

Death and Funeral Rites

Death is one of the most prominent features of Egyptian religion. Graves, whether pyramids, vast fields of rectangular mastabas, or tombs cut into the hillsides of the Nile Valley, remain a prominent part of the landscape. A large section of ancient Egypt's economic base was devoted to preparing for death. Groups of men excavated the tombs, designed them, and planned and executed their decoration. Craftsmen designed and created the coffins and statues required by the funerary cult. Other artisans formulated incense that was used for purification rituals, threw the vessels that were used for offerings, wove the lengths of linen used to bandage the mummy, and grew the food that provisioned the deceased. Men and women made their livings serving as priests in mortuary cults. Most people, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, were associated with the industry of death.

The Egyptian Attitude Toward Death

How did the Egyptians manage to live with the grim specter of death always around them yet still enjoy life? Despite their preoccupation with death, they did not look forward to dying. Rather, texts indicate that they hated and feared the end of life. The Old Kingdom sage Hordjedef wrote, "Depressing for us is death – it is life that we hold in high esteem." An inscription that appears in many tombs sums up the relative merits of life and death: "Oh you

living ones upon earth, who love life and hate death ...” The inevitability of death is related in the lament of a man over his dead wife: “All humanity in one body following their fellow beings [to death]. There is no one who shall stay alive, for we shall all follow you.”¹ The Egyptians left vivid descriptions of the realm of the dead and the sadness therein. The autobiographic text of a young woman named Taimhotep (1st c. BC) related the sadness of the end of social contact with her family:

The west [the realm of the dead] is a land of sleep. Darkness weighs on the dwelling-place. Those who are there sleep in their mummy-forms. They awake not to see their brothers. They see not their fathers, their mothers, Their hearts forget their wives, their children.

Death was a place of unnatural occurrences and deprivations. Taimhotep continued, “The water of life ... It is thirst for me. It comes to him who is on earth, [but] I thirst with water beside me.”²

As with other unknowable phenomena, such as how or why the sun crossed the heavens, the Egyptians developed a conception of life after death that was rooted in what they could see around them and what they experienced during life. Life after death was not significantly different from life itself; existence was simply transferred to another, more remote realm. The closeness and familiarity of the afterlife was comforting because the routines therein provided answers about the unknowable in terms that were entirely understandable. Those grieving the loss of a family member could envision where the deceased was, and even in their grief they could take some solace in knowing what life after death was like for the deceased. Additional comfort came from their knowing that the dead were accessible to the living. The dead were not gone; they were merely away.

Despite the close parallels between life and death, Egyptians did not view the end of life casually. They feared death, mourned lost loved ones, and exerted great effort to prolong life. Letters record familiar scenes. Someone became ill; the family called for the best doctors available; they prayed for the patient’s recovery. And when death conquered life, the friends and family grieved, often for years. Indeed, some widowers claimed that they did not remarry out of loyalty to their deceased wives’ memory.³

The Egyptians’ mortuary theology was based on the idea that all those who lived their life morally would be reborn in the afterlife. Rebirth was contingent on how one conducted one’s life, not on one’s wealth or social standing. The belief that moral rightness would eventually trump wealth

is reflected in the tomb of Petosiris (3rd c. BC): "The west is the abode of him who is faultless, Praise god for the man who has reached it! No man will attain it, Unless his heart is exact in doing right." The text continues with a reference to social equality in the beyond: "The poor is not distinguished there from the rich, only he who is found free of fault by scale and weight before eternity's lord."⁴ The Late Period text of Setna elaborates on this theme when the poor but just man died and was rewarded with riches taken from the unjust rich man.⁵ The expectation of equality after death explains the wide variation in quality evident in Egyptian funerary provisions. Shabtis (funerary figurines that were thought to be able to perform work for the deceased) range in quality from crudely molded clay figurines to finely carved stone examples. Regardless of their relative cost, they were considered to be equally effective for serving the deceased in the afterlife. The less well off must have derived some comfort from knowing that in the afterlife they would be equal to the members of the elite whose wealth and prestige they must have envied. This equality of the rich and poor before the gods, even if only at the end of life, may have alleviated social conflict and ultimately contributed to the stability and longevity of the culture.

Building the Tomb

What did the parallelism between life and death mean in practical terms? Because the deceased would have had the same physical needs in death as in life, he or she would need shelter in the form of a tomb, food and drink, pleasurable activities, and all the trappings of everyday life. These requirements entailed a tremendous expenditure of resources before death. The tomb was a major expense. Whereas houses, meant to be inhabited for only a person's lifetime, were constructed of relatively inexpensive mud brick, tombs had to last for eternity, and so they were built of durable but costly stone. The physical location of the tomb was important for the prestige of the deceased. Some tombs were grouped in specific areas because the tomb owners shared the same profession. Other owners received their tomb sites as a reward from the king. One Old Kingdom autobiographical text relates, "Regarding this tomb which I made in the necropolis, the king gave me its location . . . for I always did what his lord favors." Another inscription refers to the individual "requesting" that the king grant him a sarcophagus and burial.⁶ Not all royal favors seem to have been the result of faithful service – some were more casual. The official Debehen (Dynasty 4) recalls. "With

regard to this tomb of mine; it was the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Menkaure who gave me its place while he happened to be on the way to the pyramid plateau to inspect the work being done on [his] pyramid."⁷ There was, at least in some cases, concern that the tomb not be located on a previously developed site and not encroach on other tombs: "I made this tomb of mine where there was no tomb of any man, so that the property of one who has gone to his *ka* [died] could be protected."⁸ But often, tomb sites, and entire tombs, were usurped. If this occurred after the tomb had been abandoned by the family of the original owner, then it could be refurbished. For example, in the Late Period, the mayor of Thebes, Nespakashuty, renovated a Middle Kingdom tomb near Deir el Bahri, lining the walls with fresh new limestone slabs that were then carved with funerary scenes. Less noble was the outright usurpation of a tomb. In that case, the original inhabitant might be cast out of the burial chamber and the names on the walls changed to reflect the new owner.

Until the Third Intermediate Period, when group tombs became common, a tomb was usually commissioned for a man and his wife, unless the woman was of very high social rank, in which case she would have her own tomb, or at least her own wing of a double tomb. Children were expected to build their own tombs, but there were exceptions. A man named Djau recalled why he had chosen to share the tomb of his father, also named Djau: "I saw to it that I [Djau Jr.] was buried in one tomb along with Djau [Sr.], because of the desire to be with him in one place, and not because of the lack of means to build a second tomb. I did this from the desire to see Djau [Sr.] every day."⁹

An individual would normally contract with a professional architect for the design and with draftsmen for the decoration of his tomb. Some fortunate individuals received from the king not only the tomb site but also the labor to build the tomb. The official Debehen claimed that "he [the king] arranged for fifty craftsmen to do the work on it daily and they were assigned the completion of the *wabet*" (the place of embalming). He boasted that his tomb was "100 cubits long and fifty cubits in breadth and five cubits high [?] [about 45 by 23 by 2.5 meters] ... larger than that which my father [could have] made when he was alive." He also claimed that the king forbade anyone to disrupt the men who worked on the tomb: "His majesty commanded that they [the workmen] not be taken for any work duty other than carrying out work on [my tomb]."¹⁰ An official named Tetiseneb (Dynasty 6) also claimed to have received his tomb's plot at Saqqara from the king, but he

adopted a more hands-on approach: "I paid the stonemason who made it for me so that he was satisfied with it [the payment]. I did the work within it with my own hand together with my children and my siblings."¹¹ Other Old Kingdom texts refer to artisans' being paid with bread, beer, linen, copper, oil, clothing, and grain, and one tomb owner commented on the satisfaction of his crew: "With regard to any person who worked therein for me, they worked on it thanking the god for me very greatly."¹²

Work on a tomb started as soon as the owner had resources to devote to the project, probably as soon as he had steady employment. In some, or perhaps most, cases, work progressed throughout the tomb owner's lifetime. A not uncommon claim was "I made this tomb while I was alive."¹³ But many, perhaps the majority, of tombs were not complete at the time of the owner's death. In such cases, the eldest son, who was responsible for the burial, hastily finished decorating the tomb in paint rather in relief carving, or left entire walls blank, for by that time, the son was probably also working on his own tomb. Those owners whose tombs were completed during their lifetimes could stand back and marvel at their work. Debehen (Dynasty 4) described all the finished details of his tomb, including its false door, limestone walls, and statues, giving the impression that his tomb was complete.¹⁴ Once finished, a tomb would stand open, ready to receive the burial. For the rest of his or her life, the owner would come to admire the tomb and would no doubt bring visitors as well to be impressed by its splendor.

Most tombs were composed of two parts – the subterranean burial chamber and the offering chapel above ground (Fig. 48). Both sections were targets for robbers and vandals, and thus security was a major consideration in tomb design. Although the offering chapel was semipublic and was intended to be visited by the living, it had doors to control access. The most vulnerable part of the tomb, the burial chamber, was protected by various mechanical and magical means. After the funeral, the entrance to the burial chamber was blocked with a mud-brick or stone wall making it inaccessible to all but the most determined robbers. Magic bricks, usually in sets of four (symbolizing the protection of the four cardinal points), were placed at the corners of the burial chamber, sealed into the walls of the chamber, or placed in the walls of the burial shaft. The brick for the east usually had the Anubis jackal (Fig. 49); the west, a *djed* pillar; the south, a torch; and the north, a mummiform figure. There was great variation in the quality and appearance of these guardians. Those from the tomb of Tutankhamun are topped with wooden statues, while other, lesser tombs were protected by crudely made

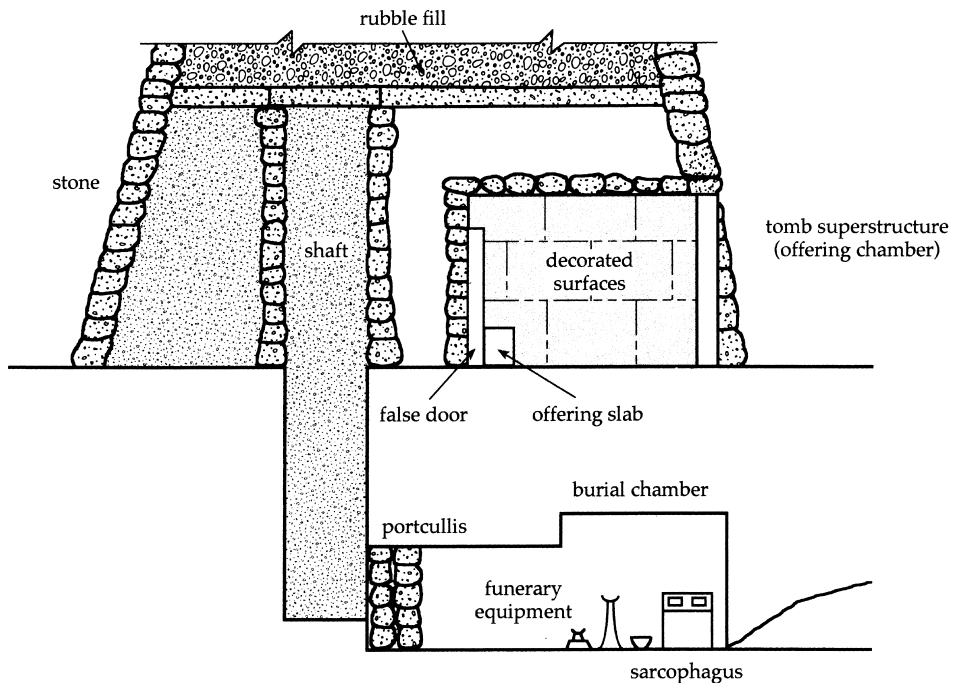


Figure 48. Diagram of a tomb with above-ground offering chamber (or chapel) and subterranean burial chamber. The burial chamber was sealed after the deposition of the coffin and the grave goods. The chapel served as an area where people could leave offerings and admire the wall decorations.

magic bricks with hastily drawn or incised hieratic inscriptions. These bricks are known from the New Kingdom into Dynasty 21, and then for unknown reasons, after disappearing for a time, they reappear in the Late Period.

Tombs were also protected by curses against anyone who might vandalize them or dismantle them in order to use the materials for their own tomb (Fig. 50). Although the form of curses changed over time, the most common threats promised physical suffering, loss of inheritance, lack of funerary offerings, and being "hated by god." These curses are very common, especially in the Third Intermediate Period when they include very detailed gruesome details of the physical suffering the offender shall endure, such as being roasted over a fire, or an ass violating the offender and his entire family.¹⁵ A common formula is "in regard to ... [anyone] who shall do evil to the tomb of mine for eternity, by removing bricks or stone from it, no voice shall be given to him in the sight of any god, or any man."¹⁶ This threat seems to take away the potential vandal's ability to appeal for mercy or to defend himself at the judgment. Other curse texts try to reason with



Figure 49. Magic brick made of mud with remains of the figure of a recumbent jackal. It bears the cartouche of Menkheper (Thutmose III) and a passage from Book of the Dead Spell 151g. The notation in white ink indicates that the brick was on the eastern wall of the tomb, facing west. Thebes. Dynasty 18. OIM 10544. Photo Anna Ressman. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

the potential vandal: "O every man who would commit sacrilege in this pure place. Do not reach out your arms against me! [Instead] perform the rites ... which are here for the deceased."¹⁷ Whether defacing tombs was seen as a serious and real problem, or only as a vague threatening possibility, the curses indicate that tomb owners did worry about it happening.

Other curses are specifically directed against those who might enter a tomb in a state of impurity: "All people who may enter into this my tomb in their impurity, after having eaten the abomination that an *akb*-spirit abominates, and while they are not clean for me as they should be clean ... I will seize him by the neck like a bird."¹⁸ A similar curse in the tomb of Hezi at Saqqara (Dynasty 6) bars from entering "any man who shall enter this tomb ... after he has had sexual intercourse with women."¹⁹ On a more positive note, blessings were also inscribed in tombs, promising to protect those who made the proper offerings to the tomb: "Anyone who shall make

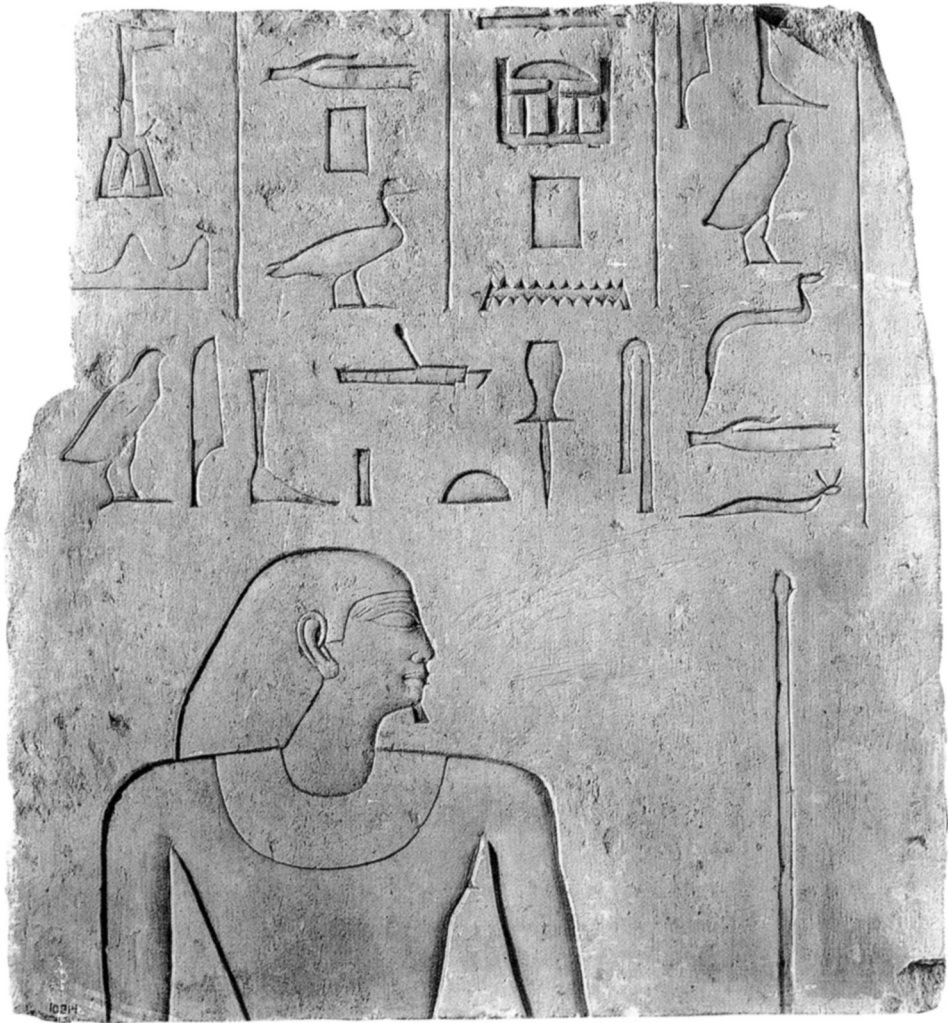


Figure 50. Fragment of a curse threatening that the neck of anyone who damages the tomb or offerings will be wrung like that of a bird. Dynasty 6. OIM 10814. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

invocation offerings or shall pour water," one tomb owner wrote, "I shall protect him in the necropolis."²⁰

Another major expense of preparing for death was the coffin(s) or sarcophagus. An elite person's tomb of the Old Kingdom might be equipped with a huge granite sarcophagus, the stone for which was laboriously brought from Aswan. These were very expensive and time consuming to produce. In his autobiographic text, the official Senedjemib-Mehi (Dynasty 5) claims to have spent a year and three months preparing his father's sarcophagus.



Figure 51. Interior of the wood coffin of Ipi-ha-ishutef painted with images of clothing, food, and objects of daily life that were wanted by the deceased in the afterlife. In the middle register are two cylindrical vessels and two *ankh*-shaped amulets. Below are a pair of sandals and a bag of natron. Saqqara. Dynasty 11. OIM 12072. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

In the meantime, the father's mummy was left in the embalmer's workshop awaiting the sarcophagus's completion.²¹ Another burial option was a rectangular wood box that could be painted with representations of food and other objects needed in the afterlife (Fig. 51). By the New Kingdom, the fashion was to have sets of anthropoid coffins (Plate XIII), one inside another, with the outermost often nested within a rectangular wood sarcophagus. Economic records from about 1200 BC indicate that a decorated wooden coffin cost an average of 25 *deben* of copper (the most expensive in

the records being 200 *deben*), a considerable expense, as compared to the 1 or 3 *deben* required to buy a sheep.²²

Decorating the walls of the tomb was another major expense. The false door was usually a large slab that needed to be carved, inscribed, and painted before it was installed near the tomb shaft. If an official caught the eye of the king, this feature of the tomb might also be given as a royal favor. The physician Ny-ankh-Sekhmet (Dynasty 5) claimed that his wish for a false door was granted by the king. The pharaoh enthusiastically donated two false doors and personally supervised their construction in the royal audience hall, where he could come see their progress.²³ Ankh-Khufu (probably late Dynasty 5) too claimed that the king supervised the construction of the false door for his tomb, recording that "his majesty saw what was done daily."²⁴

Wall paintings and reliefs were executed by professional draftsmen who consulted with the tomb owner about what scenes to create and how to arrange them. The repetition of scenes, such as the collection of taxes typical of the Old Kingdom, or New Kingdom depictions of Hathor receiving the deceased into the West, suggest that draftsmen shared standard pattern books of scenes from which a tomb owner could select. Further resources were devoted to the production of statues of the deceased that would receive offerings in the tomb.

Provisioning the Dead

The food offerings that were left for the soul of the deceased were yet another major funerary expense. Because the deceased lived forever in the afterlife, these offerings had to be provided in perpetuity, although the Egyptians were practical enough to recognize that, at some point, the arrangements for leaving food would break down as the family resources were directed elsewhere, the memory of the particular individual became dim, or the family moved away.

The cult of an important or wealthy person required huge amounts of food and supplies. The concern shown for providing for the offering cult is reflected in economic records from all periods that established funds to pay for the offerings after the death of the tomb owner. Little was left to chance. One of the longer and most explicit lists is preserved in the tomb of Ankhmeryre at Saqqara (Dynasty 6); it enumerates specific amounts of eye paints, oils, a wide variety of types of cakes and bread, meats, beers and wines, and fruit and vegetables.²⁵ Texts indicate that there was a sophisticated

network for producing the offerings for private mortuary cults. The texts of Metjen (Dynasty 4) show that his food offerings were raised in different locations all over Lower Egypt and then conveyed to his tomb at Saqqara. He also received food from the funerary estate of the king's mother.²⁶ There are many economic records that deal with the buying and selling of plots of land that were used to raise food offerings. The official Tjenti even stated that "he begged them (the lands) from the king."²⁷

Alongside the lists of what was desired for the offering cults are legal texts that sought to protect the sources of those offerings. Transfer of the fields that produced the grain to make funerary loaves might be prohibited, and the labor of the personnel who produced and presented the offerings was also carefully sheltered from being diverted to another cult.²⁸ Decrees that exempted (or protected) the workers on the royal funerary estates from being drafted for other state service are known as early as the Old Kingdom.²⁹

An individual could set up a funerary endowment that would pay for priests to come to the tomb, leave food, and recite prayers. There were several different classes of priests involved (see Chapter 2). The lector (*kbery bebet*) who read the spells is frequently mentioned. For example, an Old Kingdom text relates, "Beloved is the lector priest who shall come to my tomb and carry out rites in accordance with [those writings] of the lector. May the acts be carried out for me in accordance with what is on his papyrus roll."³⁰ Another category of priest frequently mentioned in the Old Kingdom tomb cults is the *ka* priest: "That *ka* priest who carries out the activity on my behalf under his [the son of the deceased] supervision, it is he who shall organize them [the offerings] daily." These priests worked in teams, often large groups of them as indicated by a text from Coptos that reads, in part, "My majesty has commanded that there be raised for you twelve inspectors of *ka*-priests ... to do priestly duties ... and who shall carry out the monthly festivals for her in her *ka* chapels."³¹

There were apparently conflicts over the control of the priests who served in the private mortuary cults. The tomb of Nyankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara includes the directions that neither the children nor wives of the deceased should be allowed to "have power over" the staff of priests who have been assigned the duty of making offerings for the deceased. The text suggests that priests in private mortuary service could potentially be reassigned to another funerary establishment, for it comments that "with regard to any [*ka*] priest who shall be reassigned to another priestly duty: everything which



Figure 52. Group of statues that represent the deceased's family and the house workers who will prepare food for the deceased for eternity. The group also includes musicians and a set of six conical silos for grain. Giza (?). Dynasty 5. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

has been given to him shall be taken from him and given instead to the [ka] priests of his phyle" (i.e., a priest who still works for the family cult).³²

Food for an individual's tomb could also come from offerings that were presented daily in a local temple of a god. A text in the tomb of Nykaiankh (Dynasty 5) records that his mortuary cult was to receive one-tenth of everything that entered the local temple, and that offering at his tomb was to be performed daily, at the first day of each month, at the "half months," and "at every festival throughout the year."³³ There were many festivals, so his tomb received a lot of attention.

Another means of providing food offerings was by covering the walls of the tomb or the coffin with images of food. Through the principle of substitution, the images were thought to be able to serve as actual food. Food could also be supplied by three-dimensional models, such as loaves of bread made of stone. To ensure that the symbolic food offerings would be ever present and fresh, stone statues of men and women making food could be included in the tomb. Some of these, such as the group of statues from the tomb of Nykaiankh, even include small silos to ensure that the workers never ran out of supplies (Fig. 52). In the Middle Kingdom, wooden models of entire

workshops showing the household staff grinding grain, making beer, and slaughtering cattle were included among the burial goods (Plate XIV). In the New Kingdom, tombs were stocked with mummiform statues called *shabtis* who were ready to perform agricultural labor for the deceased (Fig. 53).

Food offerings could also be supplied by merely saying prayers that referred to provisions. The offerings were actualized by the recitation that magically produced or consecrated the "bread, beer, oxen, alabaster, incense and every good and pure thing" for the deceased. These offerings were originally referred to as "voice offerings" (*peret kherw*), literally, "what goes forth at the voice," because the act of pronouncing the names of the offerings along with the name of the deceased brought them into being in the after-life – another example of the efficiency and economy of Egyptian rituals.

Individuals could actively participate in supplying food for the deceased by visiting tombs and speaking the name for food desired by the deceased. A standard element of wall inscriptions was the "appeal to the living" that encouraged visitors to participate in the cult by reciting, "Oh you who live on earth and who shall pass by this tomb of mine, pour water and beer for me which you possess. If you have nothing, then you shall speak with your mouth and offer with your hand, bread, beer, oxen, fowl, incense and pure things."³⁴ Graffiti by visitors to tombs suggest that some of them were not related to the tomb owner. They were probably drawn to the site by the reliefs and the architecture. This is an interesting phenomenon, for most necropolises are at some distance from villages, suggesting that the necropolis was a definite destination and that a walk among the tombs must have been a common recreation. The strength of the belief in the efficacy of the "appeal to the living" type texts is especially striking, for the literacy rate was very low – perhaps two to three percent in the dynastic period – and so it was unlikely that a random visitor to the tomb could actually read the invocation.

These same texts called on the living to also recite the name of the deceased. One text implored the living to say the name of the deceased "so that you shall cause me to be remembered without my being forgotten."³⁵ The same sentiment is more concisely recorded in the Late Period tomb of Petosiris: "A man is revived when his name is pronounced."³⁶ This association of the repetition of the name with the eternal life of the deceased is already stressed in the Pyramid Texts, some two thousand years earlier. The tomb and its decoration, with their many references to the tomb owner, were vital parts of the deceased's link with immortality.

Preparing the Mummy

Most of what we know about the embalming process comes from the mummies themselves and from the lengthy account of Herodotus (II:86.89). Following a death, the family members contracted with professional embalmers to take the body to a temporary reed and mat structure called the *ibu*, or "tent of purification." There the body was washed and then taken to another workshop, called the *wabet*, literally, the "pure place." A Dynasty 6 inscription relates that the official Mekhu heard that his father had died in Elephantine. When he arrived, he "found him there in the *wabet*, laid out in the manner of the dead,"³⁷ giving the impression that the *wabet* functioned as a local morgue. Some texts refer to the *wabet* as a temporary structure, although inscriptions from the tombs of Nefer and Kai refer to a *wabet's* brick walls and rock-cut basins and drains.³⁸

Oddly, there are few economic texts or references to embalmers or the organization of their profession. The most explicit is a demotic archive from a workshop in the town of Hawara.³⁹ That institution was headed by the *bery-seshba*, "he who is over the secrets." Herodotus (ca. 450 BC) referred to embalmers respectfully, as professionals who practiced the craft of mummification. Diodorus (1st c. BC) gave mixed reports of the repute of embalmers. On the one hand, he recorded a curious ritual in which the chief embalmer (according to him, called the "ripper-up" of the body) ran from the workshop in a hail of curses and stones from his fellow workers as ritual punishment for cutting into the body. Yet, he also commented that embalmers were "considered worthy of every honor and consideration." An Old Kingdom inscription from Saqqara relates that the deceased promised to be the "champion" of the embalmer, acknowledging his gratitude to the practitioner.⁴⁰

Embalmers worked in teams. At Hawara, the chief embalmer was aided by another class of priests called *khetemu-netcher*, as well as by lower-ranking *weyt*, or embalmer technicians. The much earlier (Dynasty 6) autobiographical texts of the official Sebni at Aswan offers a glimpse of the variety of people that were involved in the embalming process. When Sebni traveled to Nubia to recover the body of his father and bring it back to Egypt for burial, he was accompanied by

two embalmers, a senior lector priest, one who is on annual duty [i.e., full time], the inspector of the *wabet*, mourners, and the whole equipment from the *per-nefer* [a type



Figure 53. Mummiform statue (shabti) of Hedj-renpet that was thought to be able to perform services for the deceased. The shabti holds hoes in each hand for doing agricultural work and it wears a heart-shaped pendant. Dynasties 18–19. OIM 10580. Photo: Jean Grant. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

of embalming workshop], he brought *seti-beb* oil from the *per-nefer* the secrets of the *wabet* [i.e., the embalming techniques] ... from the house of weapons [referring to tools?], linens from the treasury, and all the needs of burial which come from the Residence.⁴¹

Demotic texts from Siut refer to specific duties in the first three days after death: collecting the body from the family and performing ceremonies in the embalmer's workshop (*per-nefer*). The next notation, for the fourth day, deals with the collection of linen wrappings. It continues with the supplies for the man who does the anointing and then for the man who "has to go and collect the people outside the town."⁴² Presumably, this is a reference to professional mourners who were a standard feature of Egyptian funerals.

Texts indicate that the embalming process usually took forty days. The seventy days that are mentioned in many texts ("A good burial comes in peace. Your seventy days have been completed in your *wabet*") was considered an

ideal interval for allowing the body to be wrapped and prepared for delivery to the family. The number of days was based on the astronomical phenomenon of decans, stars that remained below the horizon for seventy days before rising above the horizon, an allusion to the rising of the deceased from the afterlife. There was, however, much variation in the actual timing. Old Kingdom texts refer to the body of Senedjemib-Inti that stayed in the *wabet* for almost 500 days, and to Queen Meresankh (Dynasty 4) who was buried 273 (or 274) days after her death.⁴³ In contrast, a text at Deir el Medina (Dynasty 20) relates that a woman was buried only two days after her death, leaving virtually no time for ritual preparation of the body.⁴⁴

Additional documentation of the mortuary process includes references to embalmers' activities in letters and economic texts, such as receipts. The only pictorial evidence consists of the highly simplified scenes of bodies on embalming beds that appear on some coffins (Plate XV). The most complete account of mummification is given by Herodotus, who related that the embalmers offered three different styles of preparation for burial, which they demonstrated to their clients by wooden models.

Embalming tools supply considerable, but incomplete, information about the way that embalmers worked. It has been suggested that a wood table discovered in the tomb of Ipy at Thebes (Dynasty 11) is an embalmer's table, and examples of stone tables with drains at the end have also been interpreted as embalmers' tables. While some scholars consider these to be offering tables, their rectangular shape and their slant toward the drain and basin suggest their association with embalming.

Items such as knives for slitting the body are known, as are the rectangular stone tablets with small depressions for storing the seven oils used in the mummification process. Several larger groups of materials have been identified as materials from embalmers' workshops. Typically, these caches contain flat saucers with the remains of resins, scraps of linen that seem to have been rags, whisk brooms, and linen tubes and bags filled with a salty substance that are assumed to have been used in drying out the body. One such cache, purchased in Luxor in 1932–3, contained fabric tubes and packets of what is assumed to be natron, and saucers and jars, but also mysterious objects made of rolls of linen (and reeds?) about two centimeters thick that were further wrapped in strips of linen and then twisted into circles and loops with tails (Fig. 54). They are heavily soiled with resin (?), perhaps indicating that they were in contact with the body. Their function

is unknown, but they may have been used to position the limbs during the wrapping process.

Another embalmers' cache, associated with the burial of King Tutankhamun, was discovered in the Valley of the Kings in 1907. It contained about fifteen large whitewashed jars that held linen, small brooms and sticks, and dishes of resin.⁴⁵ A very similar cache of materials was discovered in the Valley of the Kings in 2005.⁴⁶

Other remains from embalmers' workshops consist of identification tags that bear the name and often the filiation and age of the deceased (Fig. 55). Examples from Roman burials at Medinet Habu were hung around the neck of the mummy.

According to Herodotus, the process of mummification began with washing the body. An incision was then made in the left side of the abdomen to allow for the removal of the major organs. This opening was short, which made it difficult for the embalmers to remove the contents of the abdomen, much less to pierce the diaphragm and remove the lungs. The limited visibility of the body's interior may account for why the kidneys, which are separated from the organs in the abdomen by the smooth wall of the peritoneum, were often left in the body.

Some corpses were subjected to very invasive procedures, such as slitting the desiccated flesh along the legs and arms in order to introduce subcutaneous packing to make the limbs look more lifelike. A few examples of bodies from the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period were entirely defleshed and the bones coated in plaster. This was probably an effort to make the mummy more like a statue, which the Egyptians regarded as an imperishable image of the deceased.⁴⁷

Although the ideal was to be mummified, not everyone could afford this luxury. One of the major expenses of the mummification process was the linen. The more lavish the mummy, the more linen that was used. Linen was so expensive that some burial shrouds and bandages were made of recycled garments. Even some royal mummies were found to have been wrapped (or at least rewrapped) in reused linen sheets rather than in bandages woven specially for the purpose. In contrast, some of the linen used to wrap the mummy of King Tutankhamun had notations on the corners indicating it was woven specifically for his funeral.

There is evidence that, for unknown reasons, some individuals who certainly could afford to be mummified were not. An ostrakon from Deir el



Figure 54. Materials from an embalmer's workshop including two tubes of natron and a group of resin-stained fabric objects whose function is unknown. Thebes. New Kingdom? Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Medina refers to a woman, Ta-hanu, who died and was buried only two days later. This is confirmed by archaeological evidence from the village, for other residents of the village were simply wrapped in linen without being mummified. However, Hatnofer, the father of Senenmut, a high official of Hatshepsut, who could certainly have afforded to be mummified, was not.

Overseeing the mummification and burial of a parent was the greatest obligation children had toward their parents. The child designated for this role bore the title "eldest son." In cases where there were no sons, a daughter, or even the widowed wife would assume the role and title of "eldest son."⁴⁸ This individual was granted a larger portion of the deceased's estate to help defray the cost of the burial. Funerary stelae frequently include the claim that "it is his son who makes his name live," a reference to the proper commemoration of the deceased and therefore to ensure a proper afterlife. This of course was the ideal, but letters reflect the complicated reality of family obligations. In one letter, a man petulantly complained that he dutifully buried his brother even though the deceased owed him linen and thirty measures of grain.⁴⁹



Figure 55. Limestone label used to identify a mummy in an embalmer's workshop. The demotic inscription identifies the deceased as a woman named Esoeris, daughter of Pachois. Roman Period, late first century BC–early first century AD. OIM 25285. Photo: Anna Ressler. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

The Funeral

One of the most moving descriptions of an ancient funeral is recorded in a text in the tomb of Dheuty at Thebes:

The beautiful burial, may it come in peace after your seventy days are completed in your embalming hall. May you be laid out on a bier in the house of rest and be drawn by white oxen. May the ways [i.e., the road] be opened with milk until your arrival at the entrance to your tomb. May the children of your children all be assembled and wail with loving heart. May your mouth be opened by the chief lector priest, may you be purified by the *sem*-priest, may Horus weigh your heart for you after he has opened your eyes and ears. May your limbs and bones be present for you. May the transfiguration spells be read for you, and may the mortuary offerings be performed for you. May your heart be with you in the right way ... you being restored to your previous form as on the day when you were born. May the *sa-mer*-priest be brought to you, and may the Friends sing the litany.⁵⁰

There must have been great variation in the scale and complexity of funerals, both across time and across economic and social standing. Our most explicit source of information comes from tomb paintings that show idealized elaborate funerals that may not have been particularly common.

After the ceremonial seventy days required to prepare the corpse, the body was released from the workshop. It was placed in a coffin, or set of coffins, which in turn was enclosed in a large shrine. Tomb scenes depict the production of these shrines, and some examples have survived. The funerary shrine was mounted on a sledge (Plate XVI) to make it easier to transport over sand. The coffin was accompanied by a smaller shrine that contained a compartmented box for the canopic jars that held the desiccated lungs, liver, stomach, and intestines that had been removed during mummification. A third element was the *tekenu*, a shapeless bundle (or a bundle with a human head) on a sledge (Plate XVII). It is thought that the *tekenu* contained material left from the embalming process that was not, or could not be, enclosed in the canopic jars, which were usually so small that they contained only a symbolic sample of the four major organs.⁵¹ No actual examples of *tekenu* have been recovered. Once mounted on sledges, the shrines were drawn by cattle or oxen in the funerary procession. Tomb scenes show participants sprinkling milk in the procession's path to lubricate and symbolically purify the way.

In the New Kingdom, the period for which we have the most explicit information, the funerary procession recreated a ritual drama alluding to the passage to the West and the deceased's union with the gods. The procession included different ranks of priests, the embalmer, craftsmen, and the family and friends of the deceased. In the tomb of Tjay at Thebes, the participants shown are various ranks of priests (chief lector, *sem*, *imy-s*-priest, *sa-mer*, and *imy-khent*) and the "Nine Friends" who represent the Followers and Sons of Horus and who drag the coffin and sing liturgies. Following this group was a sculptor, a carver, craftsmen (?), a carpenter, "the two mourning birds" (two women who represent Isis and Nephthys), a group of professional mourners, and the family of the deceased. High officials would be accompanied to their tomb by their colleagues in government service; the funerary entourage of the official Amenemope included both viziers. Such an entourage would have been a very loud and dramatic presence as it traveled through the west bank necropolis to the tomb site.

The procession set off from the embalmers' workshop in the morning. The first act in the ritual drama of burial was the crossing of the Nile from East – the land of the living – to the West – the abode of the dead. New Kingdom texts refer to the ferry as the *nesbmet* barque, the sacred boat of Osiris, an allusion to the deceased's association with the god of the afterlife.

The association with Osiris was furthered by statues (or priestesses) that represented Isis and Nephthys, the sisters of Osiris, who were the archetypal mourners in Egyptian mythology (Fig. 56).

In some texts, the Nine Friends appear, pulling the sarcophagus, as they sing the litany "beware O earth!" In the painting on the east wall of Tutankhamun's burial chamber (Fig. 57), they are followed by two priests with white bands on their shaved heads and an additional official. The Friends are exhorted by the lector priest who calls them to put "your arms on the ropes!"⁵²

The funerary procession was also accompanied by porters who carried the grave goods and by professional mourners, most often groups of women, who wailed, bared their breasts, and threw dust in their hair as a sign of grief (Fig. 58). In the New Kingdom, the period from which we have our most explicit liturgies and stage directions for the funerary rituals, the tombs of the necropolis had become perfectly adapted for these rituals, having developed into a combination of tomb and temple. A tomb's forecourt was often walled, creating a semiprivate space for the performance of the rites.

Once the procession arrived at the tomb, the mummy was stood upright, its face to the south to be "bathed in light," and absorb the life-restoring power of the sun. Texts relate, "May your mummy be set up in the sight of Re in the court of your tomb, you being given over to the scale of the necropolis. May you emerge vindicated!"⁵³ Assmann has suggested that at this moment a priest recited Chapter 125 of Book of the Dead, which records the judgment of the dead before the gods.

In scenes depicting funerals, the mummy is usually shown in the embrace of Anubis (Fig. 59), while the widow collapses in grief at the foot of the coffin. It is unclear whether these are mythological scenes of the god Anubis himself, or realistic portrayals of a priest wearing a jackal mask. Although a single helmet-style Anubis mask has survived from the Late Period (Fig. 60), it seems more likely that these scenes showing an animal-headed human are symbolic portrayals of the deity.⁵⁴

Once the procession reached the entrance to the tomb, the priests performed the Opening of the Mouth to restore the deceased's ability to see, speak, hear, and taste. This mortuary ritual was derived from the Old Kingdom ceremony that activated funerary statues, enabling them to serve as the recipient of offerings for the deceased. The Opening of the Mouth



Figure 56. Nephthys (*left*) and Isis (*right*), the sisters of Osiris, in the form of winged goddesses, guarding the mummy of their brother. Dendera. Greco-Roman Period. Photo: Emily Teeter.

was divided into a series of individual rituals. The first was primarily for the purification of the body. A *sem* priest and two lectors circled the mummy four times as they intoned, "Be pure! Be pure!" In the next sequence, the *sem* fell into a trance in order to assume the role of the son of the deceased. The other priests then "woke" him saying, "Waking the sleeping one, the *sem*-priest." The *sem* responded, "I have seen my father in all his forms," thus beginning a ritual dialogue between the priests that calls on the *sem* to protect his "father," symbolically placing the priest in the role of Horus and the deceased in that of Osiris. One very detailed account of the Opening of the Mouth from the Ramesside Period (ca. 1100 BC) continued with a sequence in which the *sem* having seen all forms of his "father" described them to the craftsmen who accompanied the funeral. This may be a reference to

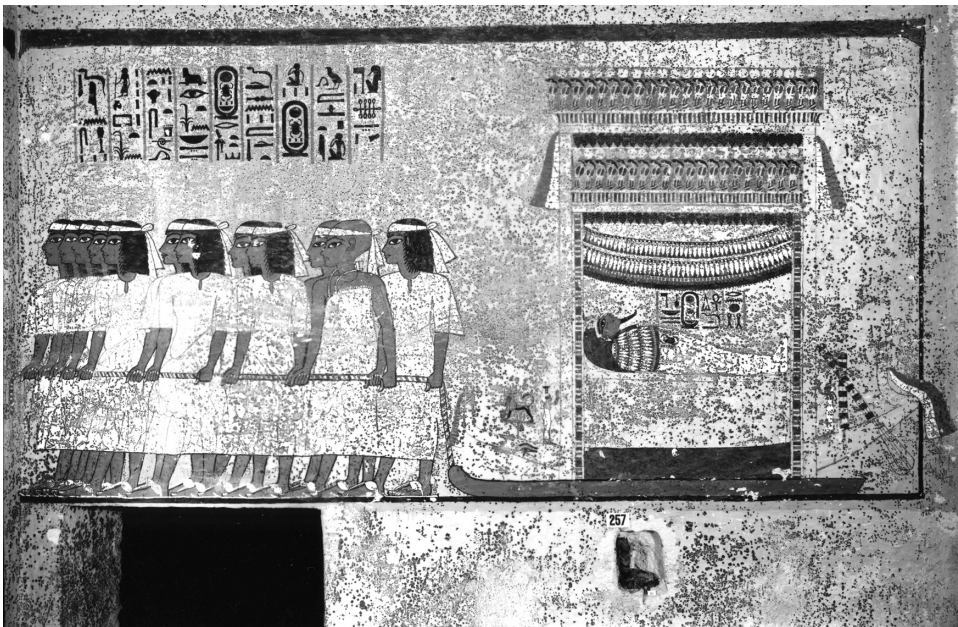


Figure 57. The ceremonial Nine Friends dragging the sarcophagus to the tomb. The Friends are followed by two bald priests and another official. Tomb of Tutankhamun. Dynasty 18. Photo: Harry Burton. Copyright: Griffith Institute, University of Oxford.

the statues of the deceased that had been brought to the tomb. The purpose of this part of the ritual was to activate them as recipients of offerings, just as the mobility of the mummy was restored by the ceremony. The dialogue with the craftsmen continued: "Make it [the funerary statue] like my father! ... Make my father for me! Make it like my father! Who is it who makes it for me?" In the next sequence, the violence visited on the statue by the act of its creation – the carving, hacking, and sawing – was neutralized by more invocations: "Who are they who wish to approach my father? Do not smite my father! Do not touch his head!" The *sem* then traced his finger along the mouth of the statue, allowing it to speak and to eat.

The following sequence of the ritual involved the grisly slaughtering of a calf in the presence of its mother. The lector priest was instructed to "run quickly with it" (the foreleg of the calf) to the mummy as it still streamed blood and twitched,⁵⁵ a sign of its continued power. The bellowing of the mother of the calf, who witnessed the slaughter of her offspring, was equated with the sound of mourning for the deceased.⁵⁶ The sequence of the ritual in which the leg was held up to the mummy and the statue was



Figure 58. A group of female professional mourners weep and throw dirt on their heads at a funeral. Tomb of Ramose at Thebes (TT 55). Dynasty 18. Photo C. F. Nims. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

called "opening the eyes and mouth." The importance of this sequence is confirmed by a text in the tomb of Rekhmire (Dynasty 18): "A foreleg will be cut off for your mummy. May your *ba* go above and may your corpse go below," indicating that the ritual enabled the separation of the physical remains from the energy of the soul. The foreleg was a particularly appropriate symbolic offering because it has the same form as the hieroglyph for "power" and because it also resembles the adze that the *sem* priest used in the ritual.

In the next sequence of the Opening of the Mouth, the *sem* continued "carrying out the opening of the mouth and eyes, first with the *djedft*-implement and the finger of electrum," as he touched the face of the statue and the mummy with his own finger, in imitation of cleaning out the mouth of a newborn. Other objects, including grain, a flint knife (*pesshef-kef*) that was possibly associated with birth rituals, and water were offered.⁵⁷ The statue and mummy were then further purified, and according to some sources, were wrapped in a linen shroud. At the conclusion of the ritual, the priests recited a summary of the rituals and their efficacy for the deceased:



Figure 59. Anubis, the guardian of the necropolis, embracing the coffin of the priest Ramose on the day of his burial. Ramose's wife, Henuttawy, has collapsed in grief at the feet of her husband's coffin. A priest (*far left*) recites the spells of the Opening of the Mouth ceremony (note the tools on the table before him), while two other priests purify the mummy with incense and liquids. Dynasties 18–19. Art Institute of Chicago 1920.264, Museum Purchase Fund. Photo © The Art Institute of Chicago.

I have given breath to those who are in hiding, I have enabled those who are in the netherworld to breathe ... I have caused them to rest in their chapels and their offerings to endure ... The breath of life, it comes and creates his image, his mouth is opened ... His name endures forever, because he is an excellent *akb* in the netherworld. He hears the call of those among his relatives. He protects the body of the one who pours water for him ... He emerges as a living *ba*, he assumes its form according to the wish of his heart, wherever his *ka* wishes to tarry!⁵⁸

This completed the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The priests brought the dead back to life and enabled the deceased to respond to the pleas of the living. The deceased was now fully mobile and responsive in the netherworld.

Other funerary rituals were performed after the Opening of the Mouth. Some involved dance. One type of dancer performing at funerary rituals was

Figure 60. Clay mask in the form of the head of Anubis, the guardian of the necropolis, which may have been worn by priests during funerary ceremonies. This is a rare example of such a mask, and not all scholars agree that they were worn during rituals. Dynasties 21–24. Hildesheim, Pelizaeus-Museum 1585. Photo © Roemer-Pelizaeus-Museum, Hildesheim.



the *muu*, who wore tall basketwork headdresses in imitation of archaic marsh dwellers (Fig. 61). Near the tomb, the *muu* erected a temporary reed shelter that replicated the precincts of the holy cities that the deceased would visit after death. The *muu* dance was thought to help ferry the deceased across waters to the afterlife.⁵⁹ New Kingdom representations show that sometimes a troupe of dwarves was also hired to dance at the mouth of the tomb. Dwarves were considered to be evocative of eternal youth because of their short stature, and their presence at the funeral stressed the idea of the rebirth and rejuvenation of the deceased.⁶⁰

In the New Kingdom, some tombs show the ritual breaking of red pots (Fig. 62). Red was a color that, in some contexts, was associated with the evil gods Seth and Apophis. Smashing the pots, an act of sympathetic



Figure 61. *Muu* dancers who impersonated the people of the marshes who wore tall basketwork crowns at funerals. The *muu* performed a dance at the entrance of the tomb. Tomb of Antefoker at Thebes (TT 60). Dynasty 12. Photo: C. F. Nims. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

magic, neutralized danger for the deceased in the afterlife and was thought to frighten away enemies.⁶¹

Upon the conclusion of the rituals, the mummy, its funerary furnishings, the statues, and chests of clothing, food, and drink were deposited in the tomb. The Nine Friends were charged with dragging the coffin. Scenes of this sequence of the funeral bear captions such as "Carrying by the [Nine] Friends. Oh Friends! Carry him on your arms! Oh Sons of Horus, hurry with your father, carry him!" An Old Kingdom text recounts the difficulties of completing a burial that, at that time, required lowering a huge stone sarcophagus down a deep vertical shaft. The deceased promises that he will give special favors to the "lector priest, embalmer, and all eighty men who shall lower the lid of his sarcophagus into its place."⁶²

Once the coffin and funerary goods were in the burial chamber, the Nine Friends may have had a brief last meal with the deceased.⁶³ There is archaeological evidence that such a wake was held for King Tutankhamun. The

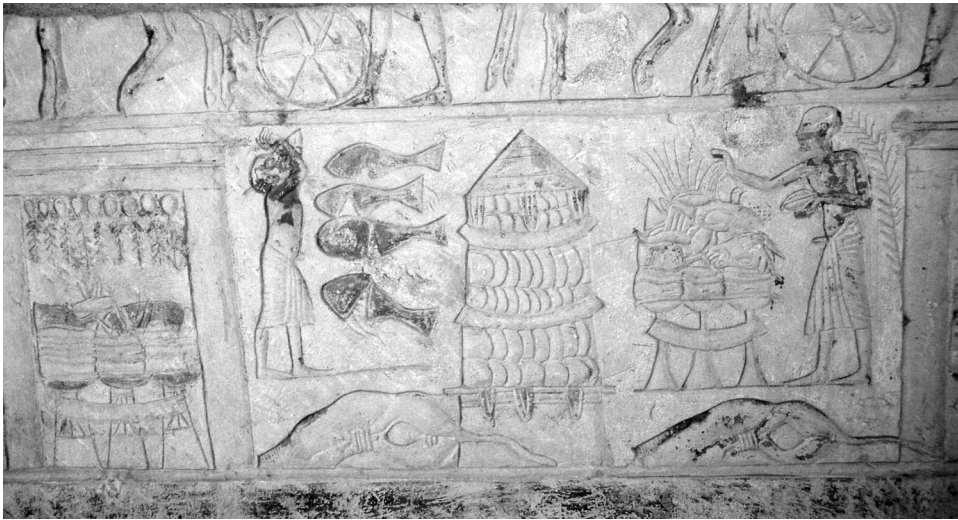


Figure 62. The ceremony of breaking red pots (*left of center*) on the day of burial, a ceremony that was thought to dispel evil. Saqqara. Tomb of Horemheb. Dynasty 18. Photo: Emily Teeter.

remains of the feast were discovered in 1907 not far from his tomb. The find consisted of perhaps fifteen huge pottery jars (the deposit was damaged by its excavator, and so exact counts are not known), jammed with other dishes. The dishes included small token offering bowls that are inscribed with the food that was offered (incense, grapes, cakes, and some sort of drink). Four beakers for wine were supplied. Leftovers packed in the jars indicate that the menu included cow, sheep, or goat ribs and a variety of birds (ducks and geese). The guests were supplied with festive floral collars, simplified versions of the great floral ornaments that have been discovered on coffins. Some scholars believe that the meal was held in the burial chamber, but the evidence is not clear.⁶⁴ To cite only one specific example to the contrary, the burial chamber of King Tutankhamun was far too small and too packed with shrines and burial goods to accommodate the participants of a ritual meal. When the meal was over, the floral collars and all the dishes and leftovers were packed inside the large pottery vessels. Materials that were used during the mummification of the king (ends of bandages, wiping cloths, kerchiefs to keep the embalmers' wigs or hair clean), and bags of natron, were added to the jars, and the ensemble was buried either in the tomb itself, or outside near the tomb. In a final act of purification, the footprints of the living were swept from the floor of the burial chamber.⁶⁵

After the many rituals, the dancing, the recitation of prayers and the offering of food, the weary funerary party watched as the burial chamber was bricked up and sealed, and the shaft was filled with rubble. The party retraced their steps to the Nile and crossed to the land of the living. They might return forty days or a year later for a brief commemoration of the death.⁶⁶ Then, every year, during the Beautiful Feast of the Valley (see Chapter 4), the living would return to visit the blessed dead.

In summary, death in ancient Egypt was a highly regulated affair that involved the entire society, from the craftsmen who made the coffins and grave goods to the architect who designed the tomb, from the different ranks of priests who enacted rites of protection and rejuvenation to even the king himself, who might grant land for the tomb. The elaborate rituals that accompanied death and burial involved the living and the realm of the dead, bringing the two spheres together. They formalized the celebration of death and rebirth, creating a sense of optimism that life in the hereafter would be positive, thereby lessening one of the humanity's greatest uncertainties – what happens at the end of life.