

# Ptolemaic Cartonnage: An Analysis of Geographic Motif Distribution & Potential Regional Workshops

## Introduction

This study examines iconographic and stylistic variations in motifs on funerary cartonnage from Ptolemaic Egypt, with a focus on the broad collar and extended torso panels as primary locations for motif circulation and adaptation. This approach identifies emerging patterns that may link motif presence and stylistic variation to regions. The study also aims to identify whether certain motifs or stylistic features are unique to specific regions, which may indicate distinct workshops or locally developed motifs. By combining archaeological context and comparative iconographic analysis with theoretical insights from sociology, material theory, and anthropology, this dissertation aims to gain a deeper understanding of how visual motifs on cartonnage functioned within broader networks. Specifically, the potential ritual meaning, artisanal practices, and the expression of regional identity on cartonnage during the Ptolemaic period.

## Background

In Egyptian studies, cartonnage refers to funerary casings made from layered linen or papyrus soaked in calcium carbonate (stucco, gesso, or plaster) or glue, then shaped while wet to fit the body (Petrie, 1891, p.28). These layers protected the body and were used for religious expression (Cooney & Hartwig, 2014, p.272–273). In ancient Egypt, craftsmen could express controlled variation within canonical boundaries. These images functioned as ritual guides (*sšmw*) and embodied perfection (*nfrw*), rather than realism (Nyord, 2020, p.12 & 16). This allowed for both conservative and innovative adaptations to ritual and social needs (Davis, 1989, p.221). Visual elements actively evoked divine power, and stylistic variation reflected diverse ritual requirements and social meanings (Nyord, 2020, p.51–54).

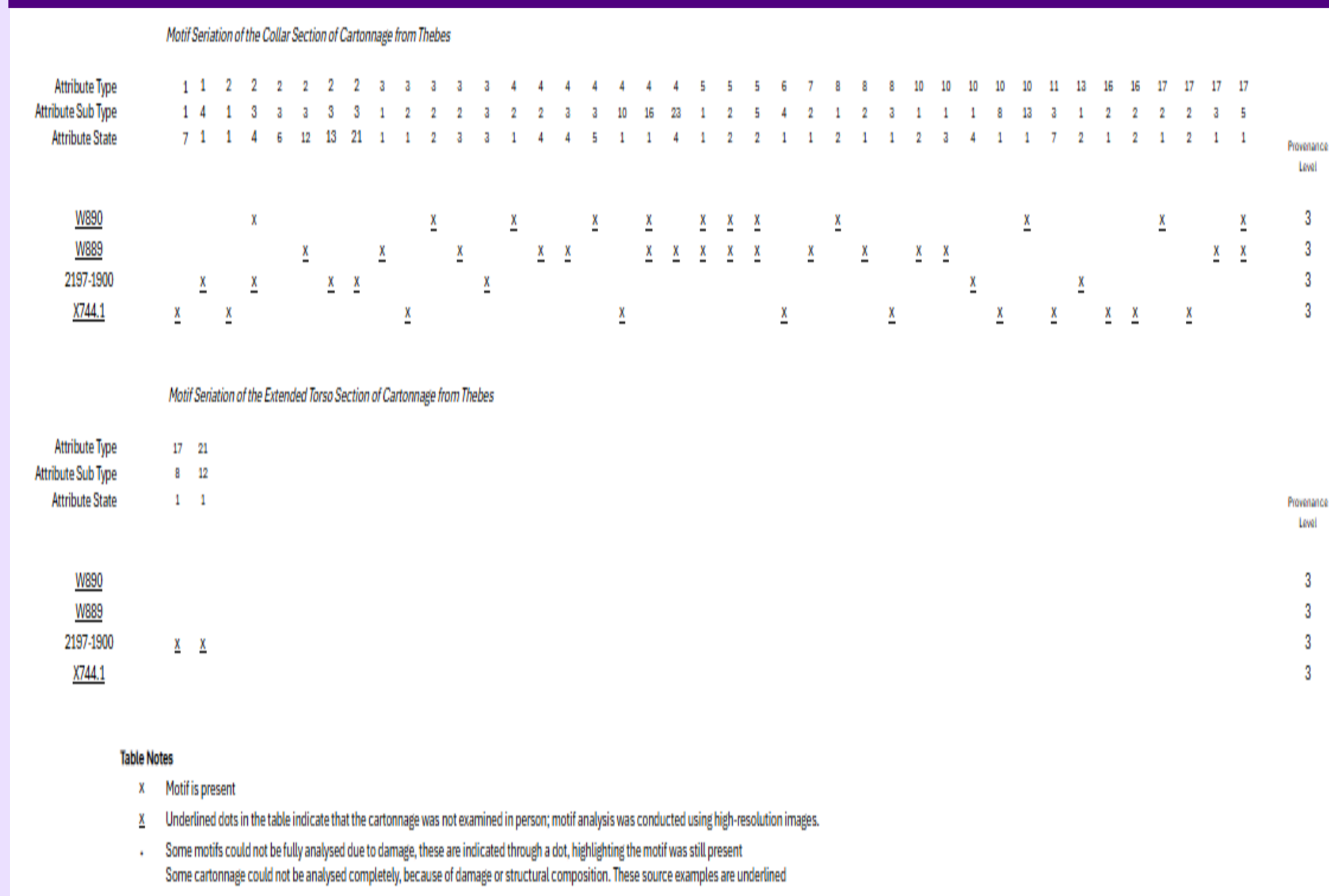
## Materials & Methods

This study builds on Clarke's *Analytical Archaeology* framework (1978, p.155-179) and Willems' application of attribute analysis for coffin classification (1988, p.53-75). In this context, attributes refer to features such as decorative layout or repeated motifs, each attribute can appear in several forms, known as attribute states, which reflect stylistic variations (Clarke, 1978, p.156 & p.494). A single attribute may have multiple states, each representing a distinct variation or category. If the states are organised into different levels or ranges, this is called multistage attributes (Clarke, 1978, p.157). All attributes and attribute states are visually listed and categorised in the appendices.

Seriation represents an archaeological method of displaying information. It is most extensively applied to pottery data in Egyptological studies (Duff, 1996, p.89-90; Frerebeau, 2023, p.9-10; Hahnekamp, 2021, p.975). In this study, seriation is implemented through occurrence matrices. Distinct attribute states - each with a numerical code- are arranged on the horizontal axis. The individual cartonnage pieces, serving as sources, are placed on the vertical axis. This organisation allows visual analysis of patterns, or the lack thereof, across source groupings. The seriations in this study were created manually, using what Kemp calls a non-mechanical approach (Kemp, 1975, p.259-291).

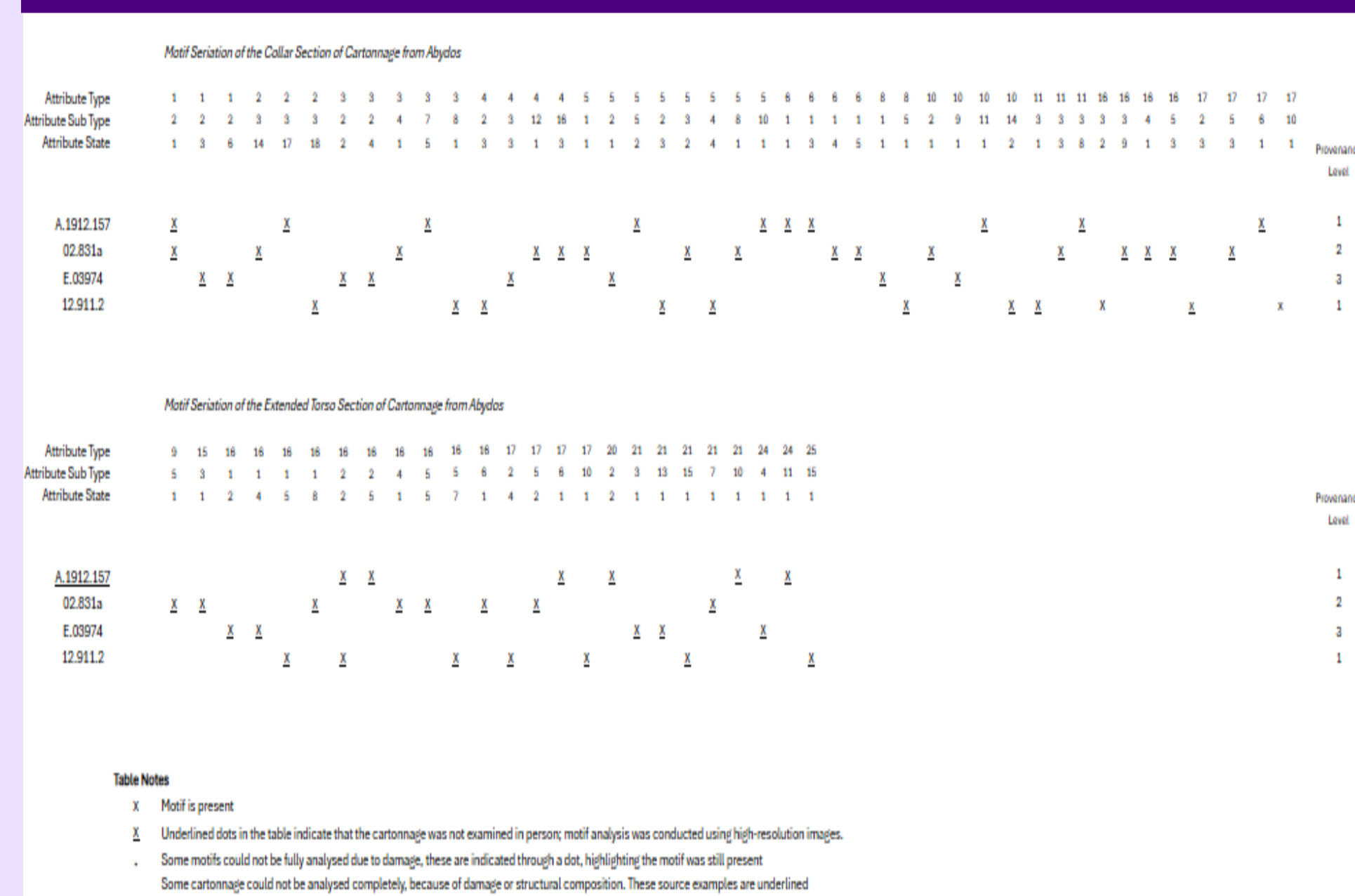
Craftsmanship indicators, such as material choice (papyrus or linen), application of paint, complexity of colour choice and linework, use of gilding, evidence of preplanning (such as under drawing), variation of line thickness, and the structural composition of cartonnage, are recorded and evaluated.

### Thebes (طيبة)



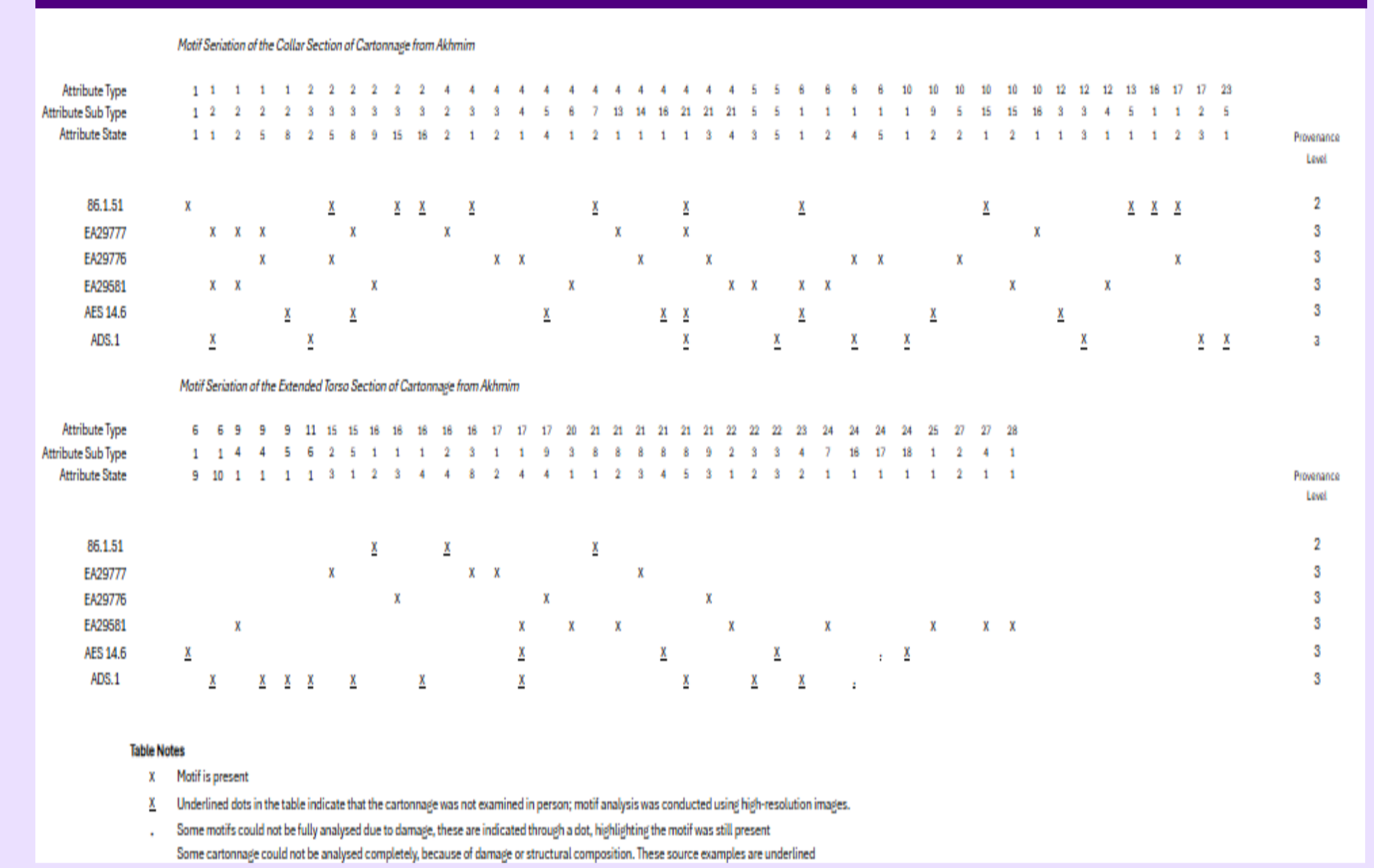
**Regional Style & Workshop Traits:** Lotus and bud bands, square/rectangle geometric pattern-based bands (weak provenance = not definitive to specific Thebes workshop traits).

### Abydos (أبيدوس)



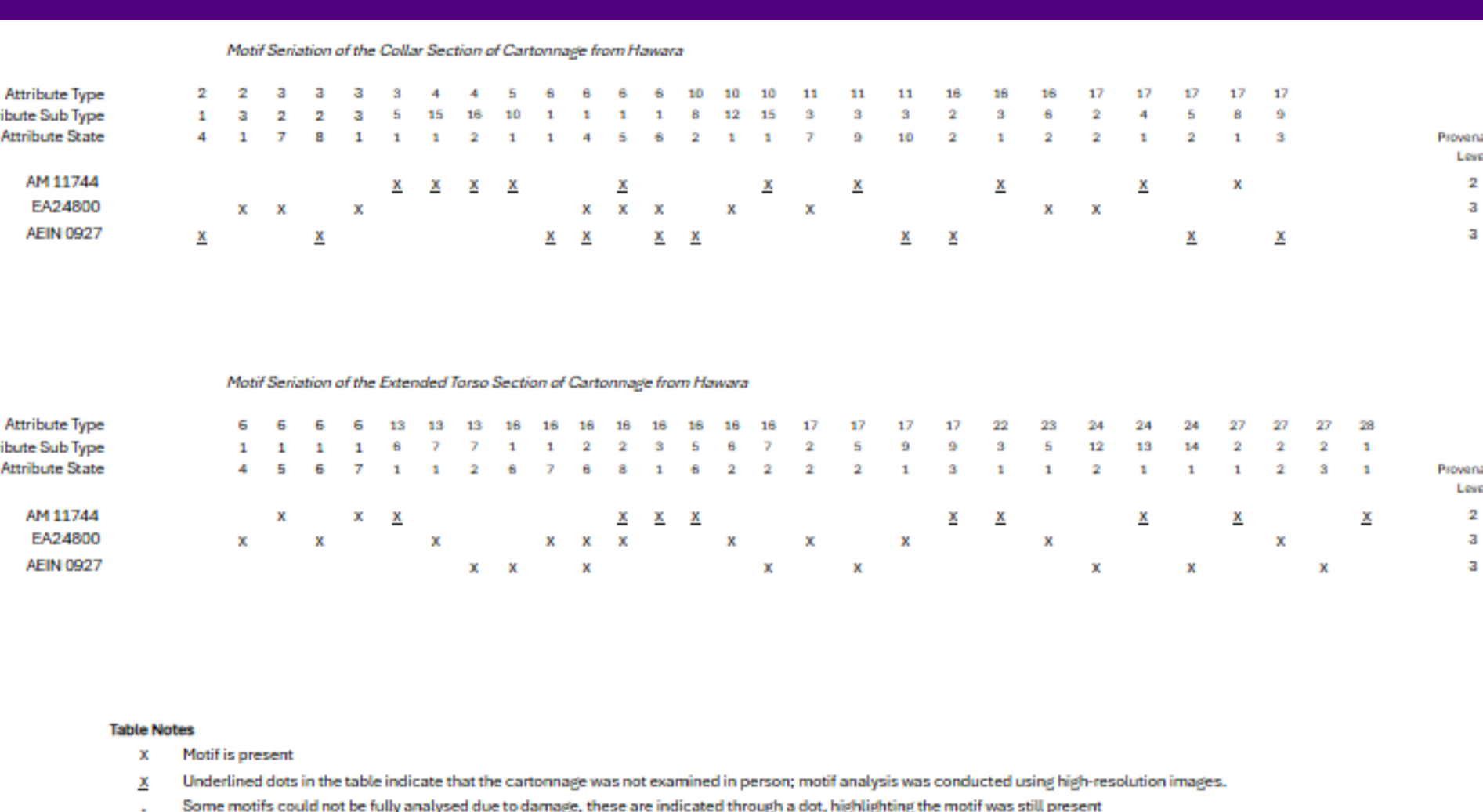
**Regional Style & Workshop Traits:** Flatter & wider freehand collars, emphasis on four sons of Horus motif surrounding a djed pillar. Clear Geometric focus of motifs focusing on triangles and rectangles.

### Akhmim (أخميم)



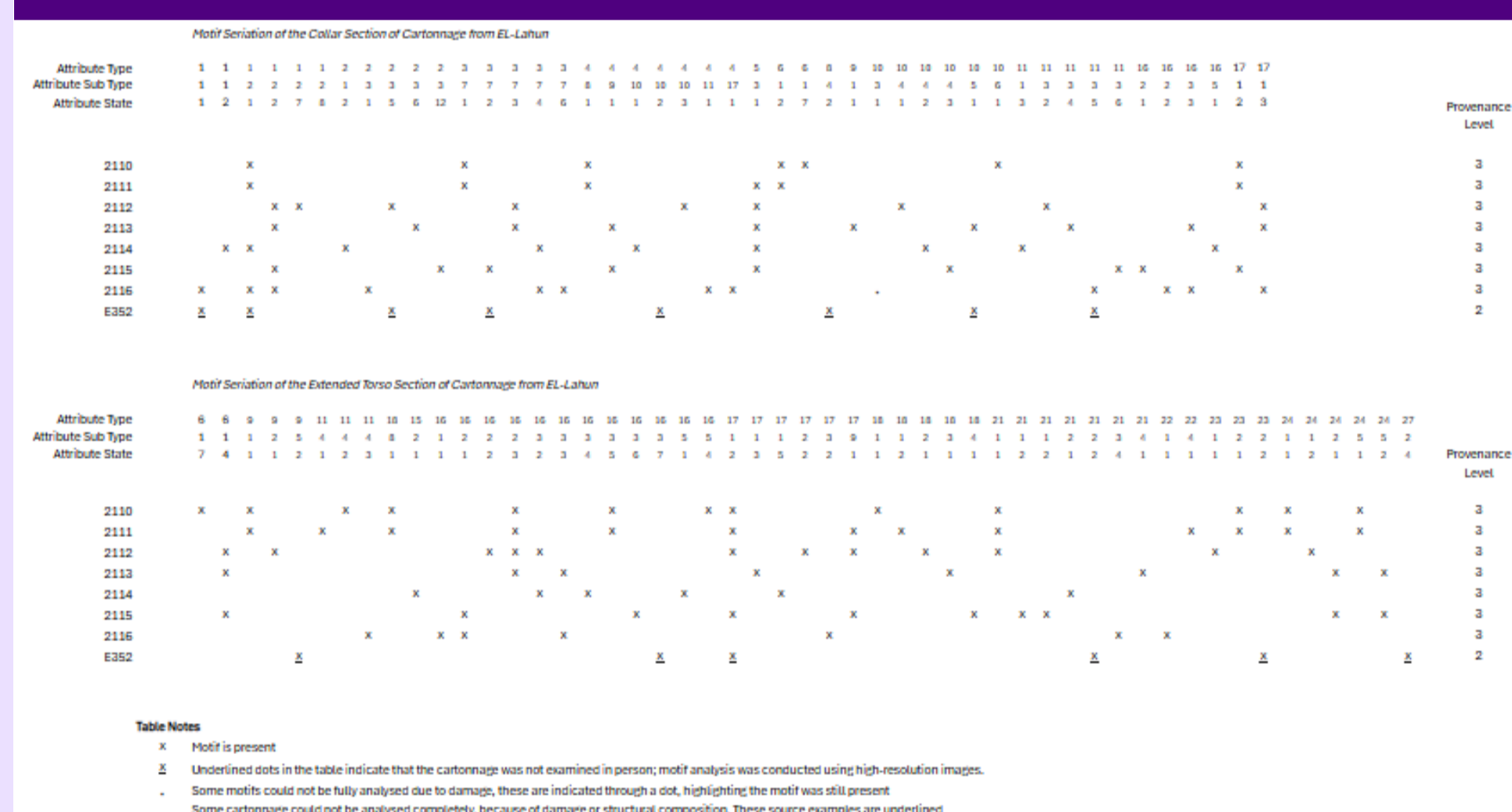
**Regional Style & Workshop Traits:** Distinct dress style which only appears in Akhmim. Collars from Akhmim cartonnage display consistent motifs but vary in style.

### Hawara (هواره)



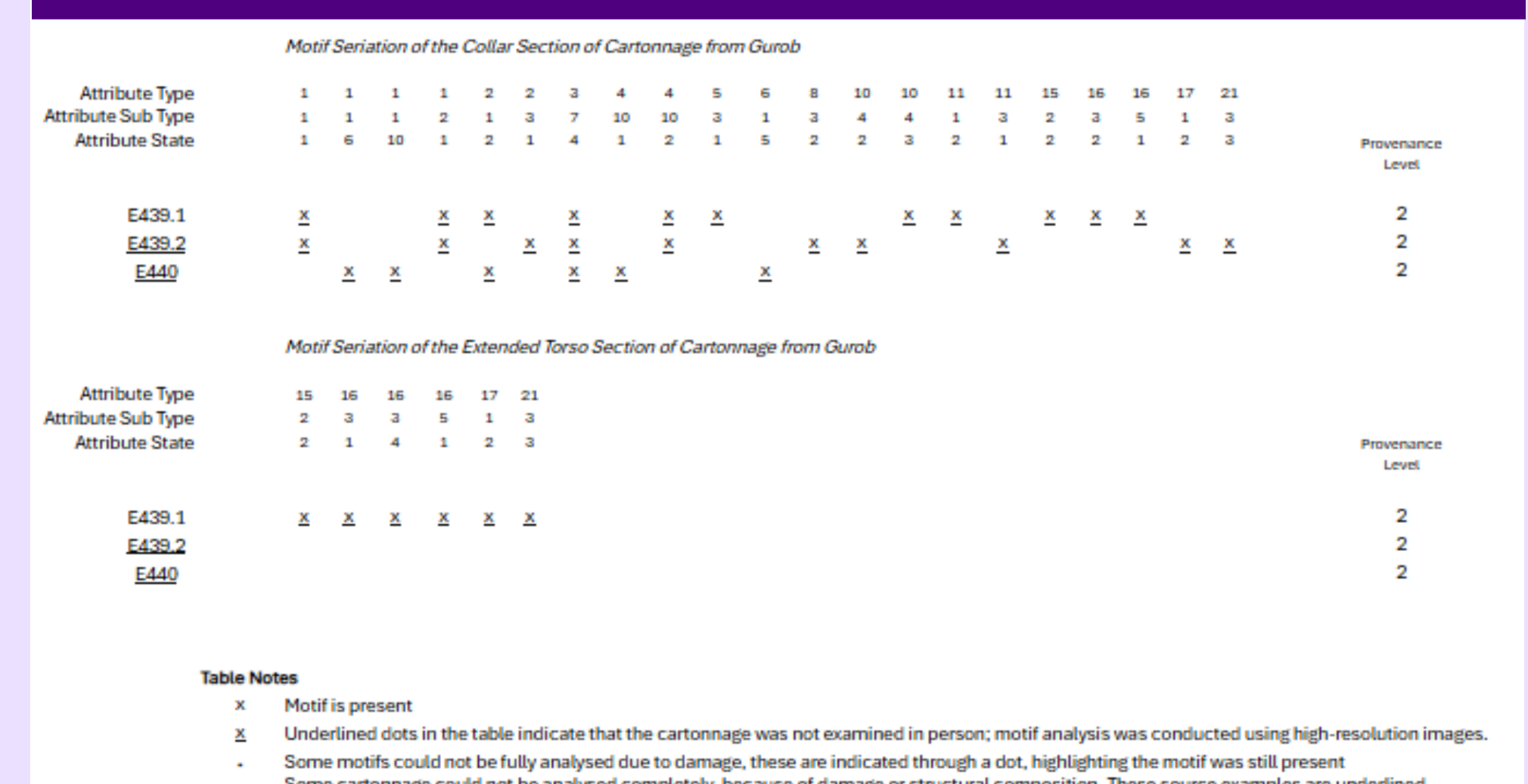
**Regional Style & Workshop Traits:** Elongated and narrower collars with geometric emphasis (rectangles, triangle motif, alternating borders), colour palette and motif placement suggest Hawara-specific aesthetic.

### El-Lahun (اللاهون)



**El-Lahun & Gurob Regional Style & Workshop Traits:** Stylised eye, snake, tripartite motif mostly restricted to El-Lahun. Consistent motif bands across corpus: teardrop beads, circles, folded/tied leaves (lined triangles). The collars within these two sites tend to follow the same motif choice and order.

### Gurob (غروب)

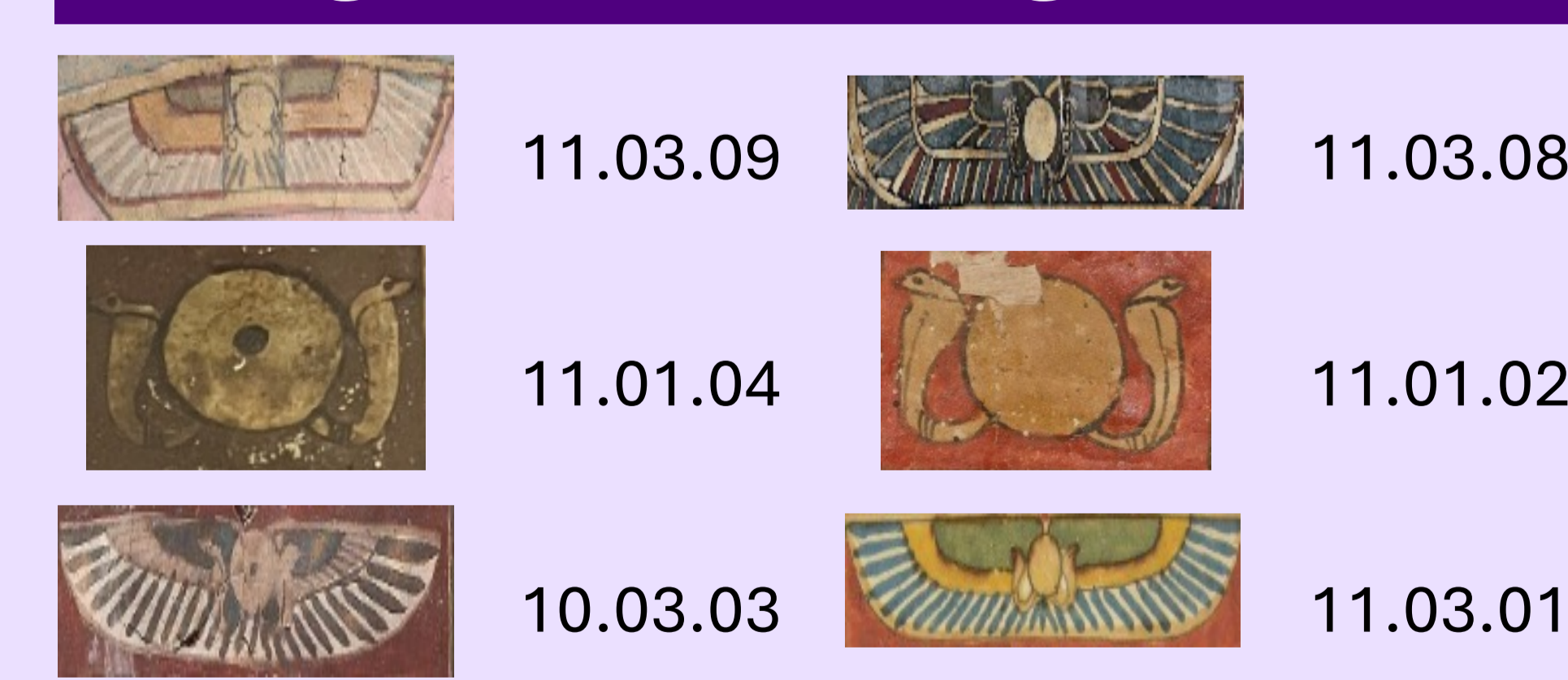


## Stylistic Variations of Common Motifs

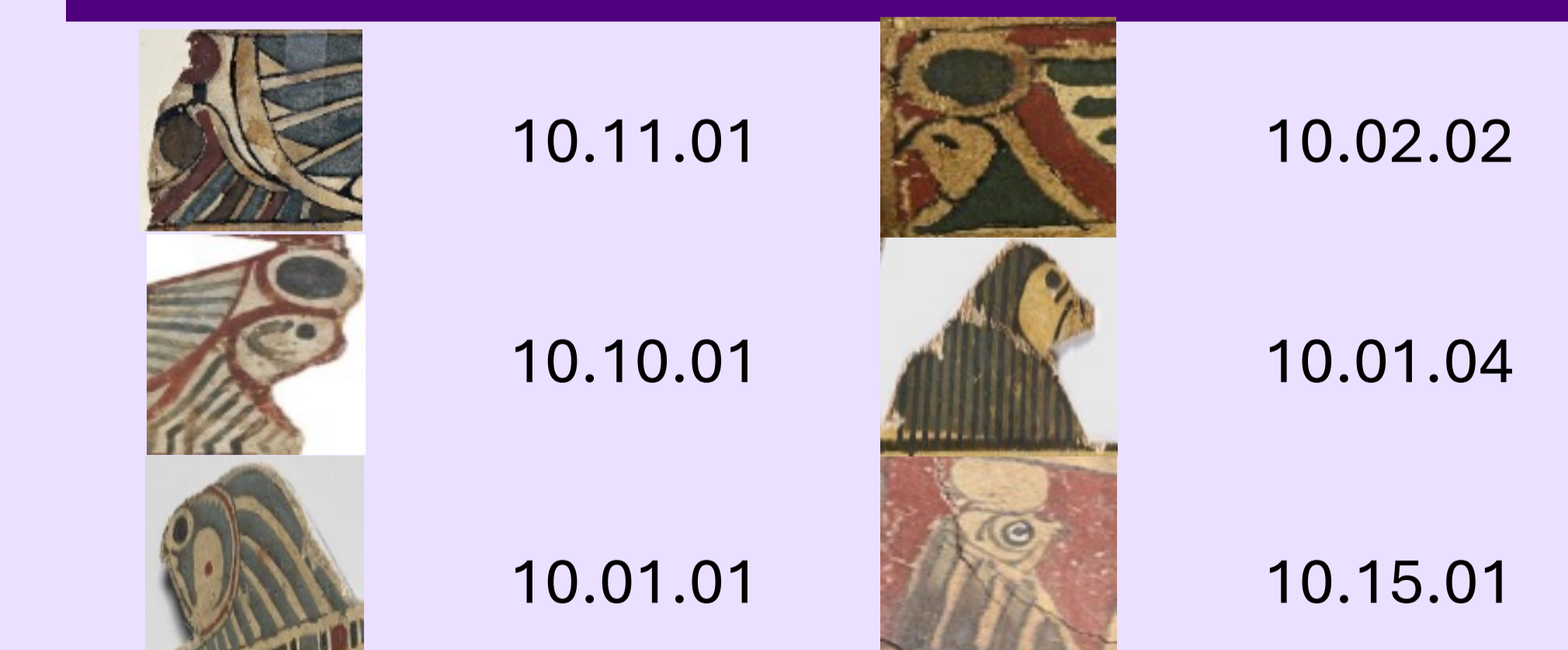
### Beads



### Winged & Non-Winged Uraeus



### Falcon Motif



## Conclusion

Differences in the execution and placement of motifs suggest local reinterpretation. The coexistence of naturalistic and stylised forms challenges the assumption of a linear stylistic progression, indicating multiple visual variations shaped by regional and workshop conventions occurred at the same time.

While definitive conclusions are limited by sample size, three key arguments begin to emerge. First, structural frameworks, such as register organisation and framing devices, tend to cluster geographically, although there is still considerable variability within regions. Second, widely diffused motifs appear to be stylistically adapted to reflect regional aesthetic preferences. Third, this variability may result from a mix of shared practices and local theological or aesthetic influences.

## References

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