DOI: 10.47979/aror.j.90.2.219-239

Terracotta Female Figurines from the Monastery of Manqabad (Asyut, Egypt): Analysis and Possible Function

Ilaria Incordino

Abstract
The project of studying and classifying the pottery assemblage from the monastery of Manqabad (Asyut) started in 2014 and has been focused in its first phase on the documentation of the items currently kept in the warehouse at el-Ashmunein (Egypt). So far, 150 out of 245 ceramic specimens have been analyzed and included in a digital database, according to the data recorded by the inventories of the el-Minya Inspectorate. During the last season (2019), some interesting terracotta figurines representing female figures and small animals have been the object of a more in-depth study in order to clarify their function and meaning within the complex Christian rituals of Late Antique Egypt.

Keywords
Manqabad monastery (Asyut) | Coptic pottery | terracotta figurines | female representation | Christian Egypt | pilgrimage center

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MONASTERY OF MANQABAD

The Italian-Egyptian Mission of Study and Conservation at the monastery of "*Abba Nefer the Hermit*" at Manqabad, Asyut (Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" (UNIOR), Project Sector of MSA, SCA local Inspectorate and the Restoration Sector) started in 2011 with the aim of surveying an almost undisturbed wide settlement located about 7.5 km west of Asyut in Middle Egypt, just halfway along the Egyptian Nile Valley at the end of an important desert road, the Darb el Arbayn.

The complex is characterized by several monks' housing units, churches, a huge production area, a monumental bath complex, a large corpus of unpublished artifacts, impressive paintings, and a noteworthy collection of texts. After a short survey conducted in 1910 by the pioneer of Egyptian archaeology Ahmed Bey Kamal, there was no later mention of the site until its rediscovery in 1965 during work on the local electricity network, but only after another ten years was the archeological survey at the site resumed by the then Director of the Coptic and Islamic sector of the SCA (Supreme Council of Antiquities), Abdel Rahman Abdel Tawwab.

The investigation brought to light (according to his unpublished reports) a mud-brick enclosure surrounding an area of about 300 × 300 m, with four main entrances located at the four cardinal points, some remains of dwellings (dated to the 6th–7th century AD) and churches, a mosque, and presses for wine and oil. In 1984, and from 1985 to 1991, more excavations conducted by Egyptian inspectors revealed the presence of another church and some wall paintings.

Between 1989 and 1991, Peter Grossmann briefly described Manqabad as a late Roman site surrounded by a rectangular mud-brick enclosure, mainly comprising buildings with Christian features, including some churches and, in the center of the site, a completely different group of buildings whose architectural features he compared with some found at Bawit (Monastery of Apollo, just north of Asyut). According to Grossmann,[1] the site should be dated between the 6th and 8th centuries AD.

Further excavations were carried out more recently (2000–2003; 2006–2010) by archeologists of the local inspectorate, who investigated a long row of dwelling structures in the north sector of the site, bringing to light a large quantity of finds, now mostly kept in the storehouse of the SCA at el-Ashmunein and Shutby, but unfortunately no reports were published.

[1] Peter Grossmann, "Neue frühchristliche Funde aus Ägypten," in *Actes du XIe congrés international d'archéologie chrétienne*, ed. Noël Duval (Rome: Publication de l'École française de Rome, 1989), 1843–908; Peter Grossman, "Manqabad," in *Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz Suryal Atiya (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1991), 1523.

In 2011, thanks to the commitment, co-operation, and collaboration of the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and the Ministry of Antiquities of Egypt, together with the help and support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), an Italian-Egyptian project started with the aim of achieving a thorough analysis and survey of the "*Monastery of Abba Nefer*" at Manqabad in order to identify the stages of development of the site, to study all the finds discovered so far, to reconstruct its history in the context of Christian Egypt, and finally to plan and undertake a complete restoration, which will allow it to be fully safeguarded and enhanced.

The first three campaigns, carried out between 2011 and 2013, were brief surveys, strongly affected by the political instability of the country. During these surveys, the mission identified most of the structures already brought to light and recorded by previous investigations: a northern row of monastic housing units, a thermae structure in the Central Sector of the site, three churches, and some small chapels with decorated niches.

During the campaign of autumn 2014, it was possible to work for longer and to start the topographical survey and the investigation of the numerous structures still extant on the site, starting from the complex of monks' cells in the Northern Sector. The site includes a Central Sector, with more housing units, churches and an impressive bath-like structure, and a Southern Sector where a large production area is located (Fig. 1).

Since the current knowledge of ancient Egyptian monastic societies has traditionally drawn heavily upon textual sources, this project rests on a bottom-up theoretical framework based mainly on the interpretation of the material culture. It seems, in fact, essential to listen not only to literary sources, which still remain a metanarrative largely meant to invoke conservative responses, and papyrological sources, that are often related only to some specific groups, but also to archeological sources, that can inform our understanding of the theory of Egyptian monasticism and how it worked in practice.

Even more relevant is the awareness of a near absence of theoretical models to help scholars interpret Egyptian monastic material remains, partly because archeologists were at first more drawn toward the architectural record of churches and basilicas and paid little attention to the artifacts.

The preliminary work conducted at Manqabad so far has shown that almost 90% of this Late Antique monastic settlement has never been the object of investigation of any kind. Therefore, a complete archeological and topographical survey and excavation of two "untouched" areas of the monastery have been planned for the near future: the collective baths structure in the Central Sector and the large southern production area surveyed in the last field season (2020). The peculiar features, richness, and variety of the material culture of Manqabad

make it highly suited to serve as the base of a much expanded and developed interpretative system of an ancient Egyptian monastic community, its related activities, and symbolic meanings.



Fig. 1 Plan of the monastic site of Manqabad (Asyut) © UNIOR.

As regards pottery, the documentation and study of the archeological material deriving from the previous excavations (1976–2010) currently kept in the el-Ashmunein warehouse also began in 2014. From the examination of the two inventories of Minya Inspectorate, it has so far been possible to determine the number and nature of 245 pottery items; following the 2014 and 2019 missions, 150 ceramics have been analyzed and included in the digital database.

Unfortunately, those items cannot be considered a proper representative assemblage of the site, since the majority of them have been collected without recording the precise relative archeological context (which could only be indirectly suggested), and consist mostly of complete vessels, with very few fragments collected (only if decorated with painted motifs) and without the possibility of analyzing the fabrics through fresh breaks so far.

One of the principal goals of the mission is to complete the documentation of material stored not only at el-Ashmuein but also at the warehouse of Shutby (where 52 ceramic specimens from Manqabad are kept but have not been documented so far) in order to get a clearer idea of the typological ceramic range from the site, to be compared with the archeological material deriving from the most recent fieldwork seasons (2012–2020) of the Italian-Egyptian mission.

Ceramics are among the most complex and ubiquitous archeological materials used to measure time, but also constitute a social medium that can be used to transmit different messages through symbols loaded with social, cultural, and functional meaning. In this respect, Late Antique Egyptian archeological ceramics analysis is still in its infancy, but it is essential in order to obtain a better understanding of the behavior of the people who produced, distributed, and used these ceramics.

The preliminary results of the pottery analysis have been regularly published as they are produced,[2] since this material has not been the object of a systematic study or any publication by the excavators who discovered the site, especially regarding some peculiar classes of material, such as in the following case of terracotta figurines.

FIGURINES FROM MANQABAD: MORPHOLOGY AND DECORATION

Among the Manqabad assemblage, two terracotta figurines (Inv. Minya 1132; 1139) depicting female figures are currently the object of a more intensive study, mainly because of the female element, which could be compared with similar examples from other monastic/domestic sites of Late Antique Egypt.

The first figurine (Inv. Minya 1132, Fig. 2) in terracotta has been made of reddish-brown clay, has a height of 14 cm and a width of 5.4 cm, and represents a standing female figure, with a "spade"-shaped flat head, possibly pierced on each side for earrings (very small holes). This peculiar form of the head may represent an elaborate headdress, usually found in similar figurines. Unfortunately, the general state of conservation is very poor, so it is not possible to see the original (white?) plaster and painted decoration or the facial features. Only the shape of the steep nose and the arms crossed on the breasts is still quite visible. The lower abdomen is roughly marked by a single oblique line on the left side of the figure (incomplete?) and the hips are slightly flared, while the back is flattened and completely covered by the modern inventory number.

[2] For a first selection of pottery from Manqabad, see Ilaria Incordino, "Analysis of a painted female Head among the pottery Decoration from the Monastery of Abba Nefer at Manqabad (Asyut)," *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 47 (2019): 107–16; Ilaria Incordino, "Documentation and analysis of vessels sunk into the floor at the Monastery of Abba Nefer, Manqabad (Asyut, Egypt)," *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 42 (2020): 83–94; Ilaria Incordino, *Pottery of Manqabad. A selected catalogue of the ceramic assemblage from the monastery of "Abba Nefer" at Asyut (Egypt)* (Oxford: Access Archaeology Archeopress, 2020).



Fig. 2 Manqabad female figurine (INV. 1132, recto and verso) © UNIOR.

The second figurine (Inv. Minya 1139, Fig. 3) is better preserved (neck break repaired), and still retains its painted white plaster decoration on its reddish-brown clay. The maximum height is 14.4 cm and the maximum width is 5 cm. The elaborate headdress is rendered through a "halo" around the head, with oblique black lines to indicate the hairs. No pierced holes for earrings are visible. The head is surrounded by a red line that frames the face, whose details are not clearly visible but are outlined in black.

The steep nose shape is in relief, while the neck is decorated with a white collar (necklace?) with vertical black lines. The breasts are in relief within a square with a black outline, separated by a red vertical line. More vertical white panels run from each armpit down the length of the body. The lower abdomen is marked by two oblique red lines (∧) above the legs, which are divided by a shallow channel. The arms were probably outstretched, but are now missing, as are the feet and the right part of the headdress. The hips are quite flared, the waist is well marked, and a slight depression indicates the navel. The back is flat and retains some white plaster.



Fig. 3 Manqabad female figurine (INV. 1139, recto and verso) © UNIOR.

PARALLELS AND PRODUCTION

Considering the heterogeneity of these items in the production of Christian Egypt, some comparisons have been sought among the production associated *in primis* with the Abu Mena shrine, one of the most distinctive centers of production as regards shapes and fabric.

In fact, these figurines, derived from the excavated workshop of the site, present a characteristic pale-yellow fabric, an average height of 15–20 cm, and were made both in molds and by hand.[3] The Abu Mena figurines are sometimes seated holding a child (similar to the iconography of the *Isis lactans*) or standing in *orans* pose, or with a hand on a pregnant abdomen.

The quality of the manufacture is variable, with some very crude items and others finer with painted decoration. They are usually related to fertility and the healing power of St. Mena, known to be a helper of women with fertility issues.

[3] Karl Maria Kaufmann, *Die Menas-stadt und das Nationalheiligtum der altchristilichen Agypter* (Leipzig: Verlag von Karl W. Hiersemann, 1910), 106–7, taf. 73; Josef Engemann, *Abu Mina VI. Die Keramikfunde von 1965 bis* 1998 (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2019), 119.



Fig. 4 Abu Mena terracotta figurines.[4]

More figurines deriving from a domestic context were found in the Kharga Oasis (Hibis/Ain el-Turba), generally dated to the IV–VII century AD, with a very characteristic "bird's head." Most of them are hand-modeled with outstretched arms, incisions, and puncture-marks on the breast. The average height is 10/13 cm and they were mostly found in decorated wall niches thought to be domestic shrines. Some of them have been deliberately destroyed for unknown reasons.

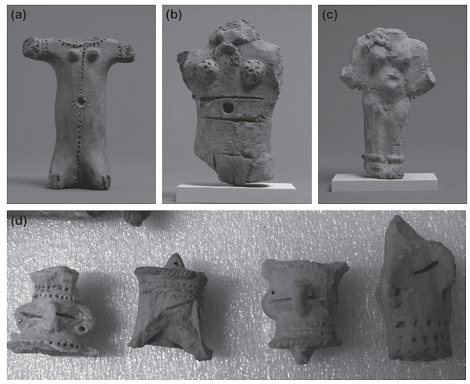


Fig. 5 Kharga figurine (Metropolitan Museum New York, Inv. No. 25.10.2048).[5]

[4] Kaufman, *Die Menas-stadt*, 107, taf. 73.

[5] David Frankfurter, "Female Figurines in Early Christian Egypt: reconstructing lost practices and meanings," *Material Religion. The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 11, no. 2 (2015): 199, fig. 8a.

Another interesting find of figurines comes from the site of Qaw el-Kebir (Antaiopolis, Upper Egypt), deriving from a burial context dated to the VI–VII century AD. One item in particular represents a standing woman (15.2 × 6.5 cm) with a triangular hairstyle, her hands raised in blessing and protection. The figurine is molded in two pieces in pink Aswan kaolinite clay, with a rough back. She has holes pierced through the headdress and wears a long-sleeved tunic with traces of yellow and black.



Fig. 6 Antaiopolis figurine (BM EA69469).[6]

An impressive number of terracotta figurines (84), mostly still unpublished, derive from the excavation of the city of Antinoopolis (Sheikh Abada) and of its northeastern necropolis in particular (dated to the V–VII century AD). Today they are kept at the Archaeological Museum of Florence, Egyptian Collection.

The main characteristic of the assemblage is the *orans* pose, a white coat and the decoration motif of the lady's dress in red and black. The preserved height of the figurines is about 10–12 cm. Many of them are in a fragmentary state of conservation (head missing) but show the elaborate dress of the female figure, with red crossing bands on the breast and belly, quite similar to the pattern on the Manqabad figurines.

Notwithstanding this, many figurines from Florence Museum also present an evident depression in the womb area, a possible indication of grace requested or received. This detail is missing in the items from Manqabad, even if it could be derived from the scant evidence collected so far. Moreover, in a few Florence fragments where the head is preserved, it is possible to identify a simi-

[6] Frankfurter, "Female Figurines," 196, fig. 3.

lar elaborate headdress with oblique black lines to indicate the hairs, already described as a feature of the Manqabad figurine mentioned above.



Fig. 7 Antinoopolis figurines at the Archaeological Museum of Florence(Inv. AT-65, AT 65.22.[7]).

More items from Antinoopolis are today stored at the Istituto Papirologico "Vitelli" in Florence, representing female figures either standing, seated, or in *orans* pose, molded and decorated with painted and incised motifs only on the front side (Fig. 8, left). The high number of figurines found at the site has been related to the local cult of Saint Colluthus, a Christian martyr who was a physician (*anargyros*) at Antinoe and later the object of veneration, as many oracular tickets found at the site attest.[8]

As a consequence, the devotional function of these figurines has never been questioned so far: it is considered highly possible that the worshippers usually left these items at the sanctuary as a sign of received grace, or in order to convey their request for salvation through the intervention of St. Colluthus. The female figurines in particular are often represented with special attention to details related to fertility and maternity, such as emphasis on the womb through painting or the molding of the clay (concave or convex form). Moreover, some of the items could have also become "sacred" objects because of their direct contact with the saint's sanctuary or relics; in this case the worshippers could have brought them back home for their salvific value.

These figurines, however, should be considered apart from other "*ex-voto*" in bronze found at the site in small quantities and representing body parts, since

[7] Loretta Del Francia Barocas, ed., *Antinoe Cent'anni dopo. Catalogo della mostra. Firenze Palazzo Medici Riccardi 10 luglio – 1 novembre 1998* (Firenze: Istituto Papirologico Vitelli, 1998), 109.

[8] Aaltje Hidding, *The Era of the Martyrs. Remembering the great Persecution in Late Antique Egypt* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 67.

the poor material of which they are made (clay) could be an indicator of the social status of the worshippers.[9]

Finally, another small group of female figurines from Antinoe is today kept at the Museo del Vicino Oriente of the University of Rome "Sapienza" (Fig. 8, middle and right), deriving from the excavation conducted at the site from 1965 to 1968 by Sergio Donadoni. The figurines are all in a fragmentary state of conservation (mostly bodies without heads or vice versa), with painted/relief details, hemispherical or triangular headdresses, and holes for earrings.

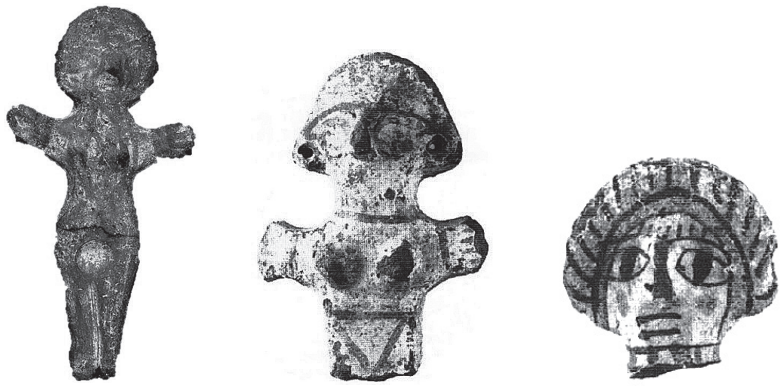


Fig. 8 Antinoopolis figurines.
Left: Istituto "Vitelli" (Inv. 921[10]). Middle and right: Museo Vicino Oriente Roma (Inv. C65.86 and C68.19[11]).

Very interesting figurines come from the site of Karanis (Fayum), which has been extensively excavated, even if no workshop has been found among the buildings of the ancient town. The majority of the Karanis figurines are made of a reddish-brown clay containing gold flecks and chopped straw, feature a thin and hard plaster for painted decoration, and exhibit a distinctive taste for abstraction. The general dating for this group is 600 AD and it includes both handmade and molded items.[12]

One of the closest parallels for the Manqabad figurines is to be found among the terracotta figurines from Karanis, today kept at the Kelsey Museum of Ar-

9 Giovanna Menci and Lavinia Pesi, *La collezione archeologica dell'Istituto Papirologico «G.Vitelli»* (Firenze: Istituto Papirologico Vitelli, 2012), 23–24.

10 Manci and Pesi, *La collezione*, tav. VI.17.

11 Loredana Sist, "Materiale ceramico antinoita nel Museo del Vicino Oriente dell'Università di Roma "La Sapienza," in *Studi in memoria di Lucia Guerrini,* ed. Maria Grazia Picozzi and Filippo Carinci (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1997), fig. 7.5 and 9.

12 Elaine Gazda, *Guardians of the Nile. Sculptures from Karanis in the Fayum (c. 250 BC.AD 450)* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan, 1978), 58–61.

chaeology, University of Michigan. One figurine in particular (Inv. no. 3432, Figure 9) has similar dimensions to the ones from Manqabad (height of 14.6 cm and width of 6.8 cm), as well as the painted decorative elements in black on the white plaster. The Karanis figurine is in a good state of preservation and the facial features are clearly visible, with particular attention to the big black outlined eyes.

The figurine features the same frontal standing representation of the female figure noted for the second Manqabad figurine (Inv. 1139), with the arms outstretched (even if they are missing in this case as well).

The headdress is very similar too: a sort of "spade" shape with a depiction of hairs drawn in black. A comparison can also be made for the garment, fastened with straps which cross in black for the Karanis figure and in red for the Manqabad one. Despite the several similarities, the Manqabad figurine has a more homogeneous layout, without the sharp separation of shoulder and head by a slender neck seen in the Karanis examples and with a widespread use of the color red.

So, even if the general layout seems quite similar, there are some stylistic differences, which could be related to regional differences in production.[13] In addition, it is worth noting that the context of the finds is also different: the Karanis figurine derives from an urban settlement of the 4th–5th century AD, while the Manqabad items have both been found within a monastic complex.



Fig. 9 Female figurine from Karanis (Kelsey Museum, INV. No. 3432[14]).

[13] Frankfurter, "Female Figurines," 201.
[14] Ibid., 196, fig. 4.

As regards techniques and centers of production, interesting observations have been made about the discovery of some molds at Elephantine made in terracotta with some residuum of red slip. The female figure is modeled in an *orans* pose (raised hands), with the characteristic triangular headdress, carved facial features, and decoration of the garment.

These molds were found in late housing units within the Khnum temple court (dated to the VI century AD) and may be related to the idea of fertility *ex-votos*.[15]



Fig. 10 Terracotta mold, Coptic Museum Cairo (Inv. No. 10080[16]).

FUNCTION OF THE FIGURINES DURING THE CHRISTIAN ERA IN EGYPT

Notwithstanding the long-lasting tradition of crafting female figurines in Egypt dating back to Predynastic times, it is necessary to consider the figurines described here as strictly related to the Egyptian Christian culture in order to try to identify their meaning and value. The most evident element of change in the Byzantine production of terracotta figurines is the general lack of the nudity[17] characteristic of previous periods, which was linked to an emphasis on female sexual characteristics, pregnant abdomens, and reproduction in general.[18]

15 Pascale Ballet, and Fatma Mahmoud, "Moules en terre cuite d'Elephantine (Musee Copte). Nouvelles donnes sur les ateliers de la region d'Assuan a l'epoque byzantine et aux premiers temps de l'occupation arabe," *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 87 (1987): 61.

16 Ballet, and Mahmoud, "Moules en terre," pl. XIV.

17 David Frankfurter, "Terracotta Figurines and popular Religion in Late Antique Egypt: Issues of Continuity and 'Survival,'" in *Le Myrte et la Rose. Melanges offerts a Francoise Dunand*, eds. Gaëlle Tallet, and Christiane Zivie-Coche (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de Montpellier, 2014), 134.

18 Joanne Backhouse, "Female Figurines from Deir el-Medina: a Review of Evidence for their Iconography and Function," in *Current Research in Egyptology. Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Symposium*, eds. Carl Graves, Gabrielle Heffernan, Luke McGarrity, Emily Millward, and Marsia Sfakianou Bealby (Birmingham: Oxbow Books, 2012), 38.

Some Christian figurines, however, are still represented nude or with babies (*mater lactans*), even if they are more frequently dressed, with an elaborate hairstyle and holes for adding jewelry. Moreover, they usually bear no evident sign of being related to a divine or religious figure (such as the Virgin Mary, Isis, etc.), despite some previous interpretations along these lines, but seem to be simple representations of ideal aspects of maternity.

Therefore, according to Frankfurter,[19] only the medium (clay figurine) may be seen as a retained element, considering the long tradition of production spread not only in Egypt but also throughout the Mediterranean, European, and Near Eastern world.

The function of the figurines is still much debated among scholars who believe that these items could represent votive objects,[20] pilgrimage souvenirs,[21] or both.[22] Moreover, some ethnographic studies on the use of dolls/figurines in modern Africa have shown that in everyday life the categories of their function seem not to be fixed, but multiple[23] ("sacred" use, use as "toys," etc.), depending on their intended use, their actual use, or reuse.[24]

Whatever other hypotheses have been proposed, the link between these figurines and the idea of fertility is often suggested because of the constant emphasis on the womb, the occasional presence of children,[25] and the association between these objects and some important religious figures related to fertility and childbirth (such as Abu Mena) in Late Antique Egypt.

This element also provides further evidence for the hypothesis of a busy and thriving female pilgrimage practice in Late Antique Egypt, which is already supported by literary, archeological, and architectural data.[26] In fact, it is logical to suppose that a significant proportion of pilgrims were actually women if we consider the relevance of the long process of conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing for women and in ancient society in general. The next step is to consider that those pilgrim women were not virgins or widows but wives,

19 Frankfurter, "Female figurines," 203.

20 Laslo Török, *Coptic Antiquities* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1993), 31.

21 Engemann, *Abu Mina*, 120. The term "souvenir" is not to be confused with the modern idea of an object which reminds us of a vacation but should be interpreted as referring to a holy object providing the owner with access to divine power.

22 Frankfurter, "Female figurines," 202–3.

23 Amy Wilson, "Female Terracotta Figurines from Kom Wasit and Kom al-Ahmer, Egypt," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 45 (2018–2019): 120.

24 Lara Weiss, "The Consumption of Religion in Roman Karanis," *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1, no. 1 (2015): 84–86.

25 Grace Stafford, "Evidence for Female Pilgrims at Abu Mina," in *Transmitting and Circulating the Late Antique and Byzantine Worlds*, eds. Mirela Ivanova, and Hugh Jeffery (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 32.

26 Stafford, "Evidence," 11–13.

probably dealing with fertility issues or simply hoping to safely survive the experience of maternity through the intervention of a saint.[27]

From this perspective, the search for the function of these items is definitely a difficult task, especially if we consider their diversity as illustrated above. But what seems to be likely, is that they belong to a ritual world of "*gesture, pilgrimage and symbolism addressing women's' maternity in all its stages, desperation and hope.*"[28]

FIGURINES OF MANQABAD: A POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION

As regards the figurines deriving from Manqabad monastery, we can try to suggest an interpretation if we consider the context of their discovery. These items, in fact, derive from the 1991/1992 excavation undertaken by Egyptian archeologists in the western part of the Central Sector of the site (Fig. 11), which has not yet been the object of a systematic investigation by the Italian-Egyptian mission.

It is worth noting that a few (4/5) terracotta figurines depicting animals (birds) and male figures (shepherds) were also collected in this area, as well as interesting ceramic items such as censers, decorated lamps, and painted fine wares, all documented by the writer in 2019 in the el-Ashmunein warehouse, and currently the object of further study.

The Central Sector includes remains of monastic housing units and is adjacent to a peculiar building: a large bath-like complex of extraordinary dimensions. This monumental structure, discovered and partially excavated in 1986, features a *calidarium* (with brick *suspensurae*), a *frigidarium*, and several columns with Corinthian capitals still *in situ*,[29] hardly comparable to the smaller buildings usually devoted to baths in other Christian complexes in Egypt, with the sole exception of the impressive baths of the Sanctuary of Abu Mena (southeast of Alexandria). This has led to speculation about the general nature of the Manqabad monastery and to the hypothesis that it may also have been a pilgrimage center, whose collective baths were intended mainly for pilgrims and were used for purification purposes or in healing practices.[30]

27 Stafford, "Evidence," 36–37.

28 Frankfurter, "Terracotta Figurines," 136.

29 Rosanna Pirelli, and Paola Buzi, "Il progetto italo-egiziano di studio e conservazione del 'monastero di Abba Nefer' a Manqabad (Asyut)," in *Ricerche Italiane e Scavi in Egitto* (*vol. VI*), ed. Rosanna Pirelli (Il Cairo: istituto Italiano di Cultura al Cairo, 2013), 203–4.

30 In order to verify this supposition, the archeological documentation already collected will be enriched with a complete archeological survey and excavation to be conducted hopefully within the next field season.

If, as suggested, the baths were mainly used for rituals related to pilgrimage, it is very likely that they represented one of the major economic resources of the Manqabad community, contributing notably to the site's general wealth and cultural level and the high standard of the craftsmen employed, already evidenced by the texts, sculptures, and paintings that decorated the architectural spaces of private and common buildings.

The hypothesis of a pilgrimage center can also be supported by the occurrence at Manqabad of some hundreds of complete and fragmentary small pottery cups with stamped motifs (trademarks?) on the inner surface with no parallel so far,[31] possibly a locally produced variety related to rituals involving (holy) water. The distribution of these findings on the site is widely spread all over the main areas of occupation, with a particular concentration in the housing units of the Central Sector and in the pottery dump area at the southern end of the site.

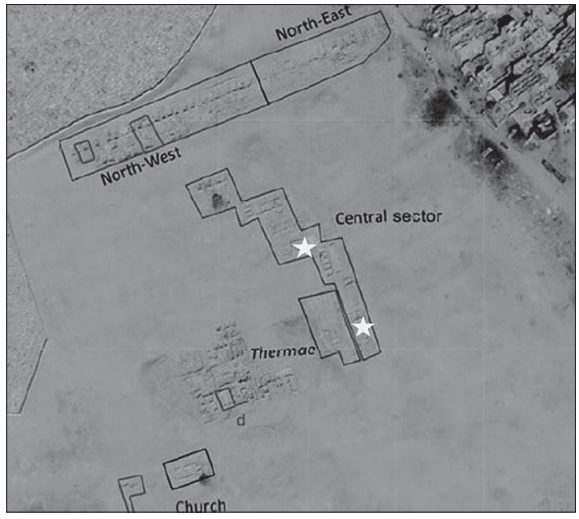


Fig. 11 Map of Manqabad site with the points where the figurines were found (yellow stars) © UNIOR.

Moreover, abundant evidence of visitors/pilgrims who came to Manqabad has been collected on the site, mostly in form of written prayers found on pottery fragments, or graffiti on walls. Unfortunately, no indication about the

[31] Incordino, *Pottery of Manqabad*, 18, 21–24, 55, 58, 80–81.

eponymous saint of the site can be inferred from these texts so far,[32] so more in-depth analysis of Coptic, Greek, and Arabic historic, geographic, hagiographic, and liturgical texts is planned in order to provide new information on this topic in the near future.

Finally, another important possible indicator of pilgrimage-related activities on the site is the recent discovery of a large kiln-like structure just outside the southern wall of the monastery (Figure 12), briefly surveyed by the Italian-Egyptian mission in 2020. In fact, thanks to the discovery of waste material related to pottery production in the area, the presence of a workshop for ceramic production at Manqabad seems well grounded, even if only few trenches have been opened there so far. More in-depth archeological investigation planned for the next field season can probably confirm this hypothesis with new evidence.



Fig.12 Manqabad kiln-like structure, ©UNIOR.

According to the pottery types identified so far at the site[33] (African Red Slip Wares, Gaza and Palestinian amphorae, Late Roman 1 and 5 amphorae), it is also possible to suggest that this workshop didn't only satisfy the needs of the local monastic community but also supported more extensive long-distance trade.

[32] Notwithstanding its large dimensions and wealth, the toponym Manqabad / "*Mankapot*" is rarely attested in ancient textual sources, while popular tradition and an Arabic text in Kufic script relate the monastery to Saint Onophrious. However, except for the Arabic text, no ancient source relates the place to this saint. More likely, Jeremias could have been the original eponymous saint before the monastery was dedicated to Onophrius, according to the substantial evidence found in situ related to this figure.

[33] Rosanna Pirelli et al., "The Italian-Egyptian Project of Study and Conservation of the Monastery of Abba Nefer at Manqabad 2018 – 5th Campaign," *Newsletter Archeologia (CISA)* 10 (2019): 356–57.

The large size of the kiln structure (43×18 m), its multi-vaulted roof and several openings, and the presence of mud-brick walls running from the inside to the outside (creating an open courtyard) are only a few of the interesting and (so far) unparalleled characteristics which suggest extensive and very standardized production, consistent with the hypothesis of a pilgrimage center. In fact, as previously mentioned, the pilgrimage shrine of Abu Mena also contains a large workshop for the production of specific pottery vessels and figurines.

The large size and complexity of the kiln-like structure at Manqabad is even more significant when compared to the relatively smaller kiln structures, or pottery dumps, found in other Egyptian monastic contexts, even of large dimensions. As a consequence, the furnace could represent the most tangible evidence of "industrial" crafting activity at the site, whose existence can be explained as resulting from a high demand for "holy" objects related to the religious importance of this monastery.

All the aforementioned observations lead us to suggest that the presence of the female figurines in the assemblage of Manqabad could be interpreted as evidence of different rituals performed in a quite important religious center, probably related to the issue of fertility and maternity. In fact, the context in which these figurines were found also points in this direction, since it is not funerary or related to the private domestic sphere but linked to a public area of the monastery (the bath-like structure), possibly visited by worshippers who were temporarily hosted in the housing units.

Even in this respect, some analogies with the Abu Mena shrine can be traced, considering that there too several housing units devoted to pilgrims have been documented, possibly also divided by gender.[34]

CONCLUSION

The high quality of the architectural, decorative, artifactual, and textual evidence found at Manqabad points to a rich and cultured community, part of a vast network of relationships both within Egypt and with the wider world. Further analysis of the material culture, together with the informative support to be derived from the new planned analysis of the rich textual corpus and paintings from the site, will hopefully provide new insights in this respect too.

Moreover, the urban context of Manqabad represents the best foundation for the identification of social groups and activities, through the analysis of a stratified material culture in order to reconstruct the specific social and eco-

[34] Stafford, "Evidence," 25.

nomic role of the site, which certainly went far beyond its immediately surrounding territory.

In this respect in particular, the analysis of the female figurines may add important information about the common users of the monastery: in fact, if the pilgrimage center hypothesis is confirmed for Manqabad, it would likely indicate that the eponymous saint of the site has an association with fertility/maternity issues as well, as in the case of the Abu Mena shrine.

At this stage, the idea that Manqabad could represent the southern counterpart of the northern sanctuary of Abu Mena is tempting, but only further investigation in the Central Sector and in the southern pottery production area at Manqabad can add more data to confirm this hypothesis.

All the pottery items from the site are going to be the object of a new and combined approach using technological analysis of different production traditions, archaeometry, stylistic study, and the analysis of organic content, which can yield insights on how the organization and management of a vast production system in Late Antiquity worked, which social groups were involved, which materials were used, from which sources they were derived, and which were the different firing techniques and types of fuel used to meet the needs of this community.

The connected study of pottery and samples of raw materials (geochemical analysis of local clays) will be particularly effective in detecting the cultural and technological choices made by the ancient potters, allowing social boundaries to become more visible even in the class of material culture par excellence: pottery.

Since one of the main issues debated is the identification of the kind of fuel used in the process, this project will hopefully give more information in this respect, considering the fundamental absence of wood in ancient (and modern) Egypt. Many hypotheses have recently been suggested, including waste from agriculture and food-related activities, but only the investigation of an original context, like Manqabad, can provide fresh data.

Another interesting aspect of the planned work will be the first application to Egyptian Late Antique pottery of the hypothesis that the degree of standardization of pottery production may be assessed through the analysis of raw material, manufacturing techniques, form, dimension, and surface decoration through metric variability.

These innovative methods will also be applied to the further study of the terracotta figurines of Manqabad, focusing on comparative data useful for the reconstruction, and possibly replication, of a *chaîne opératoire*, which, in conjunction with the archaeological data in context, can be of fundamental importance in discovering links between the production activities and sociality. The

planned analysis will be supported by detailed digital surveys, which describe more fully the peculiarities of ceramic production. The preliminary application of this method has already shown it to be the most suitable for the study of the assemblage from Manqabad (from the warehouse of el-Ashmunein and Shutby and from the investigated areas of the site), since nowadays (as for the last 30 years) the Egyptian authorities do not allow the export of archeological material, thus preventing easy analysis outside the country, and so a practical field-based procedure of ceramic analysis is essential. Such a procedure also has the advantage that is can be easily used in different contexts.

The possible local production of terracotta figurines would allow Manqabad to be added to the very short list of known manufacturing centers of Late Antique Egypt, providing updated information about the groups involved in the serial production process, their relationship with the activities of the adjacent monastic community and village, and their involvement in the possible production of souvenirs for pilgrims.

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