

## THE EGYPTIAN AFTERLIFE: WHAT TO TAKE WITH YOU AND WHY

by Betsy M. Bryan



Three thousand two hundred years ago a man composed a letter to his wife, named Ankhiry, complaining that she was causing trouble for him and announcing a legal suit. “What have I done against you wrongfully for you to change into this bad temper in which you are? ... I shall dispute at law with you ....” Following a brief summary of what a good husband he had been to her over many years of his military career and an assertion of his fidelity, he mentioned her death, after which

“I spent a number of months not eating or drinking like a [normal] person.... I cried greatly together with my family in the presence of my neighborhood. I gave fine quality linen for your wrapping, and I had many clothes made. I did not omit a good thing or prevent one being done for you.” [Noting that he had not married in the three years since her passing, he then again accused his deceased wife of not being equally caring, but at the end of the letter indicates that he may believe Ankhiry held a sexual grudge:] “...Now look! You do not know good from ill, and one will judge you and me. Look! The sisters in my house — I have not entered [sexually] one of them!”

This “letter to the dead” — written more than one thousand years after the great pyramids of Giza — tells us much about Egyptian beliefs. For the Egyptians, the afterlife was real; it had a place, a time, and a corporeality. Despite the sadness of losing one’s loved ones on earth, most Egyptians believed that proper tomb preparations and burial rituals could keep families intact over timeless eras. Death did not break social and private relationships that were usually thought to remain harmonious, but as this letter indicates, a relationship that existed on earth could develop estrangements beyond the tomb.

### Funerary Artworks

The objects made for and placed in a burial were a significant part of a proper entombment, and some had a nearly indispensable function. Although they might not be intended to be seen or admired by the living after their deposit, Egyptian funerary artworks embodied both aesthetic sense and religious function. Such artworks were intended to be seen, because they were produced for the tomb owners during their lifetimes, paid for with their assets and constructed to their own specifications. Scenes of burial processions shown on tomb walls illustrate the objects (or types of them) deposited, and these include not only purely funerary artifacts but also personal items such as mirrors, cosmetics and scribal equipment, along with jewelry and clothing. During the travel to the tomb and over their lifetimes, Egyptians acquired and displayed their wealth for eternity. The arts, funerary and other, flourished in Egypt within a highly status-conscious elite society focused on winning the favor of those in superior



Theban Tomb of Ramose, no. 55, ca. 1350 BC. Painted limestone. Friends and family carry the vizier’s (highest official to the king or pharaoh) personal furniture acquired during his lifetime to his tomb on the west side of the Nile.

position, whether in this life or the next. As we survey a handful of the types of art that were placed in Egyptian burials through time, we will consider their function in ritual and art. [For a discussion of chronology and a list of Egyptian dynasties and dates, go to page 23.]

### The Mummy as Art Object

Although the husband of Ankhiry does not mention the array of funerary objects that may have been deposited with her, her burial having been three years in the past, he does mention linens used for wrapping. The fundamental preparation for burial was that of the body itself. As early as the Neolithic period, elements of mummification were practiced to preserve the corpse as a spiritual container. During the Old Kingdom (2686-2181 BC), skulls and bodies were sometimes plastered to maintain their shape and to provide an image of the physical person. The physical identity was important not only as a container but as a form of the person that was recognizable to his or her mobile spirit (*ba*) and to others – living and deceased. Mummification was therefore intended to preserve the entire body and create it as a new image of the deceased. The linen wrapping used in that part of the procedure was called the *wt* and came later to designate coffins in anthropoid form.

The coffin had a function similar to that of mummification itself and particularly of bandaging – the collection and union of the body parts to ensure all functions in the next life and the representation of the deceased. Already in the Pyramid Texts spells were provided to guarantee the body's integrity: "O flesh of this Teti (king's name), do not decay, do not rot, do not let your odor stink. Your step shall not be passed (by another); your stride shall not be strode past (by another); you shall not tread upon the bodily fluids of Osiris." (PT 412) Once wrapped the mummy had this first order of protection, and the coffin, whether of box or anthropoid shape, was additional physical protection. Because burials were vulnerable to violation, the security of the body in its coffin



Plastered skull from a Fourth Dynasty burial at Giza, ca. 2500 BC. Plastering bodies created an image of the deceased and helped preserve the corpse as a vessel for the spirit.

might still be a concern for those who wished to ensure the afterlife.

### Tomb Statues

The creation of images of the deceased began early in Egyptian history. By the first dynasty (ca. 3000 BC), tomb statues were clearly part of elite burials. A statue of the deceased, the *wt* in Egyptian, could act as an alternate container for the person, and already in the Old Kingdom, a statue was an important part of the burial ritual, being frequently represented on tomb walls in scenes of art production and transport. Statues were placed in special rooms of Old Kingdom mastabas [platforms with multiple chambers for burials] and received purification rites such as libation and incensing in parallel with the mummy itself. The enlivening of statues was accomplished through the "opening of the mouth" ritual from the Old Kingdom on, the text of which is known from the New Kingdom (1550-1069 BC). Even entire tombs or temples might be enlivened by this ritual, ensuring that the scenes on walls and the statues erected within could magically act as real spiritual containers.

Statues normally did not portray a realistic image of the deceased; rather they supplied a healthy and strong



Tomb statue of Mesehty from Assiut. Eton College 2167. Twelfth Dynasty.

body type and a face that was believed to be readily identifiable in the divine afterlife. In practice, with the exception of a brief period in the Fourth Dynasty (2613-2494 BC) when important royal family members left personalized images of themselves, most elite statues were equipped with faces similar to the official portrait of the ruling king. This practice continued off and on for more than two thousand years. It may have originated with the Old Kingdom funerary beliefs in the exceptional divinity of the deceased king with whom others hoped to reside after death. Those recognizable as the king's followers might better hope to be provided for by him in the next world. This practice persisted in periods when the kingship itself was strong – in parts of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, and portions of the first millennium (1000 to 1 BC) as well.

Tomb statues combined the chosen physical shapes with poses, clothing, hairstyles, and attributes that conveyed the tomb owner's status and elements of his lifestyle. Statues of men seated cross-legged could also show a hand fistled to hold a scribal reed pen, while panther skin clothing could identify the wearer as a priest. In many eras of Egyptian history, even elites did not build large tombs that could

house stone carved images, and the need for tomb statues became almost nil during the Third Intermediate Period (1069-656 BC) and the later Ptolemaic (310-30 BC) and Roman eras (30 BC - AD 395). Figures of Osiris and later Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, inscribed for the deceased, may have served in part as vessels for the spirit, and together with the numerous images on coffins, supplied the ritually required alternative to the mummy.

### **Coffins, Mummy Masks, Canopic Jars and Shabtis**

The faces shown on coffins and mummy masks were often less specific than those on statues that recalled the kings. It has been suggested that this was due to the fact that all blessed deceased persons were gods in the afterlife. Thus a more generic idealizing facial type might be desirable. Yet there are elite faces in the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000-1773 BC), and even more later, that bear datable features. While stone statues were affordable only for the wealthy, coffins were a necessary expense and were produced for a wide range of consumers. To provide for the variety of coffins very likely required an equally broad range of artisans, including those outside the “royal workshop” environment. Materials could sometimes be used to elevate a rapidly produced commodity into a more elite category. For example, in the Ptolemaic (Greek) era the gilded faces on coffins and masks that represented the incorruptible flesh of gods were more common than ever for a large number of people. In that period the royal portrait was so removed from the public that the masks may well have been intended to portray the deceased in a beatific state.

Canopic jars (containing the body's organs) were also commonly placed in tombs at the time of the Old Kingdom onward. Preservation of the abdominal organs separate from the body was part of the means of protecting the human vessel. With the knowledge that the organs would rot and further damage the body while it was being dried with salts, the Egyptian embalmers from the Middle Kingdom on generally removed these parts and separately preserved them. These represented the precious “fluids of Osiris” referred to in the Pyramid Texts and later, and the canopic jars that held the organs themselves recalled libations offered to the deceased. Jars



Mummy mask from the Ptolemaic era, ca. 200-100 BC. Cartonnage (plastered linen, gilded and painted) shaped to cover the wrapped mummy's head. Body may have also been placed in a coffin or covered with bead netting.

of ointments, perfumes, and oils were often represented beneath depictions of coffins and items of mummification. These were important additions to the overall aim to maintain the body, as were incense burners and pellets of precious resin for fumigation. Like the sarcophagi in which coffins were placed and dragged to the tomb, the canopic jars were often set into boxes with pitched shrine-shaped lids. The similarity of these parts of the burial outfit reflected that they were two parts (the mummy and the jars) of the same central element – the body of the deceased.

Beyond this central aspect of burial preparation, the tomb owner considered his or her destination, where life was expected to be similar to that on earth, but perhaps more extreme. Wheat grew larger, fish were more plentiful, and everything was increasingly both enormous and accessible. Yet the need to work was a constant, and since people were called to work as conscripts, from the First Intermediate Period (2181-2000 BC) onward, people might take along small magical figures, easily held in the hand, that could be enlivened by spells and set to work as a substitute. These shawabti or shabti or ushabti (all actual spellings) mummiform figures were made of a number of materials, including wood, stone, ceramic, and faience and continued to be produced throughout the pharaonic eras. In the New Kingdom specific figures dressed in kilts were created to represent overseers for the growing number of workers, and eventually boxes full of some

401 of these were placed in tombs to include 365 annual workers and 36 overseers. Although there was no requirement as to numbers of shabti figures, from the late Middle Kingdom through the Ptolemaic era, shabtis frequently bore the spell that became Chapter 6 of the Book of the Dead, which invokes the figure to do manual labor on behalf of the named deceased.

### Funerary Books and Coffin Texts

Funerary books were another important category of art fashioned for and placed in the burial. Spells to preserve the body, to provide sustenance for the deceased, and to empower him or her as a divinity in the after life made up these books. Beginning with the Pyramid Texts written on the walls of royal tombs in the Old Kingdom (including queens), those entombed might have some portion of the spells prescribed for afterlife with them.

The Coffin Texts were painted and carved into wooden coffins in the First Intermediate Period and through the Middle Kingdom but were accessible to the broad category of Egyptians who prepared for the afterlife. From the late Second Intermediate Period (1650-1550 BC) through the Ptolemaic era, the *Book of the Dead* could be part of one's tomb equipment, but probably it was always a very expensive element of it. Papyrus was an expensive commodity, and some were embellished with polychrome painted vignettes to accompany each chapter of the Book. Additional compositions were available to people in the Ptolemaic and Roman eras, such as the Book of Breathings or Traversing Eternity, and these might be alternatives to full Books of the Dead.

It will hardly surprise anyone that tombs were provided with actual food and drink for the afterlife. Yet these also were supplied with the recitation of offering texts carved or painted on walls, on statues, on stone reliefs, or small boxes and other tomb gifts. Visitors might speak the words seen on these tomb items, and magically the deceased received “a thousand of bread, beer, ox, fowl, linen, etc.” Although scenes of estate life appeared as early as the Fourth Dynasty (2613-2494 BC) on tomb walls, by the late Fifth Dynasty (2494-2345 BC), tomb owners were

dependent upon visitors to their tombs to recite spells for them. Entrance ways were embellished and decorated to encourage visitors. Artisans were employed to carve and paint elaborate processional scenes of offerers that were intended perhaps to inspire whoever entered. Funerary wall scenes that depicted musicians, dancers, and singers were among those designed to entertain and involve the friends and family who came into the tomb. The best crafted and well-proportioned figures would certainly have gained the attention of visitors more easily than cruder artworks. Thus the dependency of the deceased tomb owners upon the prayers of the living was another encouragement for high quality artistic production.

### **Personal Tomb Objects**

Among the more varied objects placed in tombs were personal items used during the tomb owner's lifetime. Furniture — chairs, stools, beds, and clothing chests — was stored in the burial shaft, together with linen sheets, lamps, equipment for personal adornment, writing implements, and even amusements such as board games. For those whose lives had been affluent, the addition of such objects might be impressive in type and amount, but for those with lesser means such highly personal tomb deposits would have been far fewer. Occasionally the inclusion of "heirlooms" that could have been in the family for generations were added to the tomb goods, but in practice such valued pieces were probably retained for continued use or status. By the late New Kingdom (ca. 1100 BC), burial practices were changing to reflect more dire economic realities; large burial outfits, as well as decorated family tombs, became more rare. Tomb and cemetery violation was on an upswing, and the impetus to place a large proportion of one's personal wealth below ground — where it was no longer thought to be secure — was lessened.

Those funerary art works that were essential to effective afterlife remained part of burials through the end of pharaonic Egyptian culture. A wrapped mummy peppered with protective amulets, coffins, canopic jars (even when the viscera themselves might be placed within the mummy), and shabtis were a staple of internments until

the Ptolemaic era. Some form of the required offerings of "bread, beer, oxen, fowl, linen, and every good and pure thing," whether by inscription on the coffin or on a painted wood figure of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris — intended to identify with and ensure the resurrection of the blessed deceased — was also an important addition.

In the final centuries of ancient Egyptian burial practices, mummification and some sort of coffin or cartonnage remained of primary importance, but other ritual objects did not. Families often participated in associations that sponsored funerals and proper rituals for the deceased and supported a group tomb location, perhaps influencing the decrease in burial items. However, it is interesting that in Roman era Egypt, the deposit of personal objects — mirrors, combs, and small jewel boxes — became more common again, perhaps reflecting a meditation on the loss of life. Although the Egyptian tradition of "taking it with you" had greatly changed since the earlier days of the pyramid builders and the great elites of the New Kingdom, it was still true that through the carefully written and illustrated funerary books and the rituals recited and left with the mummy, the afterlife, always available, was magical still.

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