

Claudia Näser

Equipping and stripping the dead.

A case study on the procurement, compilation, arrangement, and fragmentation of grave inventories in New Kingdom Thebes

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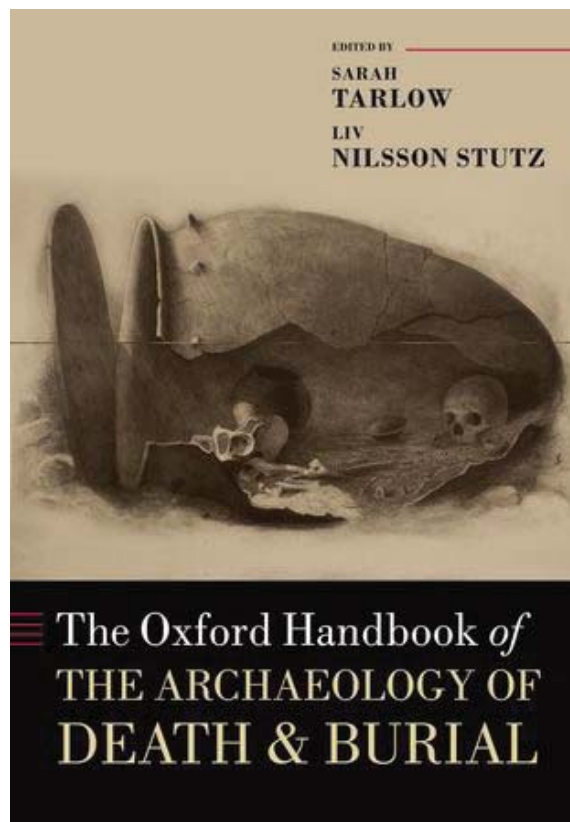
The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial

Herausgegeben von Sarah Tarlow und Liv Nilsson Stutz

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Edited by

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and

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CHAPTER 36

EQUIPPING AND STRIPPING THE DEAD

*A Case Study on the Procurement, Compilation,
Arrangement, and Fragmentation of Grave
Inventories in New Kingdom Thebes*

CLAUDIA NÄSER

STATE OF RESEARCH

Public perception holds Egyptian burial assemblages to be the epitome of excessive concern for the afterlife. Usually, admiration for the richness and excellent preservation of Egyptian grave goods goes hand in hand with questioning their proportionality, i.e. their 'usefulness' in comparison with the seemingly paradoxical 'destruction' of resources. In contrast, most Egyptologists consider grave inventories to hold only limited potential due to their heavy fragmentation by grave plundering. In consequence, scholarly analyses of Egyptian funerary practices have primarily focused on the rich textual material (Assmann 2006) and on the architecture and the extensive decorations of the monumental tombs of royalty and elites (Dodson and Ikram 2008). When touched upon or investigated more systematically, Egyptian grave inventories are usually approached as assemblages of objects that can be explained ad hoc through religious concepts known from other sources, primarily texts. At the same time, many Egyptological studies draw on grave goods to investigate and illustrate a wide variety of aspects of Egyptian 'daily life', handicraft and art production: contributions on Egyptian furniture, weapons, cosmetic practices, etc. rely almost totally on finds from tombs. The often excellent preservation and the wide range of objects related to Egyptian burials make them attractive in this way. Both approaches are exemplified in conventional displays in modern museums: Egyptian grave goods usually appear as mere illustrations, without much contextualization, in the section on 'beliefs in the afterlife' or they stock the section on 'everyday life in Ancient Egypt'.

One further line of study in which burial assemblages are utilized is the investigation of social stratification. While older studies link grave goods to the social status of the deceased in a rather unproblematic way, the flaws of this approach have been increasingly recognized

in Egyptology in recent years. In reaction to this, researchers have tried to refine their analytical criteria, for example by introducing 'wealth indexes' which refer to emic value systems, whose reconstruction is primarily based on a number of commodity prices known from New Kingdom Egypt (Meskell 1999, Richards 2005, cf. also Cooney 2007). But these studies are also based—hardly ever explicitly—on many assumptions about the intactness of burials or about which items were lost from the assemblages through plundering. Moreover, interpretation of the cited economic data in itself poses as many problems as their transposition into the funerary context.

It is remarkable that Egyptian grave inventories have received little systematic treatment in their own right. A number of studies have dealt with individual classes of objects, such as heart scarabs, pectorals, or funerary figurines (so-called *shabtis*), in order to retrace their diachronic development and to facilitate the dating of the related tomb groups. But very few studies have focused on the concrete context of the finds and the composition of individual inventories, on the symbolic-magical connotation (or, more precisely, the sacramental interpretation¹ of grave goods), or on the connection between performed ritual and material burial equipment (but see Willems 2001, Pinch 2002, Baines and Lacovara 2002, Rzeuska 2006, Cooney 2007). Those contributions that exist clearly show the relevance of these topics and the potential of the material for tackling them.

WHY DID THE EGYPTIANS EQUIP THEIR DEAD?

In the most general terms, Egyptian grave goods are thought to testify to a need for the provision and protection of the dead. This need has been detected through all periods of pharaonic history (c.3000–30 BC). For the most part this interpretation has not arisen through analysis of the object assemblages themselves, but through other sources, primarily funerary texts and tomb decorations in elite and royal contexts. As stated earlier, surprisingly little work has been done on the actual material record and its development over 3,000 years of Egyptian history (but see Taylor 2001, Grajetzki 2003).

Principally, Egyptian grave goods seem to satisfy the needs of earthly existence, as projected into the afterlife. The main aspects they cover are sustenance, clothing, and purification, in elite contexts often supplemented by objects connected to activities with a representational component, such as writing or hunting. Beyond their 'face value', however, Egyptian grave goods are also subject to sacramental interpretations. This is apparent from objects that physically occur in graves and also feature in texts and depictions. Sandals, canes, and headrests, for example, are among the most frequent grave goods, but also appear in the so-called Book of the Dead. Its 'magic' spells and accompanying vignettes were thought to assist in overcoming the many dangers faced by the deceased in the hereafter, and to support the achievement and maintenance of the aspired forms and capacities of post-mortal existence.² Analyses of the multilayered conceptualizations of grave goods and their trajectory

¹ For this term, see Assmann (1977: 15–28). It denotes a specific form of conceptualization, which interprets a phenomenon or an object—in our case an item of the burial assemblage—through its transposition in the supernatural, divine sphere, from which it consequently derives its meaning.

² As to the structure of Egyptian ideas of the hereafter, see Taylor (2001: 12–45); Assmann (2006), and Fitzenreiter (2008).

through time are a major goal in the study of Egyptian funerary culture. A pioneering attempt in this regard is a short contribution by Henk Milde (1988) on the multiple and changing connotations of the playing board. In more recent research it has been suggested that Egyptian grave goods were also involved in funerary ceremonies at the graveside, and perpetuate the burial rites through their enduring physical presence in the tomb. This adds an entirely new perspective to the analysis, which will doubtlessly become more prominent as topics as agency and performance start to reach the Egyptological debate.

The various functional fields of Egyptian grave goods outlined above can at best be analytically separated. In practice they would have been inseparably intertwined. Moreover, their individual components were subject to constant change. Even forms that were outwardly maintained for long periods of time, such as the recurrent appearance of particular types of objects, would have been continuously reinterpreted and re-conceptualized. Discourse on funerary practices certainly was important in Egyptian society, though we have little testimony of it beyond its factual outcomes. Considerations about burial equipment were based on religiously grounded concepts of the 'neediness' of the dead to obtain provision and protection in order to master their post-mortal existence. At the same time, they were necessarily reflective of worldly experiences and social identifications—as only these can act as points of reference in imagining the hereafter. An exclusive focus on the religious and social conditioning of burial practices, however, misses out on an area that I would call 'everyday death': the concrete actions connected with the preparation and performance of burials, as well as their further fate in an intra-cultural context.³ In the following, I will argue for the importance of these points. On the one hand, they shaped the archaeological record, and their understanding is a precondition for an adequate study of its material. On the other hand, 'everyday death' is a category relevant in itself. It is the very setting in which the Egyptians lived their funerary culture, and in which all aspects so far discussed were realized, experienced, and negotiated.

THE MATERIAL UNDER INVESTIGATION

Ancient Thebes, about 500 kilometres south of modern Cairo (Fig. 36.1), held one of the largest necropoleis of Ancient Egypt. Stretching over several kilometres on the west bank of the Nile, its earliest occupation dates from the Old Kingdom (c.2700–2150 BC). In the New Kingdom (c.1550–1070 BC), the Theban necropolis became Egypt's most prominent burial ground, with the royal cemeteries in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens, more than 1,000 rock-cut tombs of the elite, and extensive, though little researched, cemeteries of the lower social strata (for an overview, see Strudwick and Strudwick 1999).

In this vast necropolis, only some 30 'intact' burials of New Kingdom date have been uncovered so far (for a list, albeit incomplete, see Smith 1992). That corpus forms the basis of the present discussion, which concentrates on the private sphere, leaving the royal burials of that period aside. The 'intact' tomb groups come from different regions of the necropolis, and range from the highest echelon of society, i.e. non-royal individuals buried in the Valley of the Kings, through members of the elite to non-elite individuals buried in simple

³ An exception in this regard is the study by Reeves (1990).

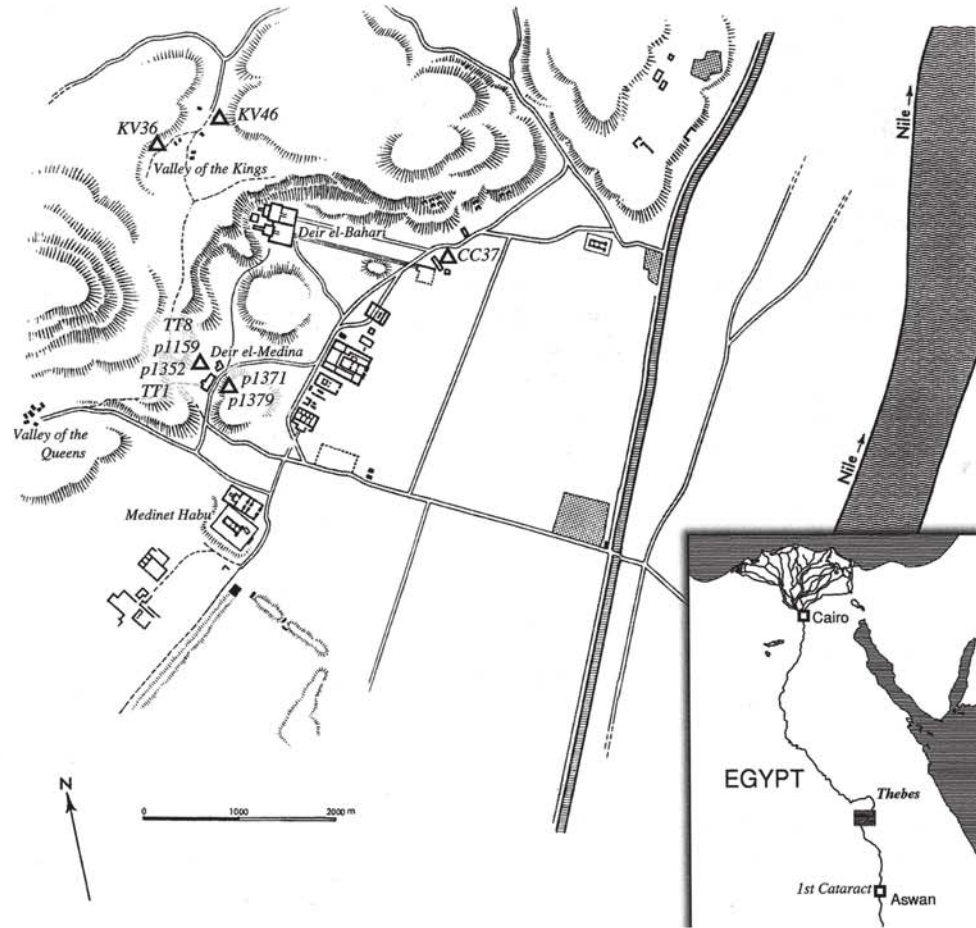


FIG. 36.1 Map of the Theban necropolis showing tombs mentioned in the text; inset: map of Egypt showing location of Thebes

Source: Drawing by R. Miltenberger.

pit tombs.⁴ My special focus is on Deir el-Medina, the settlement of the workmen who built the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Deir el-Medina is situated within the area of the Theban necropolis, about 3 kilometres away from the Valley of the Kings (Fig. 36.1). In the vicinity of the village thousands of *ostraca* have also been found, on which the inhabitants arranged their quotidian affairs. Nearly 200 texts refer to funerary matters (Näser 2002, Cooney 2007). They form a unique corpus of data, supplementing the archaeological record.

A third source of information is the decoration of the New Kingdom elite tombs. Cut in the rocky slopes of the Theban desert mountains, these tombs generally comprised three

⁴ The burials in question have been discovered by archaeological missions between 1886 and 1938. The individual missions used different systems of numbering the tombs. The most common is the TT system, with 'TT' standing for 'Theban Tomb'. Tombs in the Valley of the Kings were labelled KV. Further designations occurring in the present contribution are 'CC', denoting tombs excavated in a concession of Lord Carnavon and Howard Carter in the northern part of the necropolis, and 'p' for 'pits', i.e. burial shafts, in the French excavations at Deir el-Medina.

parts (Kampp 1996): (1) a cult chapel, decorated with reliefs or paintings, (2) in front of this cult chapel, a courtyard, where the burial rites were performed, and (3) the burial tract with a shaft or a sloping passage, usually starting from the cult chapel, leading to one or several underground burial chambers. In the earlier part of the New Kingdom such tombs seem to have been constructed for only one owner and his wife, though they could also contain burials of infants or small children alongside. Through time their character changed, and in the later New Kingdom they had become family tombs which were used over several generations and contained dozens of interments. The details of this development and more precise data on the occupants are hard to establish as most of the tombs have been disturbed repeatedly and thoroughly from antiquity up to the present.

BURYING IN NEW KINGDOM THEBES

The extensive decorations of the cult chapels usually include a canonic depiction of the funeral. In the course of the New Kingdom, a new composition was introduced, replacing the older sequence which had been in use for several centuries by then. The new composition was at least partially based on contemporary reality (Barthelmeß 1992, Assmann 2006: 299–329). Focusing on the procession to the tomb, detailed versions start with the crossing of the funerary cortège from the east bank of the Nile and culminate in the graveside ceremonies. Interestingly, the last part of the funeral, the actual interment, is missing from these representations. In many instances it is substituted by a scene showing the reception of the deceased by the goddess of the west, which visualizes the successful transition to the afterlife. In its sacramental setting, this image differs markedly from the previous sequence which without exception features real-life performances and real-life agents. Against this background, the existence of a few non-standardized sources depicting the actual interment is all the more remarkable (Näser 2008: 450–1). One of these is a rough sketch on an *ostrakon*, reportedly from Thebes (Fig. 36.2). It shows a mummy-shaped coffin being manoeuvred from the shaft into a burial chamber. The person at the head end is can be identified as a priest through the jackal mask, a symbol of the god Anubis. Around the opening of the shaft, a censuring priest, on the left, and four wailing women are assembled. Clearly, this scene depicts the moment when the rituals at the graveside have been concluded, the funerary congregation has left, and only a few specialists remain to see to the final act of the burial.

The archaeological evidence suggests that the actual process of interment was a logistical challenge. The narrow shafts and the small chambers limited the manoeuvrability of objects as well as the number of undertakers. A comparison of the dimensions of chamber entrances and coffins found *in situ* shows that the outer box-shaped coffins must mostly have been brought into the chambers in a disassembled state (Näser 2008: 452).⁵ Markings on the individual sections—still observable on several preserved coffins of New Kingdom date from

⁵ In the New Kingdom, multi-piece coffin sets became common among the Egyptian elite. For non-royal individuals they comprised a maximum of four coffins: an outer box-shaped coffin and up to three mummy-shaped interior coffins fitted within each other. Simpler burials tended to be equipped with one coffin only, mostly mummy-shaped, but they could be entirely without a coffin, the deceased then being wrapped in a mat instead.

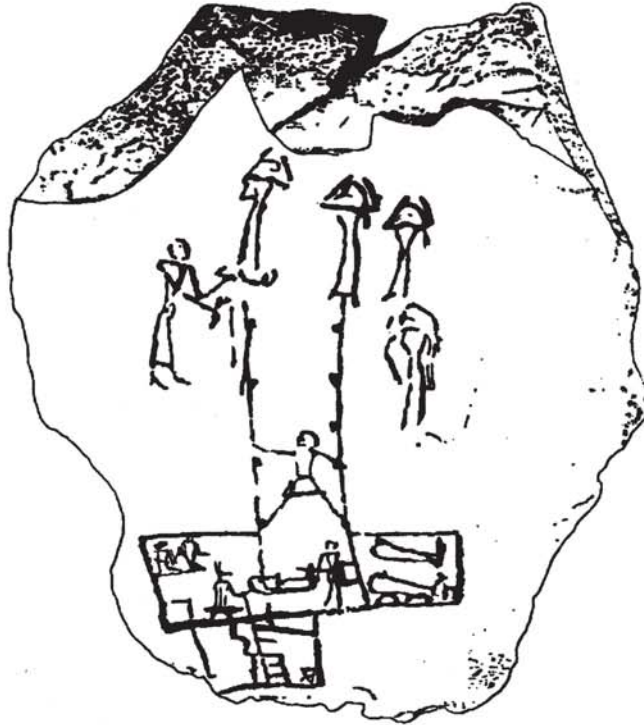


FIG. 36.2 *Ostrakon* with a non-standardized depiction of an interment, reportedly from Thebes

Notes: Currently in The Manchester Museum, accession number 5886; drawing by R. Miltenberger after Bierbrier 1982: Fig. 39 and an image supplied by The Manchester Museum.

Thebes—facilitated reassembly. In the tomb of Sennedjem, TT1, such effort had been avoided: the box-shaped outer coffins of the tomb owner and his son Khonsu were found stacked in a corner of the burial chamber in separate parts. As demonstrated by marks of wear on the wheel bearings (Näser 2002: 155, pl. 34), the coffin of Sennedjem had been pulled to the tomb fully assembled. Possibly it had been utilized repeatedly as a ‘transport coffin’ and between use had been stored in the tomb for want of a better place, in expectation of further burials that eventually failed to take place. Tomb TT1 had been used for at least two generations and contained 22 mummies in total. Only nine of them had coffins of their own (Näser 2002: 152–5).

A comparison between the dimensions of the tomb shafts and the mummy-shaped coffins indicates that the latter had often to be lowered vertically through the shafts. Thus, they would have received the mummy, its ornaments, and the grave goods that were arranged next to the body in the coffin only after they had been installed in the burial chamber. The coffins or coffin sets were usually placed at the rear or along a side wall of the burial chamber. They were the first items to reach the tomb. Only after they had been positioned was the bulk of the grave goods brought in and deposited on the floor of the burial chamber. When there was too little space, objects were piled one upon another, sometimes even on top of the coffins. Finally the entrance to the burial chamber was closed by a rough stone wall or a wooden door (Näser 2002).

FRAGMENTATION I: GRAVE ROBBING

From the archaeological evidence, it is often possible to determine the agents and timing of grave plundering more exactly. We are interested here only in 'intra-cultural' robbing, which took place at a time when the religious concepts on which the burial was based still applied. A first type of plundering that can be systematically recognized is connected to the primary interment or subsequent burials in the same tomb. In this case, the agents were the undertakers themselves. As suggested by the pictorial evidence discussed earlier, they alone were responsible for the actual burial, while the funerary congregation were restricted to the ceremonies outside the tomb (Fig. 36.2). Positioning the mummies in the coffins during the course of the interment offered the first, perfect opportunity for looting. An exemplary case of such robbing comes from grave p1379 in Deir el-Medina (Fig. 36.3; Bruyère 1937b: 170–5, Figs. 95–7). It contained two individuals, probably buried successively. The mummy of a man, in a box-shaped coffin by the wall, had been unwrapped and later hurriedly restored. After that, the coffin had been closed properly and covered with a cloth. The mummy of a woman, in the mummy-shaped coffin in front, had also been robbed of its jewellery. In contrast, the grave goods placed in front of her coffin and throughout the chamber were completely undisturbed. Thus, the burial of the woman provides a *terminus post quem non* for the robbing. Here, the mummies were disturbed without scruple, their jewellery forming the main target of the plunderers, while other easily movable and concealable objects may also have been taken.

In contrast, grave p1371 had been robbed some time after the burial, when the mummy of its female occupant was already mostly skeletal (Fig. 36.4; Bruyère 1937b: 158–61, figs. 77, 82–3). Here, too, the coffin had been covered with a cloth afterwards, and some items of the burial equipment had been arranged at the foot end and in front of it. The rest of the inventory was carelessly thrown against a wall of the burial chamber.

In another example, the burial of Maiherperi in the Valley of the Kings (KV36), the mummy had been torn open in the areas where jewellery was most likely to have been placed. Afterwards, however, it had been 'replaced in its coffin and covered with as many bindings as could find room under the lid' (Schweinfurth 1900: 105). The surviving grave inventory was almost totally devoid of metal objects and textiles; some cosmetic containers had been unsealed but not removed. Due to inadequate recording of the layout of the remaining burial equipment and the way the tomb was sealed, it is not possible to determine in this case whether the looting took place during the burial or some time later (cf. Reeves 1990: 140–7).

A closer look at other 'intact' burials from New Kingdom Thebes reveals that hardly any of them are truly undisturbed. However, damage to the mummies had often been covered up and order in the chambers restored superficially. As was apparent in p1379, the robbers themselves may have made an effort to hide their activities. In other cases, the tidying up took place after the disturbance had been discovered. This applies, for example, to the burial of Maiherperi in KV36 and to the burials of Yuya and Tuya in KV46 (Reeves 1990: 140–7, 143–53). Official inspections of the tombs are well-known from documentary evidence—further indicating the ubiquity of intra-cultural robbing. At least for the later New Kingdom, the sources prove the existence of organized robber gangs, whose members came from the mainstream of Egyptian society: they mainly belonged to the technical personnel of various temples, one band consisted exclusively of workmen from Deir el-Medina (Näser 2008: 454–5 with further references).

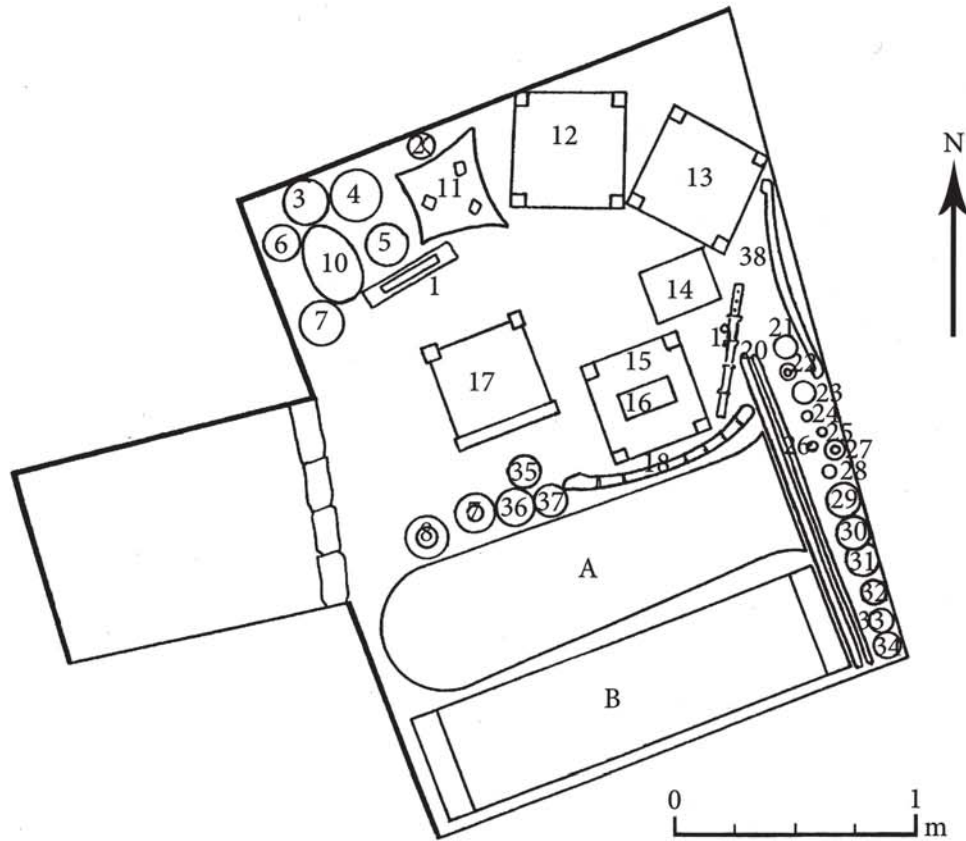


FIG. 36.3 Grave p1379 in the East Cemetery at Deir el-Medina

Source: Drawing by C. Näser after Bruyère 1937b: Fig. 96.

Organized, quasi-commercial forms of looting were complemented by a second sector, which I call 'opportunistic plundering'. That type too has a distinctive profile. It was also selective, but did not always aim at the mummies. Its primary targets were metal objects, cosmetics, and textiles, i.e. valuable materials that could be reused easily. This type of plundering often occurs in tandem with another phenomenon which has so far rarely been recognized: the re-deposition of burials. Of this practice, too, several forms can be distinguished.

FRAGMENTATION II: SECONDARY DEPOSITION

In the crowded Theban necropolis the construction of new tombs frequently led to the accidental disturbance of older ones. In the Deir el-Medina West Cemetery this problem was particularly pronounced. Within a maze of interlinked and secondarily extended shafts sits grave p1352 (Bruyère 1937a: 84, 90–109, Figs. 39–46, pls. 3, 10–13). When it was cut and usurped by shaft p1346, the original burials from p1352 were removed to a niche that had been hewn

specifically for that purpose. There, four coffins were stacked atop and across each other. Beside them stood a wooden chest containing a child's body. Most of the burial equipment was missing. Only a random collection without potential for reuse remained—mainly inscribed objects and funeral equipment. The mummies had, however, not been touched.

Re-deposition also occurred with the 'simple' reuse of graves, when no architectural changes were made. An example of this is p1159, also in the West Cemetery (Fig. 36.5; Bruyère 1929: 36–73, Figs. 24–35, pls. 1–12). The upper one of its two burial chambers was reused by a certain Hormes in the late New Kingdom. The lower chamber contained the burials of Sennefer and Nefertiti. In front of their coffins, near the entrance to the chamber, flowers and an offering table were arranged. The mummies of the couple were undisturbed. At the head end of their coffins, a chest with the body of a child was deposited. The coffin of Sennefer had been covered with a cloth. The grave inventory, however, is conspicuous in that important components, most notably foodstuff, are missing. The only remaining chest contained a random collection of objects, indubitably a secondary assemblage. The excavator suspected that this ensemble represented a re-deposition and suggested that Hormes reused the upper chamber and moved its original contents. Nothing argues against this hypothesis.

The scope of disturbance is broadened with CC37. In the cult rooms and the burial chambers of this pre-New Kingdom tomb, altogether 64 coffins were found (Carter 1912: 64–88, pls. 55–78). In some of them, up to four bodies had been crammed; in total, 83 mummies

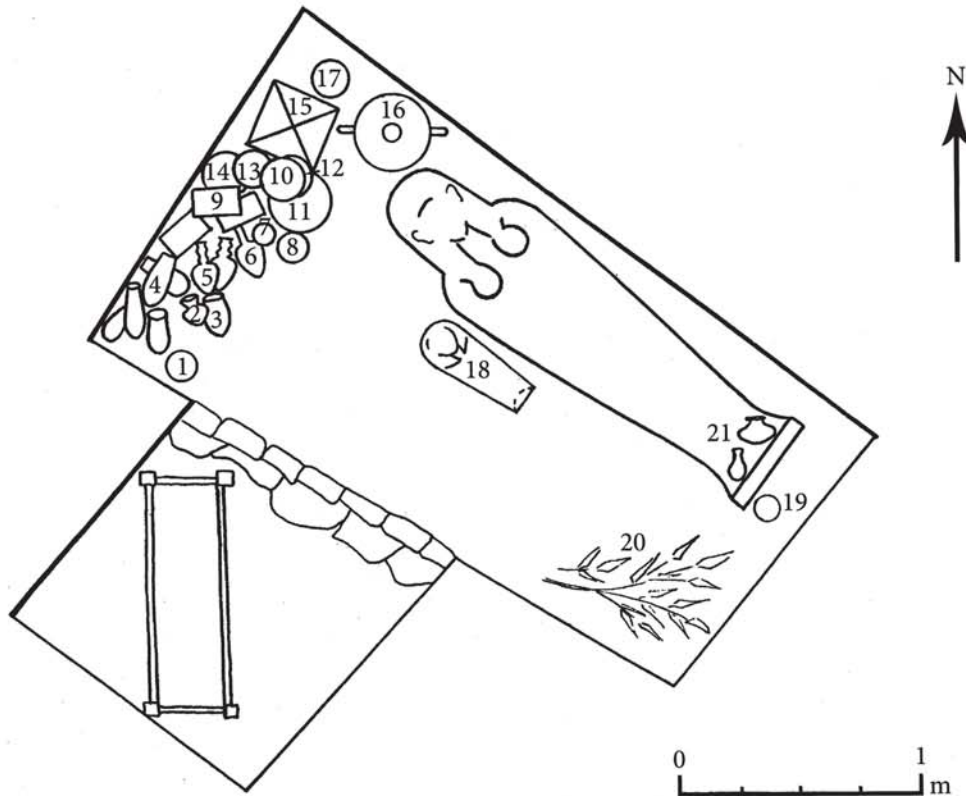


FIG. 36.4 Grave p1371 in the East Cemetery at Deir el-Medina

Source: Drawing by C. Näser after Bruyère 1937b: Fig. 82.

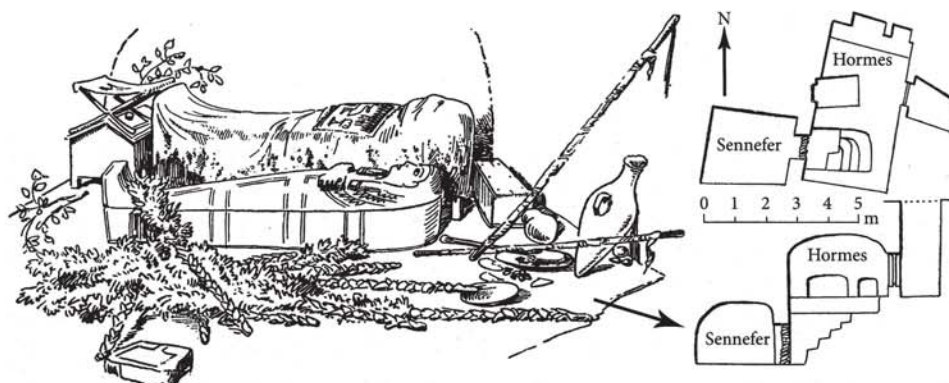


FIG. 36.5 The depot of Sennefer and Nefertiti, p1159, in the Deir el-Medina West Cemetery

Source: Drawing by C. Näser after Bruyère 1929: Figs. 24, 28.

were counted. Some of them had apparently been robbed. Apart from the coffins, there were only a few objects, including several musical instruments. The ensemble is a large-scale secondary depot, set up in the context of royal building activities in the area of CC37 during the earlier part of the New Kingdom. Graves disturbed by the building work had been emptied, and most of their contents apparently plundered or discarded. Only the bodies, along with some conspicuous objects, were re-deposited in this centralized location, their rather harsh treatment reflecting the anonymity of the large building project.

These examples illustrate a significant range of activities associated with the plundering of graves: from the quick snatch of the undertakers, via the deliberate actions of organized robbers, opportunist plundering, and disposal during re-depositions, up to the careful, albeit fragmentary, arrangement of material in cases of individual grave reuse. It is precisely this wide spectrum that shows the great extent to which the disturbance and looting of graves was embedded in everyday life and the social 'norm' of New Kingdom Egypt. This ubiquity is confirmed by textual sources, too. An official inspection report of late New Kingdom date delivers a devastating, and laconically short, judgement on the state of the non-royal tombs in the Theban necropolis: 'It was found that the thieves had violated them all' (Peet 1930: 39, Näser 2008: 457–8).

THE PROCUREMENT AND COMPOSITION OF THE BURIAL EQUIPMENT

In Ancient Egypt the burial comprised several stages, which may have spread over a considerable period of time. It started with the preparation of the corpse. Full mummification was a prerogative of the social elite and underwent considerable changes through history which also affected the time required for this process (Taylor 2001: 46–91). The actual day of burial comprised, as previously mentioned, the funerary cortège, the graveside rituals, and the interment proper. A third element of funerary practice, not discussed here, was the ongoing cult at the tomb, which was maintained for several years, in some cases even for generations.

But death intruded profoundly into life in the opposite direction, too. Among the elites, the construction of a monumental tomb was a project normally begun, albeit often not completed, during life. While it is generally assumed that the burial equipment was also procured during life, especially in elite contexts, the actual evidence displays a much more multifaceted process (Näser 2001, 2008).

The composition of the burial equipment was based on a multitude of concepts around the forms and requirements of post-mortal existence, and the necessities and possibilities through which that existence could be magically and materially secured. In spite of their superficially normative appearance, these concepts underwent constant change, not least due to their permanent discussion and revision through practice. Furthermore, their accessibility and realizability differed according to the social status of the deceased and those taking care of the burial. This concerns access not only to material resources, but also to specific cultural techniques, such as writing. Moreover, mechanisms of social representation also played a role in the choice and design of burial equipment. But besides all that, its assembly was equally influenced by numerous contingencies. In the following I will argue that these 'irregular' factors should not be underestimated. But first, in the absence of an agreed terminology, some definitions shall be provided:

- By 'grave inventory' or 'burial equipment' I mean the entirety of all movable objects placed in the burial tract of the tomb, except the body itself.
- The term '*funeralia*' designates all objects that serve a function exclusively in the funerary context, such as coffins, mummy masks, *shabtis*, i.e. specific funerary statuettes, copies of the Book of the Dead, etc. (for an overview of such paraphernalia, see Taylor 2001).
- 'Grave goods' comprise objects that could also serve a function outside the funerary context. Of course, such objects were sometimes produced specifically for the grave. This can be assumed when they bear funerary inscriptions or decorations. Since their role within the grave inventory was not affected by this, they can nonetheless be classed as grave goods—as can objects modified from their everyday counterparts in terms of scale and material, such as miniature furniture and false vessels.⁶

Eight more-or-less intact graves of the 18th dynasty, i.e. the first part of the New Kingdom (c.1550–1292 BC), were found in the East Cemetery of Deir el-Medina (Bruyère 1937b). The individuals buried there probably did not belong to the Deir el-Medina workforce proper (Näser 2001, 2002: 82–5). The scarcity and the poor execution of epigraphic objects in their burial equipment indicate that they were marginal to the social stratum which had access to and regular use of literacy. Their inventories comprise mostly quotidian objects, with no sign of having been produced especially for the grave. Many of them seem to have been part of the personal property of the deceased and were only assembled after their death. A special group

⁶ A separate category, not included in the above definitions and the present discussion, covers all movable and fixed installations in the cult complexes of the tombs, such as reliefs, statues, and offering tables, and the objects which were deposited in these always accessible parts of the tomb during the funeral and the ongoing mortuary cult.

of ceramic bowls and baskets containing a characteristic combination of foodstuffs may represent the congregation's contribution, which they brought along to the funeral (Näser 2001).

The central components of the inventories from the East Cemetery are food, cosmetics, and toiletry objects. Furniture, tools, musical instruments, and clothing also occur. About half of the inventories include inscribed coffins. In some cases they do not bear the name of their eventual occupant, but were inscribed for other individuals (Näser 2001). About half of the burials remain anonymous. This qualifies the commonly expressed view that according to Egyptian belief the preservation of the name was an essential precondition for the afterlife (cf. also Cooney 2007: 276). Apart from coffins, *funeralia* are limited to two wooden statuettes and a mummy-shaped limestone statuette in a miniature coffin (Fig. 36.4: no. 18). Especially notable is the homogeneity of the inventories. The social group using the East Cemetery must have possessed a high degree of coherence, suggesting not only a general social consistency, but also a constellation of close contact.

The tomb of Kha and Merit, TT8, in the West Cemetery of Deir el-Medina dates to the later 18th Dynasty (Fig. 36.6; Schiaparelli 1927, Näser 2008: 460–1). As head of works, Kha belonged to the leading echelons of the workmen's village. While the inventory of TT8 hardly differs from the East Cemetery graves in terms of object categories, the quantity and quality of the items bear witness to a much enlarged access to material and ideational resources. Foodstuffs remain a major element of the assemblage. But whereas in the East Cemetery they mainly consisted of bread, fruit, and beer, TT8 contained many prepared dishes, meat, spices, and wine. Furthermore, the inventory includes numerous *funeralia*: sets of three and two coffins, respectively, for Kha and his wife, a mummy mask of Merit, a statuette of Kha, a copy of the Book of the Dead, a heart scarab, and two *shabtis*. About 30 objects from the tomb bear short ink inscriptions, ascribing them as grave goods to Kha (Näser 2002: 120–1). The homogeneity of these inscriptions, their informal character, and the fact that they only occur on quotidian objects suggest that these items were selected from the household and marked as burial equipment during the preparation of the funeral. In contrast, most pieces of furniture feature decorative funerary inscriptions and were produced specifically for the grave. The naïve depictions on some chests hint at local production and stand in marked contrast to the high-quality Book of the Dead, which probably came from a workshop that also produced for royal consumption. Altogether, Kha's burial equipment was compiled from a multitude of sources.

The contingencies of this process are illustrated by the fact that the inner, mummy-shaped coffin of Merit was inscribed for Kha. Thus, Merit did not yet possess her own inventory at the time of her death, whereas Kha had already procured his coffin, which he then used to bury his wife. The outer box-shaped coffin and the wig chest of Merit entered the tomb unfinished, with obvious signs of hasty production. This, too, indicates that Merit died a sudden, untimely death, at a point in time when no steps had yet been taken to procure her burial equipment—which may also be the reason for the overall limited extent of her inventory. This evidence shows that the acquisition of grave equipment, its quantity, and its quality did not just depend on the socio-economic status of the deceased. Any analysis aimed at elucidating, for example, gender differences should take this into consideration (contra Meskell 1998, 1999, cf. Näser 2008: 461 with suggestions for other methodological approaches).

The tomb of Sennedjem and his family, TT1, in the West Cemetery of Deir el-Medina is the only partially intact tomb of the Ramesside period, i.e. the later New Kingdom (c.1292–1070 BC)—although only one of the four chambers of its burial tract was discovered undisturbed (Näser 2002: 145–74). The analysis of the surviving inventory displays two

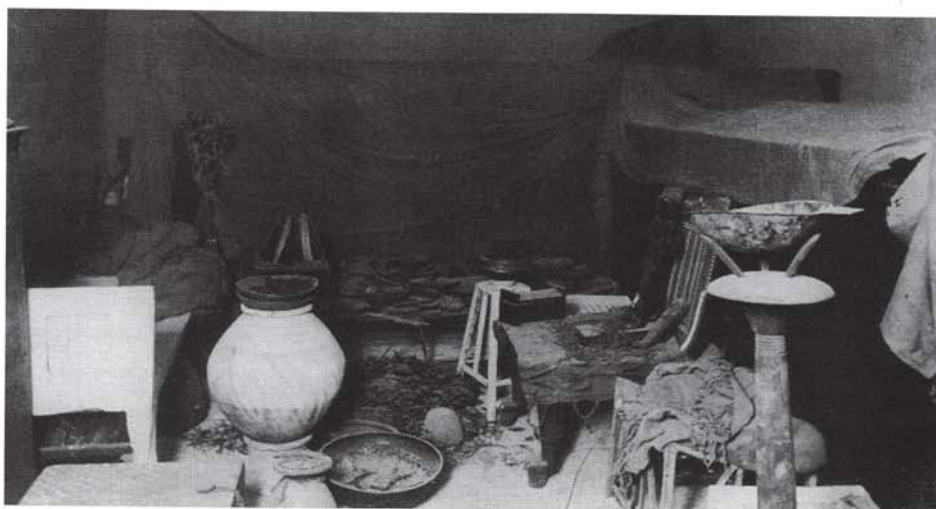


FIG. 36.6 View into the burial chamber of Kha and Merit, TT8, in the West Cemetery at Deir el-Medina

Source: Photograph from Racanicchi 1991: Fig. 73.

general trends: a multiplication of *funeralia*, and an increase in grave goods not derived from quotidian contexts, but produced especially for the tomb. The catalysts of this development are thought to be the upheavals of the Amarna period (c.1351–1319 BC) and the ensuing phase of religious restoration, which led to an intense engagement with and deep changes in the funerary culture. Both trends increase the proportion of objects acquired ante mortem, independently of the economic potential of their owner. In comparison to TT8, many *funeralia* and grave goods from TT1 are of lower material value and mediocre quality. But even with those objects, the importance of inscriptions and decoration rises. The equipment from TT1 comprises many elaborately decorated false vessels, chests, and chairs. Their functionality was not deemed relevant: some are veritable *trompe l'œils*. One richly decorated chair of Sennedjem was donated by his eldest son Khabekhenet. Some *shabtis* bore the names of individuals not buried in TT1. They may be extra-sepulchral specimens, the deposition of which permitted their owners to participate in the supply community of the tomb (cf. Pumpenmeier 1998: 76–8), but they could also be endowments, by which their donors contributed to the equipment of the deceased. The latter can be assumed for some objects from TT8, which are inscribed with the names of colleagues of Kha.

Interestingly, the equipment of the 22 occupants of TT1 varies widely. Most inscribed objects which can be personally allocated belonged to the tomb owner Sennedjem, his wife, and a few relatives of the subsequent generation. In contrast, 11 individuals were without either a coffin or any personally assignable items.⁷ Apparently, such constellations were socially acceptable, even in a literate environment. Those who had little or no equipment may have been thought to benefit from the supply community of the tomb, i.e. the more extensive inventories of the better equipped occupants.

⁷ Moreover, two infants or foetuses were interred in wooden chests.

For the Ramesside period, textual material from Deir el-Medina supplements the archaeological evidence on the procurement of burial equipment. *Ostraca*, which record commercial transactions between the villagers, show that coffins were one of the most commonly traded commodities in the settlement and were also produced there (Näser 2002, 2008: 464–5; Cooney 2007). Other *funeralia* are mentioned only rarely, although they occur in large numbers in the actual inventories, for example, in TT1. It can thus be assumed that smaller objects, such as *shabtis* and *shabti* boxes, were domestically produced, or acquired through informal networks in the professional and private environment.

FROM THE STATICS OF BURIAL TO THE PERFORMANCE OF RITUAL

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the canonical depictions of the funerals in the cult chapels of the Theban elite tombs underline the importance of the funerary cortège and its processional character. Detailed versions show long rows of bearers with grave goods which—at least according to the images—were strikingly displayed on the way to the tomb. No thoughts have so far been put forward regarding the involvement of these objects in the actual graveside ceremonies. Only Petra Barthelmeß (1992: 73) has suggested that they were placed in the burial chambers before the arrival of the coffin. This is, however, contradicted by all archaeologically preserved instances, where the coffins invariably stand in the rear part of the chambers, with all other objects placed in front and on top of them (Figs. 36.4–36.6), i.e. having been introduced thereafter. Frequently, empty storage vessels were found at the bottom of the shafts and in the entrance area of the burial chambers; it seems likely that their contents were used during the funerary rites (Seiler 1995: 186–93, 196–8; Näser 2002, 2008). Persea branches were also often deposited near the entrances (Figs. 36.4–36.6). At the Deir el-Medina East Cemetery, in several graves, sitting and reclining furniture was found in the shafts. In one case, a set of miniature furniture was deposited in the same location. And a bed with persea bouquets beneath it stood in the anteroom to the burial chamber of TT8. I would suggest that these pieces of furniture were used in the graveside rites and—as the last items deposited in the course of the interment—repeatedly ended up in the outer parts of the burial tract. A plausible case for a similar scenario has been made for an earlier period, namely the Old Kingdom (c.2700–2200 BC), where the set-up of a specific group of furniture affirmed the presence of the deceased in the course of the ritual (Fitzenreiter 2006: 233, 280, 430–6).

Regularities in the position of burial equipment that resulted from its involvement in preceding activities should be distinguished from intentional arrangements or *mises-en-scène*. Among the latter, I class an installation that also draws on the ritual role of furniture. In p1379 and TT8, a statuette of the tomb owner had been placed on a stool or chair respectively, its gaze directed towards the entrance of the burial chamber (Fig. 36.3: no. 16, Fig. 36.6). Additionally, in p1379 a statuette of the female occupant of the tomb had been deposited on the floor beside the stool (Fig. 36.3: no. 14). In TT8 sycamore and persea branches lay in front of the chair, and on top of them a deliberately smashed pottery

jug (Fig. 36.6). Pictorial evidence helps to make sense of this arrangement. In tomb TT335 in the Deir el-Medina West Cemetery, an interesting scene is depicted in a context concerned with ancestral cult and the provisioning of the dead: a man with an incense bowl stands in front of a statuette on a chair, between them is a second chair with food offerings; the caption reads 'purify: four times', the traditional offering to the dead being also mentioned (Bruyère 1926: 135, Fig. 91). What is depicted is the ritual which 'activates' the faculty of the statuette to receive food offerings. The three-dimensional installations in p1379 and TT8 perpetuates this ritual and thus, ultimately, the ability of the deceased to receive offerings.

Remarkably, the burials under discussion contain few such deliberate *mises-en-scène*. In p1159 and TT1, two coffins were placed on beds. In p1371, a mummy-shaped limestone statuette in a miniature coffin, possibly an elaborate *shabti*, was deposited alongside the coffin of the deceased (Fig. 36.4: no. 18). Apart from these thematically and spatially restricted arrangements, Egyptian burials conspicuously lack references to real-life settings, however transposed. The burials resemble storerooms more than anything else (Fig. 36.6). The placing of objects primarily followed practical considerations, brought about by the lack of space and the difficulties in manoeuvring the larger items. The New Kingdom Egyptian dead did not rest in a well-ordered world of objects; their burials were not carefully arranged retrospectives of earthly life. The archaeological as well as the pictorial evidence suggests a sharp break between the ritually highly charged graveside ceremonies and the ensuing interment, which seems to have been a thoroughly pragmatic and profane affair with corresponding results. The rituals aimed at reviving the mummy had been completed; the deceased was on the way to the hereafter. What remained were objects, whose materiality abruptly gained importance: where to put them? I would argue it was not the arrangement of the grave goods, but the lived performance of the ritual that would guarantee life in the hereafter, and that the Egyptian tombs primarily are places of safe keeping for its material requisites.

There is one significant exception to this observation, namely arrangements focusing on the body of the deceased. *Funeralia*, such as heart scarabs, which aim at the protection of the body or parts of it, are placed accordingly on the mummies. In TT8, a Book of the Dead was spread on the middle one of Kha's tripartite coffin set. Thus, it was not only put at his immediate disposal, but also offered additional protection for his mummy. This positioning refers to an older tradition: the earliest versions of the Books of the Dead were written directly on the mummy shrouds. But there is also a wide range of other objects deposited in, on, or beside the coffins. They comprise items which are functionally related to the body, such as jewellery, sandals, canes, and cosmetics, but also instruments and tools. It can be assumed that these objects too owned a sacramental dimension with regard to the protection of the body and the regaining of its vital functions. For example, in the Book of the Dead, clothes, sandals, and canes are mentioned in reference to the secure movement of the dead in the hereafter, and the spell for 'Going out into the day and living after death' is illustrated with the deceased holding a cane (Hornung 1998: 45, 415: spell 2, 346, 514: spell 169). Often, a selection of food offerings was placed in, on, or next to the coffin. Thus, the dead body, mummified or simply shrouded, formed a continuous point of reference. Its 'sphere of attraction' was, however, restricted to items which one way or the other directly related to it, be they adornments, nourishment, or objects invested with protective powers. And its intactness was the first to be transgressed by plunderers—already at the point of its installation during the interment.

CONCLUSION

A detailed analysis of Egyptian burials from New Kingdom Thebes breaks up their apparent homogeneity and their common interpretations in several regards. 'Thick descriptions' reveal that the procurement and assembly of grave inventories were multifaceted processes which cannot be reduced to the normative fulfilment of religious concepts or a linear representation of social stratification. The signifying components of funerary practice were the ritual and the sacramental interpretation of its material requisites, i.e. the body and the grave goods. The actual burial primarily served to 'store' and 'secure' those props. Simultaneously, it was the field of multiple fragmentations. Thus, archaeological analysis is confronted with a record that in several dimensions reflects the profane, quotidian aspect of death.

The above discussions convey a major tension, evolving from the overlap of what may commonly be perceived in terms of the 'sacred' and the 'profane', here exemplified in the seeming contradiction between the need to supply the dead and to preserve its body, and the intra-cultural disturbances. The commonplace nature of the plunderings, evident from both the textual sources and the archaeological record, suggests that such a discrepancy is largely a product of our modern perception. On the other hand, Egyptian texts clearly state that grave robbing was considered to be social misbehaviour and a crime. There are two possible ways to deal with these findings. One would be to abandon the categories of the 'sacred' and the 'profane'—and this has indeed been suggested (Burns Coleman and White 2006; cf. also Kümmel 2008). The other possibility would be to embrace the notion that something mundane, quotidian, contingent is inherent in every human activity, no matter where on the scale between 'sacred' and 'profane' the activity as a whole is placed by a given society.

Conventional approaches have situated funerary practices in the spheres of religion, ideology, and emotion, producing a deeply idealized and aestheticized vision of the past, which ignored a full range of other aspects connected with it. Some of them I suggest can be captured under the heading of the 'profane'. They comprise for example the contingencies in the procurement of the burial equipment, the practicalities of the interments, and the later fragmentations of the burial assemblages. An 'archaeology of the profane' should define these elements as analytically relevant criteria. They do not only determine the constitution of the archaeological record. They are also integral parts of social practice, and their identification permits us to develop a more adequate image of that practice, its conditions, and the people behind it.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Assmann, J. 2006. *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

A compelling reading on Egyptian images of death and their rites, albeit based almost exclusively on textual sources.

Baines, J., and Lacovara, P. 2002. Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society: Respect, Formalism, Neglect. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 2: 5–36.

A very useful contribution contrasting mortuary ideal and actual reality, with multiple examples from all period of Pharaonic Egyptian history.

- Cooney, K. 2007. *The Cost of Death: The Social and Economic Value of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Art in the Ramesside Period*. *Egyptologische Uitgaven* 22. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten.
An engaging case study on the economic value and the social embeddedness of burial equipment; focusing on Ramesside coffins, and their production and use in Deir el-Medina.
- Dodson, A., and Ikram, S. 2008. *The Tomb in Ancient Egypt; Royal and Private Sepulchres from the Early Dynastic Period to the Romans*. London: Thames & Hudson.
An extensive popular introduction to royal and elite tomb architecture and decoration from the beginning of the Pharaonic era up to the Roman period.
- Grajetzki, W. 2003. *Burial Customs in Ancient Egypt; Life and Death for Rich and Poor*. London: Duckworth.
A popular introduction to Egyptian non-royal funerary practice, based on archaeological material and discussing typical examples from the late prehistoric to the Roman period; with a concise and useful bibliography.
- Phillips, J. 1992. Tomb-Robbers and their Booty in Ancient Egypt. In: S. E. Orel (ed.) *Death and Taxes in the Ancient Near East*. Lewiston, ME, Queenston, Ont., and Lampeter: Mellen Press: 157–92.
An interesting contribution on tomb robbing and the reuse of objects from tombs, based on concrete examples from the archaeological evidence and textual sources.
- Pinch, G. 2002. Redefining Funerary Objects. In: Z. Hawass (ed.) *Egyptology at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century; Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists, Cairo, 2000*, vol. II: *History. Religion*. Cairo and New York: American University in Cairo Press: 443–7.
A seminal contribution on the primary functions of objects found in burials suggesting a radical change in their analytical perception and interpretation.
- Reeves, C. N. 1990. *Valley of the Kings: The Decline of a Royal Necropolis*. Studies in Egyptology. London and New York: Kegan Paul International.
A meticulous study of the New Kingdom Royal Necropolis, i.e. the Valley of the Kings, giving special attention to the shaping of the archaeological record and the use-life of the tombs after the primary interments.
- Richards, J. 2005. *Society and Death in Ancient Egypt: Mortuary Landscapes of the Middle Kingdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
A classical study on the social stratification of Ancient Egypt in the Middle Kingdom, discussed on the basis of the mortuary evidence, presenting and drawing from a wide spectrum of archaeological and other sources.
- Seidlmayer, S. J. 1990. *Gräberfelder aus dem Übergang vom Alten zum Mittleren Reich*. Studien zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altägyptens 1. Heidelberg: Heidelberger Orientverlag.
A likewise classical analysis of partially non-elite burial grounds from the Old to the Middle Kingdom, concentrating on burial patterns and associated materials.
- Stevenson, A. 2009. Social Relations in Predynastic Burials. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 95: 175–92.
An up-to-date discussion of the state of research on pre-pharaonic Egyptian burial practices (prior to 3000 BC), summarizing the aims and methodologies of existing studies and outlining starting points for future research.
- Taylor, J. H. 2001. *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*. London: British Museum Press.
A good introduction to the topic, written from a museological point of view, i.e. starting from the material paraphernalia of death and focusing on their use context, with a concise and useful bibliography.

- Willems, H. (ed.) 2001. *Social Aspects of Funerary Culture in the Egyptian Old and Middle Kingdoms*. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 103. Leuven, Paris, and Sterling: Uitgeverij Peeters and Departement Oosterse Studies.
A scholarly volume with several authoritative contributions and clear-sighted statements about the state and the desiderata of research.

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