



DID YOU SLEEP WELL ON YOUR HEADREST?—ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN IMPLEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how recent anthropological methodologies (materialities approach) as well as concepts at the interface between archaeology and anthropology (experiential and sensual archaeology) inevitably widen the boundaries of Egyptology. The presented case study contributes to a discussion of the physical relationship of material objects and the human body, focusing on states when materiality seeps deliberately and dangerously into immateriality. This is explored at the example of unpublished headrests from the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Merthyr Tydfil (Wales, UK) by looking on the intersection of bodies with the material that also could be interpreted as inter-material communication. Impressions of fabric on their wooden surface are presumably the imprint of bedding intended to ensure comfortable sleep telling us about the sensual experience using these artefacts. The contact between skin and rough wood needed to be alleviated. This theoretical discussion is then set against an experimental and experiential archaeological approach focusing on sensual experiences with these headrests.

Every tablet, every little scarab, is a portion of life solidified;—so much will, so much labour, so much living reality. When we look closely into the work we seem almost to watch the hand that did it; this stone is a day, a week, of the life of some living man. I know his mind, his feeling, by what he has thought and done on this stone. I live with him looking into his work, and admiring, and valuing it. Shall I then turn on him like a wild beast and kill so much of his life?¹

INTRODUCTION: MISPLACED, FORGOTTEN, UNLOVED?

Egyptology usually looks at archaeology, art history, history or linguistics as its main givers of ideas. This is understandable when looking at the types of sources used in the discipline. When examining objects, it seems especially logical to start with archaeological methods and frameworks. In addition to certain sub-areas (nautical, forensic, environmental, geoarchaeology), archaeology seems to be the “discipline of things,”² which excavates them, cares for them, is able to look at them and analyse them, engage with them and bind them into memory practices. At the moment, archaeology tries to (partially) reconcile with (social) anthropology from which it was “divorced.”³ It seems that archaeology is readier to welcome anthropology

than the other way around.⁴ Despite coming together, both disciplines keep their respective methodologies and different approaches to data. However, these differences are exactly what makes the interlink so interesting when discussing certain phenomena or problems. And Egyptology, as a discipline which defies already the strict boundaries of disciplines and borrows ideas from several due to being an area study, should have even less resentments to bring archaeology and anthropology back together.

When dealing with unprovenanced and uninscribed material culture and objects though, Egyptology has to be “undisciplined” in the sense of looking for help outside its narrower and specialised remit set out during the last 50 years and refocus on the strong connection with other disciplines, having especially anthropology in mind.⁵ The objects discussed here as case studies are part of the Egyptian collection of Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Merthyr Tydfil, Wales (United Kingdom). Most of the objects formed the former private collection of Harry Hartley Southey, the son of the local newspaper magnate who was stationed all over the east Mediterranean before and during

the first World War.⁶ A joint project between the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (Lampeter) and the museum is focused on “unpacking the collection”⁷ and bringing it back into the memory of different audiences. This will only be possible by taking the wide network of potential material and social agency into consideration, be it in the form of human towards and with the objects or their own non-human agency.⁸

TWO HEADRESTS WITHOUT PROVENANCE: LOST FOR EGYPTOLOGICAL RESEARCH?

The thinking about different ways to approach misplaced, forgotten, not-cared-for objects needs to draw on all possible ways to shed light on them. Objects in the Egyptian collection from Cyfarthfa Castle Museum are nearly all unprovenanced, which is typical for objects entering Western collections in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Even though it was legal at the time to acquire these pieces, and it was common to collect privately in Egypt, the fact remains that these objects have lost their contextual information. That is clearly linked to a loss of Egyptological knowledge about the particular artefacts, but also about ancient Egypt in general. Unprovenanced objects are often not included in data collections, corpora of materials to be analysed and often neglected in museum storage.⁹ The reason for this lies in the fact that their specific contexts are not clear. Even though it seems more likely that they came out of tombs rather than from settlement sites due to their state of preservation, this cannot be proven. We do not have any indication about the potential owners and their sex, age, and status. Corresponding objects which might have been buried or used together with these objects are missing even they could be part of the same collection.

One potential way demonstrating how to care for objects without provenance shall be exemplified by choosing two hitherto unpublished and unprovenanced headrests in the collection of Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Merthyr Tydfil, Wales: CCM 189.996 (Fig. 1) and CCM 190.996 (Fig. 2). *Unprovenanced* as applied here stands for the loss of information regarding the context of origin and any indication of what happened with the artefacts between the moment of discovery (which could be an excavation, or more likely, in the process of looting) and being purchased by the collector prior to his death in 1917. Up to the moment, these objects reached the museum in the

early 1920s, there is no authenticated collection history. Even the narrative within the collection between accession (as recorded in a ledger) and the first cataloguing in 1996 is nearly impossible to reconstruct due to missing documentation. To avoid that these artefacts get “lost in translation,”¹⁰ we need to create narratives that will be able to describe them in similar sensible ways as an existing provenance or an available archaeological record would.

CCM 189.996

This incompletely preserved headrest (Fig. 1) is made from a low-quality local soft wood. As it was not possible to specify the used wood via chemical analysis or under a light-transmitting microscope, it can only be broadly determined.¹¹ Seeing that the structure is very fibrous, coarse and generally of poor quality, either sycamore or tamarisk could be assumed.¹² The headrest originally consisted of three parts that were tenoned together. The base is missing as the tenon shared with the slender columnar is broken through. The crest is long, wide and thin in height. Despite the low-quality material, the headrest was beautifully made, and the proportions are elegant. All preserved parts work together and suggest a practical implement on which one person was able to sleep.

We can see an imprint of fabric at one of the longer outer edges of the crest where the linen pressed into the soft wood. The question remains if the cloth was meant to be padding or is to be seen as wrapping in the form of cover as known from many tombs covering amulets and statues, but also foodstuffs.¹³ The clarity and deepness of the imprint would suggest the first. That this headrest was once wrapped is not only evidenced by the imprint but also by patches of linen¹⁴ preserved underneath the crest and on the middle columnar. This shows that the padding was not restricted to the crest, but the whole headrest was wrapped. Both the imprint as well as the preserved linen evidence a relatively fine woven linen, being of good quality. This seems to contradict the lower quality of the wood but correlates with the quality of workmanship. From a modern perspective, padding appears to heighten the comfortability when using this implement. The linen would also prevent the wood splintering when the cheek or neck was placed on the crest. The padding was fixed with some sort of resin. The residue is still visible at the crest. This suggests that the under most layer of padding was not changed



FIGURE 1: Merthyr Tydfil, CCM 189.996; © Stephen Thomas.

very often as otherwise different overlapping imprints are expected.

This shape was so common and timeless, used from the Old Kingdom until the New Kingdom,¹⁵ that it seems impossible to date the headrest. Only a securely known find spot, archaeological context or provenance would allow to be narrowed down. None of these are given.

CCM 190.996

Compared to the first headrest, CCM 190.996 (Fig. 2) was made of a higher-quality hard wood—likely acacia¹⁶—and is more elaborate in design. It is also

formed out of the three common parts, which in this case are all preserved and tenoned together.¹⁷ In variation to CCM 189.996, this headrest features a wide rectangular base, a fluted or ribbed structure of the pedestal or shaft, and a crest which is sitting on a small abacus as its base. Such fluted shafts are typical features of headrests from the Sixth Dynasty.¹⁸ The crest does not show any sign of padding at the top; imprints or patches of linen are missing. The shaft and the lower side of the crest, however, show pieces of a coarse but regularly woven linen. The hard wood evidently hindered the linen from making an imprint while the head was



FIGURE 2: Merthyr Tydfil, CCM 190.996; © K. Zinn.

lying on it. Due to the careful design of this headrest, and especially its shaft, it would have made more sense not to wrap the top. This could be interpreted as padding for comfort instead of folding cloth around as a cover sheet in the tomb.

This particular shape is also known from other examples made with precious materials.¹⁹ A similar headrest made from ivory—likely elephant ivory²⁰—is inscribed with the name of Pepi II. Objects made from elephant ivory were rare due to the value of

this material. Such objects were likely given as gifts from the pharaoh to a dignitary who used them as tomb goods to indicate his elevated position in life and afterlife.²¹ The fragility inherent in the material suggests that headrests made from ivory were not used as supports for sleep. Their function lies in the aspect of being gifted to express the creation of social cohesion, especially between king, court and high officials.²²

ANTHROPOLOGY TO THE RESCUE?

(Ancient Civilisations) bringing us closer to an institutionalised anthropology of the past and away from the idea that anthropology and Egyptology are “like crossing artificially two different entities.”²³

As already mentioned, there is no archaeological context given or provenance known for these headrests, as it is the case for all objects of the Egyptian collection of Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery. To understand them further, we need to take different routes and discover narratives that will contribute to explain the artefacts in order to bring them out of the status of being forgotten. The way to do this is to consider the physical relationship that objects and humans enter into. In the case of headrests, this will be the physical relationship of the objects as presented in their form and materiality and the human body that interacts with the implement in the act of lying on it. As ancient lives reveal themselves through the material culture they left behind we need to look at the objects and potential ways of interpretation. Anthropological research, approaches and methodologies can provide ideas on how to do this. Following this line, tangible objects become the medium through which we can attempt to understand human-object interactions and with them the thoughts of previous cultures. As we cannot observe, interview or survey human activity directly, we need to locate and understand these media. This argumentation takes inspiration from recent discussions in anthropology, so Latour’s *actants*, Barad’s *agential realism* and Bennett’s *thing power*.²⁴ This includes the realisation that the relationships between humans and things are happening on at least two levels: the interaction that happened in the past when the objects entered into and stayed in their primary life-cycle, and the present interaction with (re-)discovered material culture by researchers and new audiences alike. In doing so, area studies scholars who see themselves as anthropologists of the past are naturally connected with material culture, its role in human society as well as representational and symbolic aspects. What is, however, often forgotten is the actual materiality of objects and the sensual experience they offer as well as the fact that objects have agency as well.

It nevertheless remains important to realise that (social) anthropology and Egyptology, even though they could and should be complementary, maintain

their indisputable distinctions that stem from methodological differences regarding data.²⁵ Anthropological ideas will deliver new impulses for Egyptology which could satisfy needs of the interdisciplinary subjects like Egyptology, but will not be fully applicable to explain all unsolved questions of the naturally interdisciplinary Egyptology. By “reclaiming things”²⁶ of the material world back from *linguistic* or *textual turn* impacting on the cultural research of the late twentieth-century we can hopefully deliver more answers.

THE MATERIAL WORLD OF ANCIENT EGYPT

The material world we deal with as Egyptologists is a window into the life of the ancient Egyptians.²⁷ Much more than texts, it can give us insights into all levels of the society, even though our view might be obstructed by the *chance of survival* that favours the transmission of high-quality elite objects deposited in tombs more than daily life objects made from perishable materials. Even though hieroglyphs exerted a great fascination, it was the material world that appealed to the early travellers to Egypt, as well as to researchers.²⁸ The fascination for art and architecture did not cease even after hieroglyphs were deciphered, often with focus on the unusual—mummies and pyramids. However, it seems that until quite recently the materiality, and especially the physicality, of this material world was largely forgotten in discussions.²⁹ It was clearly stated by Lynn Meskell in 2004 that “archaeologists have yet to deal with the implications of materiality, with the constitution of the material world in antiquity, although they have delved into contextual studies of material culture”.³⁰ Her research was inspired by discussions in the 1990s that began to investigate the relationship between object and subject (people), “irrespective of time and space,”³¹ as aptly taken as *credo* in the editorial of the first issue of the *Journal of Material Culture*. The agenda was driven both by creating theoretical frameworks and presenting empirical studies. I want to continue to be *un-disciplined*³² and bring more materiality in the discussion of material culture, discuss the materiality of objects and their agency in relation to the human *actants*. Some anthropological approaches are useful, others will mainly serve as new ways to consider while they defy their direct application due to characteristics and methods of thinking too distinctive from other disciplines.

THE MATERIALITY OF SLEEPING: ANCIENT EGYPTIAN HEADRESTS UNDER AN EGYPTOLOGICAL LENS

May the pigeons awaken you when you are asleep, O Ani, may they awaken your head at the horizon. Raise yourself, so that you may be triumphant over what is commanded that action be taken against those who would harm you. You are Horus son of Hathor, the male and female fiery serpents, to whom was given a head after it had been cut off. Your head shall not be taken from you afterwards, your head shall not be taken from you forever.³³

Due to the lack of any documentation from find to museum, the archaeological context—understood as both place and process³⁴—would not be able to comprehend the headrests. The first step in understanding CCM 189.996 and 190.996 should therefore be to re-contextualise them in comparison with other Egyptian headrests and within Egyptological discussion.³⁵

In order to discuss this particular implement called “headrest,” we need to understand its *Sitz im Leben*. The headrest is used for sleeping, both in this and the afterlife.³⁶ The interconnection between sleep and death was understood within Egyptian culture and religious beliefs. Both positions were interpreted as interlinked states of (altered) consciousness resulting from the cyclicity of time. While sleeping, a person—as well as their body—was associated with the dead who dwelled in the *duat*.³⁷ This was also the realm in which dreams were thought to originate, the hours of the underworld in which the sun god travelled during nighttime. Being good observers, the ancient Egyptians compared the status of being asleep to being dead as both display the human being as not moving consciously. Moreover, the moment of awakening after sleep was seen as the cyclical rebirth happening in the afterlife. This correlates with the interpretation the image of the head lying on the crest of the headrest is a parallel to the *akhet* (horizon) hieroglyph³⁸ as well as the behaviour of sleeping with placing the head on the rest like the sunset and the rise of the head from the implement like the rise of the sun from the eastern horizon.³⁹

As already seen from the examples discussed above, headrests differed in shape, sometimes considerably. There are simple blocks with concave tops made from wood⁴⁰ or stone.⁴¹ Concave forms seem to have been used in life and were presumably undecorated. Very elaborate headrests were decorated to increase the symbolic function as to be

seen by the variety of headrests from the tomb of Tutankhamun, KV 62.⁴² Also some of the lesser elaborate and valuable headrests were decorated as shown by the curved upper part of a wooden headrest from Abydos which shows an incised design of a Bes head filled with blue pigment.⁴³ The apotropaic function of such images—of Bes and other minor deities sharing iconographic characteristics with him—as well as related texts on headrests and beds are well documented to ward off demons, dangers or other disturbances threatening sleepers in their vulnerable state of sleep.⁴⁴

By all variations, Egyptian headrests consisted fundamentally of three parts: a curved top or crest sometimes called a *pillow*,⁴⁵ a vertical support column and a horizontal base. These three functional parts could come in one piece or be made of different parts that then were doweled together with tenons. While the curved top and the flat base more or less stayed the same, the middle section differed. An interesting and rare type has six slim rods supporting the curved top, giving this type of headrest the appearance of a chair or stool.⁴⁶

In general, the headrest was seen as being essential to sleeping well.⁴⁷ All varieties of headrests share the inherent functionality of supporting the head and neck during sleep and bridging the space between the raised head and the shoulders lying on the bed. As such, they fulfil the purpose of a modern pillow. It is usually stated that the Egyptian slept on their sides with the headrest covering the space between the shoulder lying on the ground, linen sheets or bed and the head.⁴⁸ Examples of such sleeping behaviours are shown in small model beds with reclining figures.⁴⁹ Such figurines have headrests in specific heights that keep the spine straight and would so ensure a comfortable sleep. As most headrest do not come from a secure archaeological record, it is difficult to prove if this was indeed the case and the headrests were custom-made and in need of exchange when one grew older and shoulder width changed.

Tomb reliefs and paintings suggest that headrests were seen as items of furniture,⁵⁰ often found together or depicted in connection with beds.⁵¹ The daily life handling of a headrest could be depicted in a sunken relief from Hermopolis.⁵² Here, a servant brings a headrest to a person who is facing the servant and whose legs are still visible. This block might have come from Amarna. Another indication for headrest as part of daily life comes from an interesting ostrakon, now in the British Museum.⁵³

On this limestone ostrakon are on both sides black drawings of pieces of furniture on which markers are placed, indicating with names or numbers. One the verso is a rectangular box with a headrest placed next to a bed.⁵⁴

Headrests are represented in art, but we also have archaeological evidence. Most of them are known from a funerary context in which they obviously had a higher chance of survival than at settlement sites. In the un-plundered shaft tomb G 7000X at Giza,⁵⁵ belonging to Queen Hetepheres I (Fourth Dynasty),⁵⁶ a collection of royal furniture was found. Among it was a 1.77m long bedframe made from wood, gold, copper, silver, leather, faience and ebony⁵⁷ with a gilded headrest.⁵⁸ This highly elaborate object resembles in the form the very humble and damaged headrest in Cyfarthfa Museum—CCM 189.996 (Fig. 1). The difference between the headrest of Hetepheres and the latter lies in its usability: the gilded one is representational while the wrapping of CCM 189.996 suggests daily usage. This same seems to be the case with the headrest of Merit,⁵⁹ the wife of the chief architect of royal tombs in western Thebes, Kha,⁶⁰ now in the Egyptian Museum in Turin. It had a broad base and was covered by several strips of linen fabric, probably to make it more comfortable. This headrest of Merit's husband Kha, from the same tomb, had not been enclosed by fabric.⁶¹

One of the earliest representations of headrests and beds comes from the mastaba tomb of the high official Hesy-Re (Saqqara S2405), a *confidante of the king* (*rh-nswt*) under the reign of Djoser / Netjerikhet (Third Dynasty). The funerary equipment painted on the east wall of the corridor depicts many beds⁶² and a box holding three different headrests featuring different forms.⁶³ Different colours suggest different types of wood: the one on the left is the common form similar to CCM189.996, but made from ebony due to the black paint used. The style of the one on the right resembles CCM 190.996 (Fig. 2). However, the fluted shaft as seen in CCM 190.996 is a typical feature of later headrests from the Sixth Dynasty.⁶⁴ The brighter coloration on the depicted headrest could also indicate stone used instead of wood. Stone headrests were seen as the more valuable and more durable version for the tomb of a higher elite person. This was very likely the case with the comparable alabaster headrest of Khentika.⁶⁵ The fluted style is influenced from pillars and columns as seen in temples.⁶⁶ Such columns are already to be found in the earliest stone buildings, such as the

entrance hall of the pyramid complex of Djoser / Netjerikhet in Saqqara.⁶⁷ Does the fact that Hesy-Re owned three differently shaped headrests made from diverse materials imply different sensual experiences or was this simply showing his wealth?

Headrests are also depicted in object friezes within coffins, in direct reach of the deceased and placed conveniently near the head.⁶⁸

Representations of sleeping on a bed with headrest suggest the sleeper was lying either on the back⁶⁹ or at the side / shoulder.⁷⁰ Statuettes showing women lying on beds are often characterised as funerary fertility figurines,⁷¹ characterised by the nakedness of the female figure and a child shown at their legs or in the arms.⁷² The variant with the female figure lying on the bed is a specific New Kingdom modification of an older type of small figurines of naked women found from the Predynastic Period onwards. These figurines—all of which seem to have depicted women⁷³—prove the practice of bedding the head on a headrest. In examples of double beds often two headrests are present or indicated.⁷⁴

It is interesting that the ancient Egyptians favoured headrests that we often see in our Western tradition as uncomfortable to sleep on, as they also had pillows comparable to ours. Very few survived due to the fragility of the fabric material.⁷⁵ One of the earliest Egyptian cushions, made from plant fibres and found in a tomb in Sedment el-Gebel, dates to the Second Intermediate Period.⁷⁶ This was not the only pillow found in the cemeteries at Sedment. Others were made from leather and filled with linen⁷⁷ or skin filled with straw.⁷⁸ The latter was found just above the thighs. Tomb 1295 indicates the choice between headrests⁷⁹ and pillows as the buried female adult in this tomb had a fibre pillow beneath her head.⁸⁰ This was replicated by tomb 1298, only that this pillow was made from sheepskin stuffed with wool, linen and plant fibres.⁸¹ Otto Schaden and his team found at least ten pillows made from fabric when excavating a newly found cache of funerary equipment in the Valley of the Kings in Thebes near the tomb of Tutankhamun (KV62). This KV63 titled cache is sometimes also called a reburial or embalming cache.⁸² The pillows found in it were oval. One was crammed inside one of the large storage jars (Jar #13) while seemingly intact,⁸³ while more pillows were found inside Coffin 'G', tightly packed into the base of the coffin⁸⁴ and described being of high quality, round oval measuring ca. 40 cm long and in shades of brown.⁸⁵ Even the stuffing

reminds us of modern pillows: small feathers or down-like material. Others were made up of several layers of densely woven textile sewn together in high quality: the outer fabric was very fine with coarser underlay.

THEORETICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES AS TOOLS TO DISCUSS OPEN QUESTIONS

The more traditional Egyptological approach just outlined should always be the starting point when assessing Egypt's material culture, but it falls short when some parameters are not delivered, among them the recorded find spot or an authenticated collecting history. To get closer to an understanding and potential description of tangible things and their interaction in wider networks we need to open (further) up to theoretical discussions and modify potential applications within our resource base. That then might prove itself useful, but such an approach will in any case lead to an advancement when grasping the past worlds, helping to answer questions like why the ancient Egyptians seemingly preferred headrests instead of (to us) more comfortable pillows. One explanation could be found in the climate and the consequent interaction of head and support. The headrest allows air circulation between head and neck, which is not possible with a plant fibre pillow closing off the area and potentially causing the skin to sweat. Not only is this not pleasant, it also attracts mosquitos, flies and other vermin that disturb the sleep and prevent dream phases. In addition, the folding of the fabric layers might have attracted scorpions.

That the application of anthropological theory to archaeology in general, and Egyptology in particular, can be and is highly beneficial was highlighted by Lynn Meskell and utilised by Stuart Tyson Smith. Such approaches are centred on ideas concerning individuals, persons, and their bodies as well as their interaction with the environment. Even earlier assumptions that this could be studied by looking at individuals as representative examples of the society overall did not prove helpful.⁸⁶ This nevertheless led to the realisation that ancient lives are interconnected with the tangible material culture. This assumption is core for the research in Egyptology. Due to Lynn Meskell's discussion of "intimate archaeologies" using the example of Kha and Merit (TT8),⁸⁷ lines of argumentation were presented to understand why Merit's headrest might have been wrapped while Kha's was differently treated. Both had wealthy burials, but differ

considerably. Most objects bore only the name of Kha and were attributed to his rank during life. Some show his relationship to the kings he served. 196 objects belong to Kha, while only 39 are attributed to his wife, and six inscribed artefacts bear both names. Overall, Merit's funerary goods do not indicate overarching economic and prestige value.⁸⁸ These are individual items that stand in contrast to the scale and quality of her husband's. Does this mean that we have a real-life headrest used to sleep and place her head upon?

It is therefore the body in its dichotomies of culture and nature, individual and society, that offers itself to interdisciplinary approaches.⁸⁹ Taking this further, it is the unique Egyptian understanding of the human body in death—especially that of the mummy—that expresses the blurred lines between body and object.⁹⁰ Discussions circling around the thinking concerning the body, body parts and embodied spaces were often applied earlier to linguistic phenomena than seen in relation to materialities, before they focussed on material culture inspired by archaeological and anthropological discussions.⁹¹

In this context, discussing headrests as the most common support while sleeping connects the anthropological category *body* with the Egyptian material culture. While asleep, the *ba as one of the constitutional parts of an ancient Egyptian* dissociates from the self, and the person was not able to exercise self-control, was powerless and unconscious. Therefore, sleep was compared to the state of death.⁹² When thinking in terms of the entanglement of human and non-human,⁹³ the ability of the *ba* to act, interact and to have sensory experiences becomes understandable. This explains the necessity of a headrest that creates an ergonomic sleeping position also for the dead. In entangled states like sleep and death a person was not able to exercise self-control and needed support. This was provided by implements and their materiality enriched by texts and images that magically enhanced the given support. The headrest reinforced the neck and head during sleep against head injuries and facilitated dreams. Even though the self in general was unconscious (asleep or dead), particular parts—both of soul and bodily character—were still able to interact, be active and have sensual experiences.

Research turned to sensorial approaches within anthropology and their application to archaeology, emphasising experiences with the material.⁹⁴ The anthropological concept of the *New Materialities* goes

even further.⁹⁵ It focuses on the body as a matter among others which are in constant interconnection with each other. It recognises that once popular materialist approaches are exhausted and in need to be renewed, sharing this perception with the connected approach of *New Materialism*.⁹⁶ This opens up new ways of researching material culture within Egyptology. The materiality of all agents is performative, the previously assumed distinction between *object* and *subject* is therefore accepted as being fluid and seen as entanglement of matters.⁹⁷ Meaning and form are acquired from an open-ended process of potential agential possibilities.⁹⁸

Another approach, worth thinking about when dealing with Egyptian artefacts, is the *mind* in relation to culture and materiality.⁹⁹ This focusses on a strength of archaeology and material culture studies, but extends the complexity of material cultures by looking at their intrinsically human entanglement with mental worlds.¹⁰⁰ What is important is the *thinking through the body*¹⁰¹ as well as the perception of the entanglement between the body and the thing as material culture, which sees agency on both sides.¹⁰² Within this discussion, I would like to define *material* in agreement with Nicole Boivin as the tangible sphere of things including objects, environments, landscapes and also bodies while *materiality* describes the physicality of these things: their dimensions, option of interaction, possibility of agency, etc.¹⁰³ These understandings imply the interconnection of material, body and mind. As such, material and materiality are not only a product or representation of the human mind, but also impact actively and as generative factor on humans and their social interactions.¹⁰⁴ This will help to discuss the interaction of the head on the headrest following the bodily practice of placing the head on there and keeping it there for a prolonged time. The act of lying down and sleeping on the implement seems to be forgotten in Egyptological research. When researching ancient civilisations, scholars tend to focus mainly on the symbolic meaning of the sign or object and often neglect the physicality and practicality of things.

While the applicability of sensory approaches and the methodology of the New Materialism will be discussed elsewhere,¹⁰⁵ the following case study, which brings the previous thoughts together, shall focus on the experienced interaction with a replica headrest and the interaction of modern people challenging their perception of lying on a headrest

as being uncomfortable. This case study combines ideas of *making*¹⁰⁶ with experimental and experiential archaeology.¹⁰⁷ Whilst it will not answer the question of the practicalities with and around headrests completely, it will give some indications and allow further elaboration and hypothesis creation on the subject. Case studies are recognised data collection and interpretation tools in anthropological research. In this Egyptological case study, I obviously cannot work with the original user group, but will combine this technique with experiential archaeology using a replica headrest. This will enable a sensory experience with the implement and could prove points raised in the anthropological research concerning the body as matter and its entanglement with the matter of the headrest.

SLEEPING ON THE HEADREST—SENSORY PRACTICES AS EXPERIMENTAL AND EXPERIENTIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The unusual form of the headrest makes audiences curious as how to interact with it and how practical this might be. Would it stand upright on a sleeping surface, would it be comfortable when lying on it, how is it possible to turn on it while sleeping? In other words: Would it be possible or sensible to sleep on them?

When sleeping on a headrest, we need to look at dependency and dependence between humans and things (HT) as well as things and humans (TH). Due to the fact that both of the Cyfarthfa headrests were wrapped or padded, things-things (TT) relationships become also important as do human-human (HH)¹⁰⁸ relationships when we include the wider context of making or choosing a headrest. Insofar, the case study of the headrest would encompass all four component forms present in the theory of entanglement.¹⁰⁹

These thoughts seem to have been shared by other Egyptologists, as evidenced by a former curator of the Metropolitan Museum: “the Egyptians slept on their sides, and the headrests were about shoulder height. A member of our staff tried one—once—and maintained that it was comfortable.”¹¹⁰ Believing in multisensory experiences, I wanted to focus on experiential aspects inherent in any handling activity. Only when handled, objects can be *grasped* in the double meaning of the word—following the German term *begreifen*, which translates as “to understand” as well as “to touch.” To experience a headrest, this approach would include to feel how it is to lie down, which is obviously only possible using a headrest replica.

Together with an experienced carpenter, we crafted one replica with two interchangeable crests from different woods: One crest was made from local softwood—pine—the other from hardwood—oak (Fig. 3). This model enabled the experience of sleeping on a headrest, the observation how it interacted with the head and the feel of any adventurous turn of the head while pretending to sleep (Fig. 4). It is not as sophisticated as the examples crafted by Egyptologist and furniture historian Geoffrey Killen,¹¹¹ but it gives a good impression of what it means to sleep on it.

To achieve a variety of experiences and detachment from modern biases, I chose male and female participants—including children—from different social and cultural backgrounds for the interviews. I asked the participants about their first thoughts when looking at a headrest, what they assumed about their sleeping position, how it would feel and if they had any ideas why it might be useful to sleep on such a support instead of a pillow. As most were not Egyptologists, it was often the first time they had seen such an object.¹¹² After that, I

invited them to lie down, at first on the unpadded hardwood crest, then on the softwood part before we went on to test the padded versions, choosing one time a fine, then a coarse, linen. The interview questions queried their sensual experiences of any of these instances, focussing on sleeping positions, sensations on the cheek or at back of the head, feeling differences between the diverse surfaces and general impression concerning the type of sensed action: dynamic as being raised/raising up or static as a relaxed lie down. The last two questions were leading the participants back to their initial assumptions by asking the same questions but focussing on the actual experience.

Nearly all assumed that it would be very uncomfortable to lie in such a position and some expected it to be only useful for the treatment of certain medical problems (back problems, being immobilised). Others were inspired by the climate in Egypt and saw an advantage in air being able to circulate around the neck in comparison to lie down sweating on a fabric pillow. One interviewee—who had spent some time in sub-Saharan Africa—found

FIGURE 3: Headrest replica with two exchangeable crests; © K. Zinn.



FIGURE 4: Lying on the padded headrest (finely woven linen); © K. Zinn.



it a good tool to ward off insects or scorpions.

The interviewees were relatively content lying on the headrest after having found their specific comfortable spot. Despite dubbing the first sensation as being “weird” or “awkward,” most found a particular good spot after some moving around and relaxed. However, all expressed fear of actually being asleep and move or turn around, two specifically phrased it as being “restricted,” others used the words “un-sturdy” or “not trustworthy”. This was especially a problem for the children among the participants. This could be due to the fact that the test crests were not fully affixed to the column. This might explain the consistently sturdy and large dowels/tenons used in headrests. Only two informants attempted to sleep on it for a whole night being positioned on padded ground in order to replicate how most Egyptians would have slept. Both gave up after a couple of hours tempted by a cosy bed nearby. The problem was more being situated on the floor with only some layers of fabric than the headrest itself.

The chosen sleeping position differed with each person: about half-half were laying on the side or back, only one positioned themselves on the stomach. The side-sleepers adjusted the headrest to very different positions: under the ear, over the ear, tilted and other. They appreciated the feeling of a “yoga like quality” which allowed free breathing due to the raised upper chest or the active position of the upper body and arms—“you could easily read.” Overall, the side position was preferred, but the ear felt “trapped.” This was alleviated by padding and might have been the reason why all participants preferred a padded version to the pure wooden crest due to their more “soporific effect.” However, the way in which the linen was wrapped around the headrest was important. Wrapping it in the same way as the padding still existent on the headrest of Merit¹¹³—with twisted linen strips on top of the crest—was felt as “bumpy” and “unpleasant.” Another question arising from this style of wrapping regarding the imprint found on CCM 189.996 is that the relatively loose application of linen might not have been applied enough pressure to leave such a clear imprint. This opens up the discussion if we have a functional padding or more a protection for the headrest in the sense of a dustsheet. What cannot be assessed is the style of the inner layers of fabric of Merit’s headrest, so that this question cannot be answered with certainty.

Lying on the back was experienced to be more

comfortable than originally expected, but overall it was stated that the body feels “strained” and even after it adapted to the unfamiliar situation, it still felt more “alert” than our common sleeping positions.

When asked to lie on the unpadded versions, preferences for both types of wood (one coarser softwood, the other a more polished and colder-feeling wood from fruit trees) were equally split. The interviews done so far suggest a gendered preference; female interviewees favoured the soft wood while males selected the hard wood. The specific shape of the crest could be one explanation for this. However, it is the softer wood crest that is slightly bigger and would therefore have been more suitable for men. The preference was more controlled by the material and a liking for the particular way how this material felt when interacting with the skin of the cheek. Back-sleepers had lesser preference for a specific wood. A similar picture arose with the choice of padding: women felt more comfortable with the fine woven linen, and men with the coarser type. More surveying would be needed to strengthen these assumptions.

It became obvious that the height of the shaft is very important for a satisfying sleep. Our headrest was perfect for women with wider shoulders and men. Interviewees with small shoulders (children, slim women) complained about an aching neck and head, while one sturdy male complained about his head going too far down and overstretching the side of the neck opposite the implement. This would suggest that ancient Egyptian headrests—when used in life—were especially made for particular users. Consequently, people might have used several throughout their life.

TWO HEADRESTS WITHOUT PROVENANCE: MORE IDEAS?

All the points raised suggest the following narrative for the both headrests from Cyfarthfa Castle: It is likely that neither of them was produced especially for the tomb. The deceased in the tomb received their headrest used during lifetime. This is especially clear for CCM 189.996 as to be seen by the imprint in the soft wood. Due to the position of the imprint, the owner is more likely to have slept on his or her side. Unfortunately, we do not know the height of the base, but the column seems to be relatively low compared with other examples and the replica. This suggests usage by a woman or an adolescent.

CCM 190.996 does not show an imprint due to the harder wood and does not allow any conclusion re

sleeping position, but the patches of linen, both on the column as well as shaft, suggest padding. The column is slightly higher, and the crest wider, indicating usage by a larger person.

Even though we could not many more particular details, starting from these two particular artefacts and asking questions about the reciprocal interaction of the body of the user (be it real or imagined) increased our reconstruction of the past.

**SUMMARY: EGYPTOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY—
THEORETICAL EXCHANGE AND CONCEPTUAL
DEVELOPMENT**

Unprovenanced objects are in need of more lines of explanation to incorporate them in academic discussion in a meaningful way. In doing so, they encourage interdisciplinary exchange. This will lead to conceptual development within the discipline that enables new modes of thought. In this case study, this lead from anthropological ideas of the body, and thinking about matter, to the related field of sensory archaeology. Thinking about the usefulness of new anthropological ideas such as the New Materialities and New Materialism for the capture of sensory experiences in the past encouraged a specific approach to experiential archaeology as evidenced in the act of sleeping on the headrest and the specific question in the survey asking for the experiences connected with the head-neck-skin interaction with the implement and its material. This obviously could only be achieved by an act of experimental archaeology: the making of the headrest. The fact that these two examples were unprovenanced encouraged the search for different, alternative narratives as given in the paper.

What becomes very clear is that it would not be the right way to simply substitute one turn—at the moment the linguistic one—with another (matter). The so-called “return to the real”¹¹⁴ is very useful. However, this cannot mean that matter completely should replace symbols or that meaning does not count at all anymore and is deemed backwards. These new approaches might be philosophically interesting to discuss but fail as tools for perception and cognition in order to achieve the “return to the real.” This re-establishes David Shankland’s statement that archaeology and anthropology are mutually comprehensible but nevertheless two different streams of intellectual practice.¹¹⁵ The first fact should force Egyptologists to be braver in using methodologies and theories from adjacent disciplines, especially anthropology, but the second

needs to be understood by anthropologists who sometimes claim archaeology and material culture as being traditional and not innovative enough. That might be, but the consciousness for practicality behind this seemingly traditionalist approach helps to explain the world and is needed in the discipline.

Some theories and approaches are beneficial in their own rights, such as sensory archaeology and the focus on the body, while others are necessary and creative as prompts to stimulate discussion, but are not inevitably applicable to Egyptology, such as some ideas of the New Materialism. Egyptology needs to be aware of discussions in adjacent disciplines, but does not have to apply all of them simply to stay in fashion with the newest developments.

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NOTES

- 1 Petrie 1904, 177.
- 2 Olsen et al. 2012.
- 3 Shankland 2012.
- 4 Shankland 2012.
- 5 For a baseline study of what Egyptology meant at the beginning of the new millennium, please see Wilkinson 2008.
- 6 Zinn 2017.
- 7 Byrne et al. 2011.
- 8 Knappett and Malafouris 2008.
- 9 Sowada 2009, 18; Cuno 2008, xv.
- 10 Panella 2015.
- 11 Gale et al. 2000, 334.
- 12 Gale et al. 2000, 340–341, 345.
- 13 Vogelsang-Eastwood 2000, 295. Examples are the coverings of the funerary statues of Tutankhamun (KV62). Most of the wrapped foodstuffs served as *meat mummies* or *victual mummies* (Ikram 2004).
- 14 Even the Egyptians used several fibres (sheep's wool, goat hair, palm fibre, reeds and hemp), linen made from flax was the most common one (Vogelsang-Eastwood 2000, 268–276).
- 15 Fischer 1980, 689.
- 16 Gale et al. 2000, 335–336.
- 17 A very similar headrest is Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum E.GA.293.1949, also made from acacia. E.GA.293.1949 shows the same

- slightly unusual features which otherwise are better known from stone headrests: Square abacus at the top of the central support holding the crest, fluted support/columnar. Two crossed pins forming a dovetailed dowel are used to attach the base to the columnar. Such techniques are known from coffins.
- ¹⁸ I want to thank Dr. Jan Summers Duffy for this information given in our email conversation (October 2017) regarding CCM 189.996 and CCM 190.996.
- ¹⁹ Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art 1914.626, made from travertine; Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum E.145.1954, made from stone (calcite?).
- ²⁰ Paris, Musée du Louvre N 646; Ziegler 1999.
- ²¹ Eichler 1993, 313–315; Smith 7.
- ²² Eichler 1993, 314, esp. n. 304.
- ²³ Bussmann 2015, [2].
- ²⁴ Latour 2005; Barad 2007; Bennett 2010.
- ²⁵ Goody 1995; Shankland 2012.
- ²⁶ Olsen 2013.
- ²⁷ Peck 2013, 3–7.
- ²⁸ Cooke and Daubny 2015; Cooke and Daubny 2017.
- ²⁹ A very good example is Peck 2013, in which the author very nicely describes certain types of material culture such as housing, furniture, weapons, adornment, but says nearly nothing about their physical appearance or sensual encounters.
- ³⁰ Meskell 2004, 1.
- ³¹ Miller and Tilley 1996.
- ³² Miller and Tilley 1996, 12–14.
- ³³ *Book of the Dead* 166; Faulkner 1998, pl. 32.
- ³⁴ Stevenson 2013, 109.
- ³⁵ Rezníček 2017.
- ³⁶ In general, see Szpakowska 2003, 15. The etymological connection between *wrs* (headrest), *rsw.t* (dream) and *rs* (awakening) is discussed in detail in Perraud 1997.
- ³⁷ Hornung 1975, 994.
- ³⁸ Hellinckx 2001, 61.
- ³⁹ Hellinckx 2001, 77.
- ⁴⁰ London, British Museum EA29565, Fourth Dynasty, found in Dishasha; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 16.10.329, Middle Kingdom–early New Kingdom, Thebes—Asasif, Courtyard CC 41, Tomb R 6, Burials D x.
- ⁴¹ San Diego, San Diego Museum of Man 14878; Eighteenth Dynasty, Amarna; Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum 22368, Eighteenth Dynasty, found in Amarna house N48.16.
- ⁴² Duffy 2009; Duffy 2016.
- ⁴³ Liverpool, World Museum 24.9.00.93; New Kingdom, reign of Ramesses II, Abydos—cemetery D, tomb D44.
- ⁴⁴ Perraud 2002.
- ⁴⁵ Hayes 1953, 120.
- ⁴⁶ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 31.3.12; Middle Kingdom, Late Eleventh Dynasty–Twelfth Dynasty, Thebes, tomb MMA 816, pit.
- ⁴⁷ Hayes 1953, 258.
- ⁴⁸ Fischer 1980, 686; Scott 1965, 138.
- ⁴⁹ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 15.2.8, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty.
- ⁵⁰ Hayes 1953, 258; Killen 1994, 30–33; Peck 2013, 81.
- ⁵¹ Tomb of Ramose (TT55, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty), Transverse Hall, South Wall: Funerary procession—bed with headrest as part of furniture; Old Kingdom example: London, British Museum EA718; from the tomb of Werienptah, tomb chapel (Porter and Moss 1979, 699–700)—preparation of bed with headrest in position.
- ⁵² Hannover, Kestner Museum 1964.29; Tietze 2008, 143, fig. 17.
- ⁵³ London, British Museum EA5861, Deir el-Medina, New Kingdom.
- ⁵⁴ Killen 2017b, 40, fig. 4.2.
- ⁵⁵ Porter and Moss 1974, 179–182; for a discussion of this being a tomb of a funerary deposit see Münch 2000.
- ⁵⁶ Manuelian 2017, 18–19.
- ⁵⁷ Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 53261; Porter and Moss 1974, 180; modern reconstruction Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 29.1858.
- ⁵⁸ Cairo, Egyptian Museum Cairo JE 53262; mod-

- ern reconstruction Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 29.1859.
- ⁵⁹ Headrest: Turin, Museum Egizio S. 08630 RCGE 19819.
- ⁶⁰ TT8, Thebes, Deir el-Medina, Eighteenth Dynasty (Amenhotep II–Amenhotep III).
- ⁶¹ Headrest: Turin, Museum Egizio S. 08631 RCGE 19818.
- ⁶² Quibell 1913, 28–30, pl. XIX–XX.
- ⁶³ Quibell 1913, 7–8, pl. XXI, 57 and XIV in detail. The excavator speaks of a tray rather than of a box. However, comparison with the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Tutankhamun would suggest a box: Here, an ornate box found in the annexe of KV62 had inner compartments which were holding four headrests (Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE61446; Killen 2017a, 100–101. The identification as a box might also be strengthened by ostrakon EA5861—see above (Killen 2017b, 40, fig. 4.2).
- ⁶⁴ I want to thank Dr. Jan Summers Duffy for this information given in our personal correspondence (October 2017) regarding CCM 189.996 and CCM 190.996.
- ⁶⁵ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 26.2.11, Old Kingdom, Sixth Dynasty; Hayes 1953, 121, fig. 75.
- ⁶⁶ Dr. Jan Summers Duffy, personal correspondence.
- ⁶⁷ Lehner 2008, 85.
- ⁶⁸ Inner Coffin of Gemniemhat, Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek AEIN 1585.
- ⁶⁹ Cincinnati, Cincinnati Art Museum 1921.280-1, Amarna, house N.49, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty; Freed et al. 1999, 256–257, no. 178.
- ⁷⁰ London, Petrie Museum UC8649, Third Intermediate Period.
- ⁷¹ See “Gender: Sex and Fertility—Non-royal Evidence, <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/gender/sex.html>, accessed 13 September 2017.
- ⁷² Example: London, Petrie Museum UC8657, New Kingdom, Nineteenth Dynasty.
- ⁷³ A well-known male statuette—showing the deceased crown prince Thutmose, son of Amenhotep III, on a bier (Berlin, Neues Museum VÄGM-112-97, probably from Memphis, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty)—does not indicate a headrest under the voluminous wig with youth-lock.
- ⁷⁴ London, Petrie Museum UC16601 (no provenance, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty) has only one of the two headrests preserved which has a similar shape as the above mentioned British Museum EA29565.
- ⁷⁵ Vogelsang-Eastwood 2000, 291; KV63 2016.
- ⁷⁶ Manchester, Manchester Museum 6628; Seath et al. 2006.
- ⁷⁷ Petrie and Brunton 1924, 14.
- ⁷⁸ Petrie and Brunton 1924, 18.
- ⁷⁹ Found in tombs 1260, 1286 and 1294 (Petrie and Brunton 1924, 19).
- ⁸⁰ Petrie and Brunton 1924, 18.
- ⁸¹ Petrie and Brunton 1924, 18.
- ⁸² Eaton-Krauss 2008; Sousa 2014.
- ⁸³ KV63 2016.
- ⁸⁴ Sousa 2014, 197.
- ⁸⁵ KV63 2016 (Elise van Rooij).
- ⁸⁶ Meskell 1998, 363–364.
- ⁸⁷ Meskell 1998, 371–375.
- ⁸⁸ Meskell 1998, 374, table 1.
- ⁸⁹ Nyord 2009a, 1.
- ⁹⁰ Meskell 2004, 124–130.
- ⁹¹ Assmann 2005; Nyord 2009a; Nyord 2009b; Riggs 2010; Nyord 2015.
- ⁹² Assmann 2005, 103.
- ⁹³ Barad 2007, 71–94. The discussion is based on quantum physics and diffraction of relational patterns; matter materializes differently as a result of different practices.
- ⁹⁴ Hamilakis 2013; Day 2013; Fahlander and Kjellström 2010.
- ⁹⁵ Barad 2007; Boivin 2008; Bennett 2010; Olsen 2013; Drazin and Küchler (eds.) 2015.
- ⁹⁶ Coole and Frost 2010, 3–4.
- ⁹⁷ Barad 2007, 132–141, 175–179.
- ⁹⁸ Barad 2007, 141.
- ⁹⁹ DeMarras et al. 2004, esp. part II; Boivin 2008; Johannsen et al. (eds.) 2012; Malafouris 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Johannsen et al. 2012, 13.

¹⁰¹ Hamilakis et al. 2002.

¹⁰² Hodder 2012; Hodder 2016.

¹⁰³ Boivin 2008, 25–26.

¹⁰⁴ Johannsen et al. 2012, 16–18, 69–208.

¹⁰⁵ Zinn Forthcoming.

¹⁰⁶ Ingold 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Graves-Brown 2015; AERA 2016; Der Manuelian 2017.

¹⁰⁸ A good example of such a HH entanglement would be the discussion of the differences between Kha's and Merit's headrests as Merit's funerary items were decided on by her husband and likely sons at the moment of burial. For them it was important to carefully include her personal possessions—including the wrapped headrest—but she did not receive equal treatment regarding quality and quantity of the other objects (Meskell 1998, 372–373).

¹⁰⁹ Hodder 2016, 2–5.

¹¹⁰ Scott 1965, 138.

¹¹¹ Killen 2017b, pl. 3 and 4.

¹¹² Interviewees deliberately only received a very short prompt to avoid influence: “Ancient Egyptian headrests are the pillows of the ancient Egyptians. The implement in front of you is a modern replica following loosely an ideal standardised model which combines the form of several types of headrests. I would like to let you experience the way the ancient Egyptians slept and will ask you some questions afterwards. This experiential and sensual research will form part of an article in progress entitled *Sleeping hard?*”

¹¹³ Headrest: Turin, Museum Egizio S. 08630 RCGE 19819 (see above).

¹¹⁴ Foster 1996 as cited in Olsen 2013, [1].

¹¹⁵ Shankland 2012, 15.