

Fertility Figurines and Protection in Ancient Egypt

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Children were considered a blessing in ancient Egypt; they filled homes with joy and provided a future for their parents in both the land of the living and the land of the dead. However, many hopeful couples had difficulties building and sustaining a family. In the ancient world, pregnancy and childbirth were exceptionally dangerous. Since a healthy family was both a social and spiritual necessity, the Egyptians employed what we often call “fertility figurines” to help secure fruitful and safe reproductive lives.

Fertility was of immense importance to ancient Egyptians.¹ Numerous medical texts note tests for fertility in women, and Egyptian literature tells us that creating children was the primary goal of a married couple. The first son was obligated to take on his father’s titles and care for his parents in old age. Most importantly, children would perform their parents’ burial rites and maintain their tombs, aiding them on their journey to the afterlife.²

Though children were integral to family life, pregnancy, childbirth, and infancy posed serious risks. Pregnancies could end in miscarriage, early/late term deliveries, and stillbirths. Babies and their mothers suffered bodily damage and death from protracted labor, malnourishment, infection, and illness. It is estimated that only half of the children born in ancient Egypt made it past the age of five. Often attributing the cause of reproductive threats to the spiritual realm (harm from demons, the dead, the evil eye, foreigners, etc.), the ancient Egyptians took extensive measures to protect their fertility.

One method of protection was the use of fertility figurines. These small objects, often made of terracotta, were molded in the shape of a woman. They could be shown as the figure alone or on a bed; when depicted with children, the child was shown on the side of the mother, often nursing.⁸ These objects could be placed in domestic, funerary, and divine spaces to ensure fertility.³ In fact, the ancient Egyptians left these models on domestic altars, at ancestors’ tombs, and in the spaces of their gods to petition for a productive sex life, a safe pregnancy, and a healthy child. Hundreds of fertility figurines of this type have been discovered throughout Egypt, demonstrating their popularity. They appear in many qualities and materials, suggesting use regardless of socioeconomic status.⁴

Children were highly valued and desired in ancient Egypt. They played many significant roles in domestic and spiritual life. Unfortunately, pregnancy, childbirth, and infancy were challenging and dangerous. Many women and children died or were harmed, and the Egyptians had to look to their ancestors and gods for help. Fertility figurines were one powerful way the Egyptians asked for assistance. These practices allowed a sense of security and helped the Egyptians feel less helpless when dealing with situations entirely out of their control. Though these figures are no longer used, dire circumstances still elicit a desire for divine intervention.

¹ Jabulani Tadeus Mbokazi, “Aspects of the Family in Ancient Egypt” (University of Stellenbosch, 2010), 18.

² Gay Robins, “Women and Children in Peril: Pregnancy Childbirth and Mortality in Ancient Egypt,” *Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt* 5 (1994): 24-26.

³ Elizabeth Waraksa, *Female Figurines (Pharaonic Period)*, ed. Willeke Wendrich (Los Angeles, 2008), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4dg0d57b>.

⁴ Joanne Backhouse, “Scènes de Gynécées’ Figured Ostraca from New Kingdom Egypt: Iconography and Intent” (University of Liverpool, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxrq1dt>.

Further Reading!

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