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Das Heilige und die Ware
Zum Spannungsfeld von Religion und Ökonomie

Herausgegeben von Martin Fitzenreiter



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The Functional Materialism of Death in Ancient Egypt: A Case Study of Funerary Materials from the Ramesside Period¹

KATHLYN M. COONEY

From very early on, Egyptian didactic literature stresses the necessity of preparing objects for death, in the form of tombs and coffins for the mummified body.² Intense and systematic material preparation for the afterlife mirrors a deep psychological preparation for one's inevitable death. But material creation also reveal socioeconomic agendas, providing opportunities to display funerary objects before an audience both in the context of preparation and in the eventual burial rites. Traditional Egyptian funerary practices were expensive, but rarely do we consider the costs of these activities to Egyptian individuals and communities, perhaps because our fascination with religious funerary belief systems has suppressed discussion of the economic aspects. This paper presents a contextual approach to Egyptian funerary materialism, connecting the socioeconomic concerns of prestige and display with the personal ideological concerns of transition to the next world. The focus is a case study of funerary material, particularly coffins, of the Ramesside Period and Twenty-first Dynasty (approximately 1300-900 BCE).

Funerary objects, especially coffins, are multi-functional, holding social, economic and ideological meanings simultaneously.³ They play overlapping

and sometimes conflicting roles, including but not limited to: 1) protection of the body and the provision of surplus materiality for eternity, 2) acting as transformative magical aids for the soul on its dangerous journey into the afterlife, 3) creating a material means of pulling the dead into the sphere of the living, thus making offerings and communication possible, 4) transferring, or even enhancing, the wealth and status of the deceased from this life to the next and 5) granting prestige to the living family members in the context of public and socially competitive funerary rituals. All of these functions reinforced sociocultural pressure to purchase the most impressive array of funerary equipment - to the very limits of one's financial ability. During a coffin's commission and production, it functioned as a commodity that was to be exchanged from maker to user. During mummification rites, the opening of the mouth ceremonies, and other protective and transformative funerary rituals, the object received additional perceived value as a religiously charged piece, surrounding a dead body with active apotropaic spells and images. I suggest the term *functional materialism* in this paper to describe a cultural mechanism at work in a hierarchical society, encouraging expenditure of economic surplus for socioeconomically and religiously charged material objects in which multiple, interacting ritual/prestige purposes are embodied concurrently.

1 This paper was originally presented for the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, workshop "Das Heilige und die Ware" organized by Martin Fitzenreiter. I would like to thank J. Brett McClain, David Warburton, Violaine Chauvet and Neil Crawford for careful and critical reading of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Martin Fitzenreiter, Stefan Grunert, Ben Haring, and Joachim Quack for their useful comments during the workshop.

2 For example see the Instruction of Hardjedef: "Make good your dwelling in the graveyard. Make worthy your station in the West. Given that death humbles us, given that life exalts us, the house of death is for life." For this translation, see Lichtheim, M., *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley and London 1975): 58.

3 Culture has often been separated by economists and anthropologists into three different but intersecting parts: the ideological, the social, and the technological (Marx, K.,

Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (New York 1906); Flannery, K.V. (ed.), *Archaeological systems theory and early Mesoamerica* (Washington, D.C. 1968); Flannery, K.V., "The cultural evolution of civilizations," *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 3 (1972) :399-426.)

For another useful division of culture into four types (ideological, economic, political, and military), see Mann, M., *The Sources of Social Power, volume I: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge 1986). Following Mann, I could argue that a coffin holds ideological, economic, and political power simultaneously.

The mechanism of functional materialism attempts to explain the influence of materiality in the context of social inequality. The mechanism drove variations in forms, styles and ritual activity, as opposed to simply seeing material objects as utensils of a rigid religious system. Functional materialism places the object, and more specifically the acquisition and use of the object, at the center of cultural-religious-socioeconomic dynamics and negotiations. Ancient Egyptians made choices about their funerary art, choices that were in part driven by economic factors and social enculturation. These material choices were key in forming the makers' and buyers' understanding about the value of their funerary art, in turn affecting choices about ritual emphasis.⁴ The creation of funerary material, and by extension, the rituals of which these objects were a part, were driven significantly by socioeconomic ability and status. The functional materialism of death had dynamic consequences, spurring conspicuous consumption, high volume production, competition, ritual adaptation, emulation, innovation, taste change, theft, and usurpation throughout the millennia. This is not to suggest that economic determinism is the prime mover in taste change and funerary practice. Religious desires, intellectual trends, political events, and even the influence of non-Egyptian cultural elements played important roles in style, taste, textual content, emphasis, and adaptation in funerary practice, even within the narrow confines of the Ramesside period, but socioeconomic influences must be heavily weighed in this equation.

The Role of Materiality and the Importance of Objects in Funerary Practice

1) The Funerary Object

The funerary materialism of death began with the corpse – an object which could be preserved easily in the dry Egyptian sands but which was ideally

4 For archaeological studies linking funerary materials with negotiation of ritual activity, see, for example Renfrew, C., "Varna and the Emergence of Wealth in Prehistoric Europe," in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*: 141-168; Shennan, S.J., "Ideology, Change, and the European Early Bronze Age" in I. Hodder (ed.), *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (Cambridge 1982): 155-161.

mummified⁵ and contained in a coffin which transformed a decaying corpse into an eternal, purified, and sacred vessel for the soul, thus securing a material presence in the world of the living.⁶ The preserved mummy allowed a magical-religious transformation aided by its material form, but mummification also required economic investment, which occurred within a system of socioeconomic inequality.

The coffin launched the deceased into the next life with his or her social position intact or even enhanced. These transformative and continuative powers were provided in the form of a physical manifestation that could be seen and touched in funerary rituals. Coffins acted in conjunction with a host of other funerary arts, including decorated

5 For the most part, proper mummification was only practiced by the elite. For example, the Deir el Medina mummies in the coffins of royal artisan *Sn-nqm* and the *Tst* in the Cairo museum are poorly embalmed, even though the organs were removed, strongly suggesting that, in this craftsmen's village, bodies of the dead were prepared in the home and not sent to embalming workshops. The bodies were prepared in some way because flesh and skin still remains on the corpses. Unmummified bodies placed into a tomb usually decay to a bare skeleton. It is sometimes mentioned in the west Theban documentation that Deir el Medina workmen are excused from work "to wrap" or "to mummify" someone (*hr wt h*) for burial (O. BM EA 5634), suggesting that this status group could not usually afford professional embalming, but often had to do the job themselves. Workmen were let off work for burials (*kr*s) quite frequently (O. Cairo 25506, vs. 3; O. Cairo 25510, 4; O. Cairo 25783, 26; O. Cairo 25784, 3; O. Varille 26, 8-9), indicating that the entire village was meant to be present at such an event. See also Janssen, J.J., "Absence From Work by the Necropolis Workmen of Thebes," *SAK* 8 (1980): 127-152, especially 139-140.

For literature on mummification in general, see Adams, B., *Egyptian Mummies* (London 1984); Ikram, S. and A. Dodson, *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt: Equipping the Dead for Eternity* (London 1998); Rakita, G.F.M. and J.E. Buikstra, "Corrupting Flesh: Reexamining Hertz's Perspective on Mummification and Cremation," in Rakita, G.F.M., J.E. Buikstra, L.A. Beck and S.R. Williams (eds.), *Interacting with the Dead: Perspectives on Mortuary Archaeology for the New Millennium* (Tallahassee 2005): 97-106; Shore, A.F., "Human and Divine Mummification," in A.B. Lloyd (ed.), *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society Presented to J. Gwyn Griffith* (London 1992): 226-228; Troy, L., "Creating a god: the Mummification Ritual," *Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology* 4 (1993): 55-81.

6 Baines, J. and P. Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society: Respect, Formalism, Neglect," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 2, 1 (2002): 5-36.

architectural spaces, funerary texts, shabti figurines, and canopic equipment.

Functional materialism proposes a complex blend of the socioeconomic and the religious; its focus is the religiously charged *thing* – a physical object that is an essential foundation of the ritual value that surrounds it. Sustained corporeality was essential to Egyptian death rituals, and a coffin was a valuable item because it did not decay like the corpse. Most New Kingdom coffins related the deceased with Osiris, a god associated with seasonal rebirth and the sprouting of grain after planting. The dead were therefore linked with cyclical Osirian regeneration within the context of the Egyptian agricultural economy, equating the rebirth of the deceased with the ability to grow and harvest new crops.⁷ So-called Osiris Beds – troughs in the shape of Osiris and filled with seeded earth – were placed in New Kingdom royal tombs.⁸ The sprouts of grain produced by such an object represent rebirth, but also the most basic Egyptian surplus commodity. The economic and the ideological were mutually dependent in the ancient Egyptian worldview, and this is not surprising: the mechanism of functional materialism demanded that the Egyptians embody rebirth and transformation within material objects like coffins. Objectification and corporeality played vital and dynamic roles in Egyptian death practices, ritual, and funerary belief systems, not to mention temple activity.

Spending by the elite on funerary arts also served as a form of political and socioeconomic maintenance, showing publicly who belonged where and why. Some high elite Ramesside funerary equipment, particularly granite sarcophagi, may have been gifts from the king himself, as granite finds its origins in a royal quarrying monopoly.⁹ Elite coffins and tomb

chapels made sociopolitical statements: officials always included their numerous titles, family connections, as well as their most illustrious achievements, linking themselves to wealthy state institutions and to higher members of society, particularly the royal family.¹⁰ Ultimately, the larger Theban necropolis served as a repository of vast wealth, which was actually re-used as an economic prop to support political might in Thebes in the economic downturn of the Twenty-first Dynasty,¹¹ but more will be said about this reuse later.

2) The Post-Ritual Power of the Funerary Object

Material preparation for death not only secured socioeconomic place and prestige, but also a material existence for the deceased and a corporeal link between the realms of the living and the dead. Well-known underworld texts¹² indicate that a coffin was perceived by the ancient Egyptians to be a vessel of magical-religious safety as well as a conduit for communication. In one unusual text, O. Louvre 698,

Nubia Setjau in the British Museum (EA 78; Bierbrier, M.L. (ed.), *Hieroglyphic texts from Egyptian stelae, etc. in the British Museum, Part 10* (London 1982): 20, pls. 42-43) and the sarcophagus of High Priest of Amen Bakenkhonsu (M13864; P. Bienkowski and A. Tooley., *Gifts of The Nile: Ancient Egyptian Arts and Crafts in Liverpool Museum* (London 1995): 72; pl.111).

¹⁰ Although Ramesside private tombs contain more religious scenes than so-called “scenes of daily life” compared to Eighteenth Dynasty chapels, they still illustrate the social place of the owner and his family. For information on the scene content in Ramesside tomb chapels and decorated burial chambers in the Theban region, see B. Porter and R.L.B. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings. I. The Theban Necropolis, Part 1. Private Tombs* (Oxford 1985); Hodel-Hoernes, S., *Life and Death in Ancient Egypt: Scenes from Private Tombs in New Kingdom Thebes* (Ithaca 2000); Kampp-Seyfried, F., “Overcoming Death – The Private Tombs of Thebes,” in R. Schulz and M. Seidel (eds.), *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs* (Cologne 1998): 249-263; Weeks, K., *The Illustrated Guide to Luxor: Tombs, Temples, and Museums* (Cairo 2005): 460-509.

¹¹ Reeves, N., *Valley of the Kings: The Decline of a Royal Necropolis* (London 1990); Reeves, N. and R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Valley of the Kings: Tombs and Treasures of Egypt's Greatest Pharaohs* (London 1996): 204-205.

¹² Faulkner, R.O., *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Oxford 1973); Faulkner, R.O., *The Book of the Dead: A Collection of Spells* (New York 1972).

7 For example, see chapter 124 in the Book of the Dead in which the deceased is justified and granted a plot of land to sow in the afterlife: “My soul has built an enclosed place in Busiris, and I am flourishing in Pe; I plow my fields in my own shape, and my dom-palm is that upon which Min is.” Faulkner, R., O. Goelet, and C. Andrews, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day. The First Authentic Presentation of the Complete Papyrus of Ani* (San Francisco 1994): pl. 24.

8 Raven, M., “Corn Mummies,” *OMRO* 63 (1982): 7-38; Wiedemann, A., “Osiris Végétant,” *Le Muséon* 3 (1903): 111-123.

9 For example, see two Nineteenth Dynasty granite sarcophagi dating to the reign of Ramses II: the sarcophagus of Viceroy of

a letter to the dead¹³ of the Twenty-first Dynasty, the deceased is addressed not by name and not directly, but instead through the agency of the coffin container. The text begins:

O, noble chest of the Osiris, the Chantress of Amun, Ikhtay, who rests under you. Listen to me, Send the message and say to her, since you are close to her: "How are you doing? How are you?"¹⁴

This man used his wife's coffin as a communicative tool in his letter because it had been ritually charged in funerary ceremonies. Burial rites awakened the dead and transformed him or her into an Osiris within the coffin, able to take on the challenges of rebirth.¹⁵ Thereafter, the coffin also functioned as a vessel for the deceased and as a conduit for the living. The ritually charged thing could therefore be understood as a channel between the world of the living and the realm of the dead.¹⁶ Furthermore, the coffin could be understood to allow the dead to keep a place in this world and influence events. The coffin and the rituals that surrounded it were essential elements in this fundamental transformation.

Even the vocabulary used to identify the "coffin" varies depending on the context and genre,

13 For letters to the dead, see Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society"; Jasnow, R. and G. Vittmann, "An Abnormal Hieratic Letter to the Dead (P. Brooklyn 37.1799 E)," *Enchoria* 19/20 (1992-1993): 23-43; Wente, E.F., *Letters from Ancient Egypt* (Atlanta 1990): 210-220.

14 Frandsen, P.J., "The Letter to Ikhtay's Coffin: O. Louvre Inv. No. 698," in R.J. Demarée and A. Egberts (eds.), *Village Voices* (Leiden 1992): 31-50. Note Frandsen's discussion of the archaic word *fdt* chest and its association with the meaning "coffin" in formal religious texts.

15 For the transformation of the deceased into an Osiris by means of the coffin, see Cooney, K.M., "The Fragmentation of the Female: Re-gendered Funerary Equipment as a Means of Rebirth," in: C. Graves-Brown, (ed.), *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt*, (Swansea 2007); Cooney, K.M., "Where does the Masculine Begin and the Feminine End? The Merging of the Two Genders in Egyptian Coffins during the Ramesside Period," in: B. Heining, (ed.), *Wahrnehmung der Geschlechterdifferenz in religiösen Symbolsystemen*, *Geschlecht – Symbol – Religion series*, (Münster 2007).

16 One of the most evocative material forms thought to link the world of the living and the world of the dead is the false door, used at least by the Old Kingdom. See Wiebach, S., *Die Ägyptische Scheintür* (Hamburg 1981); Haeny, G., "Scheintür," in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (LÄ) V (Wiesbaden 1984): 563-571.

suggesting that the coffin was perceived as performing distinctly different roles in the socioeconomic and religious sectors of culture. In this letter to the dead, O. Louvre 698, the coffin is formally and archaically referred to as a *fdt* chest, a word which finds its origins in the much older Coffin Texts,¹⁷ rather than as a *wr* coffin or *db3t* sarcophagus, words which were used in the west Theban non-literary texts, including receipts and records, as the main identifiers of body containers.¹⁸ In funerary texts, the language style and lexicography for funerary objects is different, fitting into the archaic grammar and vocabulary used in texts like the Book of the Dead. Older words such as *fdt*, *nb-ꜥnh*, or *krst* were used to name the object when the text focused on the ideological context of rebirth.¹⁹ This suggests that until the appropriate rituals were performed, the object remained a commodity. After the rituals, the role of the finished and decorated object changed, even though the form of the coffin itself did not.

Some texts explicitly tell us about the effectiveness of ritually charged objects in the realm of the dead. In the Middle Kingdom text "The Dispute between a Man and his *ba*" cited above, the man tell his *ba* soul how funerary objects and provisions will make his afterlife existence superior to those who have none:

If my *ba* listens to me [...], its heart in accord with me, it shall be happy. I shall make it reach the West like one who is in his tomb, whose burial a survivor tends. I shall make a shelter over your corpse, so that you will make envious another *ba* in weariness.... But if you lead me toward death in this manner, you will not find a place

17 See Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*. Translated from the German by D. Lorton (Ithaca and London 2005): 269 and n. 30 on p. 460.

18 See the lexicography chapter in the forthcoming book: Cooney, K.M., *The Cost of Death: The Social and Economic Value of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Art in the Ramesside Period*, appearing in 2007 with Egyptologische Uitgaven, Leiden University. This book is a revision of my doctoral dissertation: Cooney, K.M., *The Value of Private Funerary Art in Ramesside Period Egypt*, Ph.D Diss. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2002).

19 It is true that the Book of the Dead links to older Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts and that archaic vocabulary should be expected, but even when new chapters were added in the Ramesside Period and later, the same archaic words were used to identify the body container. Clearly, one set of vocabulary was thought appropriate for funerary texts, while another was used in practical, socioeconomic texts.

on which to rest in the West. Be patient, my *ba*, my brother, until my heir comes, one who will make offerings, who will stand at the tomb on the day of burial, having prepared the bier of the graveyard.²⁰

In this text, the man is anxious about dying without the necessary provisions, strongly suggesting that materiality and the luxuries they afforded followed the deceased into the afterlife after they had been activated in funerary rituals. In the Book of the Dead, prosperity and agency in the next world is often linked to specific objects. For example, the rubric to chapter 72 tells us that the activated coffin and the spells written on it allow provisions and transformative powers for the deceased:

As for him who knows this book on earth or it is put in writing on the coffin, it is my word that he shall go out into the day in any shape that he desires and shall go into his place without being turned back, and there shall be given to him bread and beer and portion of meat from upon the altar of Osiris.²¹

This funerary text tells us that the coffin continued to perform multiple functions after the interment of the deceased: it was protective, transformative, and it granted the dead economic powers as well, ensuring food and drink in the afterlife realm. Smaller objects were useful to the dead too: many other Book of the Dead spells include instructions about the specific amulet required to make a particular spell efficacious, leading us to conclude that functional materialism lent the dead efficacy and a variety of powers in the afterlife realm.²² It is the

ritual sanctification of the coffin that connected the economic and religious spheres – so that the funerary object was able to perform multiple functions simultaneously. After the embalming and burial rituals, the role of the material form became transcendent and communicative while still retaining its socioeconomic meaning and power. In fact, the socioeconomic value of funerary art was enhanced by the public and private ritual activity, because objects could function both in the world of the living and the dead as a transitional, intercessory object – and thus its social value in both realms was increased.

This functional materialism of death assumes an economic context – one that began with the corpse and its preparation and extended to other objects that would protect the corpse, including the coffin, mummy masks, and canopic jars. Connecting to the afterlife in such a *material* way required economic surplus because death and the passage of time imply decay and transition. If the mummified body suffered from damage or even complete destruction or loss, the ritually activated coffin could act as a surplus body. But the coffin represented an insurance policy that only the rich could afford. The question at hand is therefore: how was the production of funerary objects, and even the ritual activities that demanded them, affected by the need to *pay* for transformative and material preservation in the afterlife?

The Negotiation of Functional Materialism: A Ramesside Case Study

1) The Prices

Functional materialism ideally required a perfectly mummified corpse and a lavishly decorated coffin set, but only few Egyptians could afford such treatment. This is not to say that the mechanism of functional materialism applied only to those with the means to fund an elite burial; the system permeated all levels of society. Every individual hoped to include objects in their afterlife rituals and burials, and there was thus a wide range of value in funerary arts. Non-literary records from western Thebes documenting coffin prices represent the richest body of evidence concerning the payment for funerary goods. Coffin records are the focus of this study for two reasons: first, after preparation of the body, the coffin was the

20 Lines 39-55. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume I*: 163-169.

21 Faulkner, Goelet, and Andrews, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*: pl. 6.

22 For example, see Chapter 89, a spell which allows the *bꜣ* soul rejoin the corpse in the necropolis but requires a material object to be effective: “The Sacred Bark will be joyful and the Great God will proceed in peace when you allow this soul of mine to ascend vindicated to the gods ... May it see my corpse, may it rest on my mummy, which will never be destroyed or perish. To be spoken over a human-headed bird of gold inlaid with semi-precious stones and laid on the breast of the deceased.” Faulkner, Goelet, and Andrews, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*: pl. 17.

Of course, materiality is useful in religious-magical practice for the living as well. See in particular Ritner, R.K., *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago 1993).

most desirable and the most central element of funerary equipment, and thus prices for these items dominate the corpus. There were additional costs for other funerary arts, such as underworld papyri and architectural construction and decoration, but only few could afford these additional luxuries. Second, the complex means of production has created a data set of textual evidence documenting the creation of coffins, from raw materials to final product, all of which can be correlated with the remaining Ramesside coffin artifacts themselves. I have collected 168 prices for different coffin types in Ramesside non-literary texts from western Thebes (see Table 1); they represent a wide range in perceived value of funerary objects, indicative of the social inequality within Egyptian society, even among those who could afford coffins in the first place.²³

Table 1: Funerary objects and their Prices

Object Category	Average of all Prices	Average of Secure Prices	Median of All Prices	Median of all Secure Prices	High Price(s)	Low Price(s)	Average without High and Low
<i>wt</i> anthropoid coffin	31.57 <i>dbn</i>	29.67 <i>dbn</i>	25 <i>dbn</i>	25 <i>dbn</i>	220 (-x?) & 145 <i>dbn</i>	4 (?) & 8 <i>dbn</i>	24.61 <i>dbn</i>
<i>wt</i> decoration	10.5 <i>dbn</i>	12.14 <i>dbn</i>	10 <i>dbn</i>	10 <i>dbn</i>	65 <i>dbn</i>	2 & 2.5 <i>dbn</i>	9.38 <i>dbn</i>
<i>wt</i> construction	22 <i>dbn</i>	35.66 <i>dbn</i>	10.25 <i>dbn</i>	15 <i>dbn</i>	80 <i>dbn</i>	9 (?) <i>dbn</i>	13 <i>dbn</i>
<i>wt</i> carving	4 <i>dbn</i>	2.5 <i>dbn</i>	2 <i>dbn</i>	2 <i>dbn</i>	10 (?) <i>dbn</i>	1 <i>dbn</i>	3 <i>dbn</i>
<i>wt</i> wood	4.2 <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>	1 (?) <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>
<i>mn-nḥ</i> / <i>wt</i> ʿ outer coffin	37.5 <i>dbn</i>	40.8 <i>dbn</i>	32.5 <i>dbn</i>	32.5 <i>dbn</i>	95 <i>dbn</i>	15 (?) <i>dbn</i>	31.6 <i>dbn</i>
<i>mn-nḥ</i> / <i>wt</i> ʿ decoration	16.31 <i>dbn</i>	16.25 <i>dbn</i>	17.5 <i>dbn</i>	12.5 <i>dbn</i>	35 <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>	15.08 <i>dbn</i>
<i>wt</i> šri inner coffin decoration	16.83 <i>dbn</i>	21.25 <i>dbn</i>	9 <i>dbn</i>	10 <i>dbn</i>	60 <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>	9 <i>dbn</i>
<i>swḥt</i> mummy board	25.9 <i>dbn</i>	25.9 <i>dbn</i>	22.5 <i>dbn</i>	22.5 <i>dbn</i>	34 <i>dbn</i>	15 <i>dbn</i>	26.25 <i>dbn</i>
<i>swḥt</i> decoration	5 <i>dbn</i>	6.5 <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>	5 <i>dbn</i>	14 <i>dbn</i>	3 (?) <i>dbn</i>	4.64 <i>dbn</i>
<i>ytit</i> funerary object	23.3 <i>dbn</i>	23.3 <i>dbn</i>	20 <i>dbn</i>	20 <i>dbn</i>	30 <i>dbn</i>	20 <i>dbn</i>	20 <i>dbn</i>
<i>ytit</i> decoration	10.1 <i>dbn</i>	11.5 <i>dbn</i>	10 <i>dbn</i>	12 <i>dbn</i>	15 <i>dbn</i>	5 (?) <i>dbn</i>	10.8 <i>dbn</i>

The price of a coffin was determined by a number of variables, some clearly expressed in the textual material, some not, including: the cost of materials like wood and paint, the cost of the craftsman's time, the reputation and skill level of the maker, the length and quality of the religious texts to be included, the types of scenes painted on the coffin, and the quality level of the craftsmanship.²⁴ On the recto of the

23 For more information on these prices, see the forthcoming Cooney, *The Cost of Death* and Cooney, *The Value of Private Funerary Art*.

24 Inflation may also have played a part in price variation, but since most prices come from the 19th – mid 20th Dynasties,

receipt, O. Turin 57368,²⁵ for example, the cost for a *wt* coffin is 145 copper *dbn* – a very high price (with 1 *dbn* equaling 91 grams):²⁶

List of the silver which the scribe of the tomb *Hri* gave: 1 *wt* coffin of tamarisk wood making 80 (*dbn*), the decoration and that which was varnished making 65 copper *dbn*, a *swḥt* mummy board [...] making 20 (*dbn*). Receiving from him: 1 ox making 100 *dbn*. Receiving from him: another ox making 100(+x?) *dbn*, 1 smooth *dšyt* cloak making 20 (*dbn*), Making 43 *dbn*, a smooth *ift* sheet making 8 (*dbn*), the *swḥt* mummy board making 15 (*dbn*).

The construction of this *wt* coffin cost 80 *dbn*, a substantial investment for a piece without any decoration or finishing, compared to the median (most common) price for the same type of coffin at 25 *dbn* (see Table 1), and it must be accounted for in the mention of *isy*-wood, or “tamarisk.” The fact that tamarisk was noted for a coffin of such expense

before severe grain inflation, I am not concerned that inflation will skew the data set, at least for the purposes at hand.

25 Lopez, J., *Ostraca ieratici*, 4 vols. (Milan 1978-84): III, 23, pl. 114; Kitchen, K.A., *Ramesside Inscriptions: Historical and Biographical* (Oxford 1975-1990): VII, 322.

26 It should also be stated that these prices expressed in copper *dbn* are value equivalencies, rather than actual prices paid in quantities of copper. The “money” changed hands in the form of commodities, which were set equal to particular amounts of copper, silver, grain, or even oil. It should also be pointed out that the average Deir el Medina artisan earned about 11 *dbn* a month, so that this coffin represents more than 13 months wages, a significant expense even for a state official. See Cooney, *The Cost of Death*, forthcoming.

seems to indicate that this type of wood was economically valued and that expensive material must account for at least part of the unusually high price (see Table 2).²⁷ Another record already cited above, O. Ashmolean Museum HO 183,²⁸ provides more information about the value of expensive materials, particularly green frit²⁹ and yellow orpiment pigment:³⁰

List of all the commissions which the workman *P3-R^c-h^tp* did for *Imn-m-di.i-r^c-nb*: 1 *wt* coffin, varnished, its *knh* body part (?) being green and its *nš*i part (?) being yellow orpiment making 40 *dbn*, precious wood: [...], 1 *swht* mummy board, varnished and decorated making 25 *dbn*.

The price for the finished *wt* coffin in this text is 40 *dbn* – 15 *dbn* higher than the median price of 25 *dbn* – probably because of the inclusion of these expensive pigments.

Table 2: Examples of Valuable Materials in West Theban Ramesside Texts

	Price	Noted Material
O. Ashmolean Museum HO 183, 3-4 rt.	<i>wt</i> coffin = 40 <i>dbn</i> final price	<i>w3d^w</i> - green paint <i>kn^w</i> yellow orpiment
O. Berlin P 14366, 1-5	<i>wt</i> coffin = 220 (-x) <i>dbn</i> , price reconstructed	<i>nbsi</i> -wood ('Christ's Thorn')
O. Lady Franklin, 2	<i>mn-^cnh</i> coffin = 50 <i>dbn</i>	<i>psdt</i> -wood
O. Turin 57368, 2-3 rt.	<i>wt</i> coffin = 80 <i>dbn</i> for construction, 65 <i>dbn</i> for decoration	<i>isy</i> -wood ('tamarisk')

In this and other Ramesside texts mentioning the preparation, purchase and selling of funerary goods, coffins are presented in an economic context as priced commodities, not as sacred objects whose powers are described in formalized religious language. In workshop records and receipts, a coffin is mentioned in a list with other commodities, including livestock and clothing, usually accompanied by a price of some kind, the names of buyers and sellers, and if we are lucky, the writer also included additional technical information about crafting techniques and the expense of particular materials. These non-literary texts stress material value, in particular types of wood and paint and certain craftwork techniques (see Table 2). They also mention the names of craftsmen, the names of buyers, and the details of the trade. The means of production are the focus in these texts. The material nature of the commodities changing hands is carefully recorded in terms of price, type, and maker. But the *quality level* of carpentry and painting is not mentioned in any of these texts. The price gives only a vague indication

²⁷To strengthen this argument, in my examination of Ramesside coffins, tamarisk was found in only one place – in the inner coffin of the high value set of *Hnwt-mhyt* in the British Museum (EA 48001). See Taylor, J.H., "The Burial Assemblage of Henuhmehyt: Inventory, Date and Provenance," in W.V. Davies (ed.), *Studies in Egyptian Antiquities: A Tribute to T.G.H. James*, British Museum Occasional Paper 123 (London 1999): 59-72, pls. IX-XIV. Imported cedar was used to build the outer coffin and mummy mask, and the entire set was richly gilded, certainly testament to the value ancient Egyptians placed in this native wood. The mention of tamarisk in Deir el Medina receipts sets it apart from other native Egyptian woods, like acacia and sycamore.

²⁸ Unpublished, after Černý Notebooks 45.85 and 107.16, with permission of the Griffith Institute.

²⁹ According to Lee and Quirke, Egyptian green pigment "is made in reducing conditions by mixing similar ingredients

as for Egyptian blue, but with higher lime, and lower copper content" (in Nicholson, P.T. and I. Shaw (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technologies* (Cambridge 2000): 112). They also note that synthetic green pigments were rare or non-existent before the Eighteenth Dynasty and are secondary formations of Egyptian blue. Naturally occurring malachite pigment may have also been used for green paints, but its existence is contested by some who believe it to be degraded artificial green frits.

³⁰ Orpiment is a naturally occurring arsenic sulfide of light yellow color with coarse particles that give the paint a sparkly appearance (Nicholson and Shaw, *Ancient Egyptian Materials*: 115-116). The Max-Planck project concluded that pure orpiment paint was found only on New Kingdom royal sarcophagi and the tomb walls of Thutmose IV, and that when orpiment occurred in the private sector it was combined with yellow ochre paint, generally by layering one layer of yellow ochre. then a layer of orpiment, and another

of quality. The name and title of a particular craftsman may have provided a means for locals to judge the perceived quality of the piece, but modern readers have little insight about the reputation of a given craftsman, given the lack of contextual information in the documents. To understand differences in quality, we must look at the Ramesside coffins themselves.

2) The Coffins

The functional materialism of death demanded that the elite, wealthy Egyptians purchase an array of funerary materials, and the coffin was the most central piece. Relying on a data set of over 60 Ramesside coffins, I conducted systematic analysis and appraisal of each quality component of value, including the wood, carpentry, plaster relief, paint, varnish, additional materials of value such as gilding or inlay, hieroglyphic inscriptions, and draftsmanship.³¹ This analysis allowed me to separate the data set of Ramesside coffins into five distinct groups (A, B, C, D, and E), each characterized by a different set of aesthetic values and each participating in the system of functional materialism differently, dependent on varying socioeconomic abilities and values.

No one could afford the ideal coffin set. Lack of funds necessitated negotiation and adaptation by those without the means for an ideal set of funerary equipment. Buyers negotiated their desire for religiously charged objects (mummy, coffin, tomb, etc.) with their ability to pay for them, resulting in funerary arts spanning a range of prices and quality levels.³² It is well known to forensic scientists that

of ochre to provide the brightest possible color (Blom-Böer, I., "Zusammensetzung altägyptischer Farbpigmente und ihre Herkunftslagerstätten in Zeit und Raum," *OMRO* 74 (1994): 55-107). See also Colinart, S., "Analysis of Inorganic Yellow Colour in Ancient Egyptian Painting," in W.V. Davies (ed.), *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt: 1-4* and McCarthy, B., "Technical Analysis of Reds and Yellows in the Tomb of Suemniwet, Theban Tomb 92," in W.V. Davies (ed.), *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt* (London 2001): 17-21, who documents the use of an ochre / orpiment mix over huntite for an even brighter yellow color.

31 For the full coffin analysis and for complete explanations and justifications of these coffin groups, see Cooney, *The Value of Private Funerary Art* and the forthcoming Cooney, *The Cost of Death*.

32 For a similar range of quality within the Middle Kingdom archaeological context, see Richards, J., *Society and Death in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge 2005).

there was a wide range in mummification quality, some corpses fully embalmed and others simply washed and wrapped. Even Herodotus discussed the mummification methods of the ancient Egyptians within the context of the marketplace, including a discussion of differing qualities and expenses.³³ It was no different with coffins.

In summary, group A is characterized by the highest material and aesthetic craft quality for private sector funerary arts; it is represented by the gilded coffin set made of cedar and tamarisk belonging to the lady *Hnwt-mhyt*³⁴ (see Fig. 1). Group B includes coffins of high material value including gilding and inlay, but lower craft value, particularly poor quality draftsmanship; it is represented best by the coffin sets of *T3-mwt-njrt*³⁵ and *T3-k3yr*³⁶ (see Figs. 2-3). Group C

33 *Histories*, II: 85-89. Marincola, J. (trans.), Herodotus, *The Histories*, (Oxford 1972): 129.

34 For this coffin set in the British Museum, see Taylor, J.H., "The Burial Assemblage of Henutmehyt: Inventory, Date and Provenance," in W.V. Davies (ed.), *Studies in Egyptian Antiquities: A Tribute to T.G.H. James*, British Museum Occasional Paper 123 (London 1999): 59-72, pls. IX-XIV; Budge, W., *British Museum: A Guide to the First, Second and Third Egyptian Rooms* (London 1924): 82-83, pl. XIX; Budge, W., *The Dwellers of the Nile* (London 1926): 280, pl. X; Budge, W., *The Mummy: A Handbook of Egyptian Funerary Archaeology*, 2nd ed. (London 1925): 212; Edwards, I.E.S., *A Handbook to the Egyptian Mummies and Coffins Exhibited in the British Museum* (London 1938): 35, pl. XI; James, T.G.H., *An Introduction to Ancient Egypt* (London 1979): 165, pl. 12; Niwinski, A., *Twenty-first Dynasty Coffins from Thebes: Chronological and Typological Studies* (Mainz am Rhein 1988): 12, n. 34, 154; Potts, T., *Civilization: Ancient Treasures from the British Museum* (Canberra 1990): 88-91; Robins, G., *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, Mass. 1993): 147, fig. 60; Shorter, A.W., *Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt* (London 1932): 111-112, pl. XXVII; Spencer, A.J., *Death in Ancient Egypt* (Harmondsworth 1982): 178, pl. 25.

35 For publication of this coffin set in the Louvre, see Boreaux, C., *Musée National du Louvre: Département des Antiquités Égyptiennes. Guide catalogue sommaire* (Paris 1932): I, 192; Niwinski, A., "Sarg NR- SpZt," in *LÄ*, vol. V: 434-468, esp. 462-463, n. 26; Niwinski, A., *Twenty-first Dynasty Coffins*, 166; Dunand, F., and R. Lichtenberg, *Les momies: Un voyage dans l'éternité* (Paris 1991): 64; Colinart, S., M. Darowska, E. Delange and A. Portal, "Un champ d'observations: La restauration des sarcophages au musée du Louvre," *BSFÉ* 139 (1997): 18-38 23-24, fig. 4; Vandier, J., *Musée du Louvre: Le Département des Antiquités Égyptiennes, Guide sommaire* (Paris 1952): 68-69; Ziegler, C., "Champollion en Égypte: Inventaire des Antiquités Rapportées au Musée du



Fig. 1: Group A. The Coffin Set of *Hnwt-mhyt*, British Museum EA 48001 (photo by author).



Fig. 2: Group B. The Coffin Set of *T3-mwt-nfrt*, Musée du Louvre N2631, N2571, N2623, and N2620 (photo by author).

is characterized by the opposite – lower quality materials but higher quality artisanship; most of these coffins belong to artisans from Deir el Medina,³⁷ individuals who appreciated and had access to fine craftsmanship but who could not

Louvre,” in L. Limme and J. Strybol (eds.), *Aegyptus Museis Rediviva: Miscellanea in Honorem Hermann de Meulenaere* (Brussels 1993): 197-213, esp. 203, figs. 4-5.

36 For publication of this coffin set in the Liebieghaus, Frankfurt, see Geßler-Löhr, B., *Ägyptische Kunst im Liebieghaus* (Frankfurt am Main 1981): 25-27; Niwinski, *Twenty-first Dynasty Coffins*, 140; Bayer-Niemeier, E., B. Borg, G. Burkard, V. von Droste zu Hülshoff, D. Franke, B. Gessler-Löhr, D. Polz, H. Roeder, B. Schlick-Nolte, S. Seidlmayer, K.-J. Seyfried and H.-J. Thissen, *Skulptur, Malerei, Papyri und Särge, Liebieghaus Museum Alter Plastik Ägyptische Bildwerke III* (Melsungen 1993): 302-323.

37 For publication of Deir el Medina coffins of the Ramesside Period, especially from the intact Theban Tomb 1, see Toda, E. and G. Daressy, “La découverte et l’inventaire du tombeau de Sen-nezem,” *ASAE* 20 (1920): 145-160; Toda, E., “Son notem en Tebas: Inventario y textos de un sepulcro egipcio de la XX dinastia,” *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia* 10 (Madrid 1887): 91-148; Porter, B. and R.L.B. Moss (eds.), *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1960-), vol. I: 4; Desroches-Noblecourt, C., (ed.), *Ramsès le Grand, Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais*. Exhibition catalogue (Paris 1976); Hayes, W.C., *The Scepter of Egypt*, vol. II. (Cambridge, Mass. 1959): 414-417, figs. 264-265; Bruyère, B., *La tombe no. I de Sennedjem à Deir el Médineh*



Fig. 3: Group B. The Coffin Set of *T3-k3yt*, Frankfurt die Städtische Galerie Liebieghaus 1651 (photo by author).

(Cairo 1959); Shedid, A.G., *Das Grab des Sennedjem: Ein Künstlergrab der 19. Dynastie in Deir el Medineh*. Unter Mitarbeit von Anneliese Shedid (Mainz am Rhein 1994).



Fig. 4a: Group C. The Coffin of *Sn-nḏm*, Egyptian Museum Cairo, JE 27308, (photo by author).



Fig. 4b: Group C. The board of *Sn-nḏm*, Egyptian Museum Cairo JE 27301, JE 27308, JE 27309 (photo by author).

afford gilding (see Figs. 4-7). Group D includes coffins of much lower material and aesthetic craft quality; these are people who could barely scrape together the resources for one coffin. Group D is best represented by Ramesside coffins in the Saqqara cache of *Iw-rwd.f*³⁸ (see Fig. 8). Group E belongs to the Twentieth Dynasty and already exhibits some of the styles of the early Third Intermediate Period; a good example is the coffin of *ḥnt*³⁹ (see Fig. 9).

Functional Materialism and Ritual Emphasis

The real world costs of enacting complex belief systems led individuals to buy only the funerary objects that they could afford and to adapt those objects to perform in ritual activities in which these objects took center stage. As a result, objects informed choices about ritual emphasis. New

38 These Twentieth and Twenty-first Dynasty coffins were published in Raven, M., *The Tomb of Iurufef: A Memphite Official in the Reign of Ramesses II* (London and Leiden 1991). About seventy burials were found, but only 27 individuals were interred in anthropoid wooden coffins. The remaining bodies were wrapped in palm ribs mats, papyrus-rind coffers, or nothing at all. The discovery is very important for the purposes at hand as very few lower value coffins were preserved for the Ramesside Period, they being of little material and aesthetic value to collectors, dealers, and, until recently, even archaeologists.

39 This piece is on permanent loan to the Vatican from Dépôt du Pontificio Instituto Biblico, Roma. For publication, see Gasse, A., *Les sarcophages de la troisième période intermédiaire du Museo Gregoriano Egizio* (Città del Vaticano 1996): 148-155, pls. XXIII-XXIV; Walsem, van R., "Deir el Medina as the Place of Origin of the Coffin of Anet in the Vatican (Inv.: XIII.2.1, XIII.2.2)," in R.J. Demarée and A. Egberts (eds.), *Deir el Medina in the Third Millennium AD* (Leiden 2000): 337-349.

Kingdom scenes depicted on elite tomb chapel walls and Book of the Dead papyri are some of our best sources for the lengthy and complicated rituals that took place before the tomb, in their ideal form.⁴⁰ These scenes and texts tell us that complex opening of the mouth rituals⁴¹ were performed on the mummy – probably in the coffin – in front of the tomb entrance with an audience of onlookers. Some scholars conclude that the mummy in its mask was actually taken out of the coffin(s) upon reaching the tomb for the main set of opening of the mouth rituals,



Fig. 5: Group C. The Coffin Set of *Ty-nfrty*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, MMA 86.1.5 a-c. Fund from various donors, 1886. (photo by author).

40 For a thorough treatment of the funerary procession and ritual before the tomb, see Barthelmess, *Übergang ins Jenseits*: 35-55, 93-126. For a Deir el Medina example, see Bruyère, B., *Tombes thébaines de Deir el Médineh à décoration monochrome* (Cairo 1952): pl. VII. For textual treatment of the ritual texts associated with the Egyptian funeral, see Assmann, *Death and Salvation*: 299-329.

41 For the opening of the mouth ritual, see Fischer-Elfert, H.-W., *Die Vision von der Statue im Stein: Studien zum altägyptischen Mundöffnungsritual* (Heidelberg 1998); Otto, E., *Das ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual*. Ägyptische Abhandlungen 3 (Wiesbaden 1960); Barthelmess, P., *Der Übergang ins Jenseits in den thebansichen Beamtengräbern der Ramessidenzeit* (Heidelberg 1992: 93-120; Roth, A.M., "Fingers, Stars, and the 'Opening of the Mouth': the Nature and Function of the NTRWJ-blades," *JEA* 79 (1993): 57-79; Walsem, van R., "The *psš-kf*: an Investigation of an Ancient Egyptian Funerary Instrument," *OMRO* 59 (1978-9): 193-249.



Fig. 6: Group C. The Coffin Set of *Hnsw*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, MMA 86.1.1- 86.1.4. Fund from various donors, 1886. Sarcophagus in Cairo not shown (photo by author).



Fig. 7: Group C. The Coffin Set of *T3-m'kt*, Ägyptisches Museum Berlin 10832 (photo courtesy of the Ägyptisches Museum).

because depictions of these rituals in Theban tombs show mummy bandages and no obvious surface decoration of a coffin,⁴² but the depictions may also be interpreted as an archaic version of the inner anthropoid coffin.⁴³ According to both of these interpretations, the innermost pieces in a given coffin set would have been the most visible in funerary ritual as they are traditionally depicted, and this conclusion is supported by the analysis of groups A and B (see Figs. 1-3), in which the inner pieces, including the inner coffin, the mummy mask and perhaps also the lower mummy board, have higher material value and craft quality than the outer coffins in a given set. The choice to emphasize the value of the mask and inner coffin is even visible in the late Eighteenth Dynasty royal set of king Tutankhamen; only his innermost pieces (inner coffin and mummy mask) are solid gold with extensive inlay.⁴⁴ Thus, New Kingdom funerary rituals, as practiced by the *elite*, focused on the inner pieces in a coffin set, partly because they were the objects closest to the Osirianized corpse and partly because these objects were the main focus of transformative rituals when correctly performed according to funerary texts.⁴⁵ Analysis has shown that the inner coffins, mummy masks and mummy boards in groups A and B were decorated with the most valuable materials and labor intensive craftwork such as openwork carving, plaster relief, and inlay. It is therefore likely that these smaller items were focal points in the funerary rites of these elite individuals within their socioeconomic group's understanding and demands.

Presumably, the opening of the mouth ritual would have been performed on all coffins and sarcophagi⁴⁶ – whether the individual could afford only one or an entire set – ostensibly with the

deceased inside it, thus awakening it, purifying it, fortifying it with magical power, and enabling the coffin to represent the enduring, wooden form of the embalmed deceased. We should remember that the letter to the dead, O. Louvre 698, cited above, was addressed to the coffin of the deceased, and it was



Fig. 8: Group D. The Coffin of *Imy-pth*, from the *Tw-rwd.f* cache (after Raven, *The Tomb of Iurudef*, pl. 23).

42 Barthelmeß, *Übergang ins Jenseits*: 36, n. 202, 93, 98-99.

43 Cooney, K.M., "Where does the Masculine Begin and the Feminine End?" note 43.

44 Carter, H. and A.C. Mace, *The Tomb of Tutankhamen*, 3 vols. (London 1932-33): pls. LXIV-LIV.

45 Dodson, A., "On the Burial of Maihirpri and Certain Coffins of the Eighteenth Dynasty," in C.J. Eyre (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists. Cambridge, 3-9 September 1995* (Leuven 1998): 331-338; Taylor, J.H., "Patterns of Colouring on Ancient Egyptian Coffins from the New Kingdom to the Twenty-sixth Dynasty: An Overview," in W.V. Davies (ed.), *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt* (London 2001): 164-181.

46 Otto, E., *Das ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual*.

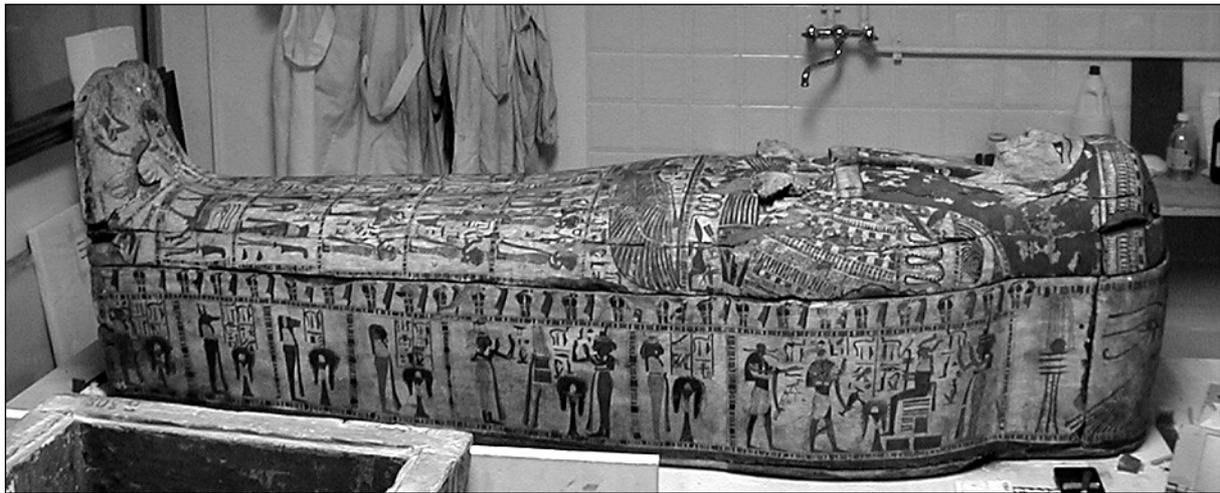


Fig. 9: Group E. The Coffin of *ʿnt*, Vatican Monumenti Musei e Gallerie Pontificie, Musei Vaticani XIII.2.1-3 (photo by author).

almost certainly ritual activity that granted the coffin and other burial equipment that kind of magical power. If the opening of the mouth ritual was performed on all coffins, then analysis suggests that the elites chose to emphasize the innermost pieces in a given set during their ritual activity, at the expense of the outer pieces.

However, it was not a strict rule to place the finest materials and most careful craftwork on the smaller pieces in a given set (as in groups A and B). Other coffin groups chose a different emphasis, which by extension suggests that ritual activity was negotiated to fit the funerary pieces on which a given socioeconomic group focused. In coffin group C, buyers and makers placed more value, materials, and time in their *outer* pieces in a given set, as seen in the coffin sets of *Hnsw* and *Ty-nfrty*, both members of the artisan's community of Deir el Medina (see Figs. 5-6). Individuals in coffin group C funneled most of their valuable materials and labor into large outer pieces, such as sarcophagi and outer coffins, suggesting that these larger objects received heightened emphasis and visibility in funerary rites. There is a reasonable explanation for this difference in emphasis within group C coffins: without the purchasing power to buy gold, there was no way for people in this socioeconomic group to appreciably add to the material value of their inner pieces. They could only add to the value of their funerary assemblage as a whole with *more* objects of *larger* size, with more wood and more pigments to impress audience members. The artisans of Deir el Medina in group C could not afford gold at all; there is no mention of gilded funerary arts in the west Theban

documentation. This group also could not or chose not to use glass inlay.⁴⁷ Either it was economically unattainable for them, or they chose to rely on a display of their craftsmanship instead of a display of expensive materials. The rarity of large objects like sarcophagi and outer coffins in this socioeconomic group of artisans placed public focus on size and scale, encouraging, I would argue, an innovative shift in ritual activity away from the innermost pieces as the prime focus, emphasizing instead the more expensive outer objects. A close look at the outer coffin of *Hnsw* (Fig. 6), for example, shows much more material and craft quality as compared to his inner coffin and cartonnage mask,⁴⁸ which by extension suggests that participants probably adapted ritual activities, putting more focus on these larger objects.

In other words, examination of the coffins of group C suggests that economic necessity and group aesthetics inspired emphasis on the larger objects in public display, which ostensibly drove variation in funerary rituals to focus on these objects. This is not to suggest that the funerary rituals themselves were radically different, but that burial rites were performed differently by shifting focus onto particular objects and de-emphasizing others. All group C coffins, regardless of size, show the most

⁴⁷ Inlay was certainly less expensive than gilding, but extensive inlay may have been prohibitive nonetheless. For possible prices for glass beads, see Janssen, J.J., *Commodity Prices from the Ramesside Period* (Leiden 1975): 306-307.

⁴⁸ For a detailed breakdown of the differing values, see Cooney, *The Value of Private Funerary Art* and the forthcoming Cooney, *The Cost of Death*.

material and craft value in the upper body of the lid, the focus of opening of the mouth rituals, which is perfectly in line with high elite practice. Deir el Medina individuals were still practicing opening of the mouth rituals, but these rites now emphasized larger pieces in a set. The three piece coffin set of *Iy-nfrty* (Fig. 5), for example, holds most of its value in the largest piece, in this case the anthropoid coffin, in contrast to her smaller pieces, the mummy board and her cheaper cartonnage mask, indicating the focus of funerary rituals. Thus, examination of coffin value strongly suggests that socioeconomics drove choices about what objects were the focus of public displays. Funeral rituals at Deir el Medina may have been depicted in traditional and standardized fashion on their tomb walls showing emphasis on smaller body containers,⁴⁹ but their tomb goods suggest that the actual practice was much more flexible.

The funerary architecture belonging to group C also shows differences in emphasis as compared to high elite burials. For example, the vaulted and painted burial chambers of *Sn-ndm*, *P3-šdw*, and *In-hr-h^cw* are unique to the village of Deir el Medina and to owners of group C coffins. Owners of groups A and B coffins were likely buried in undecorated chambers below accessible painted tomb chapels. So there was increased emphasis on burial chamber decoration for owners of group C coffins, and it was likely encouraged by cultural, social and economic forces such as: 1) innovations inspired by the workmen's access to royal painted burial chambers, and 2) the fact that most of the individuals buried in these chambers did not own decorated coffins and could benefit from the architectural materiality and painted scenes.⁵⁰ Just as we saw with the coffins of Group C, this funerary architecture hints at a different ritual emphasis – on a painted burial chamber in

which semi-public burial rites may have taken place, to ensure that a larger community benefited from these painted spaces.

Egyptian funerary ritual activity emphasized funerary objects, and ritual performance surrounding them was complex and driven by a number of different variables: socioeconomic status, gender, age, profession, understanding of rituals, and the agency of the active participants using the materials available to them. Groups A and B focused on their inner pieces. Group C focused on the outer pieces if they could afford them. But all groups focused on the face and head of a given piece, and thus the opening of the mouth was central to transformative funerary rites for all who could afford a coffin. The underworld texts painted on tomb chapel walls, burial chambers and coffins belonging to all of these groups suggest that the same basic rituals were used for all three groups, but that the *emphasis* of the ritual was different, depending on what objects an individual could afford. Those who were rich could afford to follow the most correct and traditional practice, emphasizing the smallest pieces with gilding and glass inlay; others negotiated their rituals to fit their socioeconomic group's values and purchasing power. Group C (figs. 4-7) placed their lowest value materials – cartonnage and paints – closest to the body, at odds with traditional practice. Groups A and B, on the other hand, placed gilding, glass inlay, and most polychrome painting in the smaller pieces in a set. I suggest that those commissioning coffins in groups A and B made these choices in emphasis for socioeconomic reasons. First, only higher status individuals could afford gold and, perhaps also inlay, which was ideally suited to enhancing smaller objects. Gilding larger objects was prohibitive even for the rich.⁵¹ Second, high elites probably had different social pressures and understandings of religious funerary ritual. Their scribal education and closer contact with temple priesthood and bureaucracy may have fostered a greater concern for "correct" ritual practice and effectiveness – that is, emphasizing the pieces that should traditionally be the center of attention, or doing things "by the book." While lower status Deir el Medina artisans (the purchasers of group C coffins) were quite conversant

49 For funerary rituals depicted in Deir el Medina tomb chapels and burial chambers, see Wreszinski, W., *Atlas zur altaegyptischen Kulturgeschichte* (Leipzig 1923): pls. 127-128, 166, and 209; Bruyère, *Tombes thébaines*: pls. VII, XII, XIII, and XV; Davies, N. de Garis, *Two Ramesside Tombs at Thebes*, Robb de Peyster Tytus Memorial Series 5 (New York 1927): pl. XIII.

50 In Theban Tomb 1, the one intact burial chamber found at Deir el Medina, 20 bodies were found, but only 9 of these were buried in decorated coffins. The other 11 were wrapped only in mats and textiles. Shedid, *Das Grab des Sennedjem*: 15. Bodies without coffins presumably benefited from burial in such a space.

51 For example, only the inner coffin, mask and mummy board of *Hnwt-mhyt* of group A are fully gilded. The outer coffin only has gilding in the upper part of the lid.

with the aesthetic practices of the highest elites and exposed to the secret afterlife texts restricted to royal tombs, they may not have been interested in all of the intricacies of high-level religious practice and ritual, not being part of the initiated state priesthood to which many of the top elite belonged. In fact, it is possible that profession may have played a large part in forming the aesthetic values of a particular socioeconomic group. Aesthetic values and ritual emphasis are not formed simply by economics and the amount of money available to a given group, but also by education, background, and daily practice. The artisans of Deir el Medina may not have been as socially invested in correct ritual emphasis on the smaller objects in a coffin set, because they preferred a larger canvass, so to speak, in the form of outer coffins and sarcophagi, on which they could display exquisite draftsmanship to their artisanal community. There is certainly more at work in the formation of ritual emphasis than economics and the ability to purchase certain pieces, and much of it involves social place and status.

Other individuals had little choice about which object to emphasize in funerary rituals because they could afford only one piece. Coffin group D (fig. 8) is of the poorest quality in the Ramesside coffin data set. These individuals could only afford one coffin, but no masks, no inner or outer coffins, and certainly no sarcophagi. The single coffin was automatically the focus of burial rituals for group D individuals. It is highly probable that the funerary rituals of this lower socioeconomic group would *not* have been heavily based on complicated afterlife literature and that the viewing public would not have been well versed in all of the textual ritual conventions idealized and practiced by the high elite. We have no way of knowing if the priests performing the rituals were literate or not; this group created few funerary texts and no decorated tomb architecture. Nonetheless, group D still made the choice to place almost all painted decoration and all carving on the upper body of the lid, suggesting that this group of coffin owners emulated the rituals of the elite, particularly the opening of the mouth rites. Any wealth that could be spared was invested in that most obvious place. Thus, various socioeconomic groups prepared for the next world with different agendas, different buying powers, and different levels of knowledge and education, but within the same sociocultural mechanism of functional

materialism, in which the purchased object was publicly manipulated in opening of the mouth rituals. What they could afford to purchase led to certain decisions about display and ritual emphasis.

The Consequences of Functional Materialism

1) Taste Change

Among the Nineteenth Dynasty coffins from Theban Tomb 1 (group C), the earliest coffins, belonging to *Sn-ndm* and *Iy-nfrty* (see Figs 4-5), incorporate larger figures, less detail and much more empty space in their designs, whereas the next generation's coffins belonging to *Hnsw* and *T3-m'kt*⁵² (Figs 6-7) anticipate the dense design layout of the Twentieth Dynasty and the *horror vacui* of the Third Intermediate Period⁵³ by filling more empty space, especially on the coffin lid, with additional iconography. On the earlier coffin of *Sn-ndm*, the figure of Nut on the chest is surrounded by a wide expanse of yellow varnished plaster absent decoration, but on the later coffin of *Hnsw* there are now polychrome captions and iconography filling this space around the figure of the goddess. The detail on the coffin of *Hnsw* is also crisper in its outline and fill of color, perhaps necessary features considering that more small-scale iconography is squeezed onto his coffin set. This new and fashionably dense decoration is representative of taste change occurring not only among the buyers and producers in group C, but among all able participants in Egypt's functional materialism of death during the New Kingdom. The early Twentieth Dynasty coffin of *Nakht*⁵⁴ (Fig. 10), for example, shows that decoration was already including denser scenes

52 For publication of this coffin set of *T3-m'kt*, lost in bombing raids on Berlin in World War II, see Erman, A., *Ausführliches Verzeichniss der ägyptischen Altertümer, Gipsabgüsse und Papyrus* (Berlin 1894): 174-175; Roeder, G., *Aegyptische Inschriften aus den Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*. Vol. II. *Inschriften des Neuen Reichs* (Leipzig 1924): 323-329.

53 Niwinski, *Twenty-first Dynasty Coffins*, 66; Walsem, van, R., *The Coffin of Djedmonthuiufankh in the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden* (Leiden 1997): 65-75.

54 For publication of this piece, see David, A.R. and R. Archbold, *Conversations with Mummies: New Light on the Lives of Ancient Egyptians* (New York 2000) 96-97; Lewin, P., A. J. Mills, H. Savage and J. Vollmer, "Nakht: A Weaver of Thebes" *Rotunda* 7, 4 (Fall 1974): 15-19. This piece is most similar to Group C's aesthetics in my analysis, but it belongs to the Twentieth Dynasty.

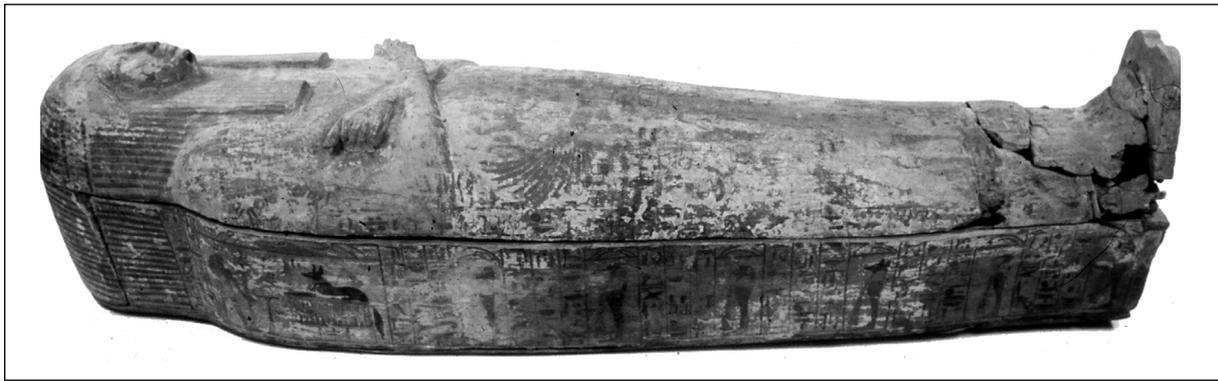


Fig. 10: The Coffin of *Njrt*, Royal Ontario Museum Toronto, ROM 910.4.1, 2 (photo after David and Archbold, *Conversations with Mummies*, p. 96).

and iconography common in the mid to later part of the dynasty, seen in the later group E (Fig. 9).

Within the accepted stylistic traditions, the artisan could incorporate subtle innovations. For example, the similar layout, design, and style of decoration on the coffins of *Hnsw* and *T3-m'kt* (Figs. 6-7) suggest that they were painted by the same draftsman – one who tended to draw the figure of Nut larger and higher up than usual so that her wings fell upon the deceased's elbows. The striking and unusual similarities in design between these two coffin sets suggest that these were painted at the same approximate time by a draftsman with his own slightly unique notions about coffin decoration and aesthetic, adapting within the context of larger funerary trends and styles in the Nineteenth Dynasty. Although there is no direct evidence for it, the draftsman responsible may have been the artisan *Hnsw* himself, and if not him, certainly one of his Deir el Medina co-workers.

Taste change is immediately apparent in the Ramesside data set, but style shifts and the reasons for them are never mentioned in non-literary west Theban documentation. The mechanism of functional materialism explains some of these style shifts. Economic downturns and political instability led to increased scarcity for some families, but adaptations to this scarcity could be met by the active agency of artisans.⁵⁵ It could be argued that limited funds drove Nineteenth Dynasty adaptations from

the generation of *Sn-ndm* to that of his son *Hnsw*.⁵⁶ Given the fact that *Hnsw* was interred in the burial chamber of his father, it is possible that he could not afford his own personalized burial space showing his own funerary procession and ritual activity, a lack that may have driven him (and others in his same situation) to include more iconography on his and his wife's coffin sets to compensate. This shift towards denser coffin decoration did not just affect *Hnsw*, but was part of a larger trend. Increased density is visible *within one generation* on the coffins from the village of Deir el Medina, and the same decorative shift increases in intensity in the group E coffins of the Twentieth Dynasty (Fig. 9). The inclusion of denser decoration is part of a wider trend connected to socioeconomic and political conditions. After the reign of Ramses II, fewer and fewer families invested in stone sarcophagi and decorated tomb chapels for the nuclear family – not only at Deir el Medina,⁵⁷ but throughout Thebes and Egypt as a whole.⁵⁸ This trend continues through the rest of the Ramesside Period and reaches its high point during

55 For a thorough discussion of individual agency in the context of funerary taste, see Cannon, A., "Gender and Agency in Mortuary Fashion," in Rakita, G.F.M., J.E. Buikstra, L.A. Beck and S.R. Williams (eds.), *Interacting with the Dead: Perspectives on Mortuary Archaeology for the New Millennium* (Tallahassee 2005): 41-65.

56 *Sn-ndm* has been dated paleographically and genealogically from late in the reign of Seti I to mid-reign of Rameses II. *Hnsw* is first seen in the crew in year 40 of Ramses II. See Bierbrier, M.L., *The Late New Kingdom in Egypt* (Warminster 1975): 30-31; Bierbrier, M.L., H. de Meulenaere, S. Snape and J.H. Tylor, "Notes de prosopographie thébaine, Troisième série: The Family of Sennedjem," *CdÉ* 59 (1984): 199-241; Valbelle, D., *Les ouvriers de la tombe: Deir el-Médineh à l'époque ramesside*, *BdÉ* 96 (Cairo 1985).

57 Meskell, L., *Archaeologies of Social Life: Age, Sex, Class et cetera in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford 1999): 147; Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society."

58 Grajetzki, W., *Burial Customs in Ancient Egypt: Life in Death for Rich and Poor* (London 2003): 84-93.

the ensuing Third Intermediate Period when many elite families were buried together in undecorated burial spaces in large caches. Andrej Niwinski asserts that the lack of decorated tomb complexes necessitated the intricate designs, scenes, and iconography resulting in the crowded *horror vacui* that characterized Twenty-first Dynasty coffins.⁵⁹ Relying on the mechanism of functional materialism, one could add another reason for these style shifts. More families were investing their piety (in the form of statuary and other visible materials) in well guarded temple spaces as opposed to much more vulnerable tomb spaces,⁶⁰ thus abandoning the expense of decorated and accessible tomb chapels. We therefore see a shift in values towards rendering the coffin as a densely decorated, discrete, almost miniature tomb for the individual, based on a limited but variable repertory of images.⁶¹ In the face of changing socioeconomic circumstances, the scenes placed onto the Egyptian coffin evolved, innovations were adopted, and a new system of conventions developed. Instead of depicting Thoth and the Four Sons of Horus on the case sides of the Twentieth Dynasty coffin, now the artisan included complicated transformative scenes from the Book of the Dead, including representations of the deceased successfully making the transition to the next world, such as the weighing of the heart or the adoration of Osiris. The amount of fine-lined figural detail increased, and depictions were now of smaller scale. The use of text as a magical protective medium decreased in favor of iconography, figures, and scenes,⁶² probably because these images could act

59 Niwinski, A., "Untersuchungen zur Ägyptischen Religiösen Ikonographie der 21. Dynastie," *GM* 49 (1981): 47-56, pls. 1-3, esp. p. 49; Taylor, J.H., "Patterns of Colouring on Ancient Egyptian Coffins from the New Kingdom to the Twenty-sixth Dynasty: An Overview," in W.V. Davies (ed.), *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt* (London 2001): 164-181, esp. p. 171.

60 For this idea, see Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society," 27.

61 For example, see Richards, *Society and Death in Ancient Egypt*: 76, where she states, "The coffin seems, by the Middle Kingdom, to have become the single most important and symbolically charged piece of mortuary furniture. This process was to culminate in later phases of history with all functions of a grave being subsumed into the coffin itself, brought on at least in part by awareness of the inevitability of grave robbers." Also see Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society," 27.

62 Assmann, *Death and Salvation*: 251.

for the deceased on a number of levels with a flexibility that texts cannot always provide. As gilding became scarcer in the Twentieth Dynasty,⁶³ color values shifted to an ever more polychrome palette. Different hues of blue and green become common, sometimes on the same coffin, as seen on the group E coffin of *ʿnt* (fig. 9).

During the Third Intermediate Period, we actually see an overarching transformation of priorities in Egyptian funerary culture. Many elite individuals, such as the wealthy High Priests of Amen at Thebes, who were probably still capable of purchasing decorated tomb chapels for themselves and their family, chose instead to focus on the densely decorated coffin set usually in an undecorated cache burial, a shift in funerary taste emphasizing the coffin set that even Third Intermediate kings took up at Tanis.⁶⁴

It is obvious that Egyptian funerary art styles changed from Dynasties XIX to XX. These style alterations, innovations, and adaptations were not only part of new elite religious interpretations and ritual formations,⁶⁵ but they were also part of larger social, economic, and political shifts and demands.⁶⁶ All of these adaptations and innovations took place within the context of functional materialism, a mechanism which relied on the *object* to realize protection and transformations, a mechanism which flourished in times of prosperity but was challenged by rapid economic downturns and sociopolitical instability.

63 No group E coffins show evidence of gilding. See Cooney, *The Value of Private Funerary Art* and the forthcoming Cooney, *The Cost of Death*.

64 Montet, J.P.M., *La nécropole royale de Tanis* (Paris 1947-1960).

65 Most Egyptologists focus on the religious realm as the prime mover of funerary arts change and associated burial rituals. For example, see Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 317-324.

66 For a theoretical discussion of economic demand and its social consequences, see Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," 31 where he states, "Demand thus conceals two different relationships between consumption and production: 1. On the one hand, demand is determined by social and economic forces; 2. on the other, it can manipulate, within limits, these social and economic forces. The important point is that from a historical point of view, these two aspects of demand can affect each other. ... Elite tastes, in general, have this "turnstile" function, selecting from exogenous possibilities and then providing models, as well as direct political controls, for internal tastes and production."

The choice to adapt and innovate resulted from a complicated interplay both between craftsmen and commissioners as well as individual consumers competing for status within their own social groups via funerary display. In general, taste change in funerary art was trickle-down.⁶⁷ Egyptian elite consumers and their chosen artisans were influenced by the stylistic changes within the royal sphere, emulating forms and styles of the king and his court to the best of their social and economic abilities.⁶⁸ Elite bureaucrats often commissioned and supervised the creation of funerary and temple art for their royal employers, and this interaction allowed them to observe and even form new styles that set royalty apart from elites. Things that were once taboo and unavailable to the elite for use in their funerary ensemble, such as certain underworld texts, were eventually employed in non-royal burials,⁶⁹ setting up a constant cycle that forced the highest levels of society to create even newer inaccessible forms, innovations that themselves would inevitably become more commonly accessible. This trend in which more people purchased funerary arts and used styles and forms previously inaccessible to them is well known: Egyptologists often call this process the Democratization of the Afterlife.⁷⁰ Although well

documented, we need to investigate the underlying socioeconomic mechanisms that drove the inaccessible to become accessible, including constant competition, innovation, and adaptation, all to produce the most socially visible and religiously effective funerary materials within shifting cultural contexts.

2) Usurpation

The usurpation of funerary arts was another inevitable consequence of functional materialism. Coffins were not freely available to all who wanted them. Even during times of prosperity, most Egyptians had no chance of saving the necessary amount, and in times of increased economic scarcity, the competition to acquire a coffin was fierce, driving many to usurp and reuse the coffins of the buried dead.⁷¹ The usurpation of a coffin broke the link between economic and religious functions by taking the religiously charged object out of the sphere of the sacred and placing it back into the sphere of the commodity. Tomb robbery was an ancient profession in ancient Egypt, mentioned in instructional texts and pessimistic literature long before the New Kingdom.⁷² Coffin reuse was quite common during the Third Intermediate Period,⁷³ but the usurpation of funerary goods was already happening at the end of the New Kingdom, to which the replastered and repainted coffin of *Mwt-htp*⁷⁴ in the

67 For theories of elite driven fashion change, see Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value"; Cannon, A., "Gender and Agency in Mortuary Fashion," in Rakita, G.F.M., J.E. Buikstra, L.A. Beck and S.R. Williams (eds.), *Interacting with the Dead: Perspectives on Mortuary Archaeology for the New Millennium* (Tallahassee 2005): 41-65; Cannon, A., "The Historical Dimension in Mortuary Expressions of Status and Sentiment," *Current Anthropology* 30, 4 (1989): 437-458.

68 Emulation and copying of funerary practices and rituals once reserved for the royalty by non royal individuals is well documented and well researched. See, for example: Assmann, *Death and Salvation*; Ikram and Dodson, *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt*; Taylor, J.H., *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago 2001).

69 One of the most famous examples is the use of the New Kingdom Amduat text, reserved for the king's tomb, in the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of vizier under Thutmose III Useramun at Thebes. Hornung, E., *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (Ithaca 1999): 28.

70 Richards, *Society and Death in Ancient Egypt*: 7-9; Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society." For a comment on the phrase Democratization of the Afterlife, see Dunand, F. and Zivie-Coche, C., *Gods and Men in Egypt: 3000 BCE to 395 CE* (Ithaca and London 2004):

175. For a discussion on the "demotization" of the afterlife, see Assmann, *Death and Salvation*: 391-392.

71 Kemp, B., *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London 1991): 240-244; Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife*: 178-182.

72 See for example in the Middle Kingdom "Admonitions of Ipuwer" the mention of robbery of royal tombs: "See now, things are done that never were before. The king has been robbed by beggars. See, one buried as a hawk is ... What the pyramid hid is empty." For this translation, see Lichtheim, M., *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume I*: 155-156. Evidence for tomb robbery goes back to the Predynastic. See Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society."

73 Niwinski, A., *Twenty-first Dynasty Coffins*: 57. About 450 coffins dating to the Twenty-first or very early Twenty-second Dynasties have been identified by Niwinski, a time period only about 125 years in length. When this is compared to the number of known Ramesside coffins at just over 60, usurpation is the likely culprit. For this same theory, also see Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife*: 181.

74 Budge, W., *British Museum: A Guide to the First, Second and Third Egyptian Rooms* (London 1924): 57; Niwinski, *Twenty-first Dynasty Coffins*: 153.



Fig. 11a: Group E. The Coffin of *Mwt-htp* of Usurpation, British Museum EA 29579 (photos by author).

British Museum attests (fig. 11).⁷⁵ On this coffin, the Nineteenth Dynasty decoration was covered with Twentieth Dynasty painting by those who wished to reuse the object for another individual.

It is unknown how coffin usurpation actually functioned: were old coffins *sold* by Egyptian family members after exhuming them from common burial spaces generations after the death of the owner, or were objects simply stolen after socially supported tomb protection systems broke down? Usurpation was adaptive and innovative, probably relying on a variety of techniques to return a buried coffin to the commodity state.⁷⁶ In ancient Egypt, functional materialism engendered such a strong social drive that even high status individuals and kings usurped and reused the funerary objects of much wealthier kings who had died before them,⁷⁷ indicating that at the base of usurpation was a negotiation between theft and re-association,⁷⁸ essentially an innovative



Fig. 11b: Group E. The Detail from the Coffin of *Mwt-htp* of Usurpation, British Museum EA 29579 (photos by author).

conciliation with the principles of *mꜣt* or truth and the need for materiality.

Usurpation also reveals that Egyptian society as a whole placed more emphasis on the use of funerary materials in *ritual* contexts than they did on the *permanent* burial of those funerary objects with the dead.⁷⁹ Ritual activity connected the thing to the belief system: funerary objects were manipulated to transform the deceased into a form that could traverse the passage into the afterlife.⁸⁰ Funerary

75 See also the late Dynasty XX P. BM EA 10053, vs. 4, 15-17, which concerns the theft of four cedar boards from the funerary temple of Ramses II that were later made into an inner coffin. This does not document the reuse of a coffin, but certainly the theft and reuse of other materials.

For anthropological theory on usurpation, see Appadurai, A., "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," 26 where he states, "The diversion of commodities from specified paths is always a sign of creativity or crisis, whether aesthetic or economic. Such crises may take a variety of forms: economic hardship, in all manner of societies, drives families to part with heirlooms, antiques, and memorabilia and to commoditize them."

76 See Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value."

77 See in particular the reuse of Ramesside royal coffins and sarcophagi by the Third Intermediate royal family at Tanis (Montet, *La nécropole royale de Tanis*).

78 For another context in which a strong drive to acquire often led to theft, and thus redefinitions of ownership transfer,

see Geary, P., "Sacred Commodities: the Circulation of Medieval Relics," in Appadurai, A. (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge 1988): 169-191.

79 For this same idea, see Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society," 15 where they state, "From an early period, symbolic approaches and interpretations could bridge the gap between aspiration and reality. It is as if the outward appearance of mortuary ritual and provision could be more important than the provision itself."

80 Anthropologists and religious studies scholars have long focused on the liminal state between death and rebirth as one in which the most ritual activity occurs because the transition requires it. See Rakita and Buikstra, "Corrupting Flesh"; Gennep, A., van *The Rites of Passage*. Originally published 1908 (Chicago 1960); Hertz, R., *Death and the Right Hand: A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death*. Originally published 1907 (Glencoe 1960).

objects also provided the soul of the deceased with a material vessel – an earthly form that could be pulled into the worldly sphere by living family members – so that they could offer to and communicate with the dead. After the required burial rites, the soul of the deceased had presumably already become an *ꜥḥ* soul, an effective being who had passed the tribunal. When the dead had reached this state, the material coffin and other funerary objects continued to be used as communicative tools, to which the letter to the dead, O. Louvre 698, attests. But the practice of usurpation suggests that this post-death-ritual role of the coffin was perhaps considered secondary.

The coffin of *Mwt-ḥtp* mentioned above (fig. 11), was usurped and redecorated about 150 years after its production, indicating that at least 7 generations had passed before the coffin was taken out of the tomb, re-commoditized, and then put back into ritual use.⁸¹ Presumably after the passing of so many years, there would be no one left to perform communicative and offering rituals for a particular individual; a passage of time may have been required to justify the reuse of most funerary materials.⁸² After some time, the transformation of the deceased into an effective soul had already been realized, and no one was left on earth to remember them or to

perform rituals in their name. This is not to say that usurpation was a commonly discussed and openly accepted practice, but some well-known texts do comment on it. For example, the “The Instruction to Merikare,” written during the First Intermediate Period, a time of social, political, and economic upheaval, which ostensibly drove reuse of older funerary material, includes the statement:

Do not despoil the monument of another, but quarry stone in Tura. Do not build your tomb out of ruins, (using) what had been made for what is to be made.⁸³

On the one hand, this attitude reflected the ideal notion that funerary arts should not be reused. On the other hand, such texts were written by members of the elite, who were conscious that tombs were being robbed and that funerary arts were being reused. When read in this fashion, the evident reuse of funerary goods in the late Twentieth Dynasty and the recycling of funerary goods in the royal tombs at Tanis take on greater importance. Usurpation always carried with it a certain moral ambiguity, but it undoubtedly happened throughout Egyptian history, a consequence of functional materialism driven by the desire for ritual objects within a context of sociopolitical insecurity and/or economic deficiency.⁸⁴

3) Adaptations by the Poor

The vast majority of ancient Egyptians had *no ersatz* body – no coffin – to speak of. Their own *corpse* was meant to provide them with a material existence after death and a vessel for their soul. Be it a richly made coffin, modest wooden case, or a simply prepared corpse, all provided the deceased with a material understanding of, and expectations for, their own afterlife. Many individuals unable to afford the real thing included miniature or imitation versions of funerary materials hoping for the same effect.⁸⁵ But was the magical force of the funerary material *less effective* if the object was of lesser material value? How did the poor manage in the afterlife without

81 However other evidence suggests that only a few generations needed to pass for reuse, theft, and usurpation to take place. See Baines and Lacovara, “Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society,” 23.

82 The Tomb Robbery Papyri certainly speak to the sanctity of the dead’s tombs, many hundreds of years after their interment. Peet, T.E., *The Great Tomb-Robberies of the Twentieth Egyptian Dynasty* (Oxford 1930). However, this attitude coexisted with long lasting and widespread tomb robbery and funerary reuse, often justified as tomb re-distribution, at least in the village of Deir el Medina (McDowell, A.G., *Village Life in Ancient Egypt: Laundry Lists and Love Songs* (Oxford 1999): 68-69). In “Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society,” 23 Baines and Lacovara comment on tomb curses and other magical-ethical deterrents: “... the prevalence of tomb robbery suggests that these dangers were little heeded, or perhaps averted through suitable magic or destruction, such as the dismembering or burning of mummies observed in many robbed tombs and mentioned in tomb robbery texts. Such beliefs can relate to how far the living and the dead formed a community: they would cease to offer protection to burials when the sense of community lessened or when the deceased and those who exploited the necropolis has different interests.”

83 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume I*: 103.

84 Barry Kemp includes discussion of theft, reuse, and usurpation in his section “The Power of Private Demand” in *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London 1991): 238-246. See also Taylor, J.H., *Death and the Afterlife*: 178-182.

85 Baines and Lacovara, “Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society.”

even a coffin? These are questions that Egyptologists have just started grappling with, and we of course struggle with a very skewed data set – a dearth of surviving and published information pertaining to the lowest socioeconomic groups and an embarrassment of riches from the highest echelons of society.⁸⁶ We often apply elite rituals and belief systems to all Egyptians with few questions asked.⁸⁷ But what about those who could not fully realize the ideal funerary models encouraged by the system of functional materialism? Most ancient Egyptians had no coffins or other funerary art, only palm rib mats and cheap textile shrouds. Did the inability to provide funerary material dictate ritual adaptation and thus changes in religious belief more fitting to a poor burial? Or even a rejection of more elaborate systems in favor of older, less materialist beliefs?

People with no socioeconomic access to techniques like mummification and to materials like coffins, canopic jars, and underworld texts were observers on the outside of an elite religious system which they did not entirely comprehend and in which they were not entirely included.⁸⁸ Logically, this would have created a parallel, additional, and slightly different afterlife practice – one that was not based on the ritual manipulation of high cost commodities and one that was not textually based. It is probable that the death rituals of the poor were performed and understood differently, employing oral rituals based

86 Richards, *Society and Death in Ancient Egypt*; Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society"; Weill, R., "Ceux qui n'avaient pas de tombeau dans l'Égypte ancienne," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 118 (1938): 5-32.

87 For example, see Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 410-414 where he notes the massive inequality of burial practice, but insists that elite beliefs and practices were still valid for Egyptian society at large because 1) even the illiterate would have had access to a scribe to read and write for them 2) all funerary art could be minimized into forms that the poor could afford, and 3) the moral aspect of rebirth is a social equalizer. Similarly, see Richards, *Society and Death in Ancient Egypt*: 61.

88 For example, John Baines states: "Most of what is known about ancient Egypt relates to the small elite; there is little direct evidence for the lives and attitudes of the rest of the people. The beliefs of the elite existed in relation to the wider society, even though they often ignored that society. Where the elite did present the wider society, it would be unwise to take their picture at face value. Make sure you close this quote. See his "Society, Morality and Religious Practice," in B.E. Shafer (ed.), *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca 1991): 123-200, quote taken from p. 124.

on local tradition rather than the complicated, textually glossed and continuously interpreted rituals of priestly written record and access.

Members of the elite were in a position to make provisions for their burial, whether death overtook them prematurely or not, and thus they were active agents in their own funerary preparation. However, most ordinary Egyptians were not in a position to make such incredible sacrifices despite their impending death, and they could not have made their own choices about their burial and its associated funerary material. Archaeologist Aubrey Cannon states:

... the dead are unlikely to be the primary agents responsible for their own mode of burial. Following the often-cited maxim that the dead do not bury themselves, the dead also would not normally be fashion leaders or followers with respect to their own commemoration.⁸⁹

While this statement may not fit many of the Egyptian elite, it does speak to the poor. When the poor were buried, choices about placement, body care, body position, and associated burial goods were made by others, almost certainly family members who were following the tastes and desires of a larger community accustomed to adaptations driven by lack of resources. For example, in the low value burial cache found in the tomb of *Iw-rwd.f* used during the Twentieth and Twenty-first Dynasties, the majority of bodies in the tomb had no coffin but were instead wrapped in reed matting or simple textiles, features shared by other poorer quality Ramesside Period burial sites.⁹⁰ None of the *Iw-rwd.f* cache bodies were

89 Cannon, "Gender and Agency in Mortuary Fashion," 47.

90 Raven, M., *The Tomb of Iurudf*. Other Ramesside burials of lower quality have been found at Matmar, characterized by pit tombs and a few wooden coffins (Brunton, G., *Matmar* (London 1948): 58-60); Kom Medinet el Gurob, preserves burials of officials, and in Gurob Tomb 605 was found one anthropoid coffin with two men inside, next to which was a female wrapped in a mat. Most Gurob tombs of the later New Kingdom have no coffins, but rather individuals wrapped in reed mats, accompanied by pottery vessels, scarabs, and sometimes shabti figurines (Brunton, G. and R. Englebach, *Gurob* (London 1927): 9-17).

Bubastis also has a late New Kingdom necropolis, and only some of the bodies were found interred in rectangular coffins. Most of the Bubastis dead were placed in rough anthropoid pottery coffins or only wrapped in mats. Some were buried extended; others on their sides in the flexed

mummified in any way, as most of these individuals were found as skeletons with no flesh surviving. Some of the adult bodies in this and other similar New Kingdom caches were actually found in the flexed position (fig. 12),⁹¹ not in traditional, bound, stretched-out Osirian form – an oblique but tantalizing suggestion of different belief systems stretching back to prehistoric times that we can only guess at without textual information. These different burial practices do not rule out a common funerary beliefs throughout Egypt, but they are suggestive of the maintenance of archaic burial practices alongside and in addition to traditional Osirian practices.

position. All of the bodies were unummified, and children's bodies were placed in jars in the fetal position with the head pointing to the east (El-Sawi, A., *Excavations at Tell Basta* (Prague 1979); Bakr, M., "New Excavations of Zagazig University," in *L'Égyptologie en 1979. Axes Prioritaires de Recherches* vol. I (Paris 1979): 159-163.). In some cases, there is clear usurpation, as seen in a small shabti figurine which was found underneath the pillow of a child's skeleton: "The finely sculpted figure bears the name of a certain "Bawut", perhaps an important official of the New Kingdom, and cannot for any logic reason, be connected with the poorly buried child except through ritual reusage." Bakr, M., "New Excavations of Zagazig University," 158.

For lower quality but elaborately decorated wooden and pottery coffins probably dating to the Ramesside Period and for bodies interred in both the extended and the flexed positions at Saqqara, see Sowada, K., T. Callaghan, and P. Bentley, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara IV: Minor Burials and Other Material*. Australian Centre for Egyptology Reports 12 (Warminster 1999): 24-34. Some of the poorest burials of this time period were found at Abusir, in the pyramid temple of Niuserre. None of the unummified cached bodies were interred in coffins, and the only burial goods include shells, amulets, and some beads. See Schaefer, H., *Priestergräber und andere Grabfunde vom Ende des Alten Reiches bis zur Griechischen Zeit vom Totentempel des Niuserrê* (Leipzig 1908): 113-114, pl. 1.

Pottery coffins were options for those without the means or access to wood. For a Ramesside anthropoid pottery coffin, painted to resemble a wooden coffin, see d'Auria, S., P. Lacovara and C.H. Roehrig, (eds.), *Mummies and Magic: The Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt*. Exhibition catalogue. Museum of Fine Arts Boston (Boston 1988): 160-161. Ramesside poorer burials at Tell el Yahudideh also focus on pottery coffins, and they include many local traditions not found elsewhere. See Griffith, F.L., *The Antiquities of Tell el Yahudieyeh* (London 1890). For similar pottery coffins in Syria-Palestine see Dothan, T., *Excavations at the Cemetery of Deir el-Balah* (Jerusalem 1979); Tufnell, O., *Lachish IV: The Bronze Age* (London,

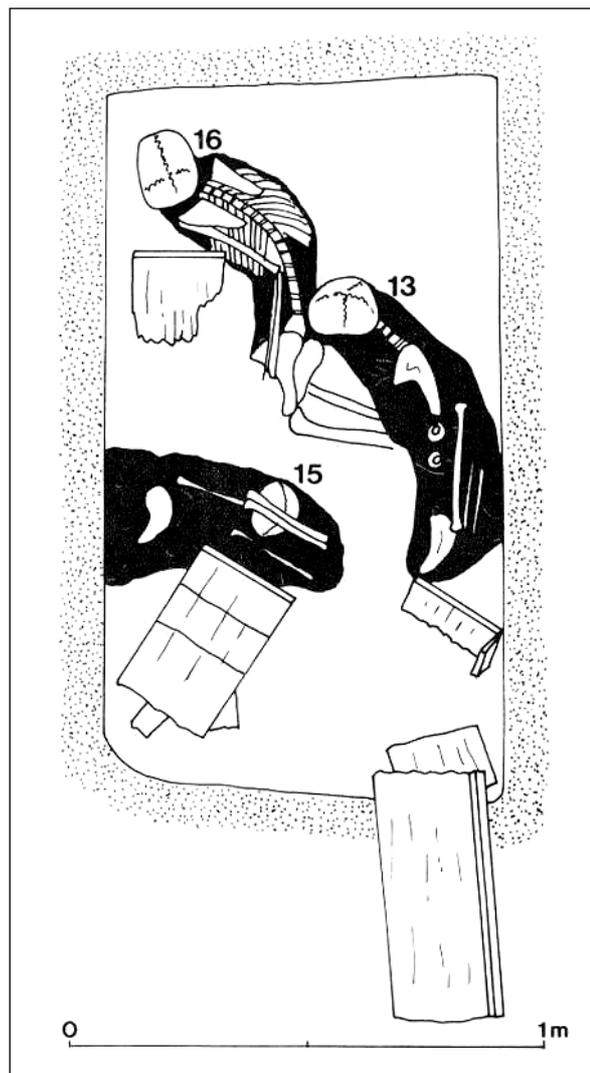


Fig. 12: Unummified bodies in the flexed position, burial cache of *Tw-rwdf* (drawing after Raven, M., *The Tomb of Iurudēf*)

Only the coffin of *Imy-ptḥ* (see fig. 8) from the Saqqara cache (group D) has a correct hieroglyphic inscription, and the text choice was a simple *ḥtp di nsw* offering formula, very different from the elegant Book of the Dead invocation to Nut that we see on higher quality

New York, and Toronto 1958); Wright, G.E., "Phillistine Coffins and Mercenaries," *Biblical Archaeologist* 22, 3 (1959): 54-66.

For summary information about poorer quality burials of the Ramesside Period, see the invaluable bibliography and data collected by Grajetzki, *Burial Customs in Ancient Egypt*; Poole, F. "Social Implications of the Shabti Custom in the New Kingdom," in R. Pirelli (ed.), *Egyptological Studies for Claudio Barocas* (Naples 1999): 95-111.

⁹¹ For other New Kingdom burials of adult individuals in the flexed position, see El-Sawi, *Excavations at Tell Basta*; Bakr, "New Excavations of Zagazig University"; Sowada, Callaghan, and Bentley, *The Teti Cemetery*.

Ramesseid period coffins from groups A, B, C, and E. This *htp di nsw* text was clearly written in a different hand than the one which performed the figural decoration on this coffin; it is quite possible that the coffin owner *Imy-ptḥ* himself was illiterate and that a scribe was hired to write this one inscription on the coffin lid. There is no doubt that most, if not all, of the people buried in this Saqqara cache were illiterate, as were almost all Egyptians.⁹² A few of the later Twenty-first Dynasty coffins in this same cache include *nonsense* hieroglyphic inscriptions⁹³ (see Fig. 13) – scribbled “texts” which were written by individuals with no understanding of the Egyptian writing system and which included no words or phrases, only a collection of incorrect signs.⁹⁴ These nonsense texts were meant to imitate the real thing, and their use indicates that illiterate and lower status draftsmen, buyers, and audience members consumed and invested in pseudo-textual inscriptions for their perceived magical efficacy and for their association with higher status funerary arts. The use of nonsense hieroglyphs hints at adapted and different funerary ritual practices, centered on oral traditions from village elders, rather than formal text editions read aloud by an initiated and educated member of the priestly elite.⁹⁵ But these nonsense texts nonetheless derived from functional materialism and an *emulation* of striving for an ideal afterlife container with a suitable text as would have been found on an elite coffin. The fact that these people in the Saqqara cache were on the lower edge of the upper status groups – at least in comparison with the anonymous rest of the population who could not afford coffins in their burials at all – is a

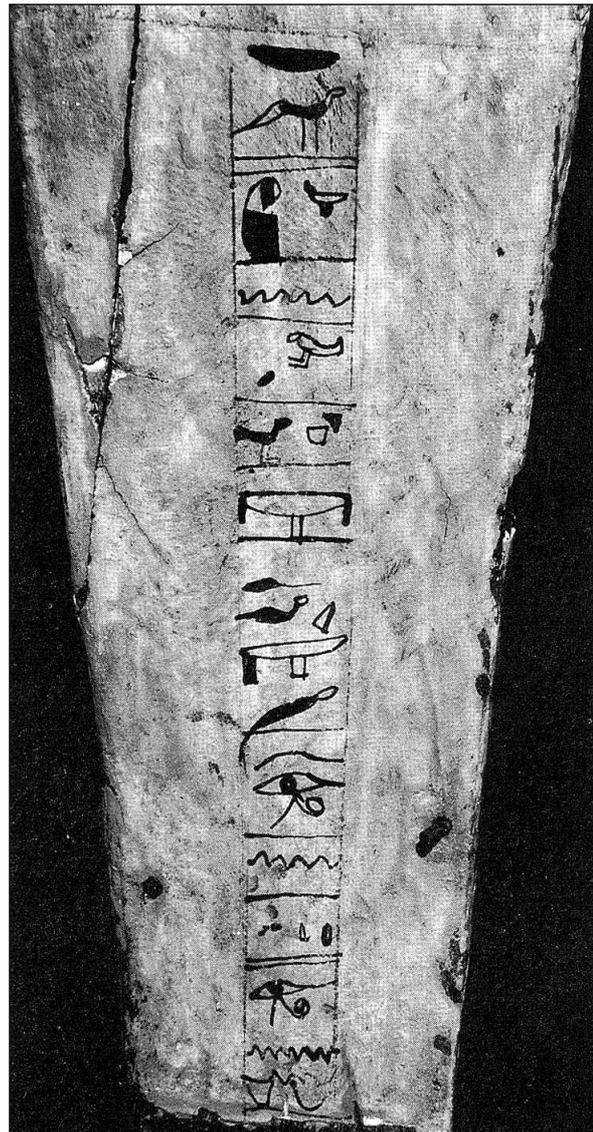


Fig. 13: 21st Dynasty Coffin with Nonsense Hieroglyphic Inscription (photo after Martin, G., *The Hidden Tombs of Memphis*).

92 Baines, J., “Literacy and ancient Egyptian society,” *Man* 18, 3 (1983): 572-599.

93 Martin, G., *The Hidden Tombs of Memphis: New Discoveries from the Time of Tutankhamun and Ramesses the Great* (London 1991).

94 For another nonsense text on a pottery coffin found in Syria Palestine, see Tufnell, O., *Lachish IV: The Bronze Age* (London, New York, and Toronto 1958): 131-132, 248, pl. 45.

95 To clarify the point further: I am not suggesting a black and white dichotomy between literate and non-literate individuals and funerary practice. There was most likely a spectrum of literacy at work within Egyptian society, which touched upon burial practice in varied ways. Many village elders in peasant status groups were probably also priests of some sort, acting as the leaders in funerary and other rituals, and they may have had some contact with texts, if not full literacy.

valuable indication of the limited degree to which understanding of elite belief systems percolated down to the rest of society.

Functional materialism tied every level of Egyptian society to a continually evolving, funerary practice led by the elite and the royal family: all are following the styles and practices of the wealthy to the best of their ability and understanding. Lower status individuals did not abandon the *concept* of using a coffin, even though most could not afford it. They did not abandon textual inscriptions, even though most could not participate in their meaning. The Egyptian peasantry did not abandon functional materiality, but followed it to the best of their socioeconomic ability and according to their

habitus,⁹⁶ using simpler rectangular coffins, pottery coffins, palm reed mats, simple textiles wrapped around unummified bodies grouped together in cache tombs, and probably using shared funerary objects, employed temporarily in ritual-display rather than permanently in the burial. The poor lacked the sophisticated and cosmopolitan understanding of funerary rituals, tastes, and belief systems of the elite status groups, and thus they would not have had a clear understanding of how their attempts to emulate may have been inadequate to elite groups. The care with which the poor were buried, as shown in the Saqqara cache tomb of *Iw-rwḏ.f*, suggests that they themselves found their practices, rituals, and styles to be quite adequate for rebirth in the next life, but we have no knowledge about the poor's actual expectations for, and conceptions of, the afterlife. The question remains: if functional materialism was a shared sociocultural mechanism, did the lower status Egyptians feel that their funerary ritual and subsequent burial would be less powerful or less transformative than that of a high-ranking person with much more elaborate goods and an ostensibly different set of ritual acts and recitations revolving around those objects?

Broadly stated, the evidence suggests that the poor *did* have anxieties about their lack of burial goods, and so they tried to attach themselves to other, wealthier individuals, even in death. Functional materialism is a reflection of Egyptian social inequality, but also a mechanism of political and social cohesion despite that inequality. It encouraged elites to bury themselves within close distance of their lord and master, the king, from the earliest days of Egyptian civilization.⁹⁷ The poor would therefore try to attain a spot in a cache tomb, thus associating themselves with wealthier members of their community. Even in the Deir el Medina Theban Tomb 1 of *Sn-ndm*, by no means a poor burial, eleven of the twenty bodies were interred without coffins. These less affluent individuals still benefited from the system of functional materialism, but in a *shared* form, because they were placed in a decorated burial chamber built by a wealthy member of their community. Poorer

96 Bourdieu, P., *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by R. Nice (Cambridge, Mass. 1984).

97 Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*: 61-63; Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society."

members of a given community needed to develop a series of adaptations that depended on placement in burial spaces with others who could afford coffins and tomb equipment. It is even possible that the purchase or legal grant of a *st-kr̥s* or "burial place," mentioned in non-literary west Theban documentation⁹⁸ is testament to the less affluent buying into a wealthier tomb than they themselves could afford – a kind of funerary "time-share" in modern real estate terms.⁹⁹ Participants in these adaptations ostensibly believed that the dead could share in the magical efficacy of their necropolis *community* and in funerary materials that did not explicitly belong to them, but with which they were implicitly associated. The deposit of the body in a burial space is, in itself, a ritual activity, and its placement, even without a coffin, is a part of that burial's value. Thus the shared material provided by the cache burial community was invaluable for the Egyptian peasantry. Just like theft and usurpation, shared grave goods within a community of death represent a creative adaptation to the system of functional materialism driving material acquisition yet defined by social inequalities and inabilities.

If the ritual purpose of a coffin was primary, while its eternal and permanent materiality was secondary, as the common practice of usurpation suggests,¹⁰⁰ it follows that the vast majority of ancient Egyptians (who could not afford to buy funerary objects at all) would have adapted their approach to the concepts of functional materialism, using coffins and other funerary objects *temporarily* in ritual activity, but not permanently. I will even go so far as to suggest that poor Egyptians found another adaptation: those who could not purchase a coffin may have had access to a temporary coffin for the funerary ceremonies – but not for the burial. In other words, it is quite possible that many Egyptian dead were publicly displayed with funerary objects, which were manipulated in vital transformative rituals, but which were *not buried* with them. We

98 For example, see O. Petrie 18, 8 rt. and P. Bulaq X / P. Cairo 58092, 2 rt., both of which legally grant a *st-kr̥s* burial space to another family member. For this phrase, see Cooney, *The Value of Private Funerary Art*.

99 For a similar situation in the burial towers and catacombs of Palmyra, see Gawlikowski, M., *Monuments Funéraires de Palmyre* (Warsaw 1970): 167-183.

100 Baines and Lacovara, "Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society."

have no surviving artifacts that were clearly designated for repeated, temporary, and shared use among individuals in a community. Unfortunately, the nature of this practice makes finding any such objects unlikely, because in the levels of society in which this practice would have been common, even the shared coffins were unlikely to have been of high quality or have had any tell-tale decoration or inscriptions. Furthermore, as these objects were never intended to be permanently interred, they do not benefit from the shelter and preservation afforded the higher status funerary goods. Nor is the practice mentioned in any funerary texts because the elite composers and readers of such texts focused on the ideal upper status burial, whose purpose was not only ritual transformation, but also to provide permanent and discrete materiality for the deceased.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, the temporary use of funerary goods would be in accord with funerary ritual behaviors around the world.¹⁰² That it would not be mentioned in the elite texts is quite reasonable, as this was neither part of their real nor their ideological world. Too many burials of the New Kingdom lack funerary arts for a culture which placed so much transformative power in material objects. The preponderance of careful, ritual burials lacking the accompanying goods may well be the best evidence we have for such negotiated practices; despite the surviving burials of the minority elite, the majority of Egyptian burials almost certainly employed funerary material temporarily, sharing the objects (and their ritual properties), rather than benefiting from the permanent and individualized grave goods with which we are most familiar.

The Inevitability of Functional Materialism

Functional materialism was a powerful sociocultural force in ancient Egypt, so much so that it may have created an intellectual backlash, causing some learned individuals to question the purpose of so

much spending and materialism for a successful afterlife.¹⁰³ There are only a few texts that question funerary expenditure, and one of the most significant is the well-known Middle Kingdom philosophical text “The Dispute between a Man and his Ba,” in which the man’s soul suggests that funerary materialism will have no long lasting benefits for the individual:

My *ba* opened its mouth to me, to answer what I had said, If you think of burial, it is heartbreak. It is the gift of tears by aggrieving a man. It is taking a man from his house, casting (him) on high ground. You will not go up to see the sun. Those who built in granite, who erected halls in excellent tombs of excellent construction – when the builders have become gods, their offering-stones are desolate, as if they were the dead who died on the riverbank for lack of a survivor.¹⁰⁴

“The Song of King Intef” also presents doubts about the efficacy of funerary materials. The text belongs to the genre of so-called Harper’s Songs, many preserved in Eighteenth Dynasty and Ramesside Period copies.¹⁰⁵ The pertinent section reads:

Those who built tombs, their places are gone. What has become of them? I have heard the words of Imhotep and Hardedef, whose sayings are recited whole. What of their places? Their walls have crumbled, their places are gone as though they had never been! None comes from there to tell of their state, to tell of their needs, to calm our hearts, until we go where they have gone! Hence rejoice in your heart! Forgetfulness profits you. Follow your heart as long as you live! Put myrrh on your head. Dress in fine linen.¹⁰⁶

Such texts emphasize the inevitability of death, regardless of the magnificence of one’s burial monuments, which is a philosophical statement, rather than an anti-materialistic one. The texts do not seem to question functional materialism, *per se*, but functional materialism as it pertains to death. The Intef song actually encourages materialism, but of a different kind – one that focuses on ritual activity in

101 For an examination of funerary texts and the ideal elite burial that were associated with them, see Assmann, *Death and Salvation*.

102 For example, see Howarth, G., and O. Leaman (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (London 2001): 103-104; Gittings, C., *Death, Burial, and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London 1984).

103 For a discussion of funerary spending and skepticism thereof, see Baines and Lacovara, “Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society.”

104 Lines 55-64. For this translation, see Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Volume I: 163-169.

105 See J. Assmann, “Harfnerlieder,” *LÄ II*: 975.

106 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Volume I: 195-196.

the context of life (dressing in linens and using myrrh), rather than death (building fine tombs and coffins). These texts express a clear anxiety about the effectiveness of funerary materials for the dead, particularly offerings and tombs. They do not express a cynical disbelief in the existence of the soul after death, but they do seem to question the effectiveness of so much material production in preparation for the afterlife.¹⁰⁷ If we do interpret these texts as expressions of doubt about the mechanism of functional materialism as it pertains to funerary preparation, they take a small step towards placing the non-material existence above and apart from the necessity of material corporeality, indicating that some individuals actually questioned functional materialism and its required expenditure. But, ostensibly, these views would have been only a minority among some of the learned elite. During times of strong central government and overall prosperity, particularly in the New Kingdom, functional materialism was paramount and drove the large scale production of funerary arts within a context of social inequality.¹⁰⁸

Ultimately, it would have been impossible for the Egyptians to dismiss functional materialism, despite the high economic costs to individuals and families, because it represented one method of maintaining the status quo within a complex society characterized by massive gaps and inequalities. Funerary display

107 See Lichtheim's comments *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume I*: 195: "Given the multiple meanings of the 'make holiday' theme, it follows that it was not the use of this theme which made the *Intef Song* so startling, but rather its skepticism concerning the reality of the afterlife and the effectiveness of tomb-building. It was this skepticism which injected a strident note of discord into a class of songs that had been designed to praise and reassure. The incongruity is of the same order as that which one observes in the *Dispute between a Man and His Ba*. For there the *ba*, though itself the guarantor of immortality, is given the role of denigrating death and immortality, denying the worth of tombs, and counseling enjoyment of life."

108 One post-Amarna text, a harpers song from the tomb of Neferhotep (TT 50), reacts against the earlier skepticism: "I have heard those songs that are in the tombs of old, what they tell in extolling life on earth, in belittling the land of the dead. Why is this done to the land of eternity, the right and just that has no terrors?" Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume II*: 115-116. See also Lichtheim's comments in *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume I*: 195.

was one of the chief ways for elite individuals and families to separate themselves from the rest of society as well as a method of moving status from this world into the next. Elite Egyptian culture created extreme social pressures for the high-born to produce one's own individual means to an afterlife. For example, in the Eighteenth Dynasty *Instruction of Any*, the father anxiously urges his son to:

Furnish your station in the valley, the grave that shall conceal your corpse; Set it before you as your concern, a thing that matters in your eyes. Emulate the great departed who are at rest within their tombs. No blame accrues to him who does it. It is well that you be ready too. When your envoy comes to fetch you, he shall find you ready to come to your place of rest...¹⁰⁹

But this text describes an idealized goal that was not attainable for most. We have already seen that funerary materiality and economic realities drove tomb caching by the Egyptian peasantry, in an attempt to attach themselves to wealthier members of their community. Lack of resources also drove adaptations for the rich: when decorated tombs became impractical to produce and impossible to protect in late Dynasty XX, even elites began caching their high quality, nesting coffins in large multi-generational community tombs, a trend particularly visible at Thebes.¹¹⁰ Coffin decoration then filled the vacuum left by undecorated burial spaces (fig. 14). In the economic downturn of the Twenty-first Dynasty and throughout much of the politically unstable Third Intermediate Period, funerary ritual emphasized the mummified body and the coffin as the discrete dwelling place for an individual within a larger community, rather than emphasizing the decorated tomb complex that was individualized for the patriarch and his nuclear family. In fact, mummification became more elaborate at the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period,¹¹¹ suggesting an increased focus on the physical preservation and ritual protection of the corpse when decorated family tombs were impractical even for the elite and when tomb security was put in question. Even the organs were increasingly placed within the body or coffin, rather than in separate canopic jars and chests, a self sufficiency that the insecure social,

109 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume II*: 138.

110 Niwinski, *Twenty-first Dynasty Coffins*.

111 Ikram and Dodson, *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt*: 124-128.



Fig. 14: Early 21st Dynasty Coffin and mummy board of *P3-nb-mnt*, Louvre E. 13029, E. 13046 (photo by the author).

political, and economic times demanded and that changes in ritual emphasis must have supported. The poorer individuals in a given community had been relying on the shared value of cached funerary space for some time,¹¹² but this adaptation became standard for just about everyone by the Third Intermediate Period, including the royal family buried at Tanis, who chose a secure burial location within temple walls.¹¹³ It is one adaptation that moved from the *lower* strata of society *up*, in response to unstable social, political, and economic times.

Each Egyptian coffin and funerary object is therefore a result of “culturally reasoned choices”

112 Baines and Lacovara, “Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society”; Raven, *The Tomb of Iurufed*; Shedid, *Das Grab des Sennedjem*. For communal burial adaptations in North Africa during the Roman empire and early Christian time periods, see Yasin, A.M., “Funerary Monuments and Collective Identity: From Roman Family to Christian Community,” *The Art Bulletin CAA* 87, 3 (September 2005) 433-457.

113 Montet, *La nécropole royale de Tanis*.

and social agency,¹¹⁴ in which type, number, material quality, craft quality, text quality, and text choice all depended on one’s means and social position. These choices then led to different emphases within funerary rituals, determining which funerary materials to accentuate at the center of the activity. For the Egyptians, functional materialism and the socioeconomics associated with the demand for funerary art were key drivers for different expressions of funerary belief systems.

In the end, I argue that funerary goods were displayed as the embodiment of abstract notions such as rebirth within a dynamic materialist ritual system that fed off socioeconomic competition and adaptable ideological beliefs, thus leading to subtle changes in ritual practice and visual culture styles, at the same time supporting emulation of elite models. The poor, who could not participate with additional funerary art, relied on the body, the community, the shared burial goods of others, and perhaps even the temporary use of objects in rituals to sustain themselves in a system of functional materialism. Functional materialism was a cyclical, self-reinforcing mechanism that lasted for millennia: religious belief systems focused on the manipulation and display of materiality, which in turn reinforced social order, emulation, competition, innovation, taste change, and a series of adaptations, including usurpation and community use.

114 Dobres, M-A. and C.R. Hoffman, “Social Agency and the Dynamics of Prehistoric Technology,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 1, 3 (1994): 211-258, specifically, pg. 224; Similarly, see Gell, A., “Newcomers to the World of Goods: Consumption among the Muria Gonds,” in Appadurai, A. (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge 1988): 110-138, especially p. 136 where he states, “The study of taste has recently become an important preoccupation of Marxist sociology (Bourdieu 1979), and quite rightly because nothing so acutely expresses social class, and the educational system that reinforces and perpetuates classes in modern society, as consumer preferences in the cultural domain – music, films, furnishings, pictures, and so on. In the study of aesthetic production, attention has shifted from the creative activity of the lone artist or craftsman to the social conditions that are reproduced in art and craft production, and that foster this kind of productive activity.”

