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## ANCESTOR BUST تماثيل السلف النصفية

*Karen Exell*

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## ANCESTOR BUST

### تماثيل السلف النصفية

Karen Exell

Büste  
Buste de laraires

*Ancestor busts (also known as anthropoid busts) date to the New Kingdom. The majority of extant examples are from Deir el-Medina. They are most commonly interpreted as belonging to the cult of the recently deceased—that is, the ancestor cult.*

تماثيل السلف النصفية المعروفة أيضا كالتماثيل النصفية الشبيهة بالإنسان تعود إلى الدولة الحديثة. أغلب الأمثلة الموجودة تأتي من دير المدينة. غالباً ما يعتقد أن هذه التماثيل تعود إلى طائفة المتوفين حديثاً أو طائفة السلف.

**T**here are 150 extant examples of so-called ancestor busts and approximately ten extant representations of the busts on stelae and figured ostraca (Friedman 1985: 82; Harrington 2003: 71; Meskell 2003: 44; fig.3). The category “ancestor bust” presents a typological range from small amuletic examples (Keith-Bennett 1981b; figs. 1 - 2) to limestone statues up to 0.5 m tall, though the majority are statues of approximately 0.23 – 0.25 m in height (Harrington 2003: 74 – 75; figs. 1 - 2). A bust consists of a head, with or without a tripartite wig, set on a base that was sometimes decorated with a *wsh*-collar and/or a pendant lotus. The base has been compared to the top of a stela (Friedman 1985: 92 - 94), the top section of a wrapped torso, or an anthropoid coffin (Macy Roth 1988: 149; Romano 1999: 282). There are a number of double busts, of which one head wears a wig and one does not (Keith-Bennett 1981b: figs. 15 - 17). A large proportion of the busts are made from limestone, some with traces of paint (figs. 4 and 5); there are also examples in sandstone, granite, clay, and wood.

Approximately half of the busts are provenanced to Deir el-Medina (Harrington

2003: 71; Meskell 2003: 44), the rest, to sites throughout Egypt—Tell el-Muqdam in the Delta, Saqqara, Kom Medinet Ghurab, Sedment, Amarna, Abydos, Asfun, and Sesebi (Keith-Bennett 1981b)—with a number of unprovenanced examples extant in museum collections. The earliest known example has been dated to the reign of Amenhotep II (Harrington 2003: 72), and the busts remained in use into the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (but see Keith-Bennett 1981a: 49 for a broader chronological span). A small number of the Deir el-Medina busts were recorded as having come from houses, where they may have sat in niches found in the walls of the first or second room (Friedman 1985: 82 - 83; Meskell 2002: 114), but the majority seem to have come from other parts of the site—the tombs, chapels, and the vicinity of the temple (Keith-Bennett 1981a: 48). At Amarna one example may have come from a workshop (Keith-Bennett 1981b: 52 [Am 1]). Unfinished examples from Deir el-Medina suggest that the busts were made locally.



Figure 1. Small (78 mm) wooden ancestor bust without a wig, from Deir el-Medina, 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, reign of Akhenaten.



Figure 2. Large (262 mm) limestone ancestor bust with wig and modius, possibly from Deir el-Medina, late 18<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty.



Figure 3. Limestone stela depicting the Lady of the House, Henut, offering incense and water to an ancestor bust. From Deir el-Medina.

The presumed use and meaning of the busts have been influenced by the assumption of a predominantly domestic context and hampered by the fact that only four of the 150 examples are inscribed (Keith-Bennett 1981a: 48 - 50). Friedman (1985) has argued that the busts constituted the focal point of the ancestor cult rites, thereby continuing the tradition, documented since the Old Kingdom, of the living presenting offerings to the recently deceased. According to this interpretation, the busts represented or embodied the *sh-jkr*, the “excellent spirits,” to whom the *sh-jkr n R*-stelae were also dedicated (Demarée 1983). The anepigraphic busts at Deir el-Medina were identified by associated inscribed objects, such as the headrests, offering tables, and *sh-jkr n R*-stelae found alongside them. A variant suggestion (Harrington 2003) argues that the majority of the busts represent women (based on the presence of the tripartite wig) and form the counterpoint to the *sh-jkr n R*-stelae, which are almost wholly dedicated to men. These interpretations also place the busts within the network of artifacts associated with



Figure 4. Unprovenanced wooden bust wearing a wig.

the ancestor cult, centered on the concept that the recently deceased could impact—positively or negatively—on the living. Included in this network of artifacts are the Letters to the Dead, which gave voice to the concept. The busts were tangible intermediaries between this world and the world of the supernatural, of the dead and the gods, and provided magical protection for the living (Meskell 2003: 46)—protection being perhaps especially pertinent at Deir el-Medina, where many of the men worked away from the village much of the time. However, it is possible that the busts had additional cultic functions that have yet to be defined (Keith-Bennett 1981a: 50). The anonymous nature of the busts would have allowed them changing contextual identifications and functions. “Anthropoid bust” may be a more appropriate term for these artifacts.



Figure 5. Small limestone (?) bust, with traces of blue paint, from Kom Medinet Ghurab.

## *Bibliographic Notes*

Keith-Bennett (1981a, 1981b) provides a useful catalog and brief pertinent discussion of possible interpretations, with illustrations. Friedman (1985) discusses the Deir el-Medina examples, and her interpretation of the busts as related to the ancestor cult has been especially influential in the following works on the subject.

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## *Image Credits*

Figure 1 Small (78 mm) wooden ancestor bust without a wig, from Deir el-Medina, 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, reign of Akhenaten. Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 53.246. Image source: Romano 1999, p. 282 [263].

- Figure 2 Large (262 mm) limestone ancestor bust with wig and modius, possibly from Deir el-Medina, late 18<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 54.1. Image source: Romano 1999, p. 282 [264].
- Figure 3 Limestone stela depicting the Lady of the House, Henut, offering incense and water to an ancestor bust. From Deir el-Medina. Image source: Harrington 2003, p. 77, fig. 5.
- Figure 4 Unprovenanced wooden bust wearing a wig (Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London, UC 16550).  
Image source: Digital Egypt  
<http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/religion/ancestor.html>
- Figure 5 Small limestone (?) bust, with traces of blue paint, from Kom Medinet Ghurab (Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London, UC 16031).  
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