



“TAKING ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MORTUARY RELIGION SERIOUSLY”: WHY WOULD WE, AND HOW COULD WE?

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Egyptian mortuary religion is full of ideas which, in their conventional Egyptological interpretation, are very difficult to take seriously, seemingly contradictory and naïve as they are. This has not been a major problem within the field of Egyptology itself due to a disciplinary stance that tends to avoid engagement with the ideas ascribed to the ancient Egyptian actor, but in comparison with anthropological approaches—especially the recent “ontological turn”—such apparently absurd ideas raise a significant challenge. This paper argues that in order to “take seriously” ancient Egyptian practices, much of the Victorian baggage still with us in the traditional idea of the “quest for immortality” needs to be rethought.

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski famously identified the objective of his discipline as “grasping the native’s point of view,”¹ and the ideal of taking indigenous thought seriously has received a new, radical impetus in the recent “ontological turn.”² Here, the notion of “taking seriously” is used of taking apparently incongruous indigenous statements at face value and extrapolating the kind of world in which they would make sense.³ While I don’t think most Egyptologists would object to the ideal of grasping the indigenous point of view, there are still very noticeable differences between the realisations of this ideal in Egyptology and anthropology. Not only does Egyptological interpretations offer an ample supply of Egyptian ideas that seem very difficult to “take seriously” (whether in the vernacular or the specific “ontological” sense), but further, the antiquarian tradition means that the act of collecting details, be they archaeological or philological, often comes to be seen as an end in itself, without necessarily engaging with the wider consequences of what they imply about Egyptian experiences and conceptions of the world. This seems to be nowhere more true than in the study of ancient Egyptian mortuary

religion, and leads to the double question in my title: How could we, and why would we, take Egyptian mortuary religion seriously along the lines of recent anthropological approaches?

EGYPTOLOGY AND ITS LIMITS

Let us begin by taking a closer look at the Egyptological tradition of distancing oneself from the ideas and practices evidenced in the material. A good example from one of the giants of Egyptology comes from Alan Gardiner’s 1957 publication of a compendium of hymns from the Middle Kingdom.⁴ After his magisterial translation and philological commentary on the hymns, Gardiner writes a paragraph so central to the question I would like to take up here that it is worth quoting at some length. Referring to a contemporary debate wherein certain of Gardiner’s contemporary colleagues had been criticised for “their unsympathetic and even patronizing attitude towards the myths and religious practices of Pharaonic times,” Gardiner remarks:⁵

There was more than a grain of justice in his criticism, but perhaps even more dangerous is a standpoint which, just because the old Egyptians were undeniably a highly gifted

and truly civilized people, can regard with respectful awe priestly writings of the kind we have just been considering. Here, as in so many human affairs, the *media via* is the wisest course. There can be no doubt that, while to ourselves the contents of our Sob[e]k hymns must appear to be unmitigated rubbish, the Egyptians will have found in them mystical charms which stirred their pious emotions. It must at least be realized that with their traditional understanding of mythological allusion much that strikes ourselves as meaningless will to the subjects of Ammenemes have sounded profound and have awakened colourful images. This, however, is the concern of the psychologist and of the student of comparative religions rather than of the Egyptologist as such. The latter is in the first instance merely a purveyor of the scanty material that has survived, and he has plenty of grounds of his own, lexical, grammatical and interpretative, to sustain his interest in what might otherwise seem intolerably arid.

Gardiner continues with criticising the literary qualities of the hymns, but concludes that they were well worth studying and publishing all the same: "It is the Egyptologist's business to display and illustrate all aspects of the ancient people's minds, irrespective of the intrinsic value of what he may find to exhibit."⁶

As I have indicated, I am not citing this example for purely historical reasons. While certainly the boundaries of the disciplines are much more blurred today than they were at Gardiner's time, I would argue that the underlying sentiment has not changed much. The reason that such evaluations today are mostly found in works for wider readerships, such as museum catalogues or other presentations for an interdisciplinary audience, has more to do with Egyptological decorum, where direct denigration of the people studied is usually not regarded as fitting within strictly academic discourse, and perhaps also with the fact that the core focus of the discipline of Egyptology has come to be much more firmly entrenched than it was in Gardiner's day, thus needing less affirmation.

Going back further, the disciplinary division of labour was even less obvious. At the dawn of the

disciplines in the 19th century, anthropology and archaeology shared many of the same aims and methods.⁷ An increased emphasis in 20th-century anthropology on the importance of fieldwork and living among the people studied (the participant-observer method) contributed greatly to the gulf between the two disciplines.⁸ In a sense, the disciplines dealing with the past were by necessity barred from leaving the "armchair" phase where people were studied indirectly through objects and communication meant for others (extant textual sources), rather than through direct interpersonal engagement, except in so far as the past and present could be made to converge through cultural "survivals."⁹ As shown by the case of the great armchair anthropologists of the 19th century like James Frazer and Edward Burnett Tylor, this can lead not only to misunderstandings, but also to a stance where tracing and cataloguing objects and phenomena can come to take the place of an engagement with the people studied as human beings—in other words, more or less precisely the stance described by Gardiner and in many ways still with us today.¹⁰

EGYPTIAN MORTUARY RELIGION IN EGYPTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Some of the ideas of the ancient Egyptians that seem most obviously absurd to the modern observer come from the domain of funerary practice. Often singled out are the ideas connected to such funerary objects as *shabtis* meant to take over the burdens of corvée labour in the afterlife, or heart scarabs intended to make the heart refrain from divulging the misdeeds done by its owner at his or her post-mortem judgment. In the concreteness of their expectations from the afterlife, as well as the superstitious reliance on magical objects as substitutes for a genuinely virtuous life, such objects are perfect illustrations of ideas that are very difficult to take seriously.¹¹ This is no particular problem for traditional Egyptological approaches, which tend to bracket out this side of things as falling outside properly Egyptological concerns, as exemplified by the Gardiner quote. On the other hand, social anthropology has wrestled precisely with problems like these for well over a century, and certain celebrated examples have become genuine motors for conceptual and theoretical development, such as the Nuer's insistence to Evans-Pritchard that human twins are birds,¹² or a Kanak informant claiming that the

missionary Maurice Leenhardt had not taught his people about the soul, which they already knew about, but that he had rather introduced them to the novel concept of the body.¹³ There thus seems to be at least a theoretical possibility of employing the apparently absurd ideas of the ancient Egyptians in a similar way.

First, we may note that there needs no anthropologist come from the grave to tell us that there are often problems with traditional Egyptological understandings, although such problems have not always had much influence on consensus. Let us take the example of the Egyptological understanding of the *shabti* as a substitute for the deceased that will take up his corvée duties in the afterlife. There is little evidence for the idea of post-mortem corvée labour outside of the so-called *shabti*-spell, so that for instance we have no knowledge of who imposes these duties on the deceased or on what authority.¹⁴ Additionally, the text of especially the earlier versions of the *shabti* spell is quite ambiguous and in fact open to several interpretations regarding such questions as the identity of the entities involved¹⁵ and the specific nature of the work to be carried out.¹⁶

The archaeological side of things is equally problematic. While the funerary use of *shabtis* from the New Kingdom onwards is well established, and could generally be taken to support the conventional "substitute labour" understanding, earlier evidence calls some of this idea into question. Thus, the earliest "true" *shabtis* (i.e., inscribed with the *shabti* spell confirming their conceptual background) with a recorded archaeological context are not funerary *per se*, but are rather used in a form of substitute burial.¹⁷ This use is in conflict with the idea that the *shabtis* were meant to accompany the deceased to be able to stand in for him so he would not have to work, and rather points to a conception whereby the person depicted wanted to be able to carry out work in a place where he was not actually buried.¹⁸

Similarly, the 2nd Intermediate Period practice in the Theban region of depositing so-called "stick-*shabtis*" also runs counter to the conventional interpretation in certain respects.¹⁹ Such objects were placed by living relations in the accessible part of tombs, presumably as part of the mortuary cult. This again makes it likely that they were meant to carry out "work" in that place, and that in some sense they were doing so on behalf of the dedicator as much as the tomb owner. Together, these earlier uses of

shabtis indicate that the "work" carried out was not an unpleasant duty, but rather something desirable which the figurine enabled its dedicant or depositor to do. The fact that the figurines were deposited in sacred places could be taken to mean that the work in question was not the unpleasant corvée labour usually assumed, but rather tasks of a cultic or even cosmological significance.²⁰

Independently of considerations of this early archaeological background, Desroches-Noblecourt arrived at a rather similar result spurred by general scepticism towards the inherent logic of the conventional interpretation. Desroches-Noblecourt suggests instead that the *shabtis* allow the deceased to participate in the primeval process of ensuring the world's fertility, so that the purpose of the *shabti* is to *allow* this participation rather than shirking the work it entails.²¹

It is of course entirely likely that *shabtis* may have had different meanings and functions in different contexts, especially in a diachronic perspective,²² and I do not want to claim that these indications necessarily form a single, correct interpretation. My point is rather that there is good, internal Egyptological evidence to problematize or at least nuance the traditional understanding of the *shabti*, yet the usual story is repeated time and again in both specialised and more broadly disseminated works.

Why has the conventional interpretation remained so strong? The answer to this involves both circumstances specific to this object category and more general Egyptological interpretive patterns. The most immediate explanation is that the conventional understanding actually succeeds in making reasonable sense of the use of *shabtis* from the New Kingdom onwards, and its obvious incongruities can be sidestepped by ascribing them to the ancient Egyptian conceptions themselves rather than their modern Egyptological interpretation. Another aspect of doubtless importance is the ubiquity of this object category in excavations and collections, which means that a simple, univocal and immediately understandable explanation is of great convenience in outreach and education, as opposed to one requiring relatively detailed discussions of archaeological contexts and textual transmission as well as background knowledge of Egyptian conceptions of images and their place in the mortuary cult.

But there are more insidious general patterns at work as well. Firstly, the traditional conception of

the *shabti* fits Orientalist²³ stereotypes like a glove. They confirm the trope of the lazy and superstitious Oriental who wants to shirk his duties in the afterlife, and who does so believing that his images will magically come to life. There is even the notional idea of slavery or forced labour to make this mix complete.²⁴ On the most general level, unlike the more nuanced interpretation I have just outlined, the conventional conception of the *shabti* fits well within the overall idea of the Egyptians as bent on a quest for an eternal, personal afterlife, in which they wanted to secure the quality of their post-mortem existence. This idea, influential as it is, has a highly problematic historical and methodological background. In fact, I will argue that it constitutes one of the main stumbling blocks for our efforts to take Egyptian mortuary religion seriously.

THE “QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY” IN EGYPTOLOGICAL THOUGHT

The general outline of the traditional Egyptological understanding of Egyptian mortuary thought is well known: Like good Victorians, the Egyptians wanted to live eternally after death, and the means to do so was to lead a virtuous life.²⁵ However, in the absence of a true divine revelation, they had to resort to various feats of imagination and magical rituals for conceptualising and dealing with the afterlife.

This has been the dominant understanding for the last century and a half, but the framework actually emerges less directly from the sources than we might imagine. In fact, it has rarely been the topic of detailed empirical research, being instead perpetuated as an overall explanatory framework especially through practices of teaching, outreach, and exhibition.²⁶ Let us briefly consider the Egyptological “afterlife” concept as an interpretative framework from two different perspectives, one historiographic and one methodological.

If we trace the history of the modern afterlife framework back to its roots in the nascent discipline of Egyptology in the early 19th century, at first sight we get an image that is exactly what we would expect. The understanding of ancient Egyptian burial practices and their conceptual background gradually proceeds from various speculative ideas towards the modern notion of the Egyptian conceptions of the afterlife that I just sketched. Thus, for example, the idea of metempsychosis or reincarnation described by Herodotus²⁷ played an

important role in the understanding of Egyptian religion by such early scholars as Rosellini and Wilkinson, both writing in the 1830s, as well as mid-century writers such as Harriet Martineau and John Kenrick.²⁸ However, the idea gradually disappeared from the framework during the 1860s and 1870s (explicitly contradicted by Maspero in 1872²⁹), and we tend to think that this is because, unlike the idea of a quest for personal immortality, the transmigration of souls is not actually found in the Egyptian sources.³⁰

However, on closer scrutiny it turns out that the formative period in the mid-19th century proceeded largely by deductive, rather than empirical, methods.³¹ A characteristic passage, from John Kenrick’s *Ancient Egypt under the Pharaohs* from 1852, reads:

It appears almost impossible for man not to conceive of himself as composed of two elements, a corporeal and a spiritual principle, to which a different destiny is assigned, when their temporary union is dissolved by death. The larger and grosser part is visibly restored to the earth; but it is only by the analogical reasonings of philosophy that men have ever been brought to believe that the soul is involved in the same destruction. The instinct of nature prompts to a belief in its continued existence, which is the more easily cherished, because it has no sensible properties distinct from matter.³²

This type of reasoning, and the results it leads to, are by no means specific for the proto-Egyptology of the period. In fact, we find more or less this exact same argument from Sir Walter Scott’s letters published in 1830³³ to anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* from 1871.³⁴ In other words, it is not that the Egyptian written sources—which only became widely translated and available during the last third of the 19th century³⁵—talked about a quest for immortality. Rather, this deductive framework could help make sense of the elaborate burial practices and depictions in tombs and Books of the Dead in the Victorian worldview. Part of the motivation for fitting Egyptian mortuary religion into a mould with marked similarities to contemporary Christianity was thus universalist: Primitive people wanted the same kind of salvation

as contemporary Christians, but were naturally doomed to search for it in vain.

There were also more specific polemical motivations for drawing parallels between ancient Egyptian religion and contemporary Christianities. While a detailed discussion of this would lead us too far astray from the purposes of this paper,³⁶ it is worth noting a couple of examples of this deployment of Egyptian religion. The Unitarian scholar Samuel Sharpe³⁷ aimed with his 1863 book *Egyptian Mythology and Egyptian Christianity* at demonstrating how false doctrines traceable back to the ancient Egyptians had made their way into mainstream Christianity, including "the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and the atonement by vicarious sufferings."³⁸ The widely debated ideas of Gerald Massey, for whom Egyptian religion was seen in a utopian light, with later Christianity misinterpreting and corrupting its spiritual insights, exemplifies a broadly similar approach of finding precursors to Christianity in ancient Egyptian, although the resulting evaluation thus becomes the exact opposite to that of Sharpe.³⁹ Whatever the tenor of such attempts to demonstrate the pagan roots of Christianity (*reductio ad Aegyptum* as a theological argument, or Egyptian religion as a purer precursor), they offered a further incentive for conceptualising Egyptian religion in terms that enabled such parallels.

Together, these different motivations led to a situation in which, by the time the written sources began to be translated in earnest, a framework was already in place that aligned ideas of Egyptian afterlife with commonplace Christian aspirations after death. The contents emerging from the ancient sources were fitted into this framework as a quest for eternal life, whose general details were remarkably, and in some cases deliberately, similar to those of contemporary Christian eschatology.⁴⁰

Surely, though, in the case of ancient Egypt and Egyptology these ideas have stood the test of time. If they were not an adequate framework for understanding the sources, wouldn't they have been questioned and rejected during the intervening century and a half? This question leads us to the second, methodological, point.

The interpretation of burial practices as evidence of belief in the afterlife, and as indications of the nature of such beliefs, is as old as the academic discipline of archaeology. It has been criticised, or at least sidestepped, by a succession of different

archaeological schools,⁴¹ but in Egyptology it has remained a basic tool of interpretation: Things were deposited in tombs, because the deceased needed them in the afterlife.⁴² This, in turn, means that we can elucidate what the Egyptian afterlife was like on the basis of the objects that were deposited as grave goods. It will be noted that this line of reasoning is entirely circular—even the most surprising object found in a tomb would not provide a basis for questioning the overall model. The idea of an eternal personal afterlife is thus impervious to empirical critique from archaeological evidence.

A similar situation prevails when it comes to mortuary texts. Given the general conceptual framework of the afterlife, they are most usually understood as descriptions of what happens to the deceased in the next life.⁴³ All the various threats and tasks presented in the texts do not really conform to our expectations of eternal bliss, so instead the texts are usually interpreted as referring to the journey leading to the eternal blessed existence.⁴⁴ The fact that this desired afterlife itself is not really described in the texts is usually not regarded as a problem⁴⁵—after all, we know that that was what the Egyptians were after, or why else put all those things in the tomb? In other words, the afterlife gets a similar unassailable status when it comes to the texts. We cannot think of any situation described in a mortuary text that would make us question or abandon the idea that these texts refer to an eternal, personal afterlife, or at least the journey to get there.

A good, early illustration of this use of the mortuary texts to flesh out an already-existing interpretive framework can be found by comparing Adolf Erman's presentation of Egyptian mortuary religion in *Aegypten und aegyptisches Leben im Altertum* from 1885⁴⁶ with the more detailed treatment in his *Die ägyptische Religion* from 1905.⁴⁷ The overall understanding is the same, but in the later work the presentation of the Egyptians' (rather confused and contradictory, as Erman repeatedly points out) ideas about the nature of the afterlife has been enriched by copious citations from texts, especially the Pyramid Texts, which had been published in the meantime by Gaston Maspero.⁴⁸

Thus, whether we approach the question through archaeology, texts, or a combination, the hypothesis that the Egyptians were engaged in a quest for personal immortality is impossible to falsify. According to Karl Popper's falsification criterion, the more difficult a hypothesis is to falsify, the weaker

that hypothesis is, so that hypotheses that cannot be falsified on principal grounds simply cannot be regarded as scientific claims.⁴⁹ In other words, the hypothesis of the Egyptians' belief in, and quest for, an eternal personal afterlife is not only dubious in its historical origin, but also extremely weak in methodological terms. While in principle the hypothesis is thus impossible to disprove, this background makes it crucial to consider whether there might be alternative ways of accounting for the evidence.

In so far as it is possible in the space available here, I hope to have made a case that far from being a framework emerging naturally from the primary sources, the traditional "afterlife" idea is really only a hypothesis. Furthermore, it is a hypothesis which was shaped in fundamental ways by the 19th-century worldviews within which it was developed, and because of the way it is formulated, it is impossible to falsify empirically. Taken together, this means there are very good reasons to be suspicious of the "afterlife" hypothesis as an explanatory framework. I hope it has also become clear that the Egyptological notion of the quest for eternal life may in fact have functioned as an obstacle preventing us from taking Egyptian mortuary religion (and the many social practices connected with it) seriously, since we tend to regard beliefs in a transcendent afterlife as dislodged from social and cultural contexts.

BEYOND THE AFTERLIFE

How, then, would we go about building an approach that avoided these pitfalls? How could we even begin to take Egyptian mortuary religion seriously? I would like to suggest a number of points drawing on recent theoretical work in archaeology and anthropology that would allow us to take an approach rooted more in the actual source material and the indigenous concepts found therein, and less in the Victorian framework of the universal human quest for immortality.⁵⁰

A new approach to Egyptian mortuary religion would involve rethinking conventional stances within each of the central aspects of the topic. It would need to be firmly rooted in the social context of the mortuary cult rather than focusing on alleged ideas of a transcendent afterlife. It would also need to be based on indigenous conceptual frameworks rather than anachronistic ideas like "afterlife" and "quest for immortality." The mortuary texts would

need to be approached in the same way as other ancient Egyptian ritual texts, instead of being regarded as a special case offering concrete descriptions of the afterlife. Indigenous understandings of the nature and role of objects, especially images, would need to form the basis for interpretation, rather than imaginative conjectures such as objects coming to life in the hereafter. And finally a new approach would have to abandon the trope of preserving the body for eternity and focus instead on mummification *and* grave goods as the material aspects of the transformation of the deceased into an ancestor. Let us explore each of these ideas in a bit more detail.

Egyptian mortuary conceptions and practices are deeply rooted in the social context of the ancestor cult. The central focus on regular offerings is well rehearsed in the literature, as is the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the living and the dead.⁵¹ Within this context, the dead are usually regarded as being in some measure bound to the tomb, as well as being dependent on services from, and general interaction with, the living. This overall framework has been extensively studied and is quite well understood, making it an excellent background for understanding other aspects of burial practices. On the one hand there is no reason to assume that Egyptian conceptions of the dead were necessarily monolithic. Yet on the other hand it is clear that the apparent paradox between the ancestor's existence in the tomb and a transcendent personal afterlife in the beyond owes much to the fact that the former is a well-attested Egyptian conception, whilst the latter, as seen above, is mainly a Victorian one.

To avoid introducing anachronistic ideas into the analysis, the conceptual framework should be drawn in so far as possible from ideas and categories expressed by the Egyptians themselves. This means that crucial notions without Egyptian correlates such as "afterlife" or "quest for immortality" become inherently suspect. Other notions, such as "eternal life" or "not perishing," can certainly be found in a literal translation of the texts (albeit much more rarely than one might have expected), but contextually they mean something rather different from what a modern scholar steeped in the New Testament usage of the concept might expect.⁵² Hence they should be raised to analytical concepts only with the utmost care. Much better candidates for a fruitful conceptual framework include such central Egyptian ontological concepts as *hpr*, "to

become," *h*, "to appear," and *shr*, "nature, propensity." A careful lexicographical analysis allows us to escape the specious simplicity of the conventional glosses, in order to arrive at an indigenous conceptual framework for analysing mortuary practices.⁵³

If the funerary texts are not assumed from the outset to describe a transcendent afterlife, there is no particular reason to read them differently than any other Egyptian ritual texts. The mythology and cosmology in such texts can then be understood as patterns governing the situation of the deceased and other persons involved in a broadly similar way to what happens, for example, in healing texts when the patient is identified as Horus or Re in order to effect his or her recovery. It is further becoming increasingly clear that the texts that ended up in tombs may have had quite varied backgrounds and correspondingly were chosen for the tomb for a variety of reasons.⁵⁴ Adding more nuance to Sethe's old, but extremely influential, idea⁵⁵ that the texts were necessarily put in tombs for the benefit of the deceased in his or her personal afterlife opens up a number of new interpretive avenues for identifying the backgrounds and motivations for these texts' inclusion.

Likewise, moving away from the assumption that grave goods were necessarily meant for concrete use or consumption by the deceased in the afterlife opens Egyptian burial practices to a wide range of recent interpretive approaches to material culture. In particular, relational approaches focusing on the capacity of objects to express or elicit connections between entities, processes and places are highly germane to Egyptian practices.⁵⁶ Grave goods and votives very often include objects mimicking or "referring" to other objects by various metaphorical and metonymical means (covering a range of conventional object categories such as model objects, dummy objects, miniaturised objects, skeuomorphs, etc.). Rather than assuming that such objects magically grow to full size to serve the deceased in the afterlife, or compensate in some other way for their supposed deficiencies, the ontological connections forged by their shape, material, decorations, and inscriptions can instead be seen to embed the deceased in the cosmos in a particular shape and role. Images deserve to be mentioned here too, due to the Egyptological convention of assuming that funerary images were believed to come to life in the beyond to serve the deceased.⁵⁷

Despite a couple of examples of this idea from Egyptian literary tales of wonder,⁵⁸ there is no evidence that actual ritual images were thought to behave in this way, and the idea seems to have more in common with the 19th-century fairy tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann⁵⁹ and Hans Christian Andersen⁶⁰ than with ancient Egyptian rituals. On the other hand, the indigenous terminology and conceptions of images are quite well-understood from texts detailing the ritual uses of images, in particular concerning the way images can be ontologically tied to what they depict. Such ancient Egyptian ideas form a much more plausible background to supplement the theoretical understanding of images as relation-makers *par excellence*.⁶¹

Finally, the Egyptological trope of mummification as aiming at the preservation of the body in a lifelike state for eternity is long overdue for rethinking, as recently argued in detail by Christina Riggs.⁶² Here as well, the traditional Egyptological perspective has been passed down by way of 19th-century receptions, where the fact that human bodies were found to have been preserved was regarded as proof that this must be what the Egyptians aimed for—in other words, effects were confused with intention.⁶³ In fact, of course, there is very little "lifelike" about most mummies, and indeed the associated texts do not refer to the idea that the body was meant to be preserved in a lifelike form. "Transformation" is a much more appropriate designation, and one which helps once again to embed the practices in the social passage from human to ancestor, rather than within a Victorian quest for eternal life through taxidermy.⁶⁴ In particular the practices connected to the dead body, and especially the resulting mummy, tend to blur the differences between the categories of person and object, indicating that we should seek a common analytical framework to approach both. The relational perspective is useful in this regard, as are the various "new materialisms" that are characterised precisely by their efforts to cut across this intuitive, but fairly modern, distinction.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

Where does such a rethinking of the central aspects of Egyptian mortuary religion lead? To begin with, it takes us one step further away from the old idea of the Egyptians being "obsessed with death." It also avoids the slightly newer, but equally condescending, reverse trope that they were instead "obsessed with life."⁶⁶ Moving beyond this idea as

just one more surviving example of the "irrational Oriental," the Egyptians do not seem to have been particularly obsessed at all, but practised an ancestor cult broadly comparable with countless other archaeological and ethnographic examples.⁶⁷ Thus, my point is not to deny that the Egyptians thought human beings continued, in one sense or another, to exist after death, but rather that framing this existence as a wish for a continued, personal existence in a transcendent realm is a historically contingent interpolation. We need to keep these two ideas separate, which can be difficult precisely because of the entrenchment of the 19th-century perspective, encouraging us to assume that continued relations to a person after his or her death implies the whole soteriological and eschatological package.⁶⁸

The apparent paradox of having an ancestor cult without detailed conceptions of a personal afterlife is in fact far from unique to the Egyptians. Over fifty years ago Africanist Meyer Fortes observed that this combination was in fact very widespread.⁶⁹ Part of the reason is no doubt a fairly pragmatic outlook: Unless it is necessary for some concrete reason, most people will not be particularly concerned with what it is actually like to be dead (or a god), and conceptions of what ancestors are and can do thus tend to be formulated from the point of view of the living rather than that of the ancestors (or gods) themselves. As I have indicated there is no compelling reason to take either Egyptian grave goods or mortuary texts to indicate exceptions to such a perspective.

But what *do* the mortuary texts tell us if they are understood as ritual texts as I have argued they should be?⁷⁰ One of the most pertinent questions in approaching these texts, from whatever conceptual background, is what to make of all the mythological events in which the deceased is said to be involved. The traditional Egyptological afterlife perspective is capable—as we have seen—of incorporating just about anything, so these mythological involvements simply become so many tasks to complete before arriving in the afterlife, or possibly, in the cases where the roles do not appear too unpleasant, they may be thought themselves to constitute the afterlife.

In contrast, an approach rooted in the conceptual framework of the texts themselves will be free to take what happens much more at face value. Texts inserting the name of the deceased in a narrative or description of the deeds of a particular god can thus

be understood as ontological statements about the involvement of the deceased in the creation and maintenance of the world's order. Once we do not assume that the ultimate goal is the empowerment of an individual in a personal afterlife, we do not need to understand such statements figuratively. Rather, the deceased is dissolved into a myriad of roles all serving, not the deceased "himself," but the world itself, which is maintained through the activities of the ancestors—as-gods.⁷¹

While the detailed ritual expositions found in ancient Egypt are cross-culturally unique, the more general image in which ancestors are credited with upholding the world's order, from the smallest details of descendants' private lives to the grandest cosmic scale, is extremely well-attested.⁷² This means that on the one hand, the results obtained by such a rethinking are not far-fetched cross-culturally speaking, and on the other that the Egyptian material can offer a unique perspective on such ideas once it is released from the conceptual straightjacket of the afterlife hypothesis. This is true not just of the textual sources, but equally of material culture, and I have argued elsewhere that attempts to rethink well-known Egyptian objects such as coffins⁷³ and funerary figurines⁷⁴ can allow them to inform ongoing discussions of object ontologies in anthropology and archaeology.

The perspectives of the new approach I suggest can only be exemplified very briefly here.⁷⁵ However, I hope to have shown that there are very good reasons for attempting to take Egyptian mortuary religion more seriously than is often done in Egyptology, and that in some ways this question cuts to the core of the divergence between Egyptology and anthropology. At the same time, I also hope to have given an indication of the kind of approaches one might take instead, and of the potential results that can emerge from embedding mortuary religion within the ontological, social and ritual lifeworld of the ancient Egyptians.

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NOTES

- 1 Malinowski 1922, 25.
- 2 See conveniently Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; cf. Brémont, this volume.
- 3 For the (occasionally somewhat polemical) notion of “taking seriously” in this connection, see the discussion by Willerslev 2013, 41–43, and most recently Astuti 2017, 105–122.
- 4 Gardiner 1957.
- 5 Gardiner 1957, 55f.
- 6 Gardiner 1957, 56.
- 7 See, e.g., Champion 2003; Gange 2015, 72.
- 8 See, e.g., Buchli 2002, 2–5 for the gradual shift from object collections to ethnographic monographs as the main source of authoritative knowledge, and see Adams 1997, 25–31 for the early relationship between anthropology and Egyptology in particular.
- 9 See, e.g., Aylward Blackman’s chapter on ancient Egyptian parallels in his sister Winifred’s ethnography of contemporary *fellahin*, Blackman 1927.
- 10 See, e.g., Ingold 2008, 81–83 for a critique of the “armchair” stance, and cf. Sera-Shriar 2014 for a less polemical characterisation of the aims and methods of actual 19th-century “armchair anthropologists.”
- 11 While as mentioned this underlying stance is largely excluded by decorum from contemporary specifically Egyptological publications, it occasionally comes to the fore in interdisciplinary presentations and other works for broader audiences, e.g., Bourriau 1988, 100, noting the apparent naivety or even absurdity of Egyptian beliefs connected to *shabtis*, or the mirthful description of Egyptian ideas of the

- afterlife in Smith 2007, 24f.
- ¹² Evans-Pritchard 1956, 130–133; cf. e.g. Evens 2012; Lloyd 2012, 73ff, for the more recent history of the idea and challenges it raises.
- ¹³ Leenhardt 1979 [1947], 164; cf. Clifford 1992, 172–188.
- ¹⁴ Note also that the *shabti* spell in turn provides one of the main sources for the Egyptological understanding of corvée among the living, as noted by Lehner 2015, 473–474.
- ¹⁵ Cf. the recent discussions in Miniaci 2014, 266f; Nyord 2017, 341–346.
- ¹⁶ See, e.g., the discussion of the range of meanings of the terms used in Schneider 1977, 50–53.
- ¹⁷ The *shabtis* of Bener and Wahneferhotep at Lisht (Arnold 1988, 34–40), and cf. the (now lost) gilded figurine of Nemtyemweskheth from chapel ANOC 19 at Abydos (Bourriau 1988, 40), although it is unclear from Garstang’s description whether this carried the *shabti* spell. Cf. most recently Nyord 2017, 346–348 with further references.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Nyord 2017, 341–347.
- ¹⁹ Whelan 2007, cf. Willems 2009.
- ²⁰ Cf. also the general argument by Pinch 2003 that very few of the object categories found in tombs are exclusively funerary, and that the deposition of an object in or near the tomb does not necessarily mean it had a specific function as equipment for the afterlife.
- ²¹ Desroches Noblecourt 1995, 157–167.
- ²² As also pointed out by Bourriau 1991, 17.
- ²³ *Sensu* Said 1978. For updated views on the continued relevance of the concept, see, e.g., Burke III and Prochaska 2008, and for a specifically Egyptological contextualisation, see Riggs 2014, 41–44.
- ²⁴ E.g., Černý 1941, 116–117.
- ²⁵ The importance of a virtuous life for post-mortem fate has recently been challenged for the earlier periods due to lack of evidence by Smith 2017, 25, although he still accepts it as relevant in the later parts of Egyptian history (e.g., Smith 2017, 257).
- ²⁶ The attraction of the ancient Egyptian “quest for eternal life” in popular imagination and scholarship alike is thus very similar to, and indeed entangled with, the focus on “beautiful objects and monuments” criticised by Moreno García 2014, 52–54, and seems to some extent to be kept alive by similar mechanisms.
- ²⁷ Herodotus, *Histories*, II, 123, with less detailed descriptions of the idea occurring in other Classical authors; cf. Zeidler 2008, 300–302.
- ²⁸ Rosellini 1836, 91–92; Wilkinson 1839–1841, V, 440–446; Martineau 1848, 179; Kenrick 1852, II, 10, apart from the writers cited by Zeidler 2008, 303. Note also the importance accorded to this idea by Prichard 1819. In the preface of the second edition of this work, Prichard (1838, xii–xiii) notes
- It was at one time very generally expected that the clue afforded by the Rosetta inscription towards the decyphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics and enchorial writings would have led to very important discoveries with respect to the religious notions and practices and the philosophical dogmas of the Egyptian priests. Hitherto little or nothing has been obtained to verify this sanguine hope. It may indeed be questioned whether from this source it could have been discovered that the remarkable doctrine of the metempsychosis was held by the Egyptians.
- ²⁹ Maspero 1872, 340 n. 1.
- ³⁰ Cf. the recent discussion of this question in Zeidler 2008. While the paucity of Egyptian evidence certainly played a role for the abandonment of the idea, it is likely that its incompatibility with the soteriological “afterlife” framework also had an influence, as several of the earlier authors struggle to combine the two ideas into a consistent model. Arguably, this continues to be the case. It is thus worth noting that Zeidler’s (2008, 305) list of differences between the ideas expressed in the transformation spells in the Book of the Dead and those required of a genuine idea of metempsychosis is more dependent on conventional interpretations of these spells than on what is actually expressed in the primary texts. Cf. the very different understanding of the

transformation spells suggested by Schäfer 1914, 103, in one of the latest genuine endorsements of the idea of metempsychosis in mainstream Egyptology.

³¹ Such sweeping statements naturally tend to gloss over the complexities of the ideas and historical developments of the period, the need for a detailed study of which to attain a nuanced understanding of the discipline's history was recently argued cogently by Gange 2015. Needless to say, no such attempt can be made here, as the goal is the much more modest one of establishing some overall characteristics of the intellectual milieus in which the development of the afterlife framework took place.

³² Kenrick 1852, I, 396.

³³ Scott 1830, 14–16.

³⁴ Tylor 1871, 387–388.

³⁵ E.g., Marchand 2009, 90. See also Gange 2013, 164, where the period 1880–1900 is characterised as "the moment when hieroglyphic, hieratic and archaeological sources finally began to define the shape of histories of Egypt."

³⁶ Cf. the discussion in Gange 2006, and compare also the presence of some of the same themes earlier in the century in the German so-called "Creuzer Streit" arising from Friedrich Creuzer's 1810–1812 monograph *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker*, wherein later religious ideas and practices are traced back to the ancient Orient, including Egypt (e.g., Marchand 2009, 66–69).

³⁷ On Sharpe's role in the proto-Egyptology of his time, see further Gange 2013, 107–109 and 112–114.

³⁸ Sharpe 1863, ix.

³⁹ E.g., Massey 1883. See Gange 2013, 220–225 for discussion and further references.

⁴⁰ Cf. the discussion of the British reception of Egyptian religion in the 1890s in Gange 2013, 208–220.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Stutz and Tarlow 2013.

⁴² If this seems caricatured, it is at least in part because this idea is taken for granted to the extent that it is rarely made explicit. However, among recent examples we find the following passage from an encyclopaedia entry (Haikal 2012, 161):

Ever since Egyptian burials were found, funerary equipment, indicating the belief in an afterlife where the deceased might need such objects, accompanied the body. Thus the question was not whether afterlife existed, but rather what it was like, how to prepare for it, communicate with it, reach it, and survive in it eternally,

echoing much earlier treatments, e.g. Budge 1895, lv: 'That the Egyptians believed in a future life of some kind is certain; and the doctrine of eternal existence is the leading feature of their religion, and is enunciated with the utmost clearness in all periods'. It is, however, worth noting that aspects of this line of interpretation have occasionally been called into question within Egyptology as well, e.g., by Pinch 2003.

⁴³ While important work has been done indicating ritual (and sometimes non-funerary) origins of a number of the texts (cf., e.g., the different recent perspectives on this in Willems 1996, 279–286; Assmann and Bommas 2004; Hays 2012, 48–50; von Lieven 2012; cf. also Riggs 2014: 163–167), this has not for the most part had any consequence for their understanding in the funerary contexts: Once adapted to be inscribed in the tomb, the mythological texts tend to be understood as describing the fate and concerns of the dead in a fairly direct and literal way.

⁴⁴ E.g., Taylor 2010, both in the title of the catalogue ("*Journey through the Afterlife*") and, e.g., on p. 12f, "a collection of spells to empower, protect and guide the dead on their perilous journey," the users of which "believed they could escape the clutches of death and reach eternal paradise."

⁴⁵ The "bucolic paradise" represented in Book of the Dead chapter 110 and often reproduced in modern descriptions is sometimes enlisted for this purpose (e.g., Taylor 2010, 241–244), without engaging with the problems in ascribing to elite and royal Egyptians a notion that an eternity of manual labour in the fields would really have been a blessing—or possibly relying on *shabtis* to solve this problem (e.g., Taylor 2010, 244f).

⁴⁶ Erman 1885, II, 413–441.

⁴⁷ Erman 1905, 87–114.

⁴⁸ First as a series of contributions in *Recueils des*

- Travaux* from 1882 to 1892, and then as a whole in the monograph Maspero 1894. Cf. also Brugsch’s contemporary note that the content of the Pyramid Texts that Maspero was publishing “betrifft durchaus denselben Gedanken, welcher den Abbildungen und Inschriften der Privatgräber zu Grunde liegt: das wonnige Dasein eines begüterten Königs in dem zweiten Dasein,” in Brugsch 1891, 185.
- ⁴⁹ Popper 2002 [1935], 57–73.
- ⁵⁰ Cf. also the critique of (to some extent still prevailing) late 19th-century attitudes to other aspects of ancient Egyptian culture by Moreno García 2009 and 2014.
- ⁵¹ See, e.g., Baines and Lacovara 2002, 5–36; Donnat and Moreno García 2014.
- ⁵² In particular they often seem to be bound to specific mythological roles rather than characterising the fate of dead human beings in general; cf. the remarks in Nyord 2015, 287–288.
- ⁵³ As an example, see the analysis of the ontological nature of the *ka* in Egyptian thought in Nyord, forthcoming.
- ⁵⁴ As argued most recently by von Lieven 2012 and forthcoming.
- ⁵⁵ Sethe 1931.
- ⁵⁶ E.g., Hutson 2010; Fowler 2013; Watts 2013.
- ⁵⁷ A very long-lived idea especially in connection with Old and Middle Kingdom servant figurines; see, e.g., Borchartd 1897, 119; Breasted 1948, 6; David 2002, 172.
- ⁵⁸ Notably the wax crocodile punishing the adulterer in Papyrus Westcar, the boat and crew bringing Naneferkaptah to Coptos in *Setne I*, and the human figures fetching and beating the rulers in *Setne II*; for the literary motif, see most recently Sérida 2015, 361f. Unlike in some later treatments, the need to distinguish such “fabulous reports” from actual ritual practice is underlined already by Gardiner 1915, 263.
- ⁵⁹ *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816), the influential French rendering by Alexandre Dumas the Elder appearing in 1844.
- ⁶⁰ E.g., *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (1838), *The Sweethearts; or, The Top and the Ball* (1843), *The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep* (1845).
- ⁶¹ Cf. the study of ritual images and their ontology in Nyord 2017.
- ⁶² Riggs 2014.
- ⁶³ Riggs 2014, 87–89.
- ⁶⁴ Cf. also Nyord 2013, 196–197.
- ⁶⁵ In particular Barad 2007, cf. Sofaer 2006 and Alberti forthcoming. See also Zinn, this volume.
- ⁶⁶ E.g., Ikram 2003, ix.
- ⁶⁷ See, e.g., Hageman and Hill 2016; Hill and Hageman 2016.
- ⁶⁸ The suggested rethinking raises some interesting chronological questions, since the sources indicate a relatively clear concept of a personal afterlife in a transcendent realm somewhat along the lines of the traditional “afterlife” hypothesis by the Graeco-Roman period (a very clear, albeit fictive, example being the story of *Setne and Siosiris*). As argued here, such a conception is much more difficult to attest in earlier periods, raising the question whether it came about through Hellenistic influence or, perhaps more probably, was developed more gradually from previous thoughts about the mode of existence of the ancestors (raising new questions of when and how).
- ⁶⁹ Fortes 1965; cf. also the discussion in Burton 1978, 142f.
- ⁷⁰ See also the cautionary notes by Smith 2014, 87–89.
- ⁷¹ Cf. the preliminary notes on the ontology of such texts in Nyord 2015, 287–288.
- ⁷² Cf., e.g., the system of different tiers of ancestors in Bronze Age China, Puett 2002, 46–54, or the overview of North and Mesoamerican cultures in Pauketat et al. 2011).
- ⁷³ Nyord 2014.
- ⁷⁴ Nyord 2017.
- ⁷⁵ A monograph dealing with these issues in more detail in the concrete case of Middle Kingdom mortuary religion is in preparation.