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Burial and the dead in ancient Egyptian society

Respect, formalism, neglect

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Egypt offers a paradigm contrast between ideals of respectful care for the dead, on the one hand, and realities of medium- and long-term neglect, destruction and reuse on the other. Ideals are expressed in normative mortuary monuments and in texts; the archaeological record, together with relatively few skeptical texts, testifies to realities. Death was as socially riven as the realm of the living. Vast amounts were invested in royal and elite monuments, while cemeteries as a whole cannot account for more than a fraction of the population. Preservation of the body was essential for conventional conceptions of an afterlife – often envisaged to take place away from the tomb – but embalming practices cannot have been required for all. The contradictions implied by divergences from the ideal were negotiated over very long periods. Such processes of accommodation may



be particularly necessary in complex societies and civilizations. They emphasize that, even if the actors may present the matter otherwise, treatment of the dead relates as much to the living as to the deceased.

KEYWORDS

ancient Egypt • cemeteries • death • mausoleum • mortuary • mummification • respect for the dead • restoration • ritual • tombs, destruction of

■ INTRODUCTION

The ancient Egyptian ideal was that in death people should be buried in a splendid and everlasting tomb that supplied a visible memorial to them. Such an extravagant requirement can apply only to small elites; the destiny of most Egyptians in death is poorly known, and many were disposed of in ways that have not been recovered archaeologically. Even for elites, the reality was that mortuary cults were short-lived, tombs were robbed from the time of burial onwards and burial places were reused. While mortuary practices changed greatly between around 3000 BCE and the fourth to fifth centuries CE, the general continuity in Egyptian civilization over that immense timespan, the onerous requirements of mortuary provision and the accumulation of the dead themselves fostered complex patterns of action toward the recent and the more remote deceased.¹

These patterns and attitudes addressed a predicament that is common in many places, notably in complex societies with long cultural traditions, but can be tackled in various ways (contrast, for example, early Mesopotamia: Pollock, 1999: 196–217). In this article we discuss for Egypt how far and in what ways people harmonized the discrepancy between the elite ideal and the imperfections and compromises of reality, as well as tensions and possible differences in mortuary beliefs. Although a mass of data about mortuary practices survives from Egypt and belief in an afterlife is well established, relatively little textual evidence relates directly to the attitudes of living society toward death and the dead themselves, as against presenting rather uninformative mortuary formulae containing little that is personal or reflective (Baines, 1999); the archaeological record too is not eloquent here. In contrast with the respectful ideal, the reality of destruction, disregard and oblivion may fit better with negative attitudes found in less public and unofficial sources (e.g. Gardiner, 1935; Posener, 1988). Some gaps in the published record are due to inadequate recording and publication; traditional excavations were seldom designed to address these questions. The Nile Delta is poorly known, much of it lacking the adjacent low

Table 1 Chronological table for historical periods in Ancient Egypt

Predynastic period	4800–2950 BCE
Early Dynastic Period (Dynasties 1–3)	2950–2575
Old Kingdom (Dynasties 4–8)	2575–2150
First Intermediate Period (Dynasties 9–11)	2150–1975
Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11–13)	1975–1640
Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties 14–17)	1640–1525
New Kingdom (Dynasties 18–20)	1525–1075
Third Intermediate Period (Dynasties 21–25)	1075–656
Late Period (Dynasties 26–31)	664–332
Ptolemaic period	332–30
Roman period	30 BCE–395 CE
Christian period	3rd–10th century
Muslim conquest	641

Note: Figures before 664 are approximate. Overlaps are deliberate.

desert, where most known Nile Valley burials were sited. Differences in terrain may have favored differences in burial practices.

Sparse indications, notably in texts, suggest that Egyptian culture was not unified in its perceptions of mortuary needs and destinies, and that attitudes to death and the dead were as contradictory as in many societies. In order to address ideas and practices that lie on the edge of the normative ancient ideology, it is necessary to combine theoretical arguments with scattered evidence from a wide range of sources.

■ 'MAUSOLEUM CULTURE'

Funerary display can be traced from prehistory onward. Predynastic cemeteries show increasing polarization in the size of tombs and in the numbers and elaboration of grave goods they contained, with the largest constructed tombs contrasting with several levels of less wealthy burials (Bard, 1994). The ultimate development of a monumental funerary complex for the monarch, consisting of a tomb and separate cultic structures, later combined into a unified whole, appeared by the beginning of the dynastic era (Kaiser and Dreyer, 1982; O'Connor, 1989), a period when elite tombs dwarfed those of other sectors of the population. Royal tombs were of a different type from non-royal and were often in a separate area of the necropolis. The king had a divine destiny in the hereafter that could be apart from his people. From no later than the second millennium, others could aspire to similar status, but royal tombs remained distinct. From the New Kingdom



on, they were in a restricted location, at first in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes and from the Third Intermediate Period in subterranean chambers in the courtyards of major temples (Stadelmann, 1971).

Provision of offerings for the dead was focused on the tomb, but was also provided in memorial chapels or through the temples of deities, where ceremonies might be enacted before statues, first known from a late Old Kingdom text (Sethe, 1933: 304–6; see also below). Throughout antiquity, king and elite wished to build mortuary structures that would ideally be visible and receive cults in perpetuity. During the decentralized intermediate periods, the difference in scale between the tombs of king, elite and others diminished, while burials for many kings are not known; textual evidence confirms this slight social levelling. From the Third Intermediate Period on, a considerably reduced proportion of the elite possessed tombs

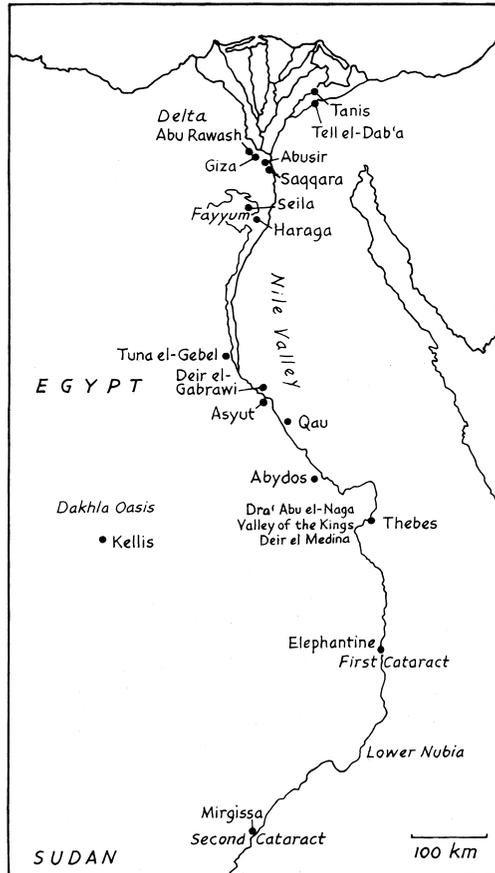


Figure 1 Map of Egypt, and Nubia as far south as the Second Cataract, with the names of sites mentioned in the text

with a superstructure, while coffins and attendant grave goods showed a strong focus on the trappings of burial, and by implication an increased salience of the funeral ritual (Taylor, 2001). Nonetheless, the tradition of large constructed tombs survived and there was an essential continuity in mortuary aspiration until the Roman period.

As exemplified in the tombs sited around the Great Pyramid at Giza, a necropolis was a community in death, where the distribution and architecture of tombs partially modeled elite organization. Such architectural statements were probably more public and political than communal and mortuary (Helck, 1962). More locally within the same necropolis, groupings of tombs sometimes display family relations (Brovarski, 2001) or occupational affiliations (Roth, 1995). Such ordering is also evident in modest provincial cemeteries (O'Connor, 1974: 19–27; Reisner, 1932: 174–90). Groups of tombs could span several generations, with later burials clustering around that of a significant person, who might be the head of a family or a leading figure. The cult of a local hero, Heqaib, within the townsit at Elephantine became the nucleus for memorial shrines of powerful Middle Kingdom families (Franke, 1994; Habachi, 1985). The most important site for such shrines was Abydos. Notables from around the country built votive memorial chapels there



Figure 2 Sector of the West Cemetery at Giza, aerial view from the east. The regular pattern of fourth dynasty tombs was later disturbed by numerous, smaller intrusive tombs. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission. ©2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All rights reserved



(O'Connor, 1985; Simpson, 1974) and pilgrims buried votive statues or animal mummies in the sacred ground. Comparable cults sometimes grew up around the cult places of gods of the dead, or where an elite figure was 'deified' and his 'worshippers' had themselves buried or made votive burials of animals or funerary figurines near him (Taylor, 2001: 133–5).

The 'mausoleum culture' in the necropolis which developed around provision for the royal and elite deceased must have been legitimized as much in relation to the living as to the dead. As in many cultures, elite men wished to construct their tombs during their lifetimes, when the tomb was a central vehicle of peer competition. An explicit illustration of this is in the sixth-dynasty statement of a man who chose to be buried in a tomb together with his father 'in order to be with this Djau in the same place, not because I did not have the means(?) to build two tombs' – making explicit the status normally accorded to a having one's own large tomb (Roccati, 1982: 227–8).

At times, much of society must have been drawn – directly or indirectly, enthusiastically or not – into great mortuary projects, especially the royal pyramids of the third and fourth dynasties. The institutions of the pyramids was economically central. Apart from the vast enterprise of construction, the pyramid and related solar temple endowments were nodes for allocation of resources, although the proportion of economic activity that passed through them is uncertain (Lehner, 2000; O'Connor, 1995). When centralized political forms broke down in the First Intermediate Period, large-scale pyramid complexes ceased to be constructed for the following 200 years.

Tomb size and type varied as much with the fortunes of the times as with individual wealth and choice. A limited 'democratization of the afterlife' has been postulated for the First Intermediate Period and early Middle Kingdom, when non-royal elites adopted some mortuary texts, regalia and beliefs that may until then have been the preserve of the king (e.g. Assmann, 1996: 104–5; but see Bourriau, 1991; Willems, 1988). The same period is characterized by a much wider distribution of prestigious grave goods than in the Old Kingdom (Brunton, 1927: 75–6; Seidlmayer, 1990: 440–1), suggesting some leveling of wealth. During much of the second and first millennia there was interchange between royal and private traditions in tomb architecture and mortuary symbolism. Thus, New Kingdom kings abandoned the pyramidal tomb, which elites took over in reduced form (Badawy, 1968: 441–2; Kampp-Seyfried, 1994). Pictorial and textual compositions inscribed in royal tombs were adopted later by the non-royal, while kings took over non-royal substitute figurines (*shabtis*). These borrowings suggest that there existed a commonality of beliefs and symbols as well as long-term variability in their use, despite sharp differentiation between major social categories (Richards, 2000; Seidlmayer, 2001).

A broad norm for mortuary practices and beliefs is easily outlined. Ideally, an elite man (occasionally a woman) would prepare for death by constructing a tomb as an everlasting memorial, starting after reaching a

career peak. He would set aside provisions for the tomb and create an endowment to maintain the cult and supply offerings in perpetuity. After death, the body was mummified and prepared for burial, a process that lasted, in theory, for 70 days. The deceased was then placed inside a coffin or nest of coffins and, in an elaborate ritual, transported from the place of embalming to the tomb and buried, in some periods with numerous grave goods, in a subterranean chamber contiguous with the superstructure. Like the tomb structure and decoration, the grave goods were no doubt associated with the deceased's identity and status as well as with material provision. The chamber was sealed and not opened again unless other family members were buried there. Burials of people connected with the tomb owner could be added in separate tomb shafts.

Men were typically buried in major tombs with their wives and sometimes other family members and some dependants. Family or communal tombs became common in the later New Kingdom (e.g. for the eighteenth dynasty, Petrie and Sayce, 1891: 21–4; for the nineteenth and twentieth dynasties, Meskell, 1999a), Third Intermediate Period, and later (cf. Lacovara, 1988: 24), but both they and grouped tombs existed in earlier periods, particularly for the less wealthy (Engelbach, 1923: 59–63; Seidlmayer, 2001). Separate burials of elite women reappeared at the end of the New Kingdom, after an absence of some centuries (e.g. Quirke, 1999); child and infant burials are discussed later in this article.

The crucial phase of the funerary ritual appears to have been the 'Opening of the Mouth', in which the body was rendered capable of receiving offerings and functioning in the next world (Fischer-Elfert, 1998; Otto, 1960). A designated person, ideally the eldest son, was responsible for completing or constructing the tomb if necessary, conducting the funeral and administering the cult. The mortuary cult, which was in principle similar to the daily cult of the gods in temples, centered on the presentation of food offerings and other essentials to statues, in the Old Kingdom mostly inaccessible in a sealed chamber (the *serdab*), or to two-dimensional representations of the deceased in the tomb chapel and through the object addressed, to the deceased himself (O'Connor, 2000; Roth, 1988: 54–5). In one of several frameworks of belief, the deceased would continue to exist around the tomb, possessing freedom of movement through the potential of aspects of the person that were liberated after death but needed perpetually to reunite with the mummy.

The preservation of the deceased's body, of the coffin and of the tomb and grave goods was fundamental. Conservation of the corpse developed slowly from the late predynastic times to its fullest form in the Third Intermediate Period, when mummification was a very elaborate and costly procedure aimed at maintaining the deceased's physical appearance (Ikram and Dodson, 1998).

Safeguards aimed to ensure that sustenance would be offered for the



deceased if relatives or mortuary priests ceased to provide offerings of food and drink. Inscribed offering formulas, attested from the fourth dynasty to Graeco-Roman times, would magically sustain the tomb owner's spirit when they were read out (Barta, 1968). The formulas presupposed – realistically or otherwise – that people would visit the necropolis as a whole, not just the tombs of their own kin, and would read and activate the formulae. These existed in two basic types, of which the one that did not explicitly address visitors to the tomb or chapel may have been thought efficacious even without being read out.

Visitors were enjoined to enter tombs in a state of purity that related to the cult performed there and to the religious content of the inscriptions (Junker, 1955b: 132–3; but see Wolf, 1957: 685, n. 2 to §70). While the latter was superficially sparse before the mid-second millennium, the range of permissible material was very circumscribed. Purity for visitors and that required of priests in temples are comparable (Blumenthal, 1991), but the social range of visitors to tombs was wider than that of temple priests, for example including women, servants and children.

Two features of offering formulae in tombs point in different directions. The core typically runs: 'A gift/propitiation that the king gives to [deit(ies)], that he/they may give [offerings] to [name].' It is self-contained, involving no ritual in the tomb beyond being read out where possible, and depends for its efficacy on the mediation of the king and the temple, where he theoretically performed the daily cult. The deceased would receive this reversion of offerings in the hereafter (Lapp, 1986). In this way, the dead participated both in the affairs and customs of the living and in the regular cult of the gods. These beliefs and practices, paralleled by such activities as writing letters to the dead, reinforced the position of the recently dead in the human community, while the offering formula linked the deceased to the cult of the gods on earth, rather than in the otherworldly domains of both, and may have tended to assimilate them to a generalized category of spiritual beings.

■ THE DESTINY OF THE LESS WEALTHY

The destiny in the next life of those who did not have elaborate tombs must be considered, although little can be said about them. As first discussed by Weill (1938), the number of burials identified from antiquity cannot account for the entire estimated population of a million at the least (cf. Baines and Eyre, 1983: 65–7; Butzer, 1976: 76–80; O'Connor, 1972: 81–3). Often, graves or other indications of sub-elite burials that have been pointed to belonged to prosperous people such as valued artisans (e.g. Hawass, 1995; Ward, 1977). While indications of poor or mass burials are sometimes reported, the majority of them being 'formal' (Smith and Jeffreys, 1979: 19; 1980: 18),

many corpses must have been disposed of in ways that are now archaeologically invisible (cf. Morris, 1987, on Iron Age Greece). At Haraga, cemeteries probably of the Middle Kingdom that had proper burials but no tomb structures or grave goods illustrate how large numbers might be treated formally (Engelbach, 1923: 2–3). Such finds are rare, but perhaps more frequent from the Roman period, for which they are, for example, reported but not yet published from Kellis in Dakhla Oasis. Some of this invisibility of the general population may derive from a focus of earlier excavations on wealthier sites, from inadequate recording and from tomb robbery; losses may also be attributed to shifts in the Nile bed and other forms of natural and artificial destruction. But even if all these factors are taken into account, not everyone seems to have had a formal grave. A good example is a generally modest Old to Middle Kingdom cemetery on Elephantine Island, 10 percent of which has been excavated, containing 248 burials spread over about 500 years (Seidlmayer, 2001). Even if multipliers are applied to these figures to account for losses of material, any total of burials that can be postulated would have to relate to an implausibly small population. One cannot assume that some burials followed other rites. Unlike execution by burning (Leahy, 1984), cremation is unknown from pre-Roman Egypt, while the statement in a literary text, that in troubled times crocodiles became gorged on the corpses of those who cast themselves into the river, is not meant literally (Parkinson, 1998: 172).

Little is reported of sub-formal or non-formal disposal. One find, no doubt among many, is from the culturally Egyptian Middle Kingdom levels at Tell el-Dab'a in the Delta, where a corpse discarded in a storage bin had been left exposed and partly consumed by animals (Bietak, 1991a: 52). Such a disposal, devoid of grave goods, suggests that members of the lowest social strata or perhaps outcasts might not have had even a simple interment in a burial ground. Not just the level of funerary expenditure but also the practice of formal burial was socially constrained.

There may be exceptions to the pattern of selective formal burial – and thus to what is found more generally in archaeology (cf. Parker Pearson, 1999: 5). Daniel Polz (1995: 40–1) proposed that for Second Intermediate Period Thebes the area of Dra' Abu el-Naga could have accommodated burials of the entire population, while some Late and Graeco-Roman cemeteries may have contained larger numbers of burials than are generally known from earlier sites.

Moreover, cemeteries seldom mirror society's demographic composition (for Greece, Morris, 1992: 72–91; for Egypt, Rösing, 1990). While in Egypt women may have had autonomy in some domains (Robins, 1993), tombs constructed for their use are rare – for the Old Kingdom fewer than 1 percent of named tombs (Hubertus Münch, 2001, personal communication), and for the New Kingdom fewer still. The less elaborate the burials, the more likely it was that men and women would receive a roughly equal



treatment (e.g. for Middle Kingdom Haraga: Engelbach, 1923: 2–3; First Intermediate Period Qau: Seidlmayer, 1987; New Kingdom Deir el-Medina East: Meskell, 1999b). Published cemetery data rarely include significant numbers of infant and child burials, yet child mortality was certainly high. A cemetery at Mirgissa that reflected this demographic fact, with 50 percent of its skeletons under two years of age, prompted its excavator to seek a special explanation for its composition. However, Bernard Boyaval (1981) noted that, in demographic terms, what needs to be explained is the pattern of age distributions in other cemeteries. Some of the discrepancy may be due to inadequate recording by earlier excavators, who may have overlooked or ignored the simpler and more fragile burials of infants in the search for valuables, and to neglect in later syntheses. An exception is a remark about finds from late New Kingdom Abydos (Mariette, 1880: 442). More careful and more recent excavations have shown significant proportions of sub-adults of all ages in cemeteries of the Dynastic Period, but still not enough to represent the likely demographic reality (Meskell, 1999b: 158–68; Seidlmayer, forthcoming).

Burials of foetuses, neonates and infants have been found recently in contexts such as foundations of buildings in the late third millennium town at Abydos North (Matthew D. Adams, 2000, personal communication), suggesting that, as in many cultures, they were not necessarily interred in the same place or the same manner as adults or older juveniles (cf. e.g. Esmonde Cleary, 2000; Pollock, 1999: 197–204). Nonetheless, the majority of the Middle Kingdom infant burials in elite houses at Abydos South were ‘formal’ in that they were neatly arranged and covered over, and some had associated artifacts (Josef Wegner, 2000, personal communication). This was clearly a special practice, because it was abnormal to bury adults within settlements, although cases are reported (for the Middle and New Kingdoms, see von Pilgrim, 1996: 81–3). Some such burials were either where the community had expanded over a burial ground (Kemp, 1968; for Deir el-Medina, see Meskell, 1997), or conversely, in abandoned habitation sectors (Lacovara, 1981: 122–4). The Palestinian Middle Bronze II levels at Tell al-Dab’a offer a useful contrast: burials within the city were common and included all ages down to neonates (Bietak, 1991b).

■ IDEALS, PRACTICE AND SYMBOLISM IN MORTUARY PROVISION

According to the ideal, the style of burial ritual, the correct deposition of the corpse and, at least in some periods, the presence of grave goods were central to burial and hopes of survival in the next world. The reality, both of procedures of burial and of maintenance of mortuary traditions, was

different. Apart from embalmers' and mortuary priests' involvement in the destruction and desecration of burials, they subverted and substituted for the prescribed literalistic forms. Such shortcuts might or might not run counter to the intentions of those who wished to be 'properly' buried.

From an early period, symbolic approaches and interpretations could bridge the gap between aspiration and reality. It is as if the outward appearance of mortuary ritual and provision could be more important than the provision itself. Many burials and tombs contained miniature or dummy stone vessels or empty food containers, imitation granite false doors and so forth. Mummification was often similarly affected: only a semblance of the embalming necessary to preserve the body might be carried out, although the wrapped body in the coffin looked as good as one that had been 'properly' prepared (Taylor, 2001: 58–63, 78–91). At least as much as they were dictated by economics, these shortcuts may have been legitimized by a belief that the correct performance of mummification rituals was more significant than meticulous preservation of the body (Goyon and Josset, 1988). Since full mummification was very costly, beliefs allowing for a more limited treatment were necessary if more than a tiny proportion of the elite were to aspire to its benefits and a consequent passage into the hereafter. Even when elaborate provisions were made, the results were not always what was desired. Sometimes the mummy was made up of the bones of more than one person, perhaps embalmers' leftovers (Spencer, 1982: 124–36; Taylor, 2001: 91).

It would be impossible to provide materially for anyone in perpetuity through the grave goods deposited in a tomb, and more sustainable symbolic or magical understandings were normal. In modest burials from predynastic times on, the grave goods could have had only token value for physical survival in the next world, unless they were meant to materialize a meal or to provide for transition to a domain where supplies would be either present or irrelevant. The only non-royal tombs of the Dynastic Period that included massive supplies of food and equipment, and in some cases even latrines and washing areas, were the enormous elite structures of the first to second dynasties (Emery, 1961: 128–64, esp. 159). How did more 'symbolic' burial assemblages – the vast majority – relate to beliefs about the afterlife? Grave goods cannot have been indispensable, since intact elite burials of periods such as the Old Kingdom contain very few of them (Münch, 1997). It is as likely that they related to the deceased's position among the living as that more than a few of them had a straightforward function for the afterlife.

Kings, for whom an otherworldly destiny with the sun and among the stars was assumed, were buried with the most lavish grave goods, preserved to a great extent only from the tomb of Tutankhamun (Reeves, 1990a) and the twenty-first and twenty-second dynasties' royal tombs of Tanis (Montet, 1947–1960). Non-royal elites, who increasingly aspired to similar destinies, constructed elaborate tombs that should have received a regular cult. The



cults themselves may not have been performed at all, or for only a short period. Large quantities of rough and miniature offering vessels found in some tomb chapels suggest that in these cases there was a significant volume of symbolic offerings (Charvát, 1981: 149–51; Richards, forthcoming). Since such material is sparse, the evidence is that mortuary cults were rarely maintained for long, despite supposedly perpetual cult endowments. The longest known periods of cult may be for some Old Kingdom kings (Kemp, 1989: 141–9; Posener-Kriéger, 1976). Neither for kings nor for others can grave goods or continuing mortuary cults have had the principal role in ensuring survival in the hereafter. Cults of some kings were maintained in later periods, but these seem to have been almost antiquarian in character.

■ AN AFTERLIFE AWAY FROM THE TOMB

Some royal and non-royal beliefs suggest that there could be an afterlife that had little connection with an earthly context, so that the tomb was mainly a point of transition from one world to another. However monumental it might be, its permanence was then less important than if it was seen as a perpetual abode; but grave goods could still be lavish. These features were significant for the deceased's standing among the living as much as for the next world. In principle, funeral rituals and the mortuary cult, rather than the tomb, were crucial to continued existence, even though the cult might not endure for long. As indicated, much relevant cult activity was sited in temples rather than in the necropolis.

A text probably dating from the Middle Kingdom describes society as consisting of four parts – the gods, the king, the dead, and humanity – with the duty of the king, and, by extension, of humanity, being to make offerings to the gods and to the spirits of the deceased (Baines, 1991: 127–9). Despite this view, which requires that the living and the dead be integrated, the social divisiveness of the knowledge that only some people would receive such cults and the awareness that the cults would not endure may have favored conceptions of other-worldly destinies away from the tomb or less dependent on central provision. These conceptions may then have acquired moral authority through the notion of an ethical judgement after death, perhaps by the mid third millennium (Baines, 1991: 151). While these ideas might devalue the tomb's significance, they do not have any simple correlate in the development or neglect of mortuary provision.

The ethical and social leveling implicit in judgement after death is powerfully stated in a tale of the Ptolemaic Period in which a poor man, who had been buried without ceremony, stands honored near Osiris, while the eye-socket of a rich man, who had been taken out to the necropolis in a splendid coffin with ceremony and lamentation, has become the entrance door-socket

of a hall in the netherworld. This contrast is based on the worth of the men's lives as assessed in judgement after death (Lichtheim, 1973–80: vol. 3: 126, 139–141). The deceased do not depend upon the tomb: neither man is said to have a visible monument above ground, which fits the period of the text.

■ SKEPTICISM TOWARD MORTUARY PROVISION

Some texts proclaim skepticism about mortuary provision and the survival of monuments. How significant and widespread were such attitudes, and how did they relate to alternative conceptions that the individual should survive in social memory rather than in a monument? The most important early skeptical statement is that of the Middle Kingdom *Instruction for King Merikare* (Parkinson, 1998: 226), which takes an existing aphorism that one should prepare a tomb (1998: 292), and states that what is important is rather to create a presumably intangible monument by acting justly toward others in this world. Since the god prefers justice, such behavior should inspire him to act on behalf of the just – presumably in the next world. Decayed monuments from earlier periods were incorporated into discussions and images of the past (Baines, 1989). In the New Kingdom, individuals and groups visited derelict Old Kingdom royal mortuary complexes and elite tombs and left graffiti recording their impressions, but did not perform a cult.

Some harpists' songs from the same period evoke the decay of tombs of the ancestors and encourage people to live for and celebrate the day because, in the universal phrase, 'no one who has gone has come back', implying that provision for life after death is pointless (Assmann, 1977); the same is stated more explicitly in a literary dialogue about death (Parkinson, 1998: 156–7). This attitude has a positive slant in another literary text, which states that monuments decay but the fame of past sages endures (Baines, 1989: 143). The harpists' songs were inscribed in tombs: mortuary structures could carry a critique of their own functions. Some of these songs may have formed part of funerals, mobilizing emotions of grief and loss and shifting concern back to the living (Lichtheim, 1973–80: vol. 3, 62–4). These discordant attitudes cast doubt upon the purpose of the structures, which nonetheless continued to be built; such discordance is not confined to Egypt.

■ REUSE OF MATERIALS AND TOMBS: (DIS)RESPECT

Tombs must have done more than ensure their owners' survival into the next world. As is observed for Egypt and elsewhere, mortuary monuments are concerned with life as much as death (Allen, 1988: 48; Metcalf and Huntington, 1991; Spiegel, n.d. [1935]: 5–11). They aided the deceased's life



in the hereafter, but the tomb, and especially its superstructure, also existed for the living owner before death. Whatever the deceased's otherworldly destiny, the tomb was present among the living as a memorial for its owner. This notion of the tomb as memorial is epitomized and relativized: 'The name [reputation] of a brave man is in what he has done; it will not perish from the land forever' (Lichtheim, 1973–80: vol. 2, 12). This proverbial statement introduces a biography in a tomb inscription, implying that the tomb, which embodied the deceased's deeds, bore witness to him, but that ultimately the reputation was more durable than the monument.

The skeptical texts, which may be part of a tradition far older than the identifiable evidence, reveal tensions in a complex society's relation to its past and its dead members. Some of the dead may have been significant to their own social groups. Kings could be important for everyone after their deaths, but because of their office's social isolation the only group that would champion them strongly might be the line of their successors – as is stated explicitly in the *Instruction for King Merikare* (Parkinson, 1998: 225).

In principle each ruler built his own mortuary complex, often on a new site. Many elite tombs were near those of their kings, and thus on different sites in succeeding generations. In terms of status, older cemeteries no doubt bore rather different meanings from current ones, and the discontinuities in location created by these patterns must have discouraged people from identifying with anything other than the most recent structures. Devaluing earlier mortuary structures – of whatever age – allowed them to be exploited as sources of construction materials, or parts of them could be annexed for use as they stood. Recycling of older mortuary monuments was common. Apart from inscriptions in tombs enjoining visitors not to damage them, no pressure to keep them inviolate is evident. From the Early Dynastic Period on, reuse in the necropolis varied from employing materials from structures that were perhaps falling into ruin, through taking stone from the tombs of unrelated people, to annexing parts of one complex for the next. Non-royal individuals of many periods also appropriated complete constructed tombs. Coffins and sarcophagi too were reused. The construction of mortuary complexes could involve destroying quite recent monuments: the fifth dynasty causeway of Wenis at Saqqara covered and rendered inaccessible a number of tombs (e.g. Moussa and Altenmüller, 1977). On a smaller scale, burial shafts of graves were very widely reused.

Similar patterns can be observed over longer periods. The overlaying of first dynasty tombs at North Saqqara with graves of the later Early Dynastic Period and, a little to the south, the obliteration of second dynasty royal tombs 400 years later by the fifth dynasty mortuary temple of Wenis show a casual approach to earlier monuments within the same overall period (Stadelmann, 1997: 29–40). To take stone from an abandoned tomb

hundreds of years old might have been fairly neutral in its implied attitudes toward the past, but it is not easy to draw a line between 'continuous' and 'remote' reuse.²

A characteristic case is the Saqqara tomb of the general, later king, Haremhab (c.1320), together with others nearby (Martin, 1978; 1991: 88–98). The stonework of these structures is largely composed of materials taken from Old Kingdom tombs – probably ruined – of about a millennium earlier. Haremhab's tomb was not fully completed and its owner was buried in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes. A generation later, a high-ranking woman was buried in the Saqqara tomb, as were several other people in the Third Intermediate Period, and it was reused again in early Christian times.

In repeated reuse of this sort, locality is significant. Particular burial grounds, places or single tombs became hallowed; people competed to be buried in or near them, increasing the crowding of sites and the stimulus to reuse earlier structures. The Theban necropolis, which was the country's main elite burial ground for half a millennium from 1500 BCE, shows the most complex developments and patterns of reuse (Guksch, 1995; Kamp-Seyfried, 1996: 123–9; Montserrat and Meskell, 1997; Polz, 1990; Strudwick and Strudwick, 1996: 188–93). In the late New Kingdom, people were assigned tombs of their forbears a few generations back for reuse (McDowell, 1999: 68–9); this no doubt involved probing to find the graves, followed by disturbing any un-pillaged burial that remained. From the first millennium and later, the rich evidence includes institutionalized management of existing rock tombs as communal burial places, in which the cult of a mummy was maintained for as long as a subscription supported it (Pestman, 1993; Thompson, 1988: 155–89). At Tuna el-Gebel during the Graeco-Roman period, the burial chamber and superstructure of the large elite tomb of Petosiris (c.300 BCE) were filled with dozens of corpses (Lefebvre, 1924: 13–29).

The visual impact and wealth of mausoleums like that of Haremhab make them natural targets for exploitation by those who either are indifferent to the status and values of their builders or value the site for its associations. If a tomb was to survive, strong sanctions were needed to protect it. These might have ranged from generalized respect or the prestige of the owners, through cemetery guards, to taboos surrounding the places of the dead or the mummy itself. Of these sanctions, the weakest is prestige, because it functions only if there is a perceived connection with the past, and that would not last indefinitely. Nonetheless, evidence for respect at some sites is impressive. At Abydos, the area of the Early Dynastic royal mortuary enclosures was not reoccupied for burials until a millennium later. Even though cemeteries were created nearby, the Old Kingdom cemetery was respected for more than 1500 years (Richards, forthcoming). One enclosure, the Shunet el-Zebib, was not encroached



upon before the mid-first millennium. A set of late Middle Kingdom stelae protected another area against tomb building and trespassing (Leahy, 1989).

The complexity of this web of connections among monuments and their later fortunes diffuses respect for the dead and people of the past. There was no single royal or non-royal pattern or practice. Moreover, people do not necessarily behave 'respectfully' toward what they formally 'respect'. Only a very few tomb owners who were deified and moved out of the human domain received veneration in the long term. The sages of ancient times mentioned earlier in this article in relation to skepticism were culturally salient, and while their monuments were respected early in their ascent to fame (Helck, 1972: 16–19), once their literary renown and cultural associations had immortalized them, their tombs could be stated explicitly to be irrelevant (Lichtheim, 1973–80: vol. 2, 175–8). The cults of a few of these people were revived out of antiquarian interest in the first millennium BCE, because of their cultural significance rather than their status and destiny as deceased people (Otto, 1957). There was no continuity between their original mortuary cults and the recreated ones. Even the widespread cult of the deified culture hero Imhotep (Wildung, 1977) related to his reputation as an ancient sage with healing powers, not to associations with his burial place, which had probably been lost in the millennia since his death.

Some mortuary monuments were restored much later. The Early Dynastic royal tombs at Abydos were partly rebuilt in the twelfth dynasty (Dreyer et al., 1998: 141–2), probably in relation to the cult of the god Osiris, the mythical first king of Egypt and lord of the underworld. The same period saw a strong revival of Old Kingdom culture (Franke, 1995). A couple of centuries later, a statue of the resurrecting Osiris on his funerary bier was placed in the Abydos burial chamber of the first dynasty king Djer, by then considered to be the god's tomb (e.g. Kemp, 1975: 36–7; for the date, see Leahy, 1977). The best known restorations are from the late New Kingdom, when the High Priest of Ptah Khaemwese, a son of Ramesses II, restored many structures in the Memphite necropolis, including pyramids. In the first millennium, Old Kingdom pyramids at Giza and Saqqara were again 'restored'. These activities probably related to the revived cults of early kings, as well as to antiquarian interests. How far the modifications affected the original burials – no doubt long plundered – is uncertain, but a burial was placed or restored in the sarcophagus of the fourth dynasty king Menkaure in the Third Pyramid at Giza (Ikram and Dodson, 1998: 238, 246–8). The tomb chamber of the third dynasty king Djoser under his Step Pyramid at Saqqara was exposed to view by the wholesale removal of masonry within the structure (Stadelmann, 1997: 65). The focus of this 'tourist entrance' was the presumably empty burial chamber.

■ THE DEAD IN RELATION TO THE LIVING

The dead required offerings, and in that sense they organized the living. The vast outlay on mortuary provision in some periods makes this partly true in material terms, but most of the expenditure was incurred before people died or immediately afterward. Texts setting up mortuary endowments show that the living had a continuing obligation to maintain the cults of their forebears, but these were seldom in fact maintained.

A Middle Kingdom text gives a moral dimension to this point by having the creator god assert that he made people's hearts 'refrain from forgetting the West [the domain of the dead], in order that offerings be made to the gods of the districts' (Parkinson, 1991: 32–4). This can be read in two ways. Either people turned to religion in the face of death, which is a moralizing and sociological commonplace (e.g. Berger, 1973: 87), or they offered to the gods as a medium through which their offerings would reach the dead. During their lifetimes, people offered on behalf of their dead, partly in anticipation of dying themselves and needing the same provision – either from their descendants or through the gods. The second of these readings fits better within Egyptian beliefs and is to be preferred, but the two are not incompatible. In either case, death and the dead kept the living in line and encouraged them to respect the gods. The dead in question were primarily elites, because only they had memorials that might stimulate the living to invoke the reversion of offerings from temples of the gods to the deceased.

Ideally, the deceased and the living interacted around the tomb. Mortuary endowments provided for regular offerings in the tomb and these were supplemented by visits of family during festivals (e.g. Graefe, 1986). The mortuary contracts which the local governor Hapidjefai made with the priesthood of Asyut in the early twelfth dynasty, however, focused on specific festivals and on cults to be performed for statues of him in the temple; only one of the main group of contracts refers to the tomb and a statue that may have been there (Reisner, 1918). Although Hapidjefai was a local leader, the texts emphasize that the cult performed for him was the same as the priests performed for their own dead. If this is to be credited, it means that mortuary cults in temples of the gods were important for more than just the elite. In later periods, temple statues of individuals were increasingly a mortuary focus, so that the dead participated more directly in the cult of the gods. Both in the formulae and through this practice, there was overlap between the cult of the living gods and the mortuary cult of the dead. In the Graeco-Roman period, this commonality had a reverse dimension and there were stated to be burials of dead gods in the cemeteries (e.g. Reymond, 1963: 55 with n. 3).

The dead continued to be involved with the living. They could be



benevolently or malevolently present to relatives and associates, perhaps especially to those who visited the necropolis (e.g. Posener, 1958, 1981). Old Kingdom tomb inscriptions assert that the deceased would intercede in the divine world on behalf of those who treated their tombs respectfully or pronounced offering formulae for them (Roccati, 1982). This intercession is paralleled by intermediary statues of prominent people in temples, of a type perhaps first attested for the twelfth dynasty vizier Mentuhotep (Simpson, 1991), that could be approached to transmit requests or prayers to the gods (Pinch, 1993: 345–6). Thus, the dead could claim to act on behalf of the living in the next world. In a manner akin to the king, they mediated between the gods and humanity.

Fear of malevolence from the dead and hope for their benevolence are expressed in magical practices and in letters written to the dead, a practice attested from the late Old Kingdom to the mid first millennium BCE (Jasnow and Vittmann, 1992/93; Wentz, 1990: 210–20). People wrote to their deceased relatives for help if they were threatened with loss or were unable to achieve what they wanted through regular channels. One letter contains the complaints of a husband who believed his deceased wife was tormenting him from the tomb (Wentz, 1990: 216–17). The letters, few of which were found *in situ*, seem to have been addressed to people recently deceased, some of whom may have acted as conduits to more remote people who were being sought. In a largely non-literate society, the written form of these appeals was probably exceptional: they would normally have been spoken. The matters presented in the letters were urgent, and the depositors probably left them in the necropolis straightaway, rather than waiting for a festival when the tomb would be visited.

The most cogent evidence for a tomb-focused connection between the dead and the living has the negative meaning form of inscribed curses against those who would defile or vandalize tombs (e.g. Posener, 1988). The texts are formulae describing what the deceased, as ‘effective and well equipped spirits’, would do against those who entered a tomb in an impure state or who damaged its reliefs and inscriptions (Morschauer, 1991). The texts present them as attacking their assailants directly but probably metaphorically – for example ‘wringing [someone’s] neck like a bird’ – or indirectly by litigating with them in an otherworldly court. The judgement the deceased obtained in that court could be effective in the next world or could strike the victim in the form of an untoward destiny during life. Thus, a late Old Kingdom text promises ‘the crocodile against him in the water, the snake against him on land, who will do anything against this [tomb]’ (Sethe, 1933: 23). Crocodiles and snakes, which were probably metonyms for unexpected adverse fate, were agents of divine retribution, and would strike the vandal – apparently in this world – as a consequence of the god’s judgement.

It is difficult to say how much conviction was carried by assertions that

the deceased could harm the living. In addition to the letters to the dead, magical rituals performed in the necropolis against generalized categories of enemies attest to fear of the dead in this broader context (Osing, 1976; Seidlmayer, forthcoming). The 'dead' who are mentioned as agents of disease in medical texts could have been a focus of such rituals, but spells intended to ward off illness and death caused by them are difficult to interpret because the word 'dead' may also mean those damned in judgement after death (e.g. Borghouts, 1978: 4–6). Be that as it may, the prevalence of tomb robbery suggests that these dangers were little heeded, or perhaps averted through suitable magic or destruction, such as the dismembering or burning of mummies observed in many robbed tombs and mentioned in tomb robbery texts. Such beliefs can relate to how far the living and the dead formed a community: they would cease to offer protection to burials when the sense of community lessened or when the deceased and those who exploited the necropolis had different interests.

Spells in the Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts that are closely related to letters to the dead treat competition among the roles of the living, the recently deceased and the preceding generation (Grieshammer, 1975/76). The recently deceased person is afraid of failing to obtain an abode in the hereafter, while members of earlier generations fear that they will be displaced from the tomb. This material implies that offerings should be made to the dead and communication maintained with them in order that they remain where they 'belong' – in the necropolis or more broadly in the next world – and should not interfere adversely in the affairs of the living. Such a dilemma, which is well attested in other cultures (e.g. Fortes, 1983 [1959]), suggests that the living viewed the dead as threatening for only a generation or two. The texts are realistic in thematizing the crowding of necropoleis and the possibility that one burial would destroy another. A correlate among excavated cemeteries is the modest Old–Middle Kingdom cemetery at Elephantine, where tombs were not encroached upon until a few generations after they were constructed (Seidlmayer, forthcoming). A different possibility is thematized in a tale where a high priest is contacted by a long-deceased official and inspired to rebuild his tomb (Wente, 1973). The tale seems to explore the limits of interaction of dead and living, envisaging that among those of high status who survived in memory the unquiet dead might not just keep the living in line in the shorter term, but might be a more or less perpetual moral burden. This possibility is the opposite of the focus of the skeptical texts on posthumous reputation rather than monuments; the two opinions could have coexisted.

One of the earliest surviving tomb inscriptions, from the beginning of the fourth dynasty, refers to the owner's having made his 'gods' [probably the figures and captions] in writing that cannot be erased' (Spiegelberg, 1930), describing the special paste inlay used for this tomb. The use of this technique and the description may suggest that the problem of



vandalism, as distinct from tomb robbery, was present by then, which is reasonable in view of the already long history of tomb robbery and destruction. Texts assuring the reader of the tomb owner's good character and virtuous payment of his debts (Roth, 1994: 232–8) imply that people with a grudge might vandalize a tomb (e.g. Baines, 1991: 139–42). A graffito next to a mutilated figure in a late Old Kingdom tomb has been interpreted as an example of such a vendetta being acted out from one generation to the next: the son does to the image of his father's oppressor what the oppressor had done to his father (Baines, 1991: 141, n. 50). The importance of an untainted reputation is illustrated in a unique passage where a tomb owner states that he was never arrested or imprisoned, and that if he was, the accusations against him redounded against the accusers (Sethe, 1933: 221). This makes sense only if some such event had occurred. It must have been necessary at all costs to protect the owner's reputation, despite the evident implications of what was said.

Vandalism could have had several aims. The relief decoration of tombs has been assumed to have supplied in surrogate form the offerings that might cease with the ending of mortuary service. This interpretation is problematic, however, and other motives of display and commemoration were also significant (e.g. Baines, 1999; Wolf, 1957: 258–62). Vandalism and desecration might make a tomb unusable for mortuary service, while it would become an unfit abode and memorial for the deceased, as well as showing visitors that he was powerless. Patterns of vandalism do not establish whether the principal harm intended was to his reputation, to his otherworldly destiny, or both. The erasure of names might suppress the deceased's identity, which could have repercussions for the next world.

Some tombs were quite thoroughly vandalized, such as rich ones of the first dynasty at Abydos and Saqqara, or the fourth dynasty tomb of Prince Hardjedef at Giza (Junker, 1955a: 135–40). These tombs belonged to royalty or to people of the highest status and some were probably soon destroyed by political enemies. Numerous New Kingdom tombs in the Theban necropolis were vandalized. The motives for these actions are not easy to interpret (Dorman, 1988; Schulman, 1969–70). Characteristic cases are of people close to royalty, such as 'Chief Stewards', who may have been vulnerable to later kings' repudiation of their predecessors' officials (Helck, 1957: 537–47). In the only preserved moralizing comment on vandalism, the fictional royal author of the *Instruction for King Merikare* regrets his complicity in the destruction of tombs in the Abydos area (Parkinson, 1998: 225). The statement comes shortly before an injunction, unrealistic in the light of archaeological finds, to quarry fresh stone for monuments and not break up earlier structures. The text distinguishes vandalism and reuse, but in relation to both it seems to focus on the idea of a monument more than on the preservation of the dead or their destinies in the hereafter. The prospects for the intact survival of burials may have been thought hopeless.

Vandalism should be distinguished from tomb robbery, which was always the commonest form of desecration. Robbery was so prevalent that few ancient tombs which might have contained numerous and reusable grave goods are preserved intact. The only realistic insurance against robbery was to have a grave too poor and insignificant to warrant plundering – and often too poor to have attracted the notice of archaeologists. Tomb robbery was treated as a crime, but this rule cannot have been enforced with any great rigour. The only surviving extensive records date to the later twentieth dynasty, when factional disputes among the administrative elite in Thebes led to the uncovering of many robberies in the Theban necropolis (Capart et al., 1936; Peet, 1930; accusations recorded in Černý, 1929). The most revealing single passage in these texts may be in the report on an investigation in which some minor royal tombs of the seventeenth dynasty were inspected and found, with one exception, to be intact: the non-royal tombs were said all to have been violated (Peet, 1930: 37–42). This distinction may have been overdrawn, but is probably not entirely misleading. If so, the state's policing of royal tombs was quite successful for considerable periods, in principle perhaps as long as there was not a political collapse. Others could not expect their burials to survive.

There is little evidence for when royal tombs were robbed – the case of Tutankhamun is disputed – but this is generally assumed to have been during troubled times, and on occasion perhaps directed by the authorities (Graefe, 1999; Jansen-Winkel, 1995). In the Valley of the Kings, twenty-first and twenty-second dynasty rulers seem to have stripped their predecessors' burials of their valuables, reusing gold and funerary objects, including a set of royal coffins, in their own tombs at Tanis (Reeves, 1990b: 273–8, 18). The bodies of the dispossessed kings, however, were treated with some respect and cached in communal tombs (e.g. Jansen-Winkel, 1995). On a lower social level, a human skull, which was found beside a plundered tomb of the Third Intermediate Period at Abydos, had been carefully covered over with a pot, perhaps in a robber's rueful gesture of reverence.

Many non-royal tombs seem to have been robbed by those who made the burials (e.g. Engelbach, 1915: 21–2). On occasion empty sarcophagi or coffins seem to have been placed in the tomb, perhaps after the burial had been stripped of its jewels and trappings with the collusion of funerary personnel (Ikram and Dodson, 1998: 93, 245–6). Previous burials in a chamber were often ransacked (D'Auria et al., 1988: 109–10) or appropriated (Montserrat and Meskell, 1997; Riggs, 2000). The blocking stones to some tombs were deliberately not placed in position (Spencer, 1982: 81). Surviving unlooted burials either contained little of material value or had been rendered invisible by later use of the ground above them, as with the tomb of Tutankhamun.



■ CONCLUSION

The routine character of tomb robbery and the continual destruction of both older and recent funerary monuments might seem paradoxical in view of the Egyptians' vast expenditure on mortuary provision and their devotion to creating and endowing elaborate sepulchres as their mortal resting places. As we have discussed, this expenditure coexisted on several levels with skepticism about the provision's worth. Such actions and attitudes if anything reinforce the fact that, for much of Egyptian history, an essential idiom in which royalty and the elite displayed wealth, status and cultural values was mortuary. The imperative to provide monuments coexisted with a symbolic understanding of the purpose and meaning of burial that allowed those who could not aspire to a mortuary monument also to hope for a destiny in the next life. One may postulate that simply going through the motions of constructing a tomb, preparing a burial and setting up a mortuary cult were the essential points, even for members of the elite. Whether or not the burial was executed 'correctly' and the cult maintained was almost immaterial.

In this way, the elite mausoleum culture was able to accommodate the short-term cultural mandate to construct and maintain tombs to the long-term inevitability of abandonment and decay. From early times, Egyptians looked to the past with its decayed monuments and conceived of the present world as imperfect in relation to an absolute antiquity (Baines, 1989). This awareness tempered their understanding of mortuary provision. In this sense, a monument like the Great Pyramid, which for the modern world symbolizes ancient Egypt, must count as an aberration. The pyramid proclaimed both its indestructibility and, in the distribution of non-royal tombs around it, the survival of human social hierarchies into the next world. At the same time, its construction absorbed much of the country's resources. Such expenditures and allocations were not sustainable, and by the first millennium BCE they had declined considerably.

The significance of a mortuary monument might be transformed or perpetuated in its ruined condition. For a few individuals, that condition led to new dimensions of social memory (Assmann, 1988), while it may not have been seen as militating against others' survival among the blessed (or damned) dead in the afterworld. We suggest that Egyptian attitudes toward the dead could ultimately dispense with or transcend particular mortuary structures or physical remains. Their ability, which is shared by modern societies, simultaneously to entertain conflicting conceptions enabled them to maintain both idealizing and rationalizing views of death and the dead.

The long-term trend away from expending resources on monumental tombs may have had a more general significance. The ultimate ideological focus of Egyptian society lay with the gods, although in the third millennium

that conception may have been physically belied by mortuary expenditure, especially on the king's monument. In later periods, and as the centrality of kingship lessened slightly, the focus of ideology on the gods was more in tune with the reality of a reduced expenditure on mortuary provision that focused more on the coffin and the burial process itself, while temples, which had a larger communal role, increased in importance.

In all periods, the dead had no overriding ideological significance: the king and the gods, rather than ancestors, were crucial. Some features of the record, such as the letters to the dead (later paralleled by letters to gods), suggest that at the level of the family people may have focused on the dead, but this does not seem to have been so true of later times. Egyptian societal organization was 'political' rather than kin-centred, and later periods were increasingly urbanized and ethnically mixed. In such a complex setting, the dead and their abodes were culturally vital because of the ancient traditions of expenditure on them and perhaps for differentiating particular communities, but they were not crucial to the coherence or articulation of society and only partly sustained its basic values. From the beginning, the preservation of the dead and their monuments was threatened by the passage of time and by competing concerns; monumental tomb building ultimately gave way to other focuses and modes of expression.

Large, inegalitarian state societies, especially those with dense populations, may perhaps not value the dead unduly, because the dead as a whole, as opposed to particular figures whose reputations transcend their mortal remains and monuments, may not be a cohesive focus for societal integration and centripetal values. Egypt did not have extended lineage structures; where cults of lineage ancestors are an essential moral focus that coexists with central values, as in China, there is an intricate nesting of social groups and ideologies. But whatever the kinship context, the Egyptian dilemma of succeeding generations vying for position in the next world – paralleled, for example, in cemetery management in Catholic Europe – is symptomatic of how almost all the more remote deceased must fade from awareness, and from the responsibility of the living, if the burden of the dead is not to become intolerable.

Ways in which these problems are confronted vary greatly. As examples we have cited show, neglect of the dead is in no way incompatible with a strong mobilization of the past and of some of its decayed mortuary monuments. While discordances can be found in many societies, Egypt seems, in part because of favorable preservation in the low desert of the Nile Valley, to stand at an extreme of contrast between the ideal of respect and the reality of disregard and desecration. For the Egyptians, the availability of alternative, partly complementary modes of transcending death – through mummification and burial, otherworldly destinies, and reputation down the generations – may have gone some way toward rationalizing this dichotomy. The primary focus of Egyptian mortuary provision was ultimately on the



living, for the elaborate precautions and preparations were as much a way of denying the finality of death as of ensuring a continuation of existence through conventional ritual.

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Notes

- 1 Much of this article concerns beliefs and practices that are commonplaces of Egyptology and cannot be documented fully here. For additional information and excellent survey of primarily archaeological materials, see Taylor (2001); for the cultural meaning of death, mainly from an elite perspective, Assmann (2001) gives extensive coverage based on Egyptian texts; his book arrived too late to be cited in detail here.
- 2 Goedicke (1971: 1–7) proposes that the old stones were reused for their almost numinous quality, as against their value as building material. So long as a particular temple complex remained in use, the stone of older buildings seems generally to have been buried in foundations or reused rather than being taken away or discarded.

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