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How to Cope with Death: Mourning and Funerary Practices in the Ancient Near East

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edited by
Candida Felli



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info@edizioniets.com
www.edizioniets.com

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PREFACE

I am sincerely pleased to present the Proceedings of the workshop held at the University of Florence on December 5th-6th 2013, "How to Cope with Death. Mourning and Funerary Practices in the Ancient Near East" and host it as the 5th issue in the series Ricerche di Archeologia del Vicino Oriente.

The workshop was organized by Candida Felli in the framework of a research project financed by the Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (PRIN 2009). It was devoted to discussing the mourning rites performed *post mortem* in particular periods and areas, and was carefully planned by Candida who assessed the main issues for the contributors aiming to pursue a coherent trajectory of analysis and let the debate flow among the participants with their different perspectives and disciplines.

This workshop was not, in fact, an occasional event bringing together specialists in funerary archaeology, but was instead conceived as a crucial step in a personal route of the research which Candida Felli has undertaken for many years with coherence and commitment, and on which she has produced a doctoral dissertation, published in the volume *Dopo la Morte* (Florence 2015). This volume, despite its accurate and in-depth examination of data and the proposed innovative approach, did not exhaust her curiosity and queries on the subject, but rather stimulated new questions opening the way for further investigations. A new focus on rituals as repeated performances and related practices, and the presence of recent data, encouraged her to promote a workshop as a joint effort among scholars for confronting different approaches and various perspectives. It is now clear that the physical burying of the corpse of the dead in a distinct space and in a definite moment was not a final act; it was more often followed by various spatial and temporal activities that had to provide the dead and the living, ancestors and successors with a perennial link and eventually mutual protection. There is a significant trajectory after the death which is composed of rites carried out in and outside the burials which were destined to create a familial and community linkage that extended beyond death.

It is certainly a demanding task to collect consistent textual and archaeological data from the Syrian Bronze Age sources concerning mourning rites and the *post mortem* performances, especially when we confront them with the richer and more vivid data offered by ethnological studies. However, the many contributions in this volume succeed in presenting new evaluations as well as criticisms of this complex and definitely fascinating subject. Despite a certain variety of situations reflecting heterogeneous chronological realities and specific cases, a quite homogeneous funerary, ideological and practical structure of post mortem rites seems to emerge from the discussion of the workshop: corpses were manipulated, treated after time, and eventually moved to spaces either adjacent to or distant

from the first burial; secondary burials integrated separated corpses in common spaces, and these were also visible, exposed and the object of reiterated rites of remembrance. We ascribe these different cases to the cult of the ancestors and the ideology of identity in a broad term definition, but in fact they testify to a quite generalized need not to cut the threads that linked the members of the family and community after a death. Death was a terminal moment, but the mourning, manipulation and displacement of corpses contributed to maintaining a spiritual and even physical contact between the living and the dead, consequently providing consolation for the loss, shortening the distance from the dead, and relieving the angst of nothingness.

The contributions in this volume are the result of different approaches and present various interpretations which, however, combine in showing the complexity and variety of behaviours in the lengthy Near-Eastern trajectory of post mortem mourning rituals. To the participants of the workshop and the present volume goes my sincere gratitude for their enthusiastic involvement in the debate, and to Candida for her ability to encourage and stimulate discussions on often difficult points. In my memory of the often vivid debates which followed the presentations, the clarity of mind and concreteness of Edgar Peltenburg stand out: we all miss him, but his contribution in this volume will help us to revive his memory.

Stefania Mazzoni

MOURNING AND LAMENT IN ANCIENT EGYPT[1]

ANDREA KUCHAREK - HEIDELBERG

Introduction

Thinking about ancient Egyptian funerary customs what comes to mind is the huge effort that went into making a deceased's afterlife worthwhile. The archaeological, pictorial and textual evidence for such rites and customs is simply overwhelming – apart from decorated and inscribed tombs and tomb equipment there are stelae and statues, not to mention the countless funerary papyri inscribed with the *Book of the Dead* or, later on, the *Books of Breathing* or the *Book of Traversing Eternity*. Thus it is almost understandable that the study of the bereaved and *their* customs has been rather neglected for a long time. The sources concerning these, while still abundant, are much scarcer than the ones concerning the afterlife of the deceased. Also, some of them are difficult to detect as they crop up in unexpected contexts. Perhaps, too, grief and lament haven't appealed to scholars as much as other subjects.[2]

While there is a large number of texts, such as laments or more or less descriptive texts, the bulk of the testimony on Egyptian mourning and lament is pictorial.[3] The most important source are the funerary procession scenes on the walls of tomb chapels, mainly dating to the New Kingdom.[4] Closely related, but usually less detailed are the vignettes to the first chapter of the *Book of the Dead* which date from the New Kingdom to the Ptolemaic period.[5] Apart from these main sources there are scenes on stelae as well as on coffins, again mainly dating to the New Kingdom, roughly the 2nd half of the 2nd millenium BC.[6]

While we are dealing here with mourning and lament as a cultural phenomenon, they are based on an emotion, grief. Grief, the intense emotional reaction to the experience of loss, is by many held to be universal. Its forms of expression or repression, however, are various. The founder of the modern theory of loss, John Bowlby, wrote: "Social custom differs enormously. Human response stays much the same" which I think is correct.[7]

I want to begin with a few remarks on method and terminology concerning the inter-

[1] This paper is based on an ongoing study on ancient Egyptian mourning customs that from 2009-2011 was supported by a Gerda Henkel Foundation research fellowship.

[2] The only comprehensive study of ancient Egyptian laments yet was published more than 70 years ago (LÜDDECKENS 1943). A comparative study of ancient and modern Egyptian mourning customs is EL-SHOHOUMI 2004. See also the overview by VOLOKHINE 2008.

[3] Cf. WERBROUCK 1938.

[4] For the Ramesside period see BARTHELMESS 1992. See also the study by TAWFIK 2008.

[5] For these see *ibidem*.

[6] There are no comprehensive studies on mourning scenes on either stelae or coffins. A paper on the latter is being prepared by the present author for the proceedings of the 2014 colloquium «Ancient Egyptian Coffins: craft traditions and functionality» at the British Museum.

[7] BOWLBY 1998, p. 126.

pretation of mourning gestures, so important when dealing with the iconography of grief. Some scholars of ancient lament have in recent years attempted to differentiate visually between "genuine emotion" and "theatrical grief" or "theatrical performance", leading them to identify gestures which denote "theatrical" mechanical lament and others which derive from "genuine" grief.[8] Merthen, who based her analysis on the iconography of Greek funerary vases, defines as theatrical expansive gestures ("Ausgreifen in den Raum") which are perceived as impetuous ("heftig"); genuine emotion in her opinion is marked by restrained gestures, with arms held close to the body and a general introverted posture.[9] According to Millward, who studies Egyptian material, the most frequently depicted and therefore most "typical" mourning gesture is that of upraised arms; this, she concludes, must be a default gesture which may be used by anyone regardless of their degree of emotional involvement. She goes on to define a class of "more spontaneous gestures" including pouring dust in one's face, opening the mouth in wailing and fainting.[10] Thus, Merthen's method is based on the perceived extrovert or introvert quality of gestures, while Millward operates with a combination of statistics and assumptions on the nature of the gestures. Amazingly, neither includes the art-historical and cultural background of their subject into her assessment; on the contrary, the cultural background of the scholars themselves seems to determine their conclusions. In many western cultures, quiet mourning is deemed appropriate and serious, while the extrovert character of mourning and lament in other cultures is often experienced as "theatrical" and artificial. Needless to say, conclusions drawn in this way from material which is not only from another but from an ancient culture are at least doubtful. And as it is ancient cultures we are dealing with there is one further obstacle in truthfully assessing what went on: especially iconographical but also other types of sources are not simply photography-like depictions of the real world but, to speak with Jan Assmann, "messages", informed by norms, intentions and ideals by those who created them.[11]

But to get back to the subject at hand: I think that terms like "genuine" or "artificial" should be avoided when studying expressions of mourning in ancient Egypt or other ancient cultures.[12] We simply cannot know about that from just looking at the scenes. Also, there are not just two states of emotional involvement: none at all or total immersion; there is, as we all know from experience, a continuum and sometimes a muddle. Of course, it can be useful to distinguish gestures according to their perceived intensity, but this should be done without judging their assumed degree of emotional authenticity or spontaneity.

[8] Merthen 2005; Millward 2013, pp. 43-50; 2012, pp. 141-146.

[9] Merthen 2005, pp. 3-4, 9-16.

[10] Millward 2013, pp. 45-46.

[11] On the distinction between «traces», «messages» and «memories» («Spuren, Botschaften und Erinnerungen») in a historical sense see Assmann 1996, pp. 18-24.

[12] Both Merthen and Millward use a caveat: that «genuine» gestures may also be used by «theatrically» lamenting persons (Merthen 2005, p. 3) or that «theatrical» gestures do not mean that there is no emotion involved (Millward 2013, p. 46; 2012, p. 146) which basically devalues their assessments. Millward 2013, p. 46 writes: «At no point will this study suggest that the mourners adopting the more typical gestures of grief are themselves emotionless, but rather that it is the gestures that lack emotion whilst the motivation behind adopting them remains passionately driven.» So how does she arrive at the conclusion that the gestures are emotionless?

I propose to use the term "demonstrative" whenever a gesture implies strong movement, thus covering much of what Millward calls "theatrical". "Demonstrative", however, simply means that grief, whether genuine or not, is displayed in a conspicuous fashion, in contrast to being limited to small or understated gestures or none at all.[13] What can be quite clearly deduced from mourning scenes in ancient Egypt or elsewhere is not whether certain gestures depict genuine emotion or not but what was the norm, the cultural standard, or even the ideal of grieving. None of the very numerous funerary scenes on tomb walls was executed after the funeral in order to truthfully record what went on and who was there. To have a rock tomb built and decorated was a process that took several years and was something that the owner endeavoured to accomplish during his lifetime. After death, the decorated tomb chapel, open to visitors, acted, among other things, as a memorial to the social and moral status of the deceased. The scenes depicted the roles performed by the tomb owner in life and death according to *ma'at*, the all-encompassing world-order. They were not a means of recording the details of his actual life, or, in the case that interests us here, the details of his actual funeral. What we have – the "message" – is what was deemed appropriate for a person of a given status at a certain time and place. Within that framework of norms and ideals, personal choice doubtless played an important role, from whether to have a funerary scene at all to which relatives, colleagues and friends ought to be depicted or the degree of sumptuousness of the whole scene.

From death to burial

To be bereaved means that somebody close to the bereaved has died. The deceased person is at the focus of grief and mourning, and thus the phases the deceased undergoes at least until the funeral may inform the phases of mourning.[14]

Due to the mummification process there was a long gap between death and funeral. Ideally, the funeral took place after 70 days of mummification and embalming.[15] The mummification as such – the desiccation of the body by means of natron – took up about half of this time span, and much of the rest was spent with anointing and bandaging the body, accompanied by the recitation of glorifications.[16] Finally, the bandaged mummy was put inside one or more coffins and then drawn on a sledge towards the rock tomb where it was laid to rest. It is not quite clear what happened immediately after death but it seems plausible that the body was removed from home within a day or two.[17] Before it was buried in natron for

[13] One might also define «radical» gestures, a term which I would restrict to self-inflicted wounds or self-mutilation.

[14] On this subject see Kucharek 2005, pp. 342-358.

[15] Theis 2010; 2011.

[16] Cf. Theis 2011, p. 186.

[17] The common opinion, reiterated e.g. by *ibidem*, 189, that the corpse was kept at home for four days after death seems quite implausible to me (cf. Kucharek 2005, pp. 349-350). Apart from the practical problems arising from keeping a corpse for such a length of time in a warm climate, allowing a corpse to commence decomposition would have run counter to the very purpose of mummification, i.e. preserving the body, one of the main tenets of an (elite) burial and central to Egyptian mortuary religion.

about 35 days it had to be washed and the intestines were removed for separate treatment; this may have taken about four days.[18] Thus there were several physical stages between death and burial: four days of washing and disembowelling, 35 days of mummification and a further 35 days of embalming and bandaging, followed by burial. These physical transformations were mirrored in stages of the relationship of the deceased's body and his soul, the *ba*, who was able to move about and was therefore pictured as a human-headed bird. At the moment of death the *ba* left the body and only returned to it after the 35 days of mummification were completed, when the body was no longer in danger of decomposing but had been transformed into a durable mummy.[19] The glorifications directed at this mummy during embalming and bandaging were consequently not directed at a lifeless body (called *khat* by the Egyptians) but at an animated being, the *sah*. The *ba* stayed with the mummy until the funeral when it was ritually released but reminded to return to its body every now and again.[20]

It is difficult to assess to what extent the phases of mourning corresponded to the stages the deceased went through. There is some evidence for an initial four-day phase of extreme fasting which would coincide with the four days until mummification was initiated.[21] In a group of documents concerning the actions to be taken by members of a cult association should one of them die the 35th day is sometimes mentioned, without any specification, however, of what was to be done on that day.[22] Maybe they presented cloths, perhaps as a contribution to the bandaging of the mummy.[23] Other than this there is little evidence for mourning phases. The day of burial, more than two months after death, must have been the culmination of the mourning period. The bereaved were reunited with the deceased for the first time after death, perceiving him in his new state as an "august mummy" (*sah shepes*). To find him thus transformed was, while necessary and desirable for the deceased, a shock for the bereaved, especially the widow who laments that she is unable to recognise her husband:[24]

> Alas! The Good One is transformed since the embalmer's deed;
> his face has been arranged into a different one,
> his it is not.
> "The mummy", they say of him.

Following burial, it seems that mourning was periodically performed on the occasion of

[18] Cf. n. 17.

[19] Very few texts refer to these early stages of the postmortal relationship between *ba* and deceased: *Book of the Dead* spell 154, whose subject is the protection of the corpse from decomposition, states: «His *ba* ascends after he dies, (while) he (the deceased = the corpse) descends when he has passed away» (Hornung 1979, p. 332). A demotic dream narrative from Saqqara contains the passage: «You have a living *ba* from the 35th day on» which clearly refers to the mummification process (Ray 1976, pp. 38-43).

[20] Assmann 2001, pp. 120-131.

[21] «I avoided bread and water for four full days»: Jansen-Winkeln 1994, p. 35.

[22] de Cenival 1972.

[23] Cf. Shore and Smith 1960.

[24] Osing 1992, p. 59, pl. 37.

some feasts; this is indicated by scenes from New Kingdom tombs in Thebes.[25] We know, however, extremely little about mourning customs after the funeral.

Now what of the mourning customs themselves? Ancient Egyptian mourning may be summed up as demonstrative – clothes are torn up, mud is smeared on body and head, hair is dishevelled, and there is loud wailing and crying. On the other hand, however, quiet mourning was also known, and the position of crouching on the ground with the head lowered onto the knees gave rise to the expression "head-on-knees", a general metaphor for grief.[26] Many of the customs belong to the category of self-reduction or self-decrease, stopping well short, however, of self-mutilating acts like cutting or stabbing.

Fasting – severe at the beginning, afterwards lightened to the avoidance of luxury food and drink, seems to have been common,[27] and according to Diodorus other amenities like soft bedding, baths and lotions were avoided as well as sexual intercourse.[28] These specifics are not mentioned in Egyptian texts, however.

Mentioned by Greek authors and Egyptian texts alike and also known from tomb scenes is the plastering with mud or dust which was a common custom. Combined with the neglect of the hair and the avoidance of washing is implied by Diodorus the bereaved must have presented a sight much more distressing than what the rather decorous images of funerary processions.

Not only gender

Mourning and lament were not, however, uniformly acted out by everyone. There are, within a single scene, clear differences in the mode and intensity of grief. The main distinction has always been drawn between "emotional" females and "restrained" males.[29] While it is true that the Egyptians themselves distinguished between the funerary obligations of their offspring in terms of gender – the sons were to perform the offering and memorial cult while the daughters lamented[30] – in fact the parameters of demonstrated grief are much more complex than that. These parameters encompass – besides gender – age, social rank and degree of kinship to the deceased. Thus, a small son of the deceased may be depicted mourning profusely, as being young and closely related to the deceased allows for impetuous gestures in spite of being male. I want to exemplify these rules for expressing grief on a scene from a Theban tomb.

The funerary scene in the tomb of Nakhtamun (figs 1, 2), dating to the 20th dyn., con-

[25] There is a considerable number of offering scenes dating to the 18th and 19th dyn. where wailing women are present, e.g. TT 51 (Davies 1927, pp. 11-12, pls V, XIIB).

[26] Sauneron 1942, pp. 75-80.

[27] Cf. Kucharek 2010, pp. 320-321.

[28] Oldfather 2004, pp. 249, 309.

[29] E.g. Assmann 2001, p. 407 («heftiger Schmerz» versus «stille Trauer»).

[30] Apart from numerous pictorial sources this is made quite explicit on a Ptolemaic stela whose childless owner expresses his fear of not receiving an offering cult as he has no son and of not being lamented as he has no daughter (Jansen-Winkeln 2012).

sists of two parts, like most of these scenes.[31] They depict the two main stages of a funeral. The first section (fig. 1), to the left, shows the procession to the tomb. The funeral barge with the mummy is carried by several men, followed by the canopic chest containing the mummified organs (only partly preserved). The end of the scene is missing but can be reconstructed as a group of male mourners, as remains of their speech indicate. This part of the funeral is dynamic, moving towards the second part which is more static (fig. 2). Here the mummy is depicted upright in front of the tomb; officiants perform the ritual of Opening the Mouth in front of the mummy, while mourning men and women witness the scene.[32]

In this left section, there are 25 male persons (M 1-25), among them a boy (M 11), and no female ones.[33] Of these 25 males, only 3, including the boy, perform a gesture of lament, raising their hands to their heads (M 3, 10, 11). In the right section, there are 11 males (M 26-36) and 11 females (F 1-11), one of them a small girl (F 11). All females perform some gesture of lament, while only 4 of the males (M 28-31) do so. In total, of 35 males[34] in the overall funerary scene only seven, that is exactly 20%, show signs of visible mourning while 100% of the women do so. The conclusion seems straightforward: men are not prone to outward signs of grief, while women are very much so.

But let's take another look at the scene. How many males are engaged in a task that involves their hands, thus preventing them from gesturing? In the left-hand section, this applies to all 22 males who do not visibly grieve (M 1-2, 4-9, 12-25): they carry the canopic chest or barge, libate and cense, drive the cows, carry yokes and bouquets etc. In the right-hand section, exactly the same pattern emerges: of the ten males present, only the four who mourn are not otherwise engaged. The modified conclusion is therefore: all females lament, as well as all males who do not carry out manual work, be it practical like carrying something or ritual like libating and censing. The further conclusion from this is that females do occur in funerary scenes always as mourners and never in a practical or ritual capacity. This is in fact almost true. There are women who perform a certain gesture who are in fact part of the ritual personnel, taking a role in the Ritual of the Opening of the Mouth.[35] They mostly come in pairs, but sometimes they are single and sometimes, there are three, like here (F 1-3), or even four of them. It is true, however, that mourn and women never carry out manual tasks; their main function in a funeral is indeed to lament.[36]

[31] Davies 1948, pls XXV, XXVI.

[32] On this important ritual, see Otto 1960; Assmann 2001, pp. 408-417; Barthelmess 1992, pp. 93-114; Taylor 2001, pp. 190-192. A complete edition comprising all sources of this ritual is being prepared at the University of Heidelberg by Prof. J.F. Quack.

[33] The two men M 26-27 belong to the second section of the funeral depiction; it was split into two halves of equal width in the publication regardless of content.

[34] M 36, a man supporting the upright mummy, is completely destroyed apart from a foot; as in comparable scenes the man sometimes performs a mourning gesture and sometimes not, nothing can be said about him in this respect and he is therefore ignored in the above analysis.

[35] To my knowledge, this hasn't been recognised before, probably for the simple reason that women are expected to be mourners.

[36] I know of only two exceptions on coffins from the late 17th/early 18th dyn. where women are depicted as yoke-carriers.

When we take a closer look at the captions accompanying the mourning males in the Nakhtamun scene it becomes clear that they are all closely related to the deceased: all three in the funerary procession are his sons, and three of the four men in front of the tomb are his brothers.[37] Several other men in the funerary procession are also sons of Nakhtamun (M 16, 24, 25) but as they are busy there is no gesture of mourning.

All mourning sons perform the same gesture of grief: they raise their hands high, probably beating their heads. This is not an exclusively male gesture, as it can be frequently observed with both men and women (in the present scene, F 7); of the male mourners in the right-hand scene, one of Nakhtamun's brothers (M 30) performs the identical gesture. The gestures of the three other men are more restrained; they equal those performed by high-status colleagues of a deceased which are missing here due to the destruction of the left end of the wall. It is remarkable that, although three of the four display restrained gestures, all of them are shown with dust on the top of their heads as if they had engaged in serious dust-sprinkling, which contrasts markedly with their quiet gestures. What is evident is that in contrast to the sons of the deceased, the brothers' mourning is mostly more restrained, in accordance with their age and status.

The group of women (F 1-9) standing behind the men is particularly interesting. In fact, they are not one group, but three. The end is made up, as mentioned, by three women (F 1-3) performing a ritual gesture probably more concerned with protection than with lament. The second group consists of five women (F 4-8) engaged in various gestures of intense mourning, the top of their heads sprinkled with dust. The caption above them designates them simply as "the people who lament", so they do not seem to be related to the deceased. The third and final "group" consists of a single woman (F 9) who stands at a little distance from the mourning group. In contrast to the five women who are bare-breasted she wears a high-necked dress beneath a sumptuous gown of pleated linen; her huge formal wig also sets her apart from the five women who wear their hair (or wig) in typical mourning style, simply held together at the back of the neck and ending in long separate strands. The gesture of this woman is quite restrained; in fact, it is a gesture usually performed by high-ranking male participants in a burial.[38] One of the deceased's brothers (M 29) in front of the woman performs the same gesture. This is, to my knowledge, the one and only instance of a woman being dressed and behaving in the way comparable to a high-ranking male guest. Unfortunately there is no indication of how this came about.

What follows from this and many other mourning scenes is that the intensity of visible grief – which may have been genuine or not – is dependent on several parameters of which gender is only the most conspicuous. Others are age, degree of kinship to the deceased and social rank in relation to the deceased. On the one end of the chart there is the underage daughter,[39] on the other end the adult high-ranking official or priest.

The iconography of grief is not the only evidence of mourning practices in ancient Egypt. Especially during the New Kingdom many funerary scenes are accompanied by the

[37] The relationship of the fourth man to the deceased is unknown.

[38] E.g. TT 45 (Davies 1948, pl. V); TT 19 (Foucart 1932, pl. X).

[39] In fact, it seems that no difference was made between underage girls and boys, gender roles being less important before maturity.

laments uttered by the mourners. For reasons which as yet escape me, the earliest laments recorded in this way are not those addressed to the deceased but to the cows pulling the coffin sledge;[40] a certain kind of lament was even attributed to them.[41] Like the intensity of the gestures of grief the spoken lament differs according to the person uttering it. Again, gender, age, degree of kinship and social rank determine what is said. Additionally, pulling or carrying the coffin sledge or canopic chest influences the wording used by those engaged in pulling or carrying. Quite often, they chant:

To the west,
to the west!
Praised one,
to the west![42]

On the one hand, this refers to the actual movement of the procession. But "west" is also a designation of the realm of the dead. Thus, the word does not simply designate the cardinal direction of the procession but also the future abode of the deceased. There is more than a hint at separation in the phrase "To the west!", sometimes illustrated by additions like "the place where you wish to dwell",[43] or else the west is said to receive the deceased within it.[44] This kind of lament is *per definitionem* often uttered by people who do not perform mourning gestures as they are busy carrying or pulling. In our study object, the funeral scene in the tomb of Nakhtamun, this adds eighteen men who utter laments (M 1-2, 4-5, 6-9, 12-15, 17-21, 23), to the three who visibly mourn (M 3, 10-11).

Quite the opposite of separation is expressed in the laments uttered by the widow and children of the deceased. Their focus is on themselves being left behind, yearning for their husband and father. The children may say "Come to me, my father!",[45] "I wish that you were with me in eternity, my father and my guidance!"[46] or simply "Do not leave me, do not leave me! My good father, do not leave me!".[47] The widows' laments may be very similar:

Do not leave me,
do not leave me!
You great one,
do not leave me![48]

[40] E.g. TT 24 (Lüddeckens 1943, pp. 72-73); TT 181 (*ibidem*, pp. 82-84).
[41] E.g. TT 260 (*ibidem*, pp. 73-75); tomb relief Leiden K 15 (*ibidem*, pp. 147-149).
[42] E.g. TT 338 (*ibidem*, pp. 91-93); TT 178 (Hofmann 1995, p. 49, colour pl. VIIa, pl. XXVI).
[43] Tomb of Renni at Elkab (Lüddeckens 1943, pp. 35-37).
[44] Grammatically, the west (*jmntt*) in Egyptian is female and was personified as a goddess, often identified with the mother of Osiris, Nut, and there are quite explicit texts which state that death in a way was a reversal of birth and that the deceased returned to the mother's womb, never to be born again (Schott 1965; Assmann 2001, pp. 226-227; 2004, pp. 140-141).
[45] TT 54 (Lüddeckens 1943, pp. 95-96).
[46] Tomb relief Berlin 12411 (*ibidem*, pp. 117-118).
[47] TT 219 (*ibidem*, pp. 156-157).
[48] TT 255 (*ibidem*, pp. 121-122).

Often, however, these are more complex and sometimes contain an element of anger, as in this instance:

I walk alone even though I am behind you!
You who loved to talk to me,
you are silent, you do not speak![49]

The grief of loneliness is very close to the anger at being left behind. Loneliness, or being left alone, is indeed one of the main metaphors of Egyptian lament.[50] Another one is illness and pain.[51] A woman laments:

My eyes are filled with tears,
my heart is filled with grief,
and my body is filled with pain for my beautiful brother![52]

A third metaphor of grief is darkness.[53] Darkness surrounds the bereaved as well as the deceased. Darkness is, in cosmic terms, the primeval state of the world before creation, that is, chaos, and darkness on an individual level is a metaphor for the inability to see what one longs for, as in this widow's lament:

Oh where is my great one,
my daily nourishment?
Darkness is in my face,
when I (wish to) see him![54]

All these metaphors can be found in real-world laments but there is another, even richer source.

Ritual mourning

The most prominent Egyptian myth, that of Osiris, revolves around death and resurrection and there are several extensive ritual texts containing laments by Isis, the widow of Osiris, and Nephthys, her sister and in some way her double. Osiris, ruler of Egypt, was murdered by his brother Seth before he had fathered an heir. In consequence, to punish this crime and to reverse its effects as far as possible several aims had to be achieved. First, the corpse of Osiris had to be found, reclaimed and reanimated. Reanimation was necessary

[49] TT 49 (*ibidem*, pp. 109-111).
[50] Kucharek 2010, pp. 560-565.
[51] *Ibidem*, pp. 549-554.
[52] TT 338 (*ibidem*, p. 622).
[53] *Ibidem*, pp. 554-560.
[54] TT 157 (to be published by Jan Assmann *et al.*; I am grateful to Sabine Kubisch for a copy of the lament).

in order for Osiris to be able to father the legal heir to his throne, Horus. This reanimation is not a complete revivification, as Osiris will not return to the world of the living. He will henceforth be sovereign of the realm of the dead. The protection and resurrection of the corpse of Osiris is the mythical role-model of every death which by embalming the body and glorifying the spirit could be overcome so that the deceased would continue to exist in the court of Osiris. Isis and Nephthys, by their lament, effect the protection and reanimation of Osiris.[55] As widows and women Isis and Nephthys combine lament and protection. As widows their lament centres on their loneliness and longing much more than on the fate of the deceased; as protectresses they call on Osiris to rise, to turn upon the bier he rests upon, and they ensure him that his enemies do not exist. All these themes together – lament, protection, resurrection, the conception of Horus, Osiris as sovereign of the realm of the dead – make up the rituals which in modern terminology are called the Laments of Isis and Nephthys.[56] I'll exemplify this by the most clearly structured of these laments, a text called *The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys* since its first publication in 1866 but whose original title is "Recitation of the glorifications made by the Two Sisters".[57] It is made up of five stanzas of about equal length, to be recited in turn by Isis and Nephthys. Isis, as the wife of Osiris, has precedence. She recites the first, third, and fifth stanzas, while Nephthys is left with the second and fourth stanzas only. The ritual is set in the embalming hall, at the bier on which the body of Osiris rests.

The 1st stanza contains the widow's lament as such, with many repetitions of the phrase "come to your house!", a phrase which, less literally translated, simply means "return to your family!". This is not a genuine call on Osiris to return to his wife and family, which would be impossible anyway, but an expression of loss: the house is empty, and the widow yearns for her husband to return. As mentioned, the lament of the widow is not so much concerned with the state of the deceased but that of the widow herself, especially her loneliness and her wish to see her husband. She says, for instance:

> Oh beautiful youth,
> come to your house!
> For so very, very long I have not seen you!
>
> My heart is asking for you,
> my eyes are searching for you,
> I am searching for you to see you.[58]

The suspicion of being wilfully left, of being deliberately abandoned is not far. Thus the final line of this 1st stanza runs: "You did not love any other (woman) but me, the sister,

[55] It is remarkable, by the way, that in Egyptian thought protection in a defensive sense was perceived as a female province, at least on the divine level; this concept may plausibly be derived from the fierce protective behaviour displayed by many female animals when defending their offspring.

[56] These ritual texts are the subject of Kucharek 2010.

[57] The main copy is Papyrus Berlin 3008, see *ibidem*, pp. 31-33, 56-96; Smith 2009, pp. 124-134.

[58] Papyrus Berlin 3008, col. 2, ll. 3-5.

the sister!"[59] Or, less literally: "You should not prefer another to me, the sister, the sister!"[60]

The widow's lament is equivalent to the real-world laments presented earlier. The content of the next stanza of the *Lamentations* is still emotionally charged and is recognisably a lament, but its focus has notably shifted: Osiris is now called upon to act, to move, to rise, to speak while being protected from his enemies. In this 2nd stanza of the *Lamentations*, Nephthys says:

> Your Two Sisters are at your side as protection of your bier,
> calling to you in tears:
> «Turn around on your bier,
> so that you may see the beautiful ones!
> Speak with us, sovereign, our lord,
> so that you dispel all the sorrow which is in our hearts!»[61]

Thus, the 1st and 2nd stanzas are both laments, but of different categories: the *widow's lament* is followed by a *protection lament*. The remaining three stanzas, still recited by the divine sisters, contain no element of lament at all. The 3rd and 4th stanzas reassure Osiris of his continuing sovereignty on earth. While he himself will rule the underworld, he will also be present in his cosmic incarnations, as moon and Orion and as the inundation of the Nile, visible to everybody; and he will still dwell on earth in his temples throughout the land. The 5th and final stanza focuses on Horus, the rightful heir and avenger of Osiris. He is described as the "lord of gods and men" but the greater part of the stanza is dedicated to the offering cult which Horus performs for his father in the temples which are now his earthly abode.

These final three stanzas deal with the result of the protection lament enacted in the 2nd stanza: reanimating and protecting Osiris guarantees his continued existence, Horus is conceived and born by Isis. Horus, by becoming the lawful king of Egypt and by providing for his dead father, ensures that justice is done and will continue to be done.

Conclusion

As shown, the divine laments of Isis and Nephthys do not simply serve as an emotionally charged atmospheric background to actual rituals. They are glorifications, effective in their own right. Did something similar apply to the expressions of grief in the real world? Was mourning for a deceased more than the outpour of a strong emotion, a reaction to personal loss, shaped according to social norms? Or did it transcend the abyss between the living and the dead, reaching out for the deceased in a way comparable to the laments of Isis and Nephthys for Osiris? In short: what was mourning for in ancient Egypt?

The textual evidence leaves no doubt that mourning for a deceased was not merely an

[59] Papyrus Berlin 3008, col. 2, l. 13.
[60] Thus Smith 2009, p. 129.
[61] Papyrus Berlin 3008, col. 3, ll. 3-7.

expression of grief but also a social obligation. There was, for instance, a saying "Do not celebrate your feast without your neighbours; then they will surround you with mourning on the day of burial".[62] And a passage in a literary text describing a world turned upside down, reads: "Death will not be wept at; the night will not be spent fasting for death … Mourning will not be done today, for the heart has turned away from it entirely".[63] The associations whose members were obliged to fulfil certain mourning customs should one of them die have already been mentioned. Clearly also it was a question of prestige for members of the highest elite to have their peers and betters depicted as guests at their funeral, proclaiming their own elevated rank to posterity.

The laments of the widow which I have briefly touched upon are void of elements of transcendence. Their notion of the netherworld, where the deceased now dwells in, is devoid of the joys wished upon the dead in glorification spells – like food, drink, light, and good company. For the bereaved the netherworld is a place marked by the lack of all this: it is dark and narrow, silent and lonely. The widow's lament negates all that constitutes the established conception of the beyond. It plainly reflects the main elements of grief – loneliness, abandonment and yearning. It is thus radically different from all other aspects of a burial; all of these – mummification, coffins and grave goods, prayers and glorifications, offerings and rituals – have the clear purpose of supporting and empowering the deceased in the netherworld. The widow's lament, as well as weeping, crying and screaming serve no such purpose.[64]

Fortunately, however, there are some texts which do refer to a function or effect of lamenting, and according to them, lament did indeed serve a purpose: the grief expressed by the bereaved reached the deceased in the netherworld and called him back to his tomb so that he might receive offerings. Thus, a man wishes:

> May a great offering be performed for me at the entrance of my tomb.
> Then the excellent glorified spirits will emerge because of the screams of the wailers,
> in order to receive the offerings of Wennefer (= Osiris) on the day of burial.[65]

It seems, then, that lament, initially a simple expression of grief, came to be interpreted as a transcending medium of support for the deceased, thereby assimilating it to other burial rites. The effect ascribed to lament, to call for the deceased to return from the netherworld, was attuned to one of the main concerns of the widow's lament, to have her husband return to her. While this, of course, was impossible, the cries of the bereaved might still be heard by the deceased and lure his spirit back to his earthly tomb. Several texts from the Ptolemaic period testify that this interpretation evolved so that now lamenting and weeping as such were regarded as offerings to satisfy and revive the dead.[66]

Lament and mourning, in ancient Egypt, to sum up, were made up of several layers of

[62] Ostracon UC39614 = oPetrie 11 (Hagen 2005, pp. 136, 144).
[63] From the *Words of Neferti*, after Parkinson 1998, p. 137.
[64] Kucharek 2010, pp. 625-626.
[65] TT 106 (Assmann 2005, pp. 515-516).
[66] Kucharek 2010, p. 627.

meaning. They were, or could be, an expression of intense emotion, grief; they constituted a social norm which followed a complex variety of rules; and they formed an actual bond with the deceased, summoning them to return to the bereaved, enabling them to partake of the ritual offerings they were dependent on.

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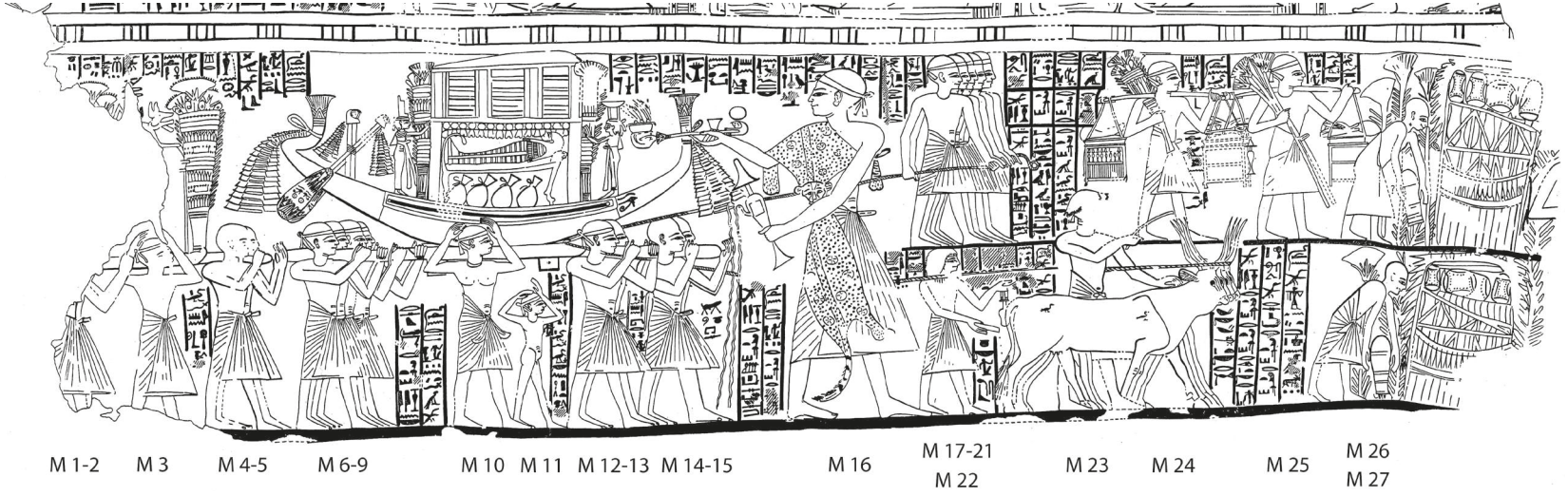


Fig. 1. The funeral of Nakhtamun: The funerary procession (from Davies 1948, pl. XXV).

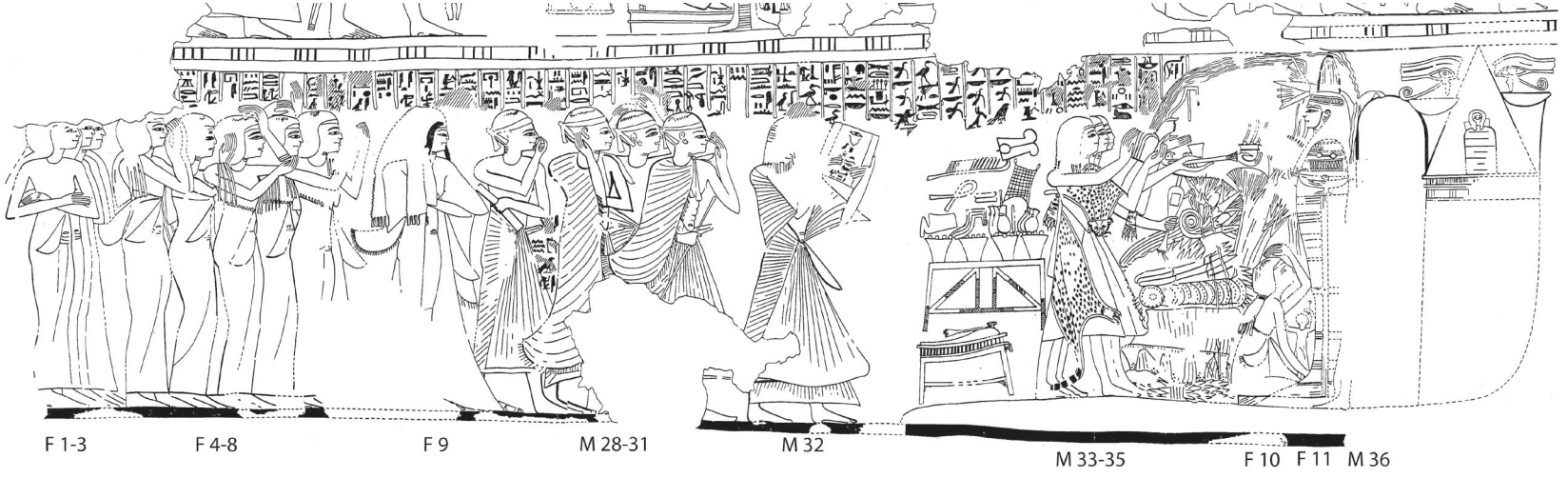


Fig. 2. The funeral of Nakhtamun: Rites in front of the tomb (from Davies 1948, pl. XXVI).

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Piazza Carrara, 16-19, I-56126 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com
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