

## Ancient Egyptian Backs (and some Fronts)

*By Joan Ann Lansberry*

I came across "*Playing With Fire: Initial Observations on the Religious Uses of Clay Cobras*", an article by Kasia Szpakowska and made a further observation.

Ms. Szpakowska begins her article, "In the galleries of the Bolton Museum in England sits a small blue clay figurine in the shape of a rearing cobra. With its asymmetrical shoulders, lumpy mismatched eyes, roughly shaped form, and odd cone-shaped bulge rising up its middle, on first glance it looks rather like a child's toy or a reject from a potter's experiment. Yet, although it is a far cry from the gilded uraei that graced the forebears of the pharaohs, this humble artifact and others like it may represent one material manifestation of the usually undetectable religious practices of Egyptians living in the New Kingdom"<sup>1</sup>

By comparing the clay cobras with other clay figures, we may get additional clues about their meaning.



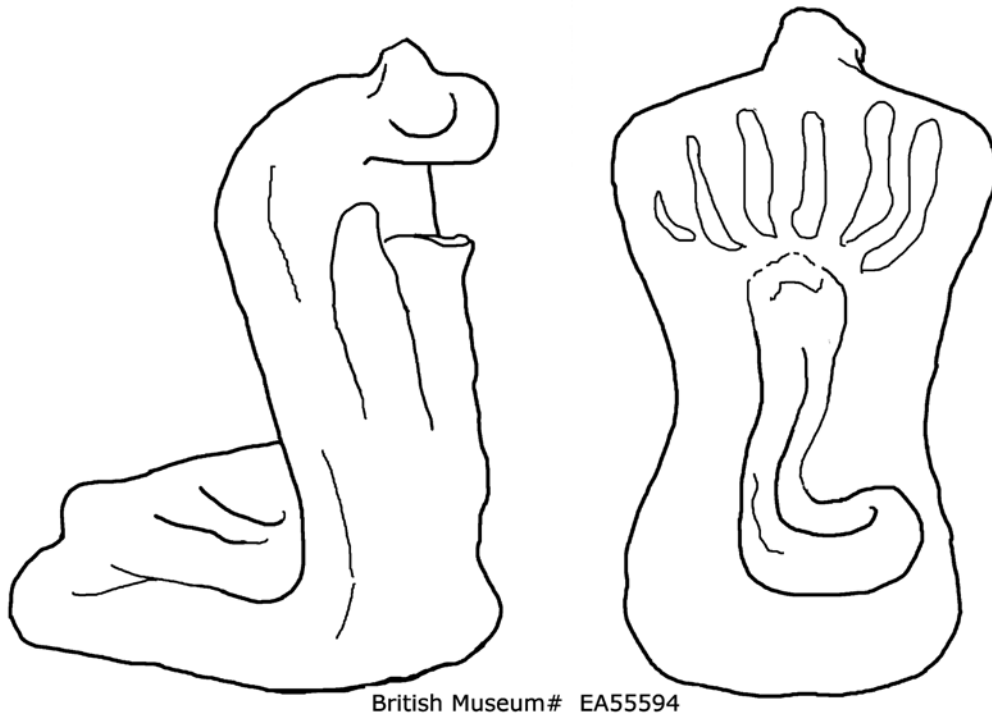
*Trace of Bolton #15.22.9 from photos in Szpakowska article*

The other example she shows is from the British Museum, but there are many similar examples.

From the front, the British museum piece appears to be merely a crude rising cobra. But from the back, it may give clues to further meaning. Notice how much its back resembles a human torso. The serpent on the back, with its red-painted flares, could represent the kundalini fire, as it rises up the spine.

Ms. Szpakowska, who thinks these figures may have an apotropaic purpose, quotes from the Leiden Papyrus, a spell of dispelling terrors:

"It is the consuming flame by Sia, Lord of Heaven.  
The earth is on fire, the sky is on fire, the people and gods are on fire.  
You say you are hidden from it (but) 'it is come' -  
is its name in truth."<sup>2</sup>

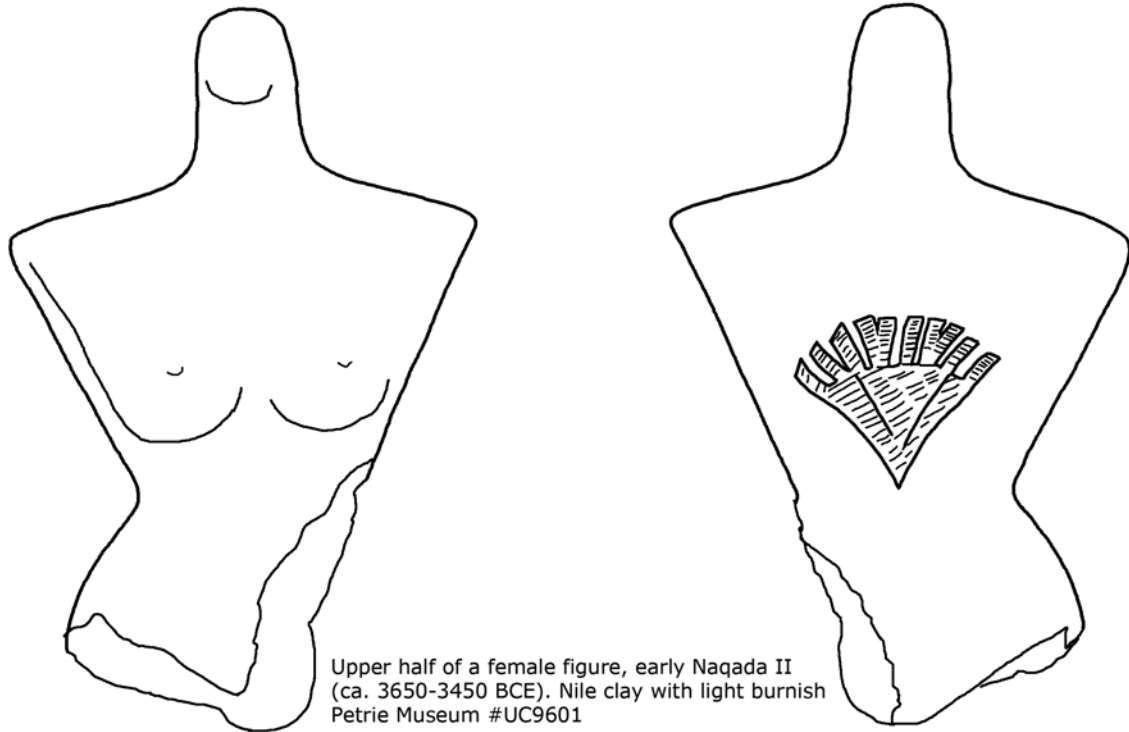


*Trace of British Museum #EA 55596, front view from Museum website photo and back view from photo in Szpakowska article.*

As we read in Wilkinson's *Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, "Sia was the personification of perception and could be said to be the equivalent of the 'heart' or mind of the god Ptah which underlay creation in the Memphite theology"<sup>3</sup>

This 'consuming flame' could be the primal power enabling creation.

Although EA 55596 strongly resembles a human torso, I'd like to share another ancient Egyptian piece, showing a back that is very similar to the one in the Bolton Amarna figure. The torso of the Bolton piece may not be so readily visible. However, it resembles the back of an upper half of a female figure from the early Naqada II period which also has some unique decoration on its back. The shapely front is undeniably a human depiction. Possibly the decoration on its back represents a blossoming, the type of flourishing that occurs when power is drawn up from the root and rises.



*Petrie Museum UC9601, traced from scan of Dawn of Egyptian Art exhibition catalogue photos, page 102*

### **Footnotes**

- 1:** Kasia Szpakowska, “*Playing With Fire: Initial Observations on the Religious Uses of Clay Cobras From Amarna*”, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* XL (2003): 113.
- 2:** Szpakowska, 121
- 3:** Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, (Thames and Hudson 2003), 130.