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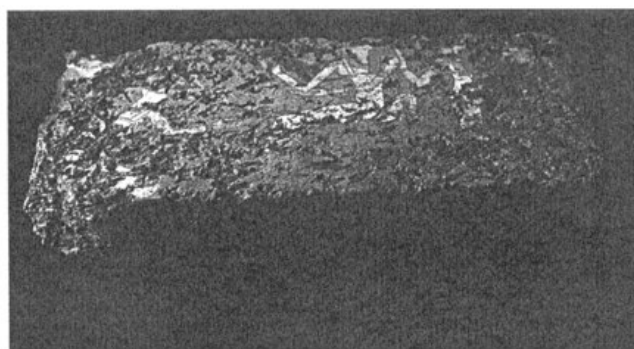


A decorated birth-brick from South Abydos

An account of the ongoing work of the Pennsylvania-Yale-IFA Expedition at South Abydos was included in *EA* 17 (pp.8-10). The expedition has recently discovered a unique object during the excavation of the mayor's residence. **Josef Wegner** describes the find.

After over a century of excavation in Egypt it is a rare occurrence to discover artefacts that have not been already recovered in one form or another. Such, however, was the privilege, during the 2001 season, of the Pennsylvania-Yale-Institute of Fine Arts, New York Expedition at South Abydos. During work in the mayor's residence in the Middle Kingdom town named *Wah-Sut*, a remarkable decorated mudbrick was exposed. The brick is covered with polychrome painted decoration depicting scenes related to childbirth. The object is a magical birth-brick, known to the ancient Egyptians as a *meskhenet* and deified as a goddess with the same name. It has long been known from Egyptian literary and representational sources that the standard practice in ancient Egypt was for women to give birth while squatting on a pair of birth-bricks. However, hitherto actual birth-bricks have not been found. The example from *Wah-Sut* is the first object of its kind to be identified from ancient Egypt. It dates to the second half of the Thirteenth Dynasty, c. 1,750-1,650 BC.

Measuring 35cm long and 17cm wide, the brick was originally decorated on all six sides. Five decorated faces (the base and four edge scenes) are preserved. The scene on the brick's base depicts a seated mother clad in a linen dress and holding a newborn baby in her arms. The male baby is shown with his head supported from behind by the mother's hand. The mother is flanked by two other female figures. One stands behind the mother, placing a hand on her shoulder in an attitude of comfort, while the second kneels before the mother with arms outstretched as if about to deliver the newborn child. Behind each of the female



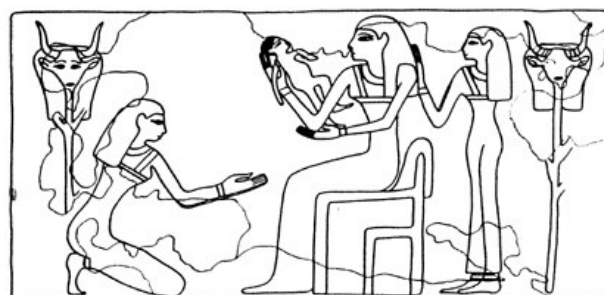
Side view of the birth-brick

figures is an unusual divine standard composed of a wooden branch or trimmed tree trunk surmounted by a head of Hathor, the goddess most closely associated with motherhood.

The Hathor standards symbolise the magical presence of the goddess, implying that the mother and the women flanking her are both emulating and invoking Hathor at the moment of birth. A remarkable feature of this birth scene is that turquoise blue is employed not only for the hair of the Hathor heads but also for the two female figures and the mother herself. Turquoise blue is a colour closely associated with Hathor as well as with divine beings in general. This use of colour appears to have been intended to express an inherent divinity attached to the mother at the moment of childbirth. Thus, the identities of the mortal mother and of the goddess Hathor appear to have merged briefly at the moment of delivery - in the same way, for example, that a deceased individual became 'an Osiris', a mother during childbirth assumed at-



Photograph of the scene on the base of the birth brick



Line drawing of the scene on the base of the birth-brick



Detail of the depiction of a serval cat on the edge of the brick

tributes of Hathor, in a sense herself becoming 'a Hathor'.

Decorating the edges of the birth-brick are scenes of an explicitly magical nature. These depict a series of divine creatures, some anthropomorphic and some zoomorphic. Scenes of this genre are known from another type of magical implement of the Middle Kingdom: apotropaic wands of ivory or bone (sometimes called 'magical knives'). The birth-brick scenes represent larger painted versions of the scenes on the wands and demonstrate conclusively that the principal use of the magical wands was in rituals associated with the birthing process.

The scenes both on the wands and on the edges of the Abydos birth-brick can be understood to depict the allies and enemies of Re, the sun-god, at the time of his daily rebirth on the eastern horizon. One of the creatures shown, in wonderful detail, is a desert serval cat (*Felis serval*), which was closely associated with Re. On the birth-brick it was probably intended to represent an incarnation of the sun-god himself. Many of the other creatures depicted are defenders of the young sun-god against his enemies and the chaotic forces that may beset him in his most vulnerable state. The sides of the brick preserve portions of 13 other creatures including a cobra, a baboon, leonine figures, the goddess Beset, and a scene of a human enemy undergoing decapitation. The intent of these scenes can be understood as a form of 'sympathetic magic' whereby the mythical protection of the vulnerable newborn sun-god is transferred to an actual human baby during and immediately following childbirth. It is an interesting fact that numerous infant burials occur in the rear parts of the houses at *Wah-Sut*. The need for such magical protection during childbirth was undoubtedly rooted in the high infant mortality rate and very real physical threats to the survival of newborn children.

The birth-brick from *Wah-Sut* was found inside a section of the mayor's residence which underwent extensive renovations during the Thirteenth Dynasty and which had particular female associations. Throughout the area are clay sealings impressed by a scarab seal naming a king's daughter, Reniseneb, who appears to



Scene showing the decapitation of a human enemy

have lived in the residence during the second half of the Thirteenth Dynasty and was probably married to one of the mayors. It is intriguing to speculate that the birth-brick may in fact have belonged to this very woman, although it could equally well have belonged to other female residents of the mayor's household.

Another interesting feature of the Abydos birth-brick is that the upper face (which originally would have been the most important visible surface) is crumbled away. This is the surface which would have supported the foot of a woman squatting during delivery. The damage to the upper part of the brick may well have resulted from its use (and that of its companion) for numerous deliveries. Since many of the Middle Kingdom magical wands have short hieroglyphic texts that name specific women, with spells for their protection, the now-lost upper surface of the birth-brick was probably painted with the name and titles of the woman who owned and used the brick, accompanied by spells for her protection.



Detail of the mother holding her baby in the base scene

□ Josef Wegner is Professor of Egyptian Archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania and Assistant Curator of the Egyptian Section, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. The excavations of the Senwosret III mortuary complex and town of *Wah-Sut* at South Abydos are part of the combined Pennsylvania-Yale-IFA Expedition to Abydos under the general directorship of David O'Connor and William Kelly Simpson. All photographs by E Jean Walker. Line drawing by the author.