Common among Late Antique objects in Egypt and the Near East are molded ceramic figurines of a nursing woman, often identified as Isis or the Virgin Mary. Several such nursing figurines were discovered in tombs of the Northern Cemetery. New evidence about cult practice in Beth Shean encourages a reconsideration of their identification, and of the religious identity of their owners.

In a 1923 report published in The Museum Journal, Clarence Fisher described a temple to Bacchus unearthed in the previous season. The temple contained a frieze depicting the garlanded head of Dionysos. This frieze, in addition to “several fine terracotta figurines of Bacchus nursed by nymphs found in the cemetery,” supported the conclusion that the sanctuary was dedicated to the god Dionysos, who enjoyed the worship of a founder cult at Nysa-Scythopolis. While ongoing excavations have revealed additional evidence for the worship of Dionysos during the Roman period at Beth Shean, Fisher’s nymph-nurses have been all but forgotten.

Fisher’s casual mention seems to refer to a group of terracotta figurines found in June of 1922 in the Northern Cemetery’s Tomb 105, a burial the excavators dated to between the 4th and 6th centuries CE. The best-preserved example shows a seated woman with a child in her lap. Her right arm crosses her body to

This molded ceramic figurine from Tomb 218 may represent Nysa, a nursermaid associated with the founding of Nysa-Scythopolis. Museum Object #29-103-935, UPM Image #225845.
touch her left breast, the nipple of which she holds between her first two fingers to suckle the child. A similar figurine shows the same iconography, although the style of the figurine is somewhat different.

The iconography of a woman nursing a child is common across the Mediterranean, but found special popularity in Egypt, where pagan examples of the Isis lactans show the goddess Isis nursing the infant Horus, and later Coptic examples of the Virgin lactans depict Mary offering her breast to the infant Jesus. Kourotophos imagery is far less common in Israel, however, and while the Beth Shean terracottas have been variously identified as Isis or Mary, they do not seem to refer to either divine mother, as they show no attributes that suggest an Isiac or Marian connection.

The key to the identity of the women depicted by the terracotta figurines may lie in the mythical foundation story of Nysa-Scythopolis and in the city’s founder cult. The city was said to have been founded by the god Dionysos, who, according to the Roman historian Pliny, stopped there to bury his nursemaid, a nymph called Nysa, and left behind a city named in her honor. The city celebrated its founder with statuary, and an altar honoring the god suggests a small temple with a round cela discovered in the 1980s was dedicated to the god. Coins also show the city’s dedication to Dionysos and Nysa: 2nd-century coin types from Scythopolis show the nymph enthroned nursing the infant god. Indeed, nursing was a significant aspect of Dionysiac cult worship and the performance of its mysteries.

Textual evidence also supports the identification of these figurines as Nysa. The Rabbinic text called the Tosefta contains a passage commanding Jewish believers to discard any images of a nursing female. This prohibition was previously thought to refer to Isis lactans imagery, but Isis is never named in Talmudic literature. Given how little evidence there is for an
active Isis cult in Israel, Emmanuel Friedheim has suggested this prohibition must instead be a Rabbinic response to the proliferation of images of nursing Nysa.

The grave would not be an unusual place for Dionysiac imagery to appear in Late Antiquity; in fact, Dionysos and his circle of followers often appear on sarcophagi during the Roman period. The god’s unusual birth explains why the dead would want to be associated with him. When his mother Semele died before he could be born, Zeus sewed the baby into his own thigh so that it could gestate there. Dionysos was therefore said to be born twice—once when he was removed from his mortal mother, and once when he was born from his divine father’s thigh. Because of his rebirth, Dionysos was regarded in Late Antiquity as a god who could offer his adherents rebirth, which the dead would experience as the afterlife.

Dionysos lived his own “afterlife”—the period after his birth from Zeus’s thigh—at Mount Nysa, where he was raised by nymphs. Greek poetry refers to the land of Nysa as a paradisiac place, the land of the blessed. By the Hellenistic period, Mount Nysa came to be thought of as an individual. Nysa, in her guise as nymph-nursemaid, may have retained her resonances as an ideal, heavenly place, thus serving for the deceased as a personification of the hoped-for afterlife. A third figurine from Beth Shean may participate in a similarly toponymic understanding of the nymph Nysa. This terracotta woman, shown above on the right, carries a child over her left shoulder in a pose that indicates travel in the ancient world. When Nysa takes up this pose, she may be embodying her role as a place of protection and refuge for Dionysos. For the deceased of Tomb 105, she may have been seen as a psychomp, a protective escort for the soul, and as symbol of the isle of the blessed which the deceased adherent of Dionysos hoped to reach.

The inclusion of apotropaic objects in the same tomb supports this reading. Besides the nymph-nursemaids, the deposit
contained bells, which have been ascribed an apotropaic function. Tomb 218 (where the first figurine discussed was deposited) also contained terracottas of horsemen, which in both pagan and Christian belief systems represent the deceased’s desire for victory over death and safe transport to the afterlife. These assemblages of goods suggest the deceased’s hope for protection on the journey to the afterlife, as well as for rebirth in imitation of the god Dionysos.

Because Nysa-Scythopolis claimed to be the site of Nysa’s grave, a funerary practice relating to the beloved nursemaid would be particularly meaningful there. These burials could provide evidence of private worship being driven by a civic cult, highlighting the specifically localized nature of Scythopolis’s cult practice. 

**For Further Reading**


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