ABSTRACT

Figures with physical disabilities were rarely represented in ancient Egyptian art. The idealistic representation of the body was the customary rule followed by gods and kings. Predynastic and Dynastic exceptions suggest the intention to display disability by representing figures with bodies but without their arms. It is argued that the armless figures must have played a significant role, especially during funerary rituals. Predynastic examples discussed here include figures without arms related to funerary rituals, accompanying the funerary boats or deposited inside tombs to bless the deceased. Dynastic examples raise the possibility that these armless figures were divine and may have played a dedicated role in the deceased’s funerary fate. A lack of arms may have represented the state of disability itself. The armless figures may have imitated the sun god’s period of weakness during his journey through the night, perhaps playing a role that was suspended for a while, and continued in the afterlife. Their role may have been as guardians of the burial place or demons protecting the deceased. Some divine figures appear with a definite role to help the sun god in his night hours journey, as in the Amduat.

KEYWORDS

armless, disability, decorum, Neper, stump arms, Predynastic, paralysed arms, hidden arms, netherworld

INTRODUCTION

In ancient Egypt, religious anthropomorphic representations carried a message created by the artist that the audience could interpret, even as early as the Predynastic Period.¹ This art

had to adopt and follow specific rules, especially that it most likely was created to serve practical purposes. Among those rules was the representation of the body’s idealistic shape for both gods and kings. The artists rarely showed their kings or divine creatures with actual disabilities or deformities. However, this paper presents exceptions to this Egyptian cultural standard in depicting some divine figures in a full human body, but without representing the arms or intentionally ‘armless’.

The objectives of the research are to identify and analyse the armless figures from Predynastic Egypt to the end of the New Kingdom, as well as interpret them to explain their symbolic functions and meanings.

First, the figures considered in this study are specifically those represented with a full human body, yet without arms, rather than those whose arms are hidden under cloaks, such as those inside a shrine on Early Dynastic ivory tablets, mace-heads or tusk figurines. It has been suggested that they could be predecessors of mummies representing the earliest gods. The focus here lies in human representations showing enough details, even in an abbreviated style, but with no arms. During the prehistoric times, stumps were in many cases provided as a replacement. As the presented evidence proves, they were intentionally represented in this condition. As a result, this article suggests that they must have had their own purpose, symbolic, function and meaning, distinct from representations of armed humans.

A recent study identified human figures with stumps instead of arms as the most numerous, hence the worthiest of research, during the Predynastic Period rather than those with raised arms. While relating between the former and armless figures with triangular bodies painted on Predynastic pottery. The study argued that stumps replacing arms must have served a stylistic function, rather than a practical one to avoid breakage. However, this study was only based on a collection of Naqada II figures discovered by De Morgan in El-Ma’mariya. A recent study by the same author also included anthropomorphic objects, except for representations and covering only the Predynastic Period. More examples are known from later periods.

3 The goddess Rpwt is a goddess known from the Old Kingdom. She is shown as a woman. Her name is written with the determinative of an armless woman inside a shrine as . Leitz, Ch., “Rpwt”, in LÄGG IV, 662-3; Kaiser, W., “Zu den der Alten Bilddarstellungen und der Bedeutung von Rpwt, in: MDAIK 39 (1983), 274-296; WB II,415.1.
4 See for example: The mace-head of King Narmer or The label of King Djer.
7 The collection is currently at the Brooklyn Museum, New York.
8 Ordynat, R., Egyptian Predynastic Anthropomorphic Objects, 57ff.
REPRESENTATION OF ARMLESS FIGURES IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

First appearances of armless human figures date to Predynastic times, despite human figurines being rare. The better-known examples come from Upper Egypt. Dating to the Badarian (ca. 4500-4000 BC) and Naqada I-II (ca. 4000-3600 BC) Periods, women figurines [Fig. 1] are executed in the abbreviated style, with a beak-like head and stumps as arms. Their statopygia makes them comparable to Prehistoric Venus figurines. This type of armless female figurines is known as “serving figures”, made of pottery. When they exhibit stumped arms, they have a flat, hollowed head. Realistic figures are found alongside abbreviated ones, demonstrating the artist’s capability to create both, and confirming that the latter examples were deliberately styled in that fashion.

Figure 1: Female serving figures, Late Naqada I-early Naqada II [after D.C. Patch, Dawn of Egyptian Art, Cat. 95, 96].

Female figurines, including those with exaggerated features, increased in number during the early Predynastic Period. A few crude examples are made of unbaked clay and show stumps instead of arms. A female figurine also made of clay is seated inside a model boat.

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3 Hornblower, G.D., “Predynastic Women and their Successors, and their Successors”, in: JEA 15 (1929), 29-47; Wunn, I. & Grojnowski, D., The Origin of Religion in the Evolution of Humans, in Ina Wunn and Davina Grojnowski (eds.), Religious Speciation: How Religions Evolve, New Approaches to the Scientific Study of Religion, NASR 6 (2019), 223-241. Mother figurines, such as the Willendorf Venus, or other nude female figures, were known in Europe since the Upper Paleolithic, usually represented with hardly any features, emphasizing their femininity. The arms are almost always missing with these abstract features and only hold the breasts or point to the thighs or belly when represented. Their function was associated with fertility, although it is now clear that it changed when Prehistoric society changed its subsistence from hunting to agriculture. The absence of arms can be contrasted to the exaggeration of the female aspects, which is explained by the fertility function not requiring the use of arms.
4 Petrie, W.M.F. & Mace A.C., Diospolis Parva, London (1901), 33; Patch, Dawn of Egyptian Art, 117.
5 Patch, Dawn of Egyptian Art, 103.
6 Patch, Dawn of Egyptian Art, 110.
7 Patch, Dawn of Egyptian Art, fig. 33.
It does not have arms and also lacks the stumps protruding from the shoulders [Fig. 2].

Figure 2: An Armless Female Figure Seated inside a Boat Model [after El-Yahky, Gerzian Boats, pl. XXXIII.2].

Stick or reed armless figurines are known from the early Naqada Period. They continue being produced as both males and females with stumps replacing the arms in an abbreviated style.\(^2\) Decorated pottery dating to Naqada II Period shows female figurines with stump arms painted on the exterior surface. As seen in [Fig.3],\(^3\) the human figure is a female based on body characteristics.

Figure 3 [Left]: Representation of a Human Figure with Stump Arms on a Naqada II Pot [after Relke, Predynastic Figurine, 63]\(^4\)

Figure 4 [Right]: A Naqada II Pot with Wavy Handles showing Armless Figures in boat cabins [after Payne J.C., JEA 63, fig.4].

Painted pottery was used to display wealth, and boat scenes were a common theme. Armless figures are associated with funerary boats, seen as symbolising the dead’s soul or ‘order out of chaos’ and power over it,\(^5\) among other interpretations including representing the afterlife.\(^6\) In [Fig.4],\(^7\) armless females are seen inside the cabins of a large boat, while sailors

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2 Patch, D.C., Dawn of Egyptian Art, 118 (Cat.98).
3 For more examples from late Naqada II to Naqada III see: El-Yahky, “Clarifications on the Gerzean Boat Scenes”, pl. XXXIV.
7 The authenticity of decorations on a late Naqada II period – or or possibly early Naqada III – pot with wavy handles [Fig.4] cannot be confirmed. Hence, caution needs to be practiced when dealing with what is being
are holding the oars to direct the ship. These armless females may represent the dead relatives of the deceased, giving their blessing. Indeed, this representation shows that the potter could execute humans with a full body, and others without.

During the dynastic periods, figures intentionally lacking arms were rare. Examples from the New Kingdom (1570 BC-1544BC) represent armless figures in some individuals’ tombs.

Four indefinite armless figures in funerary rituals

Four indefinite armless figures appear in a funerary ritual scene; these appear to be intentionally without arms. A rectangular shrine framed by a frieze of kheker ornaments encloses four male figures, with no arms, facing two by two. They have short hair and wear short kilts. Their bodies and clothes are alternately yellow (colour of the sun), and blue (colour of the night). The four armless figures appear – with no differences in depictions – in several tombs from Thebes. They differ in their appearance and position relative to the shrine of the god Osiris, as presented in the following table.

Different activities were performed during the pilgrimage to the sacred places, or during the funeral of a deceased, as the burial scenes of a deceased were prevalent. The whole scene displays completely a series - often compact of micro-scenes in no particular order.

### Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tomb No.</th>
<th>Ref.</th>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tetiky (TT 15)</td>
<td>PM I, p.26-27; Settgast, ADAIK 3, 52ff.</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Tetiky" /></td>
<td>In front of the shrine of Osiris.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th Dyn., Ahmose I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineni (TT 81)</td>
<td>PM I, 159.</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Ineni" /></td>
<td>Beside the shrine of Osiris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th Dyn., Amenhotep I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User (TT 21)</td>
<td>PM I, 35.</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="User" /></td>
<td>In front of the shrine of Osiris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th Dyn., Thutmosis I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1Petrie, *Ancient Egypt*, 43.


4Davies N.de G., *The Tomb of Antefoker of Sesostris I and of his wife Senet (no.60)*, (1920).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Rekhmire (TT 100)</strong> 18th Dyn.¹, Thutmose III &amp; Amenhotep II</th>
<th>N.de G. Davies, The Tomb of Rekhmire at Thebes, pl. LXXXVII</th>
<th>Far from the shrine of Osiris. A text is written referring to their role.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>**Puyemre (TT 39)**² 18th Dyn., Thutmose III</td>
<td>PM I, p.71; N.de G. Davies, The Tomb of Puyemre, pl.XLVII</td>
<td>Beside the shrine of the three female mourners³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paheri (EK-3)</strong> 18th Dyn., Thutmose III</td>
<td>T. Griffith, The Tomb of Paheri, pl.5; L. Manniche, Lost Tombs, 75, pl.28.</td>
<td>Behind the shrine of Osiris.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Siuser (A4)</strong> 18th Dyn.</td>
<td>PM I, p.447; L. Manniche, Lost Tombs, pl.28.</td>
<td>The shrine exists in the final act of the funerary rituals. The shrine of Osiris appears in the upper register. Four men guards the coffin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amenemhat (TT 123)</strong> 18th Dyn., Thutmose III</td>
<td>PM I, 236.</td>
<td>Behind the shrine of Osiris.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The four armless figures appear for the first time in the tomb of Tetiki (TT 15)⁴. They are facing each other, two by two, with short kilts. The colours of their kilts and their bodies are apparent in the tombs of Rekhmire and Paheri.

The existence of the Shrine of the four armless figures near that of Osiris in various tombs, as highlighted in the previous table, implies their involvement in the realm of the dead in the land of Osiris. Moreover, in a shrine, three female figures, perhaps goddesses, are expressing their sadness by the placement of their hands in front of their head.⁵

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¹Rekhmire was an 18th Dynasty vizier and mayor of Thebes during the reigns of Thutmose III and Amenhotep II. His tomb (TT 100) is located in the Sheikh Abd el Qurnah Necropolis on the West bank at Luxor.  
²Puyemre is the Second prophet of Amun during the reign of Thutmose III.  
⁴He was the mayor of Thebes during the reign of Ahmose I. Baikie, J., Egyptian Antiquities in the Nile Valley, 1932; PM I, The Theban Necropolis, 26-27.  
⁵Settgast, “Untersuchungen zu Altägyptischen Bestattungsdarstellungen”, 51.
II-Armless figures in the Book of the afterlife Amduat

Two figures are armless in the Book of the afterlife Amduat: the god Neper in the second hour, and five minor deities in the eleventh hour.

a-The armless god Neper in the second hour of the Amduat

The illustrated version of the Second hour shows the boat of the sun god Ra in the second register. The boat is shown during his night journey, preceded by four other boats. They are in the place called “Werns”, in which the god Osiris gives the gifts of the land to the inhabitants. The name of the gods who are in this place is ‘The Souls of the duat’. They are worshipping the great god, and they are guiding him on his way. Some of them bring him the prayers of those who are upon the earth. They also lead disembodied souls to the forms which belong to them. Others mark the annual seasons.

Figure 7: The Eleventh Hour of Amduat (after Hornung, Das Amduat, pl.217, 161).

In front of the boat of Ra, the first one shows the god Neper, the god of grain and of vegetation. Neper is considered an image of the god Osiris, the god of vegetation. The prow and stern of his boat terminate in cobra heads. There is a kneeling armless god in the centre of the boat, while two others are standing without arms. There are also two large wheat spikes.

2The Second Hour represents “The Field of Wernes” which is a fertile region due to its waterways. Here the sun god provides water and bread for the blessed.
3Piankoff, The Tomb of Ramesses VI, p.240.
The legend written by the ear of corn in the front of the boat reads: “The boat which conveys Neper”. By the ear in the stern, one reads: “Collector of herbs and plants”. The god Neper appears armless among two other unknown armless figures. The Elder books suggests that the one in the middle is a goddess. In contrast, the present author assumes that these three figures represent the god Neper, and the three seasons of the year (Inundation-Harvest-Sowing). Including the vegetal germination, growth and resurrection may guarantee a new birth for the sun god’s boat.

b-The five armless minor deities in the eleventh hour

The illustrated version of the eleventh hour shows “The place of rest of the inhabitants of the Netherworld”. In the second register, the boat of the sun god is dragged by several gods. The upper register contains twelve minor deities. The first four are represented with a full human body, but the fifth to the tenth ones are armless, with their names in front of them.

Figure 8: Detail of the Second Hour, Second Register.

Figure 9: Eleventh hour of the Amduat (after E. Hornung, Die Unterweltsbücher der Ägypter, Abb.175).

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2Hornung, Das *Amduat*, 202, Nr.161.
Figure 10: Detail of the upper register of the eleventh hour.

Table 2: Five Armless Minor Deities in the Amduat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The deity</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- The first deity is called $swt$- $iw$</td>
<td>“Flesh of the south”</td>
<td>A full human minor deity without arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- The second deity is called $ImnW$- $Wy.f$</td>
<td>“His two arms are hidden”</td>
<td>A full human minor deity without arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- The third deity is called $Mr.n$- $wy.fy$</td>
<td>“The one with paralysed arms”</td>
<td>A full human minor deity without arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- The fourth deity is called $wpwy.t$- $wy$</td>
<td>“Separation of the two lands”</td>
<td>A full human minor deity without arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- The fifth deity is called $wy.fy$- $m$- $bt.f$</td>
<td>“His two arms are in his body”</td>
<td>A human deity with a double snake head.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FUNCTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF ARMLESS FIGURES

Armless figures appear from the predynastic periods, but one must be cautious in interpreting their roles from such an early period. There were various artistic treatments of the human

1Leitz, “$swt$- $iw$”, in: LÄGG VI, 224.
2CT III, 98 m; $dgg$ $imn$- $wy.f$ m $ntp$ “He whose hands are hidden will be seen as a god” A. de Buck, CT, spell 190; Leitz, “$Imn$- $wy.f$”, in: LÄGG I, 342.
3Leitz, “$Mr.n$- $wy.f$”, in: LÄGG III, 328.
4Esn VI, 510, 13.
6Leitz, LÄGG II, 6; E I, 333, 14; Osing, J., Hieratische Papyri aus Tebtunis I, University of Copenhagen, (1998), y4, 11, S.184, Tf.15; II, L19, 29, S.244, Tf.25; designation of a serpent of the 13th nome upper Egypt in the Greco-Roman period.
7A title that suits snakes as they have no legs or arms.
body at this date, in different places and times. Nevertheless, the representation of a human without arms dated to that period evokes the hypothesis that these armless figures were associated with religious functions and roles. This is supported by the representations of armless individuals seen with funerary boats from the predynastic period to the dynastic periods. The armless figures must have had a role during the funeral, which was finished or suspended for a while and completed in the afterlife. The divine role of the armless figures is emphasised in funerary rituals of an early date.

During the New Kingdom, the four armless figures continue to appear with the funerary rituals and the burial. The place of the funeral is called “ḏsr”, meaning “The holy ground”. This term is traditionally translated as “The Necropolis”.

The four armless figures played the role of “guardians” during the funerary journey. They are referred to by the term “nfrw r wt n rw” “Gods, keepers of the great gates” or “The gods at the great gates” in three tombs: Rekhmire (TT 100) (ḏsr (TT 112)), Menkheperrasonb (TT 112) (ḏsr (TT 112)), and Hekamaetrenakht (TT 222) (ḏsr (TT 112)).

They are involved in different rituals performed in the cemetery. In ancient Egypt, several sacred places were visited by Egyptians to get a blessing from them. The most famous place was the district of Abydos, the city of the god Osiris, the god of the afterlife and the dead. The voyages to the sacred places were represented on tombs walls, even during the owner’s life.

Other explanations of the role of the four armless figures are cited in the following table.

Table 3: Suggestions for the identity and role of the four armless figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>teḥt</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Guardians10</td>
<td>In tombs accompanying them: nfrw r w ṭw n rw</td>
<td>The difference in the colour of the body of the four figures in scenes, suggests that two of them guarded the place during the night (with blue colour), and the two others during the day (in yellow colour).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Gods, keepers of the great gates”11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Coffin Texts, they are referred as: ṭw n ṭrw n ṭw ṭrw n ṭw lr w</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The door keepers of the district of silence”12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(necropolis)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Demons &amp; Terrible Creatures</td>
<td>——</td>
<td>The lack of arms makes them strange and scary.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Wb V, 228, 6-9.
2 FCD, 293.
4Griffith, T., The Tomb of Paheri at el Kab, The Egypt Exploration Fund 11, London, (1894), 22, pl.V.
5Urk IV, 129, 13; V, 67, 5.
6Davies, N.de G., The Tomb of Rekhmire at Thebes, PMMA XI, (1973), pl.LXXXVII.
7High priest of Amun (priest of Amun aashefyt)-Thutmosis III; PM I, 229; Davies, N.de G., The Tombs of Menkheperrasonb, Amenmose, and Another, (Nos.86, 112, 42, 226), (1933).
8PM I, 323; Settgast, Untersuchungen zu Altägyptischen Bestattungsdarstellungen, 52.
12CT V, 333 g-h.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3-The Four sons of Horus</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>4-The Fighters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who conquer the enemies of Osiris and lost their arms during the fight? ḫt.w.n.f ḫwy m ḡṣmt ḫr ḫpjw tāmmt “May he have arms in Neshmet in its way on the western roads” ²</td>
<td></td>
<td>In a story relating to a fight against the enemies of Osiris, some fighters lost their arms during the struggle. It is written on a stela from the Cairo Museum (CG 20561). After, they wish to have arms to defend Osiris and restore him to life. The armless fighters may have lost their arms to prevent their fighting. ³ This may be why their shrines appear just behind Osiris.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The four armless figures were guardians of the place of burial and of the god Osiris. Whether demons, sons of Horus, or fighters of Osiris, their nature is more challenging to determine. Their number suggests other potential identities, such as the four mww dancers, ⁴ the four men who guarded the coffin during its travel across the river and unloaded it. ⁵

After all these interpretations regarding their nature, the question about their armless state remains unanswered. The arms are important for humans to perform tasks successfully, so losing these necessary appendices leads to retardation and a handicap for any person.

It is possible that these figures were seen as having finished their role and transformed into armless figures in a helpless state, stayed in a closed place, waiting for the resurrection after the body of the dead entered the netherworld. This is understood thanks to a passage from the Pyramid Texts: “This Unis will become truly functional, and his arms will not go off”. ⁶

Regarding the five armless minor deities, their arms are intentionally missing as they appear with other normal minor deities with full bodies. Their role is known as “The helpers of the sun god Ra”, his servants. They are supposed to be called by him to the hidden place to bring the secrets and the offerings every day. These secrets are in the boat of Ra, and the helpers live upon it, ⁷ as the texts of this hour say.

“Lifting the mystery of this great god to the Hidden Chamber, day after day. They go forth with this great god to the sky”. ⁸

The existence of armless deities among those with arms denotes the role that they might perform to serve the sun god. Their role is suspended, especially during the strengthless periods of the sun god. The weak period of the sun god started at the fifth hour of the night, which the twelve deities represent. The fifth hour of the night starts with the first armless deity, followed by the four others. From the names of the five minor deities, we conclude

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¹Settgast, Untersuchungen zu Altägyptischen Bestattungsdarstellungen, 55
²nšmt is the divine boat of Osiris in Abydos, Wb II, 339(15).
³CG, 194ff.
that there are three forms of the arm: a) A hidden arm (The second deity), b) A paralysed arm (The third deity), and c) An interior arm (The fifth deity).

Due to these different states, it is possible to suggest that the armless figures have their arms hidden inside their bodies. However, this is answered thanks to the Prehistoric examples of the figures with stumps replacing the arms. In addition, given that they are deities, we cannot conceive that their arms have been cut off, as they are considered guardians and not guilty of anything. As a result, the armless figures had hidden arms rather than inside their bodies, not represented, paralysing the hands.

CONCLUSION

The examples of the armless figures are directly connected to the burial scenes and the afterlife’s sacred rituals. Human representations in ancient Egyptian material culture were associated with divine or magical rituals. Examples of armless anthropomorphic representations began with small scale figurines during Prehistoric times, then encompassed other ways of representation. The earliest figurines with stump arms replacing the arms dated to the Badari Period. Among figurines, anthropomorphic representations were rare, and their presence in Predynastic graves is thus considered a symbol of status.

Representing divine figures without arms was rare in ancient Egyptian art. In this paper, the author dealt with different armless figures:

a) Those who accompany the boats of the dead,

b) The four armless figures in the sacred land,

c) Divine figures of the afterlife.

The author suggested that those figures have a temporarily suspended role for some time. The absence of arms represents the weakness and the helpless state of the body.

Armless figures represent divine identities. They are figures of dead people or ancestors who may bless the deceased and his journey in the afterworld. They were a manifestation of a moment of transition of power and represented without arms to express a certain period of disability to do their duty until the resurrection.

Armless divine figures of the Amduat afterlife were represented at the night’s second or the eleventh hour. Both hours can be interpreted as representing a transitional phase right after sunset and directly before sunrise. The armless god Neper is also a divine identity at a transitional state from germination to growth. In ancient Egypt, a horrific fate such as death was diluted in the minds of the Egyptians by thinking of it as a transition into a new state that rituals could ensure. It was embedded in their heritage since the time of formation of the state itself. The four armless figures inside a chapel were part of these rituals. They were described in the accompanying legend as: “Gods, keepers of the great gates”, or in the Coffin Texts, “The doorkeepers of the district of silence”. Being at the gates of the necropolis is in itself a transitional moment at one’s sunset and a place of transition. This is supported by the colours of their body, yellow as the sun or blue as the night. Finally, I conclude that the representation of armless figures is influenced by the phases of the sun god, who has different phases during his journey from his powerful state to his weak one, which affected the manifestation of the armless figures.
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53-……………., Ancient Egypt, British School of Archaeology, (1914-1942).