PART II

BODY VALUE
CHAPTER 6

OBJECTIFYING THE BODY: THE INCREASED VALUE OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MUMMY DURING THE SOCIOECONOMIC CRISIS OF DYNASTY 21

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Abstract

The Twenty-first Dynasty Egyptian mummy provides a case study for changing funerary values among Theban elites. These mummies are particularly illustrative of a new kind of body value within elite social contexts, in which an idealized preserved human body was objectified, commodified, and ultimately transformed into a viable, unique, and defensive container for the soul that could, when necessary, replace the coffin in case of theft or damage. The religious value of the mummy is self-evident. The economic value of a Twenty-first Dynasty mummy must have been high, although we have no prices preserved in the ancient documentation. Finally, the embalmed corpse also held significant prestigious and display value.

Introduction

At the end of the Late Bronze Age, from the latter part of the Twentieth Dynasty to the end of the Twenty-first, Egypt suffered a profound collapse—imperially, politically, economically, and socially (Broekman et al. 2009; Kitchen 1986; Ritner 2009; Taylor 2000). Egypt’s gold mines and stone quarries weren’t functioning. Official trade routes had collapsed. The Egyptian king pulled his forces out of the
south to defend northern territories being threatened by destructive incursions of Sea Peoples. (For a map, see Figure 6.1.) By the Twenty-first Dynasty, the king was absent from the south altogether; in his place he left a small group of elite Theban families, most with hereditary lineages connected to the powerful Amen priesthood. Throughout Egypt, but best documented at Thebes, political systems moved away from centralization and toward a broader social inclusion based on family hegemonic systems. Displays of centralized power from this time period—that is, depictions of the king—are less visible compared to displays of elite family power, with the Karnak temple's professional Amen priesthood being an example. Military force also became decentralized, encouraging competitive skirmishes between rival factions or sometimes all-out civil war. Economic scarcity and political instability encouraged the normalization of a number of behaviors previously considered more or less deviant, in particular tomb robbery and the widespread reuse of funerary objects.

Egyptology has often turned toward burial assemblages as indicators of social power within this hierarchical society (e.g., Cooney 2007; Grajetzki 2003; Meskell 1999). Decorated tomb chapels, coffins, tomb furniture, stelae, and pyramidia were clearly a part of social display strategies employed by elites during the New Kingdom and before. However, by the end of the Bronze Age, elite funerary demands were complicated within this context of political decentralization, dwindling imperial revenues, the loss of access to materials required for funerary arts production, and a lack of security in the necropolis. In this paper, I will focus on innovative, elite Theban funerary strategies that emerged as responses to crisis at the end of the Late Bronze Age, and I will pay particular attention to the increased value of the ancient Egyptian mummy. Mummification techniques for elites reached an apex in the early Third Intermediate period (Dunand and Lichtenberg 1994; Ikram and Dodson 1998; Smith 1912), and I will treat the changing value of the mummy as a case study for defensive burial adaptations within this insecure political and economic context.

Changes in mummification techniques, based on the thousands of mummies the dry Egyptian sands have afforded us, have been formally typologized and described by Egyptologists (Ikram and Dodson 1998), but they have not been fully problematized within the social context of crisis and concomitant innovation. Since the beginnings of ancient Egyptian civilization, mummification was an integral part of the elite concept of the afterlife, but I would argue that, for the bulk of Egyptian history, the main focus of economic and material funerary investment was not the human body but instead the more visible and displayable funerary arts, including decorated tomb chapels, statuary, and coffins. Yet, for a brief period during Egypt’s Bronze–Iron Age transition, comprising nearly 150 years during the twenty-first and early twenty-second dynasties, the mummy’s value skyrocketed among elite groups in Thebes, making it one of the most important and perhaps most expensive elements in an elite individual’s tomb assemblage. The question is why. Why
Figure 6.1. Map of Egypt showing Tanis (San el-Hagar), the northern capital, and Thebes (Luxor), the center of the Amen priesthood (courtesy of Aidan Dodson).
did funerary values shift at Thebes? And what did these shifts mean in the larger context of ancient Egyptian social values and strategies?

There is not a rich theoretical literature on value—social, economic, or otherwise—for the ancient Egyptian or Near Eastern world, and my own perspective is informed by Arjun Appadurai’s economist’s perspective that we could be “looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things” (Appadurai 1986a:13). From this point of view, the mummified body was indeed a crafted object, the result of the skilled application of resins, oils, and other substances to human flesh and bone. Goods were exchanged for its production, and, presumably, elite consumers engaged in conversations with embalmers about the comparative cost and quality of the procedure, although we have no workshop records or receipts to tell us how the purchase of embalming actually worked, such as whether an elite individual might commission his mummification in advance or if a family focused on this necessity only after death (but cf. Herodotus, book II, chapter 86, for a description of embalming in the fifth century B.C.E.).

David Graeber’s anthropological approach has also served as a foundation for this research (Graeber 2001). Graeber grapples with the different meanings of the word “value”—value in the moral sense, value in the economic sense, and value in the linguistic sense. His main point is that “ultimately, these are all refractions of the same thing” (Graeber 2001:2). Similarly, this study on mummification treats value broadly, including economic, religious, and social aspects of value at the same time. If we investigate the mummy as a material embodiment of such abstract aspects (Graeber 2001:54), then the mummy reflects religious beliefs on the one hand (that is, the ability to have an eternal, bodily existence in the afterlife) and social concepts on the other hand (such as the mummy’s ability to preserve and enhance high elite social status). Elites used mummification as one venue of social display and thus social comparison. Indeed, Graeber demonstrates that “the realization of value is always, necessarily, a process of comparison” and “for this reason it always, necessarily, implies an at least imagined audience” (Graeber 2001:87). And following Graeber (2001:76), the mummy can essentially be understood as the result of a variety of human actions in the pursuit of value—social, religious, and economic values displayed in a ritualized but still competitive arena of comparative prestige.

The Funerary Crisis and Reactions by the Theban Elite

The shift in mummification techniques occurred at the end of the New Kingdom and thus within the context of crisis. We therefore need to start with the economic, political, and social background for funerary behavioral shifts in Thebes. The Theban political regime was run by a group of intermarried Libyan–Egyptian
High Priests of Amen, men who used their professional priestly positions to take control of military and economic systems in southern Egypt (Taylor 2000). This small group of Theban elites had to deal with a new set of challenges when preparing for their high-cost burials. As political systems became more decentralized, access to some raw materials needed for funerary arts, in particular high-quality wood, was threatened. At the same time, security systems for the western necropolis in Thebes eroded, making theft and reuse of older funerary objects not just possible but probable. A variety of evidence points to the wide-scale reuse of older, Ramesside-period funerary arts for Twenty-first Dynasty Theban dead (Niwinski 1988:13; Taylor 1992). Twentieth Dynasty textual evidence from western Thebes suggests that it was common to enter older burial chambers to remove objects of value, including coffins, leaving the mummies behind (Cooney 2012). Many richly painted elite Twenty-first Dynasty coffins found in a variety of hidden coffin caches were originally made for Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasty individuals. This means that during the socioeconomic crisis beginning at the end of the Twentieth Dynasty, many older coffins were separated from their mummy inhabitants, removed from their original tombs, replastered, and repainted for new owners.

In Andrej Niwinski’s catalog of Twenty-first Dynasty coffins (Niwinski 1988), dozens of coffins are marked as “usurped.” Niwinski was most interested in the erasure of names and titles for later owners, even though some Twenty-first Dynasty coffins show obvious evidence of earlier decoration and sculpture underneath. For example, the Twenty-first Dynasty coffin of Tayu-her (inventor number 3912) reveals a carved wooden foot, a decorative element common in only the Nineteenth Dynasty, peeking out from broken plaster on the coffin’s left side (Figure 6.2). In the museum’s label, curators have misinterpreted this foot, seeing it as evidence that the coffin was a stock item, modified for a picky buyer. But other Egyptologists (Niwinski 1988:13) have revised this opinion, categorizing this as an example of widespread reuse during the Twenty-first Dynasty crisis.

The Late Bronze Age crisis of funerary security went so deep that even royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings (the tombs of Amenhotep III and Ramses II, among others) were systematically looted, probably by the very men in charge of the Theban region at the time—the High Priests of Amen—who ostensibly used the riches to fund their political regimes (Reeves 1990; Ritner 2009; Taylor 1992, 2010). Even some Nineteenth Dynasty royal tomb goods made their way into Twenty-First dynasty kings’ tombs at Tanis. The most famous example is the Nineteenth Dynasty red granite sarcophagus of Merneptah, which was appropriated for the Twenty-first Dynasty burial of king Psusennes I at his northern temple burial site (Montet 1951). Not only can we conclude that, given limited access to the inactive granite quarries down south in Aswan, reuse of funerary goods was the only option for people at this time of crisis, even kings, but we can understand that there were diplomatic and/or trade links between the kings in Tanis and the High Priesthood of Amen in Thebes.
The Development of Defensive Funerary Practices

From just these few examples, it becomes obvious that tomb robbery and funerary object reuse were realities beginning around 1000 B.C.E., to which the well-known Tomb Robbery Papyri attest (Peet 1930); these were risks to burial viability with which the elites of Thebes now had to grapple. Starting in Dynasty 20, wealthy Thebans shifted their funerary arts away from visible and ostentatious displays of wealth and power, such as monumental tomb chapels with statuary and painted relief, because their visibility risked the viability of the burial chamber underneath containing the mummy, coffins, and grave goods. The elite moved toward hidden burial chambers, with no aboveground markers. They abandoned decorated nuclear family tombs, opting instead for hidden but crowded multigenerational cache burials shared by hundreds of other individuals in their peer group.

Security systems had broken down in elite necropolises all over Egypt, but the clues are most clear at Thebes, where we have archaeological and written evidence of the phenomenon (Taylor 1992). As the elite tombs changed, we also see shifts in the funerary objects placed within them (Grajetzki 2003). Accessible, aboveground tomb chapels marked a tomb as an easy target for theft. As elite burials were hidden en masse in cache tombs, commissioners had to abandon bulky objects, such as stone and wooden sarcophagi, which would have been difficult to fit in the newer, space-efficient burial chambers.

Figure 6.2. Detail of the coffin of Tayu-heru in the Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, accession number 3912, showing a Nineteenth Dynasty sculptural foot underneath Twenty-first Dynasty decoration (photo by the author).
Objects of daily life such as furniture, linens, and food were already being phased out. Before, in the Eighteenth Dynasty, burial chambers had been stuffed with gilded objects, tables, chairs, shirts, sheets, and all the comforts of daily life, including foodstuffs, oils, wigs, and cosmetics. These items had to be abandoned during the Late Bronze crisis. Not only was there no room for objects like these in the shared tombs, but such commodities created a real threat to the security of the larger group because they attracted tomb robbers and opportunists immediately after burial. Even hundreds of years after interment, most of these objects could be taken and recommodified. In fact, the Twentieth Dynasty inventory texts from western Thebes mentioned above suggest that people could remove objects such as linens, sandals, and metals from centuries-old tombs, probably to be reused or sold (Cooney 2012). The danger of burying the dead with a vast assortment of usable commodities was just too great, and the comfort previously provided by such objects had to be supplied magically through other avenues. This could be one explanation for the increased numbers of shabti figurines meant to labor for the deceased in the afterlife.

As the New Kingdom was ending, the funerary needs of an elite Theban had to be condensed down into one nesting coffin set. Two or three containers that fit within one another were placed into an unmarked and secret shared tomb, sometimes with hundreds of other elites (Grajetzki 2003). No longer did elites embellish their tombs with masonry pyramids or any other markers associated with the decorated tomb chapel, including stelae, offering tables, and false doors, as they had in the previous New Kingdom (Seyfried 1987). An elite funerary ensemble now included only items perceived most essential to an individual’s transformation—the carefully embalmed and wrapped mummy, a richly decorated coffin set to enclose it, and perhaps a Book of the Dead papyrus.

The economic downturn profoundly changed how people acquired tomb goods. It encouraged many Egyptians to risk their morality in exchange for funerary commodities (Baines and Lacovara 2002). The trade was probably considered worthwhile and justifiable—if a recently dead relative needed the ritual protection of a coffin, then it was likely considered a good trade-off to disturb the body of a long-dead person and to take the coffin and other funerary arts to help someone who needed them at that present moment. Perhaps the Egyptians believed the older dead individual was already in the afterlife, transformed long before with funerary rituals and rites of passage. After only four or five generations, likely no one on earth really remembered most dead individuals, and offerings in the name of those individuals probably ceased. However, given all that we know about Egyptian funerary religion (Assmann 2005), the elites preparing for death during the Twenty-first Dynasty would have believed they needed funerary materiality for a successful rebirth, even if that materiality was stolen, usurped, and recycled. Political insecurity allowed the reuse of coffins and tombs. Economic scarcity of wood for coffins probably demanded it. And the Egyptian material approach to
death required the reuse (Cooney 2008a). Demand for coffins by elites who could afford them probably exceeded a very limited supply in Dynasty 21, a supply that could be replenished only if some mummies were removed from their coffins to accommodate new occupants. Otherwise, why would so many high elites be interred in reused coffins?

In the midst of these threats to established New Kingdom funerary behaviors, elite Egyptians never abandoned their perceived need for materiality in connection to the afterlife. Nor did they forgo funerary display, even if that display probably could not take place at the site of the burial chamber for security reasons. Despite the maintenance of these essentially Egyptian funerary behaviors and beliefs, the Twenty-first Dynasty crisis demanded new constructions of funerary arts value, constructions that could maintain ritual functionality and competitive displays simultaneously, even within the context of necropolis insecurity. These new constructions of value attempted to bypass the risks of tomb robbery, on the one hand, while at the same time supporting the religious and social needs of the dead and family members on the other. Defensive-religious functionality was necessary for the competitive displays of a small-scale, hierarchic, hegemonic system of elite Theban families. The end result was the creation of a set of funerary values that were at once defensive, religiously functional, and socially competitive.

Theban elites developed innovative funerary strategies in an attempt to remove risk from their high-cost burials, but what if they started to steal from each other? Archaeological evidence makes it quite clear that even hidden elite burials of the Twenty-first Dynasty were not safe. One mummy board now in the British Museum, BM EA 15659 (Edwards 1938:42), has a restoration inscription on the underside explaining that it was returned to its mummy, thus implying that it was illicitly taken from an elite Theban tomb cache to be reused, that other elites recognized the piece, and that it was forthwith returned to its dead owner in the tomb (Figure 6.3).

Many other coffins from Theban elite caches show chisel marks and missing hands or faces—evidence that people with access to the tomb, that is, fellow elites, had removed valuable gilding, often going after only the inner pieces of a coffin set because the theft could be hidden inside outer coffins in the same set (Figure 6.4). One defensive innovation taken up by elites in response to this kind of theft was to commission coffins without as much, or without any, gilding—not because they couldn’t afford it but because they couldn’t trust their peers not to steal it. As the Twenty-first Dynasty continued, more and more high elite coffins were finished with paint and varnish alone. Thus, even in one’s own elite peer group, there was no security for the materiality of the dead. The elites of the Twenty-first Dynasty were walking a tightrope of constant innovation and negotiation—between the ideal afterlife based on a precious material reality and the practical threats to that funerary materiality.

Ostentatious displays of wealth could be profoundly dangerous, not just to one’s coffin but to the corpse, and thus to the very afterlife existence of the deceased.
The Tomb Robbery Papyri tell us that many thieves simply burned coffins, with the mummies still inside them (Peet 1930). Burning was an efficient means of obtaining a coffin’s gilding and the precious amulets from the mummy’s wrappings in one step, allowing thieves to collect valuable materials from the ashes. In the midst of all this mutual mistrust and opportunism, the elites of Thebes developed not only burial assemblages with less gold but also new coffin decoration that was incredibly dense and complicated, able to absorb all the functions once performed by the tomb chapel, statuary, stelae, and false doors. And along with these changes, they also developed innovative methods to preserve and embellish the embalmed corpse—just in case the dead body was left without any protective container. This is the object at the center of all this preparation and adaptation: the Twenty-first Dynasty mummy.
The Twenty-First Dynasty Mummy as Part of a Defensive Funerary Ensemble

Most of my past research has dealt with the value of funerary materiality—coffins, tombs, and other objects (Cooney 2007, 2008b), but I have begun to treat the embalmed corpse as a funerary commodity as well (Appadurai 1986a). The mummy is the core reason for all ancient Egyptian funerary material; without a dead person to protect, surround, and transform, there was no purpose for any additional objects. The embalmed corpse is the object at the very center of ancient Egyptian funerary materiality (Taylor 2010:11). It was believed to be the most important vessel for the soul, morality, and personality of the dead. The nesting coffins, masks, mummy boards, funerary papyri, and worker figurines all extended from the embalmed human body, yet I would argue that for most of Egyptian history, elites spent much more on the funerary objects surrounding the body rather than putting a great deal of wealth toward embalming. Spending by Ramesside elites on tombs, coffins, pyramids, and stelae almost certainly outweighed spending on mummification (Cooney 2007).² But as we move into the Twenty-first Dynasty, elites were spending much more on their mummification techniques in order to fit into a particular context of socioeconomic crisis and elite competition.

The Twenty-first Dynasty is known to Egyptology as the apex of mummification technique for a reason. For the first time, elites developed an interest in the preserved body’s discrete self-sufficiency (Smith 1912:95; Taylor 2010). At the close of the Bronze Age, we see a number of changes in the embalmer’s art. First, it became the norm to return internal organs to the body after preservation rather than interring them in separate canopic jars and chests. Twenty-first Dynasty mummies were not split into different containers. Instead, when the embalmed organs were returned to the mummy, the corpse was intact and whole—that is, self-contained (Ikram and Dodson 1998). There were a number of other innovations: The natural and full appearance of the body was now restored. The mummy of Nodjmet, for example, a Twenty-first Dynasty high elite woman, has packing under her cheeks to restore the fullness of the face, as well as external padding on the body to restore the lifelike quality of torso and limbs (Figure 6.5). Previously, in the New Kingdom, a mummy’s skin was left slack and drawn, allowing desiccated flesh to sink into bones. Now a more lifelike face was desired. Twenty-First Dynasty embalmers also repaired any defects in the body and skin. They painstakingly repaired tears with leather patches and plaster. They even fixed anatomical problems with additional limbs of wood. The skin of the mummy was finished with a coating of plaster plus red or yellow paint, depending on the sex of the deceased. The mummy of the woman Maatkare, for instance, is plastered and painted with a mixture of yellow ochre and gum, and powdered resins were sprinkled over her face. Her fingers even show deep grooves from the string once tied around her nails to hold them
in place during the desiccation process (Smith 1912:99–101) (Figure 6.6). We also see significant hair extensions for the first time on these mummies—lifelike wigs of real human or artificial hair. The mummy of Hennatawy, for example, has a wig of spirals made of black string, parted in the middle. Embalmers stuffed her cheeks and her right foot with a “curious cheese-like mixture of fat (butter) and soda.” Hennatawy’s eyes were inlaid with stone. Her face was painted yellow and her lips red (Smith 1912:103) (Figure 6.7).

Embalmers of this period were interested in making the deceased look alive. The mummy of Djedptahiuefankh, for example, has incredibly realistic-looking eyes, made of white stone with a circle of black, inserted under half-closed lids (Smith 1912:114) (Figure 6.8). Egyptologists have suggested that this new treatment of the eyes was meant to represent the embalmed body as if it were a funerary statue, aware and ready to interact with the world (Smith 1912:95; Taylor 2010).
Figure 6.7. Mummy of Hennatawy in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, accession number CG 61090, Twenty-first Dynasty (photo after Smith 1912).

Figure 6.8. Mummy of Djedptahuiefankh in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, accession number CG 61097, Twenty-first Dynasty (photo after Smith 1912).
By placing realistic artificial eyes into empty sockets, craftsmen were in fact making the mummy look awake, a critical shift from previous dynasties, when the custom was to present the embalmed individual as if asleep, with closed eyes.

All these new embalming treatments were expensive. We do not have any prices for mummification—from this period or any other—but the Twenty-first Dynasty mummified body was now subject to the application of more expensive materials, such as resins and oils, and more time-consuming techniques—in other words, labor value—than ever seen before. Although all these characteristics of Twenty-first Dynasty embalming are well known to Egyptology, if we put these innovations into a context of economic and religious adaptation during a time of crisis, one could argue that elites were manipulating the flesh of the dead to act as stand-alone funerary objects, capable of functioning without protective coffins if they were removed by later opportunists. If we examine the mummy art historically and economically—as something that can be manufactured and conformed to high elite demands—it is also possible to see this dead flesh and bone as a commodity, one that is crafted within a defensive funerary preparation to be religiously and socially functional for its owner.

I would even take this argument a bit further. It seems that Theban elites were commissioning mummies that mimicked the appearance of the deceased as they were depicted on their coffins. In fact, the link between the anthropoid coffin and the mummy seems key to the development of a self-contained and lifelike corpse during Dynasty 21. In previous dynasties, it was the coffin that created an eternal, lifelike, imperishable body for the deceased, surrounding the vulnerable body with protective and lasting wooden material. The words for mummy and coffin are actually almost the same in Ramesside socioeconomic texts (Ancient Egyptian “wt”), the only difference being that the word for coffin has a determinative of wood. Therefore, the ancient Egyptian word for coffin actually meant something like “an embalmed body made of wood” (Cooney 2007:19). From this lexicographical evidence, the coffin and mummy seem to have had the same religious functionality.

The Twenty-first Dynasty coffin was therefore a kind of abstraction of the deceased’s body (Figure 6.9). It remade the corpse as an Osirianized and solarized version of itself—represented as fully awake and activated in the next life with open eyes, idealized facial features, and crossed arms—all in a wooden package covered with religious iconography, scenes, and Book of the Dead texts. For most of Egyptian history, the coffin was meant to be a better, more ideal representation of the mummy inside (Assmann 2005), and in the New Kingdom, elites likely spent much more on their coffin sets than they did on mummification.

The coffin was believed to be a highly functional funerary object (Taylor 1989; Walsem 1997), but in times of economic and political uncertainty, relying primarily on the coffin to transform the deceased became a serious drawback. As an abstraction, the coffin could be reassigned very easily. The name of the previous owner could be painted over to make room for a new one, or the entire coffin might be
replastered and redecorated in a different style for another person. For example, the Twentieth Dynasty coffin of Muthotep in the British Museum shows the earlier Nineteenth Dynasty decoration of a reused coffin underneath (Cooney 2007) (Figure 6.9).

In the light of such commonplace coffin usurpation, elite Theban families chose to invent intensified and expensive treatments for the preserved human corpse. When the body was worked into an imperishable coffin-like object depicting the idealized deceased, it was not an abstraction. Instead, it was the body the dead person had used in daily life, not only manufactured into a form that would not decay but also fashioned into a youthful and perfected manifestation of the deceased with open eyes, lifelike full features and limbs, and full and lustrous hair. As other Egyptologists have suggested, this intensified mummification was akin to creating a lifelike statue or mummy mask of the deceased (Smith 1912:95; Taylor 2010:232), much like the ideal coffin representation of the deceased. This lifelike image used the human body itself to create a functional image of the dead using flesh and bone as the main media (Figure 6.10). And like a Ramesside or Twenty-first Dynasty coffin, the mummy includes a full wig; open, idealized eyes; smooth, youthful skin the color of yellow or red ochre; eye paint; and lip paint, as well as a full and idealized body. In other words, the Twenty-first Dynasty focus on these embalming techniques

Figure 6.9. Coffin lid of Muthotep (a) and detail of reuse (b), British Museum, London, accession number 29579, Twentieth Dynasty (photos by the author).
indicates that the overall object value of the mummy was actually increasing as the value of other funerary objects, such as coffins, was decreasing. Generations of elite Twenty-first Dynasty Thebans responded to tomb robbery and economic insecurity by returning their focus to the most essential part of the burial—the human body. Theban elites decided to invest less of their considerable resources for burial in tombs and gilded coffins and more in high-quality preservation techniques for the corpse.

Egyptologists discuss funerary arts and mummies primarily from the point of view of religious meaning and stylistic dating. We know that Twenty-first Dynasty ancient Egyptian elites were investing more wealth in their mummies than people at any other point in history, but the reasons for this increase in value have not been fully formed yet. If we treat the mummy as a commodity and examine the problem through a socioeconomic lens, one obvious reason the mummy’s value shot up during this time of crisis was because it was not an exchangeable object. Although one could embellish the corpse with valuable materials, such as resins and oils, human hair, plaster, and paint, these commodities could not be recycled after application. In a way, the mummy absorbed them, took them into itself, making them impossible to recommodify. The mummy as a crafted commodity had only “value in use” and no “value in exchange,” unlike every other funerary object in the

Figure 6.10. Mummy of Nesikhonsu in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, accession number CG 61095, Twenty-first Dynasty (photo after Smith 1912).
Twenty-first Dynasty ensemble, including coffin sets, shabtis, Books of the Dead, amulets, and jewelry, which could all indeed be exchanged and reused, even after ritual use in burial. The new treatment of the mummy had the extraordinary result of creating tremendous use value while at the same time cutting out any exchange value, the latter being the most dangerous element of expensive and desirable funerary arts such as coffins, which could be abstracted for another owner.

The increasing value of the mummy was therefore inherently defensive: any investments in mummification could not be recycled or returned to the economy, thus removing many risks to the viability of the body. This economic reasoning is not mutually exclusive to more abstract religious-ritual motivations because investments in mummification provided an adaptation during times of social and political instability by granting a new psychological security within the very flesh of the deceased perfectly preserved.

The mummy’s most vulnerable feature was also its most defensive characteristic: it was irreplaceable to its owner. It was inherently unique to the person who inhabited it and could not be abstracted and occupied by another dead soul. It was of value to one individual and one individual only—which made it the perfect element of focus during a time of socioeconomic insecurity and funerary innovation. This element of irreplaceability added value over time for the mummy’s perceived inhabitant. When tomb robbery was functioning, the ritual value of a given funerary object held precedence over its value over time. In other words, if a coffin could be reused by another owner, people probably felt it had already served its primary purpose to the original owner by ritually protecting the body during opening-of-the-mouth rituals and other transformative funerary rites. The reasoning may have been: a reused coffin could justifiably be put back into service for the necessary ritual use of another person who needed it at that very moment. The crafted mummy, on the other hand, may have been a core part of funerary rituals, but it was of no ritual value to anyone else.

During times of prosperity, such as the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties, eternal value was probably taken for granted by the elite population with regard to their burial goods. But as insecure political and economic conditions descended, careful embalming of the body was one of the cleverest ways to ensure both the ritual value of a container of the soul and its presence with the deceased over time. By adding more economic—and ritual—value to the embalmed body, Twenty-first Dynasty Theban elites transformed the mummy into something coffin-like that they believed could stand on its own, as the primary religious vessel for its owner for all eternity, bypassing many risks associated with theft and reuse.

In addition, the mummy acted as a funerary commodity, something that could be used as a tool for competition among Theban elites. David Graeber explains that the construction of value always had a social context:

Society is not a thing at all: it is the total process through which all this activity is coordinated, and value, in turn, the way that actors see their own activity as meaningful as part of
it. Doing so always, necessarily involves some sort of public recognition and comparison. This is why economic models which see those actions as aimed primarily at individual gratification, fall so obviously short: they fail to see that in any society—even within a market system—solitary pleasures are relatively few. The most important ends are ones that can only be realized in the eyes of some collective audience [Graeber 2001:76].

This collective construction of value adds a clear political element to the intensification of mummification in the Twenty-first Dynasty (Graeber 2001:88). It is important to remember that all instances of such enhanced embalming come from one particular social group: the intermarried, highly competitive, Egyptian–Libyan families associated with the High Priesthood of Amen at Thebes. The royal mummies from the Tanis royal tomb were too poorly preserved for us to determine if Egyptian kings’ bodies were also subject to the same techniques, but it remains likely. I think it is fair to say that only individuals with high elite links, Theban or Tanite (Figure 6.1), were capable of, and interested in, the creation of lifelike, intensely prepared corpses for burial. In the end, this kind of mummification set all such elites apart, not only from the rest of the Egyptian population but from other competitive elites. Only highly placed individuals would have had access to the knowledge and skilled labor needed to have such mummies commissioned, and likely only they had the privileged access to view the carefully preserved bodies of their relatives and peers up close.

This access created a knowledge base that allowed comparisons to be made between mummies, even though they were surely separately displayed at each funeral, opening up discourses of evaluation and competition between elites. We can only guess at the details of the social interactions. Who viewed the unwrapped mummies and where? How were they compared? How did elite competition manifest? In the end, I think we can at least conclude from the archaeological evidence that elite Thebans felt a profound need to participate in the new intensified mummification—not just for defensive reasons, not just for economic reasons, and not just because it provided a new religious functionality in a time of crisis, but because it also allowed them to compete with fellow elites in an exclusive arena of comparative display.

Some of the more nefarious actions of Theban elites may even help us locate the source of inspiration for intensified mummification. If Theban elites, in particular the High Priesthood of Amen, were in fact the same men who systematically looted and dismantled tombs of the New Kingdom kings in the Valley of the Kings (Reeves 1990; Taylor 1992), then these men would have seen firsthand the impeccably preserved mummies of these kings.

Egyptologists have found clear signs that royal mummies were carefully unwrapped at some point after their burial (Smith 1912), ostensibly to remove all objects of value found on the corpses—things like amulets and jewelry of solid gold. If we implicate the Amen priesthood in the methodical removal of the kings’ riches, which I think we can do as early as the end of Dynasty 20 (Ritner 2009:104–109),
then these Theban elites would have stood face to face with skillfully preserved mummies belonging to kings such as Seti I. Not only would these New Kingdom royal mummies have represented the highest levels of embalming yet achieved in ancient Egypt, but they may have served as the inspiration for a new construction of value in mummification.

The Amen priesthood probably conducted its unwrappings in secret, within a small community of peers, in confined, confidential conditions. After the thorough removal of all amulets and precious objects, the High Priests rewrapped the royal mummies in fresh Twenty-first Dynasty linens, the wrappings in which archaeologists found them. The priests eventually placed the kings in the same secret caches as themselves (Ritner 2009:99, 114, 158), and this is another important shift in elite funerary values: the movement of the kings’ bodies to some elite tomb caches granted the High Priests of Amen and their families a new proximity value by locating their own eternal existences with the great kings of Egypt.

The very act of personally viewing the unwrapped and naked bodies of Egyptian kings may have been formative for innovative mummification practices. Perhaps visible access to these well-preserved bodies encouraged Theban elites to intensify their own embalming techniques, so that their own bodies would last into eternity like the kings of old. Or maybe seeing such well-preserved bodies in the midst of social chaos and the mass looting of the Theban necropolis convinced elites that intensified embalming was an excellent defensive practice that they should mimic, because it ostensibly allowed an eternal existence even without expensive coffins or any other funerary objects. But we should not forget the social arena of mummification innovations. Only high elites had access to these New Kingdom royal mummies, granting them membership in an exclusive club of knowledge and proximity. The Theban rich participated in innovative mummification techniques, intensified amid heightened social competition within the small, intermarried, inward-looking community of the High Priests of Amen. Having gone through this argument, the actual methods of inspiration do indeed remain conjectural, but the possibility of such influence is very real.

THE END OF INTENSIFIED MUMMIFICATION

The reasons for more intense mummification in the Twenty-first Dynasty become even more complicated when we take into account what a short period of activity this represents—it was essentially a blip on the radar screen—an anomaly confined to the elites of the early Third Intermediate period. These embalming techniques did not last long beyond the early Twenty-second Dynasty among Theban elites, even though most of the same economic, social, and political conditions prevailed. Curiously, the early Third Intermediate period remains the only time period in all Egyptian history when mummification intensification held such economic, aesthetic,
religious, and social value. This high level of embalming lasted only 150 years—from the end of Dynasty 20 to the beginning of Dynasty 22. If there are such clear economic, religious, and social reasons for the increased value of the mummy, why did these techniques not last?

The evidence is clear that the carefully mummified body was abandoned in Dynasty 22 (Ikram and Dodson 1998), even though economic scarcity and necropolis insecurity were key drivers for funerary arts during the rest of the Third Intermediate period (Taylor 2010). From mid-Dynasty 22, it became common for elites to have their family members’ bodies treated in a more perfunctory way. Organs were still removed, and the body was still dried out in natron; however, there was no interest in creating a realistic and lifelike corpse with inlaid eyes, stuffed face and limbs, and painted features. Instead, Twenty-second Dynasty elites were primarily interested in a corpse that would not rot.

This is a return to the norm: a body that evaded decomposition was the standard for elites throughout most of Egyptian history, particularly during times of prosperity such as the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties. So why did Twenty-first Dynasty mummification intensification fall away, even if many of the same conditions prevailed? An answer might be found if we add another social element—what I call display value—to the equation. The focus on the mummy cut out a very important element of public social display for the Theban elite. It is important to remember that these Twenty-first Dynasty mummies are currently unwrapped only because twentieth-century archaeologists performed intense examinations, leaving the bodies naked and exposed (Smith 1912). In ancient times, access to an unwrapped mummy would have been allowed for only a very short period of time, before the body was enclosed in complicated linen bandages and shrouds. The perceived vulnerability of the mummy disallowed an intimate view of the body tissues or facial features of any given corpse by the public. Instead, the susceptible mummy needed to be carefully wrapped for any larger displays during funerary rites.

Ancient Egyptian ritual scenes do not show mummies on display during funeral ceremonies without outer protection, such as wrappings, a mask, or a coffin. Because Twenty-first Dynasty unwrapped mummies were likely only viewed by family members or close associates who may have been invited to the embalming workshop before the bodies were bandaged and shrouded, elite Thebans would not have been able to show expensive mummification treatments publicly. In other words, elites could not have benefited from the display of the crafted corpse, into which they had invested so much money, to a larger audience. Mummification intensification worked as tool of social display for only a very small, more inward-looking society of elites. It may have been an ideal competitive platform for the extended family groups and complicated kinship lines of the High Priesthood of Amen, but it was a nonstarter if one wanted to make a larger, more public statement. Elite family members could ostensibly discuss the value of a particular mummy with people outside their circle, letting others know of the expensive treatments hidden from
their eyes, but this process would likely have had no visual drama, nor would it have created any larger public intrigue. In the end, a large investment in funerary materiality was invisible. All the expensive and time-consuming craftsmanship was impossible to publicly display in any way. The intensification of the Twenty-first Dynasty mummy was a creative way of defensively reacting to risk when engaging in exclusive social competition, but this innovation could not create broader social display value for elite Egyptians.

Ancient Egyptian funerary materiality always needed to fulfill multiple functions for the deceased simultaneously (Cooney 2007), including religious protection for the dead, ritual use in funeral ceremonies, and a social functionality of prestige and display for the family of the deceased. In other words, value, whether economic, religious, or social, must be visible to its audience so that it can be shared, consumed, and realized. As already noted, value demands public recognition, which then allows comparisons of value (Graeber 2001:76–77). This leads us to a possible explanation for the shift away from mummification intensification—that the audience for determining value had become larger, broader, and more public by Dynasty 22. During the Twenty-first Dynasty, the potential audience for viewing and comparing mummification value was a small, inward-looking group connected to the Amen priesthood. However, as we move into Dynasty 22, the potential audience in Thebes must have changed, making new demands on elites with regard to visibility and the display of their funerary arts.

We do know that the makeup of the Theban high elite began to change in Dynasty 22, when King Sheshonq I at Tanis appointed his own son as the High Priest of Amen at Thebes, interrupting the patrilineal hereditary succession that had been the norm for the Amen priesthood during Dynasty 21 (Ritner 2009). The introduction of new elite players into the Theban landscape may have demanded new social innovations with regard to funerary behaviors. If we keep in mind that the high elite Egyptian funeral had the potential to act as a social tool of public display and prestige, then it makes sense that expensive but nondisplayable mummification innovations would be quickly discarded in favor of something else. In other words, elites decided that their money could be better spent elsewhere.

And so in Dynasty 22, a period with many of the same socioeconomic stresses, we see much less emphasis placed on high-cost embalming. This shift in demand actually occurred in conjunction with a new type of body container made of cartonnage (Grajetzki 2003; Taylor 1985). Cartonnage is a variety of papier-mâché, not a high-value material like wood but an inexpensive and easily manufactured medium (Cooney 2007:24). Cartonnage containers were very hard to remove from corpses; they were tight fitting and laced up the back. Both the low material value and the tight fit made this object very defensive—that is, difficult to reuse and not expensive enough to make theft worth one’s while. But crucially, the painted cartonnage cover provided a new possibility to display the embalmed corpse for purposes of social prestige, in both a defensive and lifelike, idealized manner. The Twenty-first
Dynasty mummy may have provided \textit{internal} security during a time of crisis, as well as the opportunity for exclusive social comparisons, but the value of public social display was probably too important for this innovation to last for long.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Egyptologists typically tie shifts in funerary style to religious developments and internal theological debates (Assmann 2005), but rarely do we attribute shifts in funerary materiality to social, economic, and ritual value constructions. Only occasionally do we consider the object as returning an investment in social display. However, because of the functional materiality (Cooney 2008a) involved in preparation for the afterlife, and because of the considerable investment required to transform and protect the dead, crisis must be seen as having had a profound effect on the construction and abandonment of certain funerary values in ancient Egypt.

\textbf{Notes}

1. Ostracon British Museum 5624; Ostracon Deir el Medina 828 plus Ostracon Vienna H. 1; Ostracon Florence 2621; Ostracon Madrid 16243; Papyrus Berlin P. 10496; Papyrus DeM 26.

2. There are no prices for mummification from the New Kingdom or Third Intermediate period, but there are many prices for tombs, coffins, and other funerary objects from the Ramesside period. Nonetheless, I think it can be argued that, proportionally, the cost of mummification was a smaller part of the overall burial ensemble during the Ramesside period. In addition, the quality of mummification for elites during the Ramesside period is lower than that of Twenty-first Dynasty elites. Finally, if we could estimate the average cost of embalming labor, plus the cost of resins, waxes, natron, and other embalming materials required for elite Ramesside-period mummies, it would probably compare to the cost of one or two nesting coffins of the period. The latter statement is the most hypothetical, but the point remains: out of the entire burial ensemble, the cost of mummification would almost certainly not have been the most expensive element. During the Twenty-first Dynasty, on the other hand, the proportional cost of embalming probably reached its highest point.

3. John H. Taylor is one of the few scholars to attempt some kind of reasoning for Twenty-first Dynasty mummification intensification: “The motivations for these changes are not immediately apparent from written sources, and can only be speculated on. Was the greater self-sufficiency given to the dead a measure of compensation for the decline in the practice of mortuary ritual at the tomb? Was there also a practical reason for the placing of all crucial organs within the body—to prevent their loss in the event of the mummy being transferred from one resting place to another, a phenomenon characteristic of the time?” (Taylor 2010:232).
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