhotep I[55]. Petrie maintained that:

> 'Similar niches are found in the private houses of Tell el-Amarna. The focus of domestic worship then appears to have been a niche or false door in the wall of the principal hall, usually in the west wall like the false doors of tombs; this was dignified with steps in some cases, and painted with the objects of adoration, the ancestral double and spirit, *ka* and *ba*, and the tree-genius who preserved them…'[56].

This possibility, as Petrie says, would relate the funerary cult to the niches at private houses. This theory was addressed by Lynn Meskell too[57]; as Stevens points out: 'Meskell has raised the possibility that the red and yellow-painted niches at Deir el-Medina served as points of contact with deceased ancestors'[58].

III.1.3. Ancestors' busts

According to Exell, the term 'ancestor bust' includes several sizes, from small amuletic samples to limestone statues of 50 cm. tall[59]. A bust consists of a head, with or withtout a wig, and sometimes decorated with a *wsḫ*-collar or a pendant lotus—Figure 3—. Exell maintains that a half of the known busts comes from Deir el-Medina, and the rest come from several sites throughout Egypt[60]. Within the Deir el-Medina examples, a small number were found in houses. However, they are supposed to have been sat in niches found in the walls of the front room or in the sitting room. The majority of these busts are from tombs, chapels and temples, and some unfinished examples suggest that these artefacts were made locally[61].

The function of these busts is attested since the Old Kingdom. However, Deir el-Medina examples are well-preserved. They represented the *ꜣḫw-jḳr*, 'excellent spirits', to whom the *ꜣḫ-jḳr n R'*- stelae[62]—see figure 4— were dedicated as well. The function of the busts may have been representing the deceased to be given offerings and to be asked about intervention in the living world. This influence of the deceased could be positive—healing, mediation between divinity and the relative, etc.—or negative. The ancestors mediated

[52] Weiss 2010, 197.
[53] Weiss 2010, 198.
[54] Weiss 2010, 198.
[55] Stevens 2003, 152.
[56] Petrie 1898, 34-35.
[57] Meskell 1999.
[58] Stevens 2003, 152.
[59] Exell 2008, 1.
[60] Exell 2008, 1.
[61] Exell 2008, 1.
[62] It seems that according to Demarèe (1983, 279-290), these stelae show an important status that distinguish the deceased depicted in them from the rest of the members of the community of Deir el-Medina. The condition of *ꜣḫ* or *ꜣḫ iḳr* formed part of both the funerary and domestic cults. The main features of the deceased who appeared in these stelae show that they were 'able' to intervene or mediate between the Living and the Gods, in the Hereafter and in this world as well. The living could approach them by asking for wishes or help in daily life issues. These 'spirits' could intervene in favour of the living or against them, and they must have been provided with daily offerings and ritual cults in order to be satisfied.

between the supernatural world and the living one; they provided protection for the living or could intervene negatively.

According to Nicola Harrington, it seems to be plausible that these busts depicted a person during his/her lifetime[63]. She claims this by arguing that the *Book of the Dead* papyrus of Iouiya states: 'I have come forth as an *akh iqer*… I shall be seen in my human form forever'[64]. This is why Exell prefers naming these busts as 'anthropoid busts' more than 'ancestors' busts'. In addition, she suggests that the solar aspect of the busts—its vinculation with the *ȝḫ-jḳr n R'* stelae, usually associated with the solar god Re as the creator— is referred to the sun cycle related to life cycle: conception, pregnancy and birth, mentioned by Meskell[65]. In addition, Pinch argues that some fertility female figurines from houses at Deir el-Medina could have been offered to ancestors depicted on busts for protection[66]. These female figurines will be addressed in a specific point in this paper.

III.1.4. Letters to the dead

The ancestors or anthropoid busts are related to the letters to the dead, which constitute one element of the interaction with the deceased[67]. It is believed that these letters generally had the same purpose of the busts. They were the most common form of communication between the living and the dead[68]. The majority of the letters are written on pottery vessels or jar stands[69], and most of them were probably conceived for being left at tombs, as just a few were found *in situ*[70]. The standard format of these letters was: an initial greeting to the deceased, appeals to the good will of the spirit, and a closing statement with the specific matter the living wants to solve[71]—a request of protection from misfortune or for illness, for instance—. According to Moreno García, the letters to the dead would have disappeared from the end of New Kingdom, and replaced by the 'letters to the gods', such as the one from Kenna to the god/deified king Amenhotep I[72]. In this letter, written on an ostracon, Kenna complains to Amenhotep I about a dispute with an individual named Mery-Sekhmet for a chapel he built[73].

III.1.5. Votive stelae

According to Exell[74], votive stelae which record private events are common at Deir el-Medina. She classifies them into 5 different types, according to what they record: state festivals and oracles (47 stelae), conception and birth (12), entry/promotion within a profession (21), entry/participation in local religious ceremonies (18), and those related to personal illness or crisis (4)[75]. Apart from these stelae, there are some related to oracles and others describing important events, such as the visit of the vizier To[76].

There are also a group of stelae known as 'ear stelae'. They were common in the New Kingdom and they probably indicate that the relationship between the individual and the god was closer, without the necessity of any priest mediating[77].

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[63] Harrington 2003, 79.
[64] Harrington 2003, 79.
[65] Meskell 2002, 69.
[66] Pinch 1994, 120.
[67] Baines 1991, 154.
[68] Teeter 2011, 153.
[69] Weiss 2009, 221: also ostraca or pottery bowls were often inscribed with these letters.
[70] Teeter 2011, 153.
[71] Teeter 2011, 154.
[72] Moreno García 2010, 16.
[73] McDowell 1999, 177-178
[74] Exell 2010: 82.
[75] Exell 2010,87-95.
[76] Exell 2010, 79-82.
[77] The votive stelae of Deir el-Medina are stelae devoted to relatives, deities, deified individuals and 'excellent spirits' as seen. Specifically, it can be said that these stelae were dedicated during an individual's lifetime in order to acquire benefits from a deity, high-rank individual or a king, in this life and the next. But they also seeked for a 'record of access to divinity' (Exell 2010, 6), so in this sense, they can be considered commemorative, as well.

III.1.6. Miscellanea: Ostraca and female figurines

Numerous ostraca have been found at Deir el-Medina—mainly in the so-called 'Great pit'—. These pottery fragments were used as: petitions to divinity, oracles, letters to the dead (see the specific point in this paper), legal documents for solving disputes, for example. It is believed that during some festivals, ostraca were used as direct requests to the god or gods and goddesses. These pottery fragments were used as a way for contacting the gods and communicating with the dead[78]. There are several sorts of ostraca depending on their function: legal, religious, literary, teaching, health, economy, etc. Weiss points out that some ostraca were marked[79]. She proposes that the markers could have been the own inhabitants of Deir el-Medina, who probably decided to mark these pieces as a 'memorandum of the god's decision'—when working as oracles—, or simply as an identity marker. These marks also appear in administrative and literary texts, and this is why Weiss suggests that they may have been included in a Deir el-Medina private archive[80].

Some female figurines have been discovered at Deir el-Medina domestic context either. Some of them were carved in ostraca—See figure 5—. Others, with perfume cones on their heads or with an arm crossing their chests—figure 5—.Bruyère believed that these figurines were integrated with the *lit clos*[81] and most of them are from the New Kingdom. Backhouse also believes there is a relation between the elevated platforms and these female figurines[82] due to the association of women with the *lit clos*. Pinch in fact maintains that female fertility figurines are associated with these platforms, and she shows evidence of this by saying that ostraca with female figures depicted on them were found in the platforms working as a 'House of birth'[83]. Some of them were also found at Edfu and Amarna[84]. They may have worked as votive offerings to the gods asking for protection in relationship with fertility.

IV. Evidence for the funerary religious practices

IV.1. Tombs and chapels

The standard Ramesside burial type at Deir el-Medina is the tomb complex with its multiple vaults, chapel, courtyard and pyramidion[85]. Meskell adds that the tomb structure was a superstructure, a chapel and a substructure. The superstructure often was a small pyramid. The chapel in the 19th Dynasty took on aspects of a temple to the deceased and the worshipped gods. The substructure—usually in wealthier tombs—represented the Afterlife[86].

The superstructure, a small pyramid (pyramidion), embodied the solar aspect of the tomb[87]—in order that the deceased could achieve the Afterlife with the creator (Amun-Re)—. The substructure had the objective of representing the Afterlife, and this could be observed in their decorative features[88].

They differ from the funerary standard stelae, because these ones were conceived for depicting the deceased with standarised formulae, offering or adoring a concrete deity, and presenting their career life. These votive stelae were also found in other places in Egypt (Exell 2010, 99): Lower Nubia (Abu Symbel,Wadi es-Sebua), Qantir-Pi-Ramesses (Eastern Delta).

[78] Teeter 2011, 76-170.
[79] Weiss 2009, 230.
[80] Weiss 2009, 230.
[81] Backhouse 2012, 33.
[82] Backhouse 2012, 33-34.
[83] Pìnch 1994, 127.
[84] Backhouse 2012, 33.
[85] Meskell 1999, 103.
[86] Meskell 1999, 104.
[87] Meskell 1999, 189.
[88] Meskell 1999, 189.

As seen in the general data about Deir el-Medina, this settlement has two cemeteries. The Western one is the best preserved, and in this necropolis the most of the tombs were from the 19th Dynasty. There are some preserved from the 20th Dynasty, when they turn into family tombs where the descendants of the original owners were also buried[89].

There are some impressive data about the eastern hill of Qurnet Mura'I which is that in the lower part there were hundreds of burials of babies and children in domestic pottery, baskets, boxes and coffins[90]. The adult burials were situated in the higher parts of the hill in contrast and these burials are dated in the 18th Dynasty mainly[91].

Chapels were an important part of the religious cult at Deir el-Medina as well. Ann Bommann[92] made an exhaustive study about these chapels based on the studies of Bruyère and she re-examined 27 chapels at Deir el-Medina comparing them with those of Tell el-Amarna. These chapels were named and classified by Bruyère[93] as *Chapelles*, *Chapelles votives*, *Chapelles des Confrèries* or *Chapelles religieuses.* They consist of cult buildings with a small court before a shrine with or without benches and usually cut into the cliff[94]. As an example, the Hathor chapel of Seti I, which is from the Ptolemaic Period, consists of a more elaborated chapel in comparison with the typical chapels of Deir el-Medina: it has an outer and an inner hall, pronaos, sanctuary a left annex and subsidiary chambers[95].

IV.1.1. Paintings

Pre-Ramesside 'scenes of daily life' tombs are frequent, whereas they tend to decrease after the reign of Ramesses II. In the Ramesside period scenes and texts of funerary or religious nature predominated and depictions of burial scenes on tombs were increased as well. It is believed that during the 19th Dynasty onwards a concern for the articulation of the next world was expressed[96] by including scenes of the Book of the Dead, for instance.

To sum up, it could be said that there are main differences in scenes of life between the 18th Dynasty and the 19th Dynasty. Whereas the first one tried to represent the desire to spread the world of the living into the Afterlife, the second one shows a clear concern for the experience of the Death and the depiction of how the next world was articulated[97].

IV.1.2. Offering tables

Offering tables were used for libations of water, wine or beer to gods or to the deceased by pouring these liquids on to the table. Sometimes, they present images of food carved on the surface to replace real offerings—Figure 6—. They were found in domestic context as well as at tell el-Amarna, for instance[98]. In funerary context, these tables were placed near the deceased statue in the tomb, so that the spirit of the individual could be satisfied with daily offering by his relatives[99]. In Deir el-Medina many stelae depicting these practices in front of deities were found[100]. Very often, the deceased appears depicted together with his wife and children showing offerings to the god chosen by them as proctector, possibly[101]. The tables were carved with the offering formulae with magical

[89] Peacok 2018.
[90] Peacok 2018.
[91] Peacok 2018.
[92] Bomann, 1991.
[93] Bruyère 1931-32,56-57; 1939, 1-12; 1948, 97-98.
[94] Peacok 2018.
[95] Toivari-Viitala 2011, 8.
[96] Meskell 1999, 104.
[97] Meskell 1999, 189.
[98] Stevens 2003, 157.
[99] Teeter 2011, 128-132.
[100] Exell 2010, 27-29.
[101] Peacok 2018.

powers so that in case there were not real food, the deceased could be nourished either way[102].

IV.2. Other funerary evidences

There are many other artefacts from the funerary context that show protection and to some extent religious funerary practices, such as scarabs, amulets, pectorals, shabti, coffins, etc. They all were used mainly for providing protection to the deceased. Although the main ones addressed in the lines above were common, these amulets and artefacts are not less valuable and they contribute to set the religious context and the ancient Egyptian religious practices.

V. Conclusion: the representativeness of Deir el-Medina

To summarise, all these evidences together provide a general picture of the religious context at the village of Deir el-Medina. This settlement is extremely important not only for the religious practices reconstruction of the past, but for the economic, administrative and social perspectives. In addition, it provides evidence that some of its inhabitants were literate—domestic libraries have been found according to Moreno García[103]—. As the workmen were involved in elite activities, such as building the royal tombs, it is believed that despite their modest condition, the workmen assumed the values of these individuals, fact that could explain the religious practices which took place without any intermediary. These practices were devoted to the gods and the king, mainly at least in the first place. However, with the so-called 'democratisation' of the afterlife, they may have applied what they learnt from elite building to their own tombs.

However, this settlement is an exception for personal piety, as domestic altars, for example, are so well preserved that the domestic reliefs can still be appreciated. At the same time, this site offers reliefs, statues, stelae, altars, etc., whereas in other sites these are very rare[104]. The evidence for personal piety is generally too fragmentary and spread throughout Egypt. This is the main reason why Deir el-Medina is such a unique archaeological site. The main issue, however, is that it is difficult to compare this settlement to others due to the fact that it is exceptional for the 19th and 20th Dynasties.

In addition, scholars have tended to contrast and balance the evidences from Deir el-Medina with those from Tell el-Amarna. This comparison adds new problems, which have to do with the fact that it is still debated whether during the Amarna period some workmen from Deir el-Medina moved to Amarna[105]. However, scholars could compare small votive offerings or structures from different places in Egypt, as Geraldine Pinch and Waraksa[106] did in their article 'Votive Practices'.

Personal piety is not an isolated phenomenon in ancient Egypt—Luiselli has found evidences since the end of the Old Kingdom onwards[107]—. There are evidences for personal piety in other emplacements such as Tell el-Amarna, Abydos, Saqqara, Hemopolis, Abusir, Deir el-Bahari or Karnak among others[108]. By looking at sites such as Deir el-Medina and others, experts can combine different evidences for personal religion and put them together in order to build the whole puzzle.

[102] Peacok 2018.
[103] Moreno García 2010, 18-19.
[104] Moreno García 2010, 19.
[105] Toivarli-Viitala 2011, 6.
[106] Pinch and Waraska 2009.
[107] Luiselli 2014: 110.
[108] Sadek 1988, 7-9.

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Fig. 1: (Left) Stela to Ahmose-Nefertari from Deir el-Medina, RDGE 5747; (Middle) Stela to Meretseger from Deir el-Medina. No inventory number yet; (Right) Stela from Mutnofret to Renenutet from Deir el-Medina, RCGE 14896. Source: http://www.deirelmedina.com/lenka/Turinstelae.html

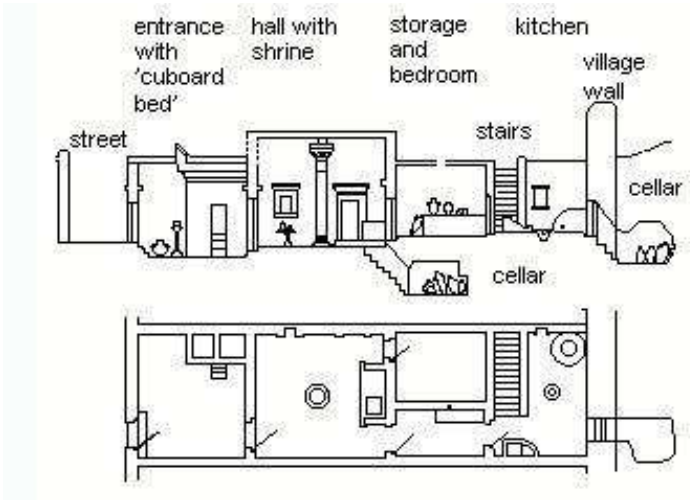

Fig. 2: Section and plan of a standard Deir el-medina House. Source: http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/building/deir_el_medine.htm

Fig. 3: *Lit. clos* from Deir el-Medina. Source: Meskell 1998: 222, fig. 7

Fig. 4: (Left) Large (262 mm.) limestone ancestor bust with wig and modius, possibly from Deir el-Medina, late 18th-early 19th Dynasty; source: Exell 2008: 2, fig. 2. *ȝḫ-jḳr n R‘*- (Right) stela example; source: Demarée, 1983: 326, Plate II, A3

Fig. 5: Figurine with right arm across the body, Louvre Museum, E16513C. Source: Backhouse 2012: 29, fig. 2. 12

Fig. 6: Offering table from Deir el-Medina. Limestone. 19th Dynasty. Source: UCL Petrie Museum, UC14446; http://www.deirelmedina.com