

1 Introduction

This Element aims to provide an evaluation of Egyptian burial customs in the New Kingdom, the time from about 1539 to 1077 BC. It will cover not only Egypt proper but also those regions under Egyptian control. These include the Southern Levant and Egyptian-ruled Nubia (Fig. 1). The inclusion of foreign countries provides insight into the interaction between the centre of the empire and its conquered regions, but it might also offer insights about what is typical Egyptian and to what extent the conquered regions were culturally influenced.

This Element is a by-product of a project re-evaluating the cemeteries of Rifeh, in Upper Egypt. While assessing the archaeological remains of that site, it very quickly became clear that the New Kingdom remains there are as important as those belonging to the Middle Kingdom. Middle Kingdom Rifeh is famous for its soul houses but also for the Tomb of Two Brothers. The New Kingdom finds are less spectacular, but precisely for this reason they provide an ideal view of a New Kingdom provincial cemetery, despite all the shortcomings of early 20th-century recording and publication.

One further reason for writing this Element is to counterbalance the permanent top-down view of society within Egyptology. Although there are many re-evaluations that challenge this approach to society, it certainly persists. Already the expression ‘top-down view’ is dubious. Most readers will understand the meaning, but putting one social group, and indeed the smallest one in a society, at the ‘top’ is problematic. In the same way, dividing society into elites and non-elites – as all too often has been done in recent years – is troublesome. The bulk of the population is defined by not belonging to the smallest segment of society. It is possible to compare this to the highly offensive term ‘non-white’, where white people are seen as ‘normal’ and all the others are not (Bosmajian 1969, 264). For an archaeological approach to burials, the terms ‘richly equipped tomb’ and ‘poorly equipped burial’ seem to be more suitable. They just imply that more resources were invested into one burial than into another one without any indication of the social status of the dead person.

In summaries on burial customs, most often objects especially made for the burial stand at the heart of the discussion. These include coffins, canopic jars (vessels for the separately embalmed entrails), shabtis (a helper in the afterlife) and amulets. The decoration of tomb chapels is another focal point. Egyptian tombs of the wealthiest people often have a decorated tomb chapel, which was open to those bringing offerings for the deceased. However, as it will be shown, these features are not typical for burials of most people, and not even typical for wealthier people in the provinces.

Ancient Egypt in Context

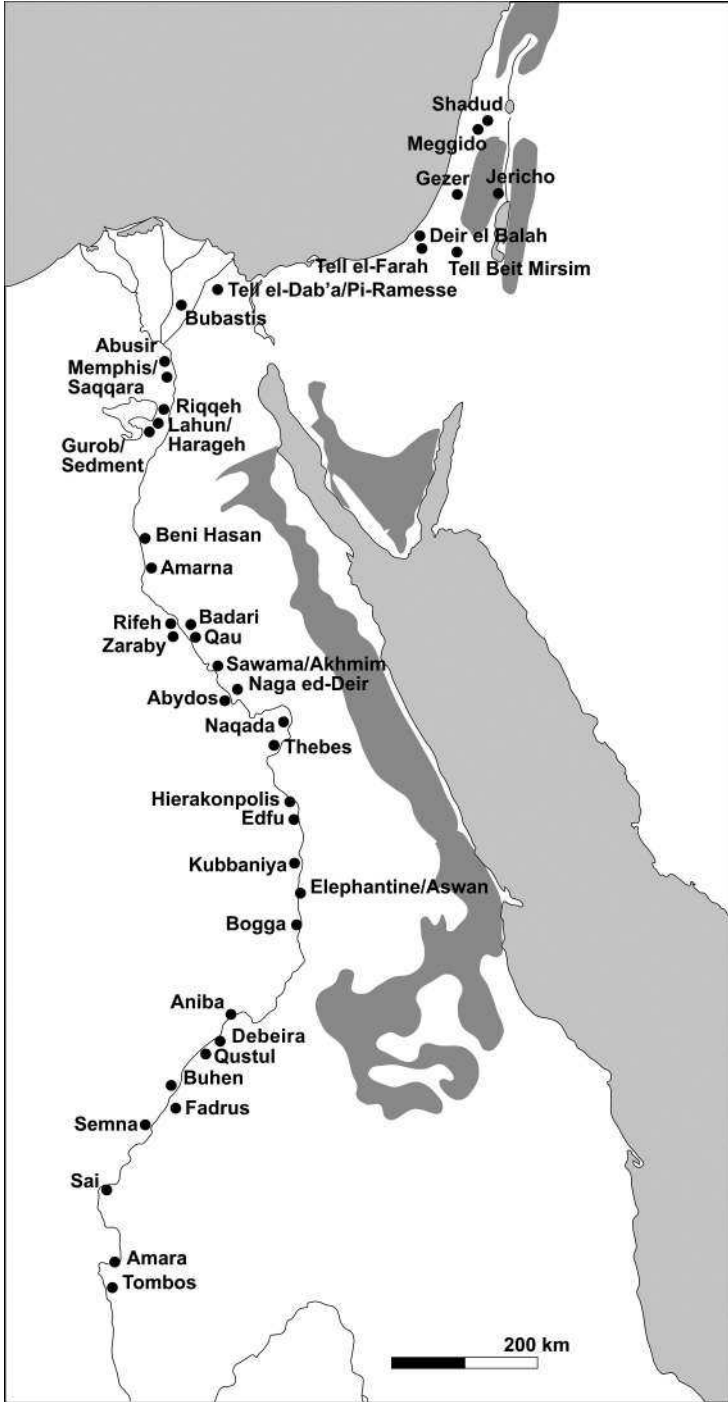


Figure 1 Map of Egypt, Nubia and the Southern Levant in the New Kingdom (drawing: author)

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In the early 18th Dynasty, around 1539 BC, Egypt was united after a period when foreigners coming from the Levant, known in later traditions as the Hyksos, had conquered parts of the Delta. Egypt itself, after their expulsion, now conquered parts of Nubia, and also parts of the Levant came under its control. Lower Nubia had already been in the Middle Kingdom under Egyptian rule. In the Second Intermediate Period, the region became part of the powerful Nubian empire of Kerma, but it seems that Egyptians still lived in the region. The material culture of the area became Egyptian. The New Kingdom rule of the Egyptians in Nubia came close to being colonisation (Smith 2003, 83–96; Smith 2015). Local families were incorporated into the Egyptian administration. They took over Egyptian titles and writing. The material culture in Lower Nubia, the region closest to Egypt, remained very much Egyptian.

In contrast, in the Levant several city states flourished with their own culture that did not change much with the arrival of and takeover by the Egyptians. It seems that the Levantine provinces were rather loose vassal states that had to pay tributes and offer military aid when needed, but often acted quite independently. Egyptian objects appear often in burials and even Egyptian-style coffins were produced. However, the underlying burial customs and beliefs were most likely still Levantine (Braunstein 2011).

Over the periods of Egyptian history and across different social classes, Egyptian burials contained different types of objects, evidently with various functions in rituals or for the afterlife. Some objects seem to come from rituals performed at or before the burial. They are often not easy to identify. A prime example is the pottery. It might be used in rituals, but vessels might also have been intended as food containers for the nourishment of the deceased. Next to items used in rituals, there are also objects especially made for the tomb. The most important one is evidently the coffin. Many amulets were perhaps also made especially for burials, but here again some amulet types might have been previously worn in daily life. The borders between daily life and funeral objects appear fluid (Pinch 2003). Daily life objects are common in burials too, especially in those of people with few resources. Pottery vessels and personal adornments are frequently used at all social levels.

Knowledge about the archaeology of grave goods is essential for understanding Egyptian material culture. Objects found in burials are on average much better preserved than those found in settlement sites. A bead necklace excavated in an undisturbed burial, well recorded, could tell us how beads were arranged on a necklace. With a few exceptions, such as in Amarna (Frankfort, Pendlebury 1933, 18), beads found at a settlement site will be loose without their stringing (Frankfort, Pendlebury 1933, 44).

While there is a popular conception that burials were stuffed with daily life objects, this is only true for the Early Dynastic Period (around 3000 to 2800 BC)

and the 18th Dynasty (1539–1292 BC). However, even in these periods, particular types of objects were selected and not everything that belonged to a person's household was placed into a burial. Poorer people might make a selection due to limited resources, but even in the wealthiest tombs not everything was there. One example would be tools which are rarely a part of burial equipment in most periods of Egypt's history but also do not appear often in those periods when daily life objects are common in burials.

In most other periods (Table 1), the range of material going into an Egyptian burial was more restricted than in the Early Dynastic Period or the 18th Dynasty. This selection of objects limits heavily our knowledge of daily life objects for certain periods. One striking illustration of this is leather. It has been argued that leather working was not well developed in the Old Kingdom as there are so few finds of leather from this period (van Driel-Murray 2000, 308). However, artefacts made of leather do not belong to the types of objects chosen to go into the burial chamber in this period. The missing leather works of the Old Kingdom just reflect a gap in the archaeological record based on the specific burial customs of the day.

Table 1 Chronology

All dates BC if not otherwise stated. Egyptian dates follow Hornung, Krauss, Warburton 2006, dates before the New Kingdom are rounded up.

Egypt	Southern Levant	Nubia
Badarian Period about 4000		
Naqada Period 4000–2900		A-Group
Early Dynastic Period 1st to 3rd Dynasty 2900–2550	Late Early Bronze Age I to II	A-Group
Old Kingdom 4th to 6th Dynasty 2550–2150	Early Bronze Age III	unknown
First Intermediate Period 8th to 11th Dynasty 2150– 2000	Intermediate Bronze Age	C-Group
Middle Kingdom 11th to 13th Dynasty 2000–1650	Intermediate Bronze Age to Middle Bronze Age II	C-Group
Second Intermediate Period 14th to 17th Dynasty 1650–1539	Middle Bronze Age III	C-Group, Kerma Empire

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Table 1 (cont.)

Egypt	Southern Levant	Nubia
New Kingdom	Late Bronze Age IA	Egyptian occupation
18th Dynasty		
Ahmoose (II) 1539–1514		
Amenhotep I 1514–1494		
Thutmose I 1493–1483		
Thutmose II 1482–1480	Late Bronze Age IB	
Hatshepsut 1479–1458		
Thutmose III 1470–1425		
Amenhotep II 1425–1400	Late Bronze Age IB	
Thutmose IV 1400–1390		
Amenhotep III 1390–1353		
Amarna Period	Late Bronze Age IIA	
Akhenaten 1353–1336		
Smenkhkare/Neferuaten 1336–1334		
Tutankhamun 1334–1324		
Aya 1323–1320		
Haremhab 1319–1292		
Ramesside Period	Late Bronze Age IIB	
(19th and 20th Dynasty)		
19th Dynasty		
Ramses I 1292–1291		
Sety I 1290–1279		
Ramses II 1279–1213		
Merenptah 1213–1203		
Sety II 1202–1200	Late Bronze Age III, Iron Age I A	
Siptah 1197–1193		
Tawesret 1192–1191		
20th Dynasty	Late Bronze Age III, Iron Age I B	
Sethnakht 1190–1188		
Ramses III 1187–1157		
Ramses IV to Ramses XI 1156–1077		
Third Intermediate Period	Iron Age IIA to IIB	
Dynasty 21 to 25 1076–655		
Late Period	Iron Age III	Kingdom of Napata
Dynasty 26 664–525		
Persian Period	Persian Period	
Dynasty 27 525–404		

Table 1 (cont.)

Egypt	Southern Levant	Nubia
Late Dynastic Period Dynasty 28 to 30 404–343	Persian Period	
Second Persian Period 343–332	Persian Period	
Ptolemaic Period 332–30	Hellenistic Period	Kingdom of Meroe
Roman Period 30 BC–AD 395	Roman Period	

2 Burial Traditions in Ancient Egypt

2.1 Belief in an Afterlife

From religious texts as well as from the elaborate burial equipment, it is clear that Egyptians had a belief in an afterlife. The information about this often appears rather confusing to us, not adding up to a unified picture as we would like to receive it. Texts, including religious spells, were found in many burials of wealthy people of the Middle and New Kingdom. In the Middle Kingdom they appear most often on coffins, in the New Kingdom often (but not exclusively) on papyri. Today the latter are called the Book of the Dead. The ancient Egyptian name of the collection of spells was Going out at Daylight. According to this religious literature, the passage to the Underworld was complicated and at several points dangerous, as there were demons blocking the journey. One important station on the way was the judgement of Osiris, who was the god of the Underworld. In meeting this god, the deceased faced judgement of the good and bad deeds in their life. The heart of the deceased was placed on a scale against a weight representing Truth (in Egyptian *Maat*). If the bad deeds of the deceased weighed more than the good ones, they faced a composite crocodile-lion-hippopotamus monster called Ammit, ‘the Devourer’, that would eat them and they would face eternal death. Those who passed could enter eternal life in the Underworld (Assmann 2001, 73–7).

In the Underworld, located in the west where the sun sets, life seems to have been similar to that on earth; tomb scenes commonly show the deceased ploughing fields or at the harvest. There was, evidently, the permanent fear that the deceased might not have enough to eat. Many spells in the Book of the Dead tackle this problem (Assmann 2001, 128–30).

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New Kingdom written sources refer to different aspects of individuals, including words we translate as ‘body’ and ‘shadow’, but also words we translate as ‘soul’. However, soul might not be an adequate translation for them. These ‘souls’ are aspects of the human being that became especially important in the afterlife. The concepts are often hard to understand, as there is nothing directly comparable in current major religions. One of them is called Ba. As a Ba, the deceased transformed, as attested from the New Kingdom on, into a bird with a human head and was able to move around freely (Assmann 2001, 90–1). The Ka was perhaps the most important aspect (Assmann 2001, 44). It represents the power of life. Its symbol is a pair of raised arms, but KAs are normally depicted as human, as a double of the deceased person. The food offerings for the deceased went to their Ka. The offering formula, a short text found on many inscribed objects, especially in funerary contexts, always wishes the offerings should go to the Ka of the deceased. The Akh (Janák 2013) is the third Egyptian concept of soul and the most difficult one to understand. *Akh* is an Egyptian word for ‘light’ or ‘illumination’ and the Akh is most often shown as a crested ibis, but it is doubtful whether the Egyptians really saw the Akh as a bird. The deceased only became an Akh after death, and becoming an Akh was one important transformation. As an Akh the deceased became powerful and was able to protect tombs (Otto 1975). *Akh* could also mean ‘useful’ and on becoming an Akh, the deceased could be useful for the living (Assmann 2001, 339).

In the coffin, the deceased was identified with the Underworld god Osiris. The coffin was identified as the sky goddess Nut, who was the mother of Osiris. Placing the deceased in the coffin placed them into the womb of their mother (Assmann 2001, 170–3).

It remains difficult to see how much these concepts of the Underworld were understood by everybody. It might be assumed that most people of all social levels had some ideas of these aspects of human beings, but the refined versions were perhaps known only by some specialists, in this case, funerary priests.

There is some debate in Egyptology over whether the body of the deceased needed to be preserved for eternity. The development of mummification seems to be a strong indicator for this. In general, special care for the body is visible in burials. This contrasts with the record from the Southern Levant. However, most Egyptians were not properly mummified, and their bodies soon decayed. Egyptians must have been aware of this, but they still equipped their burials with all types of goods, at least in certain periods. They evidently believed in an afterlife, even if they knew that their bodies would not survive apart from some bones (Willems 2014, 140–1).

2.2 Burials of the Working Population

Burials of ‘poorer’ people had been described early on by Gaston Maspero (1895, 167–9) in a general book on Ancient Egypt, even though his main focus was the graves and the tombs of the most wealthy people. More than half a century later, Walter Bryan Emery included in his general account, *Archaic Egypt*, a separate section on burial customs within the chapter on religion (Emery 1961, 128–64). The burial customs chapter is more an architectural guide to Early Dynastic tombs rather than a description of burial customs as, for example, burial goods are hardly mentioned. However, this chapter also includes quite detailed descriptions of burials for people that he regards as belonging outside the ruling class: the peasantry (Emery 1961: 139).

Nevertheless, in Egyptology there is the discussion whether archaeologists have excavated burials of the working population, those of the farmers and craftsmen of Ancient Egypt, or whether the burials so far excavated do not include these people. There are opposing views on this subject within Egyptology. One extreme opinion proposes that many Egyptians did not have any formal burial at all and bodies of those who could not afford it were just thrown away with little or no formal procedure or any religious rituals (Baines, Lacovara 2002, 12–14). It has also been argued that bodies of people from the poorer segments of society were just thrown into the water (Niwiński 2014).

Clearly it is very hard, or even impossible, to identify the social level of people in graves. As already indicated, there seems to be a certain tendency in Egyptology to assume that not many burials of the working population were preserved (Weill 1938; Baines, Lacovara 2002, 12–14; Driaux 2019, 8–9). This hypothesis might in some cases reflect a lack of knowledge about the archaeological record in general, but it might also relate to certain assumptions automatically made about burials of the working population. In this particular case, there seems to be the hypothesis that farmers and craftsmen, the bulk of the Egyptian population, did not own anything. The majority of the population is identified as the poor part of society and is almost automatically equated with destitution. In this view, only those burials with few or no burial goods can belong to the working population.

Baines and Lacovara (2002, 13) took the cemeteries on Elephantine as their main example for arguing that a high percentage of burials, and especially of the working population, are missing. According to them the poorest segment of society is not visible in the records. About 10 per cent of Elephantine’s burial grounds was excavated, with about 248 burials for 500 years, yielding an extremely low population number of about 2,500 deaths in this period; this would indicate about 125 people living on Elephantine at any given time, taking

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25 years as average age of death. Some more burials can be expected at Qubbet el Hawa, opposite the island, where the richer segments of the society were placed. Although the settlement on Elephantine was doubtless very small in the Old Kingdom, about 125 people seems too low. However, several other factors have to be taken into account. One of them is the reuse of tombs and burial places in general. Many burials dating to the earlier part of this 500-year occupation period on Elephantine might have been destroyed by later activities. Especially in more densely packed cemeteries in Egypt, the reuse of older burial shafts and chambers is often detectable. An extreme example is the Theban necropolis with the permanent reuse of tombs (see for example Graefe 2007). Furthermore, only 10 per cent of the cemeteries on Elephantine were excavated and there is not much we can say about the other parts of the burial ground. There might be parts packed with simple surface burials that would fit more closely the expectations of some researchers about ‘poor’ burials. In addition, Elephantine is a small island and many more burial grounds might be expected on the lands on the west and east of the island. Indeed, further Old Kingdom burial grounds were recently identified at Aswan, east of the island (von Pilgrim 2021, 399). Taking just one burial ground to calculate the number of burials in one funerary landscape of a rather small settlement seems problematic.

There are further, rather negative, views on the burials of the broader population. One example is Baines (2009, 118–21) discussing the Old Kingdom cemetery at Naga ed-Deir, excavated by George A. Reisner at the beginning of the 20th century. Reisner argued that the cemetery belonged to a small, rural community. Baines argued against that and wondered whether Naga ed-Deir was in fact the cemetery for Thinis, the provincial capital town. He points to the high status objects found in some tombs and the elaborate architecture of some of them. Furthermore, he observed that few tombs were looted and that almost no burials overlap others, showing that there was a respect for older burials that indicates a ‘well integrated and consistent’ community. According to Baines, this cannot be the burial place of ordinary farmers. That conclusion would imply that ordinary farmers did not respect the dead, and did not form well-integrated and consistent communities.

These views are contested by other scholars. Under Barry Kemp, several cemeteries have been excavated at King Akhenaten’s capital city Amarna, and for him and his team, there is no doubt that they belonged to ‘commoners’ (Kemp 2013, 256). Stephan Seidlmayer argues for the cemeteries in the Qau-Badari, Matmar, Mostaggeda region (in Upper Egypt, just east and south of Asyut) that the graves found were mainly the burial places of the farming population in nearby villages. He refers to the simple tomb form and simple burial equipment (Seidlmayer 1990, 206–7).

In addition, there seems to be in Egyptology a certain tendency to conflate the terms poor and farmers. Evidently, a definition of poor people is needed (Driaux 2019). What does ‘poor’ mean? Are all Egyptian farmers automatically poor people? Is there in the burials a difference between carpenters, fishermen or herdsmen? Can we assume that these people are all automatically poor or are there also differences between some farmers and other farmers? Were carpenters better off? Are there distinctions of wealth between those farmers living on ‘poor’ land and those who are lucky with fertile land providing them with a rich harvest each year? Or was the rich harvest taken away by local ‘tax’ collectors? We have little knowledge about land ownership in Ancient Egypt (Janssen 1975, 141–2). Did most farmers own their land or did they work on estates of officials or on estates of institutions such as temples? Here, I prefer to label these people the working population rather than the poor. Clearly, some people might have been really poor, always at the edge of survival, but others might have had a fairly stable income, more than just enough to survive. However, in the archaeological record it is most often only possible to speculate.

This Element presents a high percentage of burials of the New Kingdom that most likely do not belong to the wealthiest section of society. It will be assumed that a substantial proportion of those burials found in provincial cemeteries belong to the working population of these regions. Certainly, there were also some wealthier people in the provinces. Towns had local governors, and probably other officials on the local level, people who were doubtless better off. Most of the burials that were found in the provinces do not have a tomb stone that could tell us the name and profession of the deceased. Inscribed coffins that would provide similar information are extremely rare. The social level of a very high number of buried people remains enigmatic and open to speculation. A social reading of burials remains a complicated task (Lemos 2017, 123–4).

It is evident that the resources of the working population were limited. It can be expected that they did not have much in the way of assets for acquiring elaborate objects. As these people plausibly also had some expectations for an afterlife, they would presumably have made some arrangements. After all, it can be supposed that they might have had some commodities at home. Even the very poorest of the working population must have had some pottery vessels for storing, preparing and eating food. They would also have had clothes. Furniture might have been quite expensive and we might not expect it in the houses of the poorest, but they would probably have had mats for sleeping on and baskets for storing some items. At Tell el-Dab’a in the Eastern Delta, an early Middle Kingdom settlement with miniscule houses was excavated, offering a view on the living conditions of the working population. The finds