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Satirical Imagery of the Ramesside Period:  
A Socio-historical Narrative

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During a short period in New Kingdom Egypt (1540-1069 BCE) images of an interesting nature were produced in a small workers' village called The Place of Truth.<sup>1</sup> These images featured anthropomorphized animals in the roles of humans. In this imaginative world mice become noblewomen, foxes play lutes, cats are geese herdsman, and lions play board games. These satirical drawings, as they are referred to, were created by the same artists who made the tombs in the Valley of the Kings and make fun of the rigid and formal decoration of these spaces. However, these images were more than comic relief for the artists who made them, they also reflect the social and political atmosphere in Egypt from the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty and onwards. The Ramesside period (1295-1070 BCE) was a time of diminishing pharaonic authority and growing economic uncertainty. The first organized worker strike in history would occur in this village during the period in which satirical drawings have been dated. These images create a unique opportunity for examining the historical moment at the time of their creation and give us insight into the everyday lives of the workers who lived in The Place of Truth. This paper will investigate the integral social and historical elements that facilitated the creation of satirical imagery during the Ramesside period.

Although Ancient Egyptian Art has been examined and analyzed for many centuries now, this study was mainly focused on the imperial arts and architecture and it has only been in the recent past that Egyptologists have begun to examine art of the lower classes of Egypt. One of the most informative locations in the study of non-imperial arts is the village of Deir el-Medina. This small conglomeration of houses located across the Nile River from Thebes<sup>2</sup> served as living quarters for the stone workers, craftsman and artisans that created the tombs in the

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<sup>1</sup> Present day Deir el-Medina

<sup>2</sup> Present day Luxor

Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. It is considered to be one of the most important sites for ascertaining knowledge of everyday life for the average Egyptian citizen.<sup>3</sup> A significant contributing factor to the historical wealth of this site is the fact that many of the inhabitants were literate, and therefore left a wealth of written material on daily occurrences. According to A. G. McDowell, “This [literacy] reached a peak in the Twentieth Dynasty, when it has been estimated that at least 40 per cent. . . learned to read and write.”<sup>4</sup> This number may seem egregiously low to us today, but at this time Egypt’s literacy rate was less than 1 percent of the entire population.<sup>5</sup> The education taking place here was far more rigorous simply because the inhabitants were responsible for painting and carving hieroglyphs into the sacred royal tombs.

The members of this community were part of the lower classes but because of their involvement in the production of the Pharaohs’ and Queens’ sacred tombs they had an interesting relationship to the royal family. Eugen Strouhal claims, “They belonged to the pharaoh himself, and the vizier administered them on his behalf. For the most part they were tied all their lives to their place of work.”<sup>6</sup> Although this may seem like a form of servitude close to slavery, the workers here were free to do as they pleased in their free time, were provided with a home that their family could live in and received a hefty grain ration in return for their services. In fact, the workmen received roughly 215 kilograms of grain every month, which was more than a family would need to or be able to eat.<sup>7</sup> This led to a system of bartering, wherein community members

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Meskell. *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.), 38.

<sup>4</sup> A. G. McDowell *Village Life in Ancient Egypt: Laundry Lists and Love Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>5</sup> “Literacy,” *The British Museum*, accessed October 12, 2016.  
<http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/themes/writing/literacy.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Eugen Strouhal, *Life of the Ancient Egyptians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 187.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

could trade their extra rations for goods such as livestock, foodstuffs, oil and clothing. Not all the craftsman and workers were able to work on the tombs at the same time; stonemasons were the first to be employed and plasterers and artists came later, after the structure was in place. This meant that the craftsmen had a significant amount of free time, which the artists used to hone their painting and drawing skills

Over the 300 year history of this village thousands of art pieces and written works were produced, giving us rich insight into the day to day life of its inhabitants. Although papyrus was used for the official documents, the use of ostraca was far more common. Ostraca are either flakes of limestone or pieces of broken pottery that function as a smooth surface for writing and drawing. This was a cost effective and readily available alternative to papyrus paper and led to the production of art and writing of a personal nature. Examples include: "...letters, records of economic transactions and legal disputes, testaments, magical spells, sketches, and the remains of an extensive private library, to name only a few examples."<sup>8</sup> This wealth of private literature was also accompanied by drawings and sketches by students and masters. It is here that we begin to see a divide between public and private works of art. Some ostraca are more spontaneously painted and show animals and humans in uncharacteristic roles. These drawings and paintings often figure animals performing human tasks, providing commentary on social and political events.

A salient example of this type of painting was discovered in Deir el-Medina and is referred to as the *Cat and Mouse Ostrakon*<sup>9</sup>. It was made sometime between 1295 and 1070 BCE, which encompasses the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> dynasties of Egypt. This era is also known as the

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<sup>8</sup> McDowell, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Refer to Figure 1

Ramesside period, due to the rule of Ramses I through Ramses XI during this time. This ostraca features no human figures, instead they have been replaced by a cat serving an enthroned mouse. This image works in two ways: first, it upsets the laws of nature by portraying the mouse as the dominant animal and the cat as the meek servant and second, it parodies a common depiction of the relationship between royalty and servant. The workers at Deir el-Medina were well versed in the traditional, formal scenes used in the decoration of tombs and this ostraca can be seen as a reaction to the formality of tomb painting. It has been suggested that this drawing represents an animal story or fable: “If so, however, it was entirely an oral tradition. Virtually no trace of such stories has been found in the extensive body of surviving texts, which include literary, moralizing, and satirical works.”<sup>10</sup> Considering the wealth of written material that has been extracted from Deir el-Medina and other sites this theory seems unlikely. Instead, it is more probable that this drawing is an exercise in satire, a genre not unknown in Egyptian literature.

Although the *Cat and Mouse Ostrakon* may seem less skilled in execution than the works of funerary art in the Valley of the Kings, it is important to remember that these drawings were private and not intended for the eyes of the public. It is most likely that they were sketches made by the workers of Deir el-Medina in their spare time. This specific ostraca was not adorned with any pigment, which lends credit to this theory. Jaromir Malek argues, “There is little doubt that these drawings were made by the same men who were involved in the decoration of royal tombs: they are superbly fluent and economical in the use of the brush.”<sup>11</sup> The fine detail of the mouse’s robe and the overall softness of the line supports Malek’s assertion. These drawings may have

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<sup>10</sup> T. G. H. James and Edna R. Russmann. *Eternal Egypt: Masterworks of Ancient Art from the British Museum* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 167.

<sup>11</sup> Jaromir Malek. *Egyptian Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 334.

been a way to escape from the rigidity and meticulous planning of tomb imagery and allowed the artists to show off their ability to draw naturalistically. The organization of this drawing has a striking resemblance to tomb images that honor gods and pharaohs.

The *Vignette of Kha and Meryt Before Osiris*<sup>12</sup>, from *The Book of the Dead* found in their tomb, contains many similar structural elements to the *Cat and Mouse Ostrakon*. Osiris is seated on a throne similar but more elaborate than the stool the mouse resides on in the ostrakon drawing. However, the mouse is not deified, just elevated in both stature and status in comparison to the cat. The mouse is actually of high rank, as signified by her clothing.<sup>13</sup> She wears a lotus flower on her head, a symbol of her refinement. She also holds a bowl and flower in her paws, a sign that she need not use her hands for work. The *Osiris Vignette* also contains lotus flowers, but as a symbol of rebirth. As with most depictions of gods Osiris is regal and idealized in appearance, which clashes forcefully with the corpulent stomach and hairiness of the lady mouse on the ostrakon. Both images include figures of lower status honoring those of higher status: the cat and the figure of Kha are more diminutive and size and possess less adornment, bringing gifts to show their fealty. This ostrakon blatantly subverts this natural order, which is further emphasized by the cat's small size, hunched appearance and the placement of his tail between his legs. This witty depiction pokes fun at both the established forms for depicting the royalty-servant relationship while defying the hierarchy of nature, suggesting that the workers at Deir el-Medina were certainly aware of the political and social conditions playing out during

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<sup>12</sup> Refer to Figure 2

<sup>13</sup> Richard Bolton. *The Art of Ancient Egypt: A Portfolio - Masterpieces from the Brooklyn Museum* (New York: New Press, 1996), 15.

their lives, to the point that they were analyzing and creating artworks based on their observations.

In a similar vein to the *Cat and Mouse Ostrakon* is the *Cat, Mouse and Captive Ostrakon*<sup>14</sup>. This pigmented drawing is dated during the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty (1196-1070 BCE) and also originates from Deir el-Medina. The inclusion of pigment in this image gives it more animation than the previous ostrakon. During the New Kingdom, in which these satirical works were made, continual military excursions into Syria and Palestine became the driving force for Egypt's prosperity and the ultimate expression of authority for the Ramesside Kings. The limestone relief, *Ramses II Smiting Captives*,<sup>15</sup> is exemplary of the types of militaristic imagery found in temples and tombs during this period. The image of Ramses II has a twofold purpose: first, as a way to assert his authority as ruler of Egypt and second, to insure that the citizens of Egypt knew their place within the hierarchy of society. In the ostrakon image we see a prince, ascertained from his lock of hair, being held captive by a mouse and a cat. It is unclear what the boy has done to deserve his captivity but it seems that punishment is imminent. What is interesting about these satirical images is their blatant disregard of hierarchy in nature and society. Francesco Tiradritti asserts, "These scenes are both caricature and satire. Through the subversion of the natural order of things a criticism of behavior and customs is implied."<sup>16</sup> Only in this invented world could a mouse or a cat hold a human boy captive. These images allowed the workmen to

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<sup>14</sup> Refer to Figure 3

<sup>15</sup> Refer to Figure 4

<sup>16</sup> Araldo De Luca and Francesco Tiradritti. *The Cairo Museum: Masterpieces of Egyptian Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 271.

break free from the restraints of order and express their discontent with a pyramidal system of social organization.

Although papyrus was usually reserved for official documents because of its expense, there is one artwork referred to as the *Satirical Papyrus with Animals Behaving like People*<sup>17</sup> that uses this material. It is dated to 1150 BCE, in keeping with previously mentioned works, and was also found in Deir el-Medina. One of the largest satirical works, this image depicts animals personified as humans once again. What is different about this work is the incredible attention to detail and color choice which we don't see developed to this point in other ostraca. This object's value should not be overlooked because of its comic subject matter, someone clearly spent a lot of time on this image, carefully detailing every animal and applying color. Common tropes of satirical images are represented here and hierarchies are complicated. Some of the scenes featured are: a lion playing a board game with a gazelle, a fox playing a flute while herding goats, a hyena carrying a bag slung over his shoulder, and a cat herding geese with a type of shepherd's hook. It is imperative that the animals fill the roles of their human counterparts completely, so imperative that the animals' legs and arms are bent in positions completely impossible under normal circumstances. The cat with the shepherd's hook even holds a gosling, albeit precariously. This papyrus has an organizational scheme similar to images of funerary processions, illustrating the artist's ability to paint with traditional elements of funerary art while breaking away from the customary subject matter.

The move towards parody and satire reveals the growing disapproval of the social and political atmosphere by the artists at Deir el-Medina. The Ramesside period is characterized by

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<sup>17</sup> Refer to Figure 5

increasing intervals of war and conquest. According to B.G. Trigger, “The early Eighteenth Dynasty kings were true war-leaders, directing and often personally participating in major campaigns, establishing a tradition that continued to be an ideologically potent convention...”<sup>18</sup> Although these campaigns kept Egypt’s economy afloat during the New Kingdom, this militaristic focus also caused the kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty and onwards to neglect their administrative responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on militaristic strategy came to a head during the rule of Ramses II. His victory in the battle of Kadesh was recorded on multiple monuments including the temples at Karnak, Luxor, Abydos and Abu Simbel.

The *Kadesh Battle Poem* supports the image of Ramses II as fearsome conqueror:

A bowman without his equal,  
 Who prevails over vast numbers.  
 Head on he charges a multitude,  
 His heart trusting his strength;  
 Stout-hearted in the hour of combat,  
 Like the flame when it consumes.  
 Firm-hearted like a bull ready for battle,  
 He heeds not all the lands combined;  
 A thousand men cannot withstand him,  
 A hundred thousand fail at his sight.<sup>20</sup>

This poem, written to commemorate Ramses II’s victory over the Hittites, suggests that the king played an integral part in the defeat of the foreigners. In all reality the king would not have played such an active role in the battle, instead scenes such as *Ramses II Smiting Captives* were used to signify his authority as ruler of Egypt. It is this disparity between historical fact and fictional depiction that the artists of Deir el-Medina expose in their satirical works.

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<sup>18</sup> B.G. Trigger, B.J. Kemp, and D. O’Connor. *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 206.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>20</sup> Mariam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 63.

The neglect of the Ramesside pharaohs came to a head during the first worker strike in recorded history. The strike occurred when the craftsman and artists at The Place of Truth discovered that the officials distributing their rations were being less than truthful about the quantity of wheat being supplied. Due to the location of Deir el-Medina and its distance from The Nile, the inhabitants depended completely on the grains and other foodstuffs provided by the pharaoh in Thebes. Although the artists were allowed to build their own houses, the land here was not fertile and therefore they were completely dependent on the timely distribution of their rations. In November of 1152 BCE<sup>21</sup>, almost all of the 60 workers at Deir el-Medina left the Valley of the Kings and refused to return after discovering that the distribution officials were corrupt and had been using a smaller sized measure for the grain, keeping the extra for themselves. The workers made a camp outside of the Valley of the Kings and although the officials tried to bribe them to return they stayed in the camp until the missing rations from the previous six months were returned.<sup>22</sup> According to Isidor Lurye, “[The strike] was clear evidence of the conflicts in ancient Egyptian society between the various strata of the free population [and] the economic chaos which afflicted the country during the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty and led to its collapse.”<sup>23</sup> After three days the rations were restored, but this would not be the last strike in The Place of Truth. Ramses III’s rule would continue to be plagued by administrative errors and corruption, something that did not go unnoticed by artists of the New Kingdom.

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<sup>21</sup> Approximately the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of Ramses III’s rule.

<sup>22</sup>John Romer. *Ancient Lives: Daily Life in Egypt of the Pharaoh*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 118-119.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in: Strouhal, *Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, 198.

The *Satirical Papyrus* is dated within two years of the worker's strike at Deir el-Medina.<sup>24</sup> Even if it is dated narrowly, this papyrus was definitely completed during the Ramesside period, as were all ostraca previously mentioned. The emergence of this new artistic genre in Ancient Egypt is linked to an intensifying distrust of the government and the degeneration of pharaonic power. N. De Garis Davies asserts, "Satire is the natural weapon of the weak. It cannot directly parry the strong, but it slips within his guard in the form of a fairy tale of the world of animals, in whose persons the sins and foibles of the great receive without offence their appropriate castigation."<sup>25</sup> Satire was used by this community of artists to voice their concerns about Egypt without fear of reprimand; these works could be passed off as simple sketches and were never publicly displayed. The artists were certainly warranted in their loss of faith in the administration of Egypt. Although the Egyptian state would continue for many successive decades, it was under the Ramesside kings that cracks in the empire began to form, widening in each successive dynasty until it shattered under Roman rule.

The artists of Deir el-Medina expressed their discontent with the government through their art, poking fun the elites and the god-like depictions of Ramesside kings. This provides us with an opportunity to appreciate an uncensored and unrestrained form of Egyptian art. The satirical artworks created by this community from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Dynasty offer rare insight into the political and social fabric of Egyptian society; these artists used satire to censure the improper administration and neglect of the Ramesside pharaohs. Curious scenes of animals acting as humans are a clear break from the rigid and meticulously planned images used

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<sup>24</sup> However, it is important to note that this art work cannot be dated finitely. Malek dates this work to ca. 1150 BCE, while Edna Russmann gives the range ca. 1295-1069 BCE.

<sup>25</sup>N. De Garis Davies. "Egyptian Drawings on Limestone Flakes." *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 4, no. 4 (1917): 234-40.

in tomb decoration. The depiction of cats bowing to mice, herding geese and holding young princes captive are certainly imaginative but they carry a meaning beyond aesthetic or humorous value. These works were born from a historical moment in which artists were critiquing and analyzing events taking place during their lifetime. The corrosion of pharaonic power led to ration shortages, which affected the workers' ability to provide for their families. Therefore, the creation of images that made fun of the regal depiction of pharaohs is not anomalous, it merely reinforces the social conditions that we know existed at this time. Satirical imagery served as a voice for the artists of Deir el-Medina, allowing them to express their opinions of the social, governmental, and political structures of New Kingdom Egypt.

Images

Figure 1\*  
*Cat and Mouse Ostrakon*  
 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, ca. 1150 BCE  
 Deir el-Medina



Figure 2\*  
*Vignette of Kha and Meryt Before Osiris*  
 18th Dynasty, ca. 1567 BCE–320 BCE  
 Deir el-Medina



Figure 3\*  
*Cat, Mouse and Captive*  
 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, ca. 1196-1070 BCE  
 Deir el-Medina



Figure 4\*  
*Ramses II Smiting Captives*  
19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, ca. 1295-1186 BCE  
Thebes

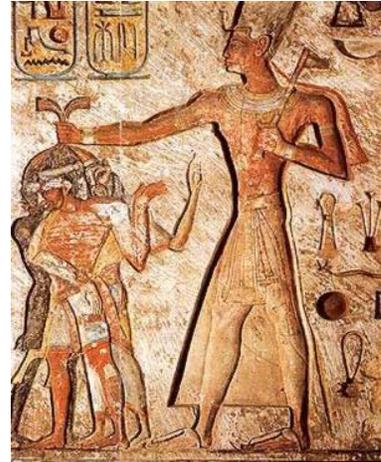


Figure 5\*  
*Satirical Papyrus with Animals Behaving like People*  
20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, ca. 1150 BCE  
Deir el-Medina



\* Image is not copyrighted

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