1 Introduction

Egypt is best known—today and in antiquity—for its obsession with things. But not just any things; in our eyes, the Egyptians were obsessed most with those things associated with death. And thus we are to understand that, for the Egyptians, death itself was something to be physically overcome by massive quantities of gold and precious gems, hard stones to make massive sarcophagi, columned tombs hewn from living rock or built out of masonry blocks, fine-grained wood to build body containers, not to mention all of the collected quotidian objects to feed and clothe the deceased in the afterlife, stuffed into the burial chamber with the corpses of the dead. Indeed, our modern world celebrates and visually consumes all of this materiality of Egyptian death within museum spaces, thus constructing an ancient Egypt that was the most materialistic of cultures, and impractical and superstitious to boot.

But what was the reason for all of this death-related materiality? And was Egypt really as death-obsessed as we think? It was Gene Wilder playing Dr. Frankenstein who yelled in the 1974 film Young Frankenstein, “I am not interested in death; I am interested in the preservation of life!” At which point he pounds a scalpel into his leg to accentuate his point. Egyptology too is prepared for the logic flip from death to life. Indeed, researchers enable it, denying an Egyptian obsession with mortality, arguing instead that the ancient Egyptians were focused on continuing life (Assmann 2005: 1; Parkinson 2010), thus enabling the scholarly transformation of all those crafted and collected funerary things into “embodiments,” that is, symbols of what people would have wanted if they were to live forever, not a literal expectation of physicality in the afterlife. This intellectual turn from “death” to “life” has enabled Egyptology to see every coffin or tomb as a remnant of a social life once lived, as a human reality in which the dead did not bury themselves and in which death objects were representative of human wishes and social status. The living created these objects to manifest particular social powers. And it is the actions and social manifestations of those living at the moment the funerary goods were made, sold, displayed and deposited that were being played out. Summarily stated, funerary actions are, at least in part, documents of social power by living people.

Egypt is known for its obsession with death-related stuff—all of those daily-life objects crammed into tombs, the furniture, wigs, food, dishes, jars, cosmetics, sandals, and clothing, not to mention the coffins. It is also true that these things were made to draw our attention, as they were fashioned with shiny metals, bright paints, glossy resins, and eye-catching iconography. These funerary objects were created to manufacture social power. We still cannot look away from them, it seems, and Egyptian-based exhibitions regularly cycle in and out.
of museum spaces to enormous crowds (usually quietly derided by other curatorial staff as yet another Egypt death show that should be abhorred as naive, fetishized, materialistic, etc.).

It seems that the obsession with death, on the one hand, and the obsession with things, on the other, have been conflated to create some negative stereotypes. At the same time that Egyptology examines all things funerary, post-processual archaeology often treats “things,” in and of themselves, as base and primitive, hardly touching those supposedly superior cognitive realms of humanity. And so, we are embarrassed to be seen counting and analyzing these ancient things—even though we are not the ones who deposited them in the first place. The ancient materiality continues to have so much social power that it confounds the research. Funerary materiality was and is such a powerful method of manufacturing social power that it still creates shock and awe within the modern human mind, millennia after it was deposited in a burial.

Many humanistic scholars have been trained that they should be involved only with the mind, the abstract, the intellectual, or, if we must examine the baser materialistic side of humanity, then we should focus on history, social change, dynasties, and power (LeCain 2017). Thus, we are taught that things, however we define them, are not something to which we should be giving our precious attention, and, if we do, then we should direct our cerebral focus to the human input those things embody. We prefer to examine things as human manipulations because “[s]ince humans have been in existence we have affected the world on a large scale so all things are to some degree human made artifacts” (Hodder 2012: 4). Such problematic anthropocentrism fits well with the Egyptological mindset because we continue to catalog our excavated objects while prioritizing the thought encoded upon them or embodied within them, seeing funerary things like coffins and tombs only as vehicles for the cognitive information they contain, giving prominence to religion over the material conveyance, to decode the thought patterns of the ancient Egyptians, even though the immaterial could not exist without the material.

We do not want to admit how the material—the stone, wood, plaster, varnish, and pigment—could in fact have agency of its own that can be wielded over the human. Indeed, as I will argue in this Element, these funerary things so cleverly created by the ancient Egyptians ended up creating a genie that they could not put back into the bottle and under whose influence they themselves were quite helpless, unable to abandon the social powers of the material, prone to the power of the funerary things they had “brought to life.” Indeed, these funerary objects wielded so much energy over the Egyptian mind that when scarcity set in, people made all kinds of adaptations so that they could continue to acquire them, engaging in recommodification and reuse of already existing funerary
things, performing what would previously have been seen as immoral actions, all so that they, too, could benefit from their extraordinary power. Ancient Egyptians never abandoned their death materiality.

Many who study ancient Egypt are drawn to the things not preserved elsewhere – painted and plastered wooden objects, dried fruit, loaves of bread, linen garments, leather sandals, chariots. Egyptologists who surround themselves with materiality in their work often feel the need to cover a perceived materialistic obsession by adding a cognitive veneer – determining what symbols the things represented to the ancient Egyptians, abstract cognition, religious ideas, social realities, human details about identity, and so on. As Olsen observes “No wonder then that the material qualities of things have increasingly been covered up by the piles of epistemologies invented to make them as transparent and compliant as possible, in which their role is never to be themselves” (Olsen 2010: 26).

In some ways, the field of Egyptology has an identity problem. We are like the baseball card collectors of antiquity studies, stereotyped in other fields as antiquarians and connoisseurs, not interested in elucidating the great human condition, but only in collecting more stuff. While the cataloging and typologizing of all that preserved material have encouraged many of us to eschew theoretical archaeology, it is becoming clear that ancient Egyptian datasets create the ideal circumstances to study materialism itself and how it has shaped and continues to shape a human society obsessed with stuff – from ancient coffins and tombs to plastic water bottles, fast fashion, and Amazon Prime.

Egyptology is usually materially grounded in its inquiries, even among the philological side of the field. Egyptology has certainly never been “under-materialized” (Olsen 2010: 26), a fact that could be discomfiting to the researchers themselves, as it unfairly implies that many were drawn to this world of pharaohs and pyramids precisely because of its beautiful objects and the (unspoken) connoisseurship thereof.

But the materiality of Egyptology is its strength. We Egyptologists know tens of thousands of objects in our mind’s eye. We know which statues are owned by which museum collections or which were found at which archaeological sites. We look for comparanda constantly. And we categorize. We date. We typologize. We create value judgments, whether we admit it or not, choosing to highlight a few such objects in a given category as masterpieces to be pored over in art history survey volumes, not discarding the vast wealth of ancient materiality considered mediocre or same-y. We separate objects into fine art (such as statues and tomb reliefs) and minor arts (like cosmetic jars and scarabs). We discuss craft specialization – how the objects were commissioned, in what workshops they were made, how they were exchanged, displayed, and
interred (Amenta & Guichard 2017; Broekman et al. 2018; Clark 1990; Costin 1991, Costin & Wright 1998; Miniaci et al. 2018). We identify craftsmen’s hands, saying who made what (Amenta & Guichard 2017; Cavilier 2017; Keller 1984, 1991, 2001, 2003; Rigault & Thomas 2018). We put these objects into functional types: royal stone statuary, temple reliefs, obelisks, funerary stelae, private statuary, coffins, wooden furniture, jewelry, and so on. We pay extra attention to the materials used to make these objects (sandstone, varnish, red granite, pigment, acacia wood, gypsum plaster, etc.), evaluating each ingredient all the while: was it imported or native; man-made or naturally occurring; costly or cheap?

That materiality wields power over the researcher. Egyptology deals with so much stuff that the field drowns in it. We talk of religious functionality and how it was available to anyone who could emulate the objects of their richer cousins, like an offering bearer that does not come close aesthetically and materially to the brilliantly executed example found in Meketre’s tomb (Figure 1 and Figure 2). We might assume that the lesser object performed the same magical functions as the one of greater aesthetic value, but in our synthetic analyses we largely ignore

Figure 1 Offering bearer, Tomb of Meketre, 12th Dynasty. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 20.3.7.
those objects without symmetry, balance, or quality of applied line, in favor of the better made thing. We copy and translate the religious inscriptions from the objects’ surfaces, creating source patternbooks, reveling in our ability to reach the cognition of people buried thousands of years ago. We discuss iconographic and semiotic meaning, seeing mastery of order over chaos in a tomb painting in which the deceased man spears fish in a marshland accompanied by his wife and children in fancy dress (Figure 3), or understanding multiple divine manifestations of a king shown, somehow, worshipping himself on a temple wall (Figure 4). To do all of this material analysis, we demand better photos, databases, information about materials used. We Egyptologists are so cognizant of how much cataloging still needs to be done that only recently have we had the luxury to come up for air and ask what it all means (Olsen 2010: 11, 23, 98).

Object studies allow us to examine how materiality forms a society—whether that society consists of a bunch of Egyptologists or a (larger) bunch of ancient Egyptians, because these thousands upon thousands of well-preserved things are formative in their own rights. How were the ancient Egyptians themselves affected by their own preservative climate and its resulting overwhelming
materialism? How did desert aridity, which could preserve a human body intact with flesh, nails, and hair, work upon the ancient Egyptian mind? How did abundant farming and easy access to extraordinary mineral resources and draft labor change the Egyptian intellect and culture? How did objects crafted for the dead make social claims on the living? Wengrow argues that such high cost materiality “gave tangible expression to the person’s mobility within, and command over, social space via the material landscapes it encompassed” (Wengrow 2006: 122).

Many of us know in our bones that the ancient Egyptians were also a people of stuff. They were materialistic too. Compared with some of their ancient peers they were even hoarders. We can innately understand them to be such, coming from our own overabundant world of computer-guided factory production in which everything sparks joy and so much stuff is maintained that the United States has almost as many storage units as people (Arnold & Lang 2007; Smith 2019; Strutner 2015).

Scholars of New Materialism, like Tim LeCain, Bjønar Olsen, Nicole Boivin, and to some extent even Ian Hodder, have moved away from the postmodern turn of anthropocentric views of the world in which human agency is the prime mover of culture and history, in which evolutionary biology – nurture, if you
Neomaterialist thinking is exactly what can help us understand the agency of things on the ancient Egyptian mind (DeMarrais, Gosden & Renfrew 2004; Malafouris 2013). As Tim LeCain states, “The result will be a new type of history and humanism, one in which we recognize that history, culture, and creativity arise from the things around us” and that “humans are not an exception to the material world so much as an expression of it” (LeCain 2017: 15).

And this is where one ubiquitous Egyptian object type comes into our discussion – the wooden container for the human corpse. It is the object that mediates transitions, “transforming the body into an image,” which, as David Wengrow argues for mummification, was a means of “extending the period between death and burial, and treating the body as image and sign” (Wengrow 2006: 123). A close examination of the Egyptian coffin from creation, sale, religious transformation, deposition, theft, and reuse (Cooney Forthcoming-b) can help us to understand how we humans are animals shaped by the material world around us (LeCain 2017: 38). In this Element, I will argue that materials and materiality worked on the Egyptian mind as much as the Egyptian mind

Figure 4 Nebamun hunting in the marshes with his family. Tomb of Nebamun, 18th Dynasty, Thebes, Egypt. © Trustees of the British Museum.
worked upon them. The Egyptians were a unique product of all of their stuff, of both natural things like wood and gold and manufactured things like coffins and tombs.

2 The Power of the Thing

Egypt presents us with an extraordinary case study of objectified power. The Egyptian desert environment naturally allowed the preservation of a whole lot of stuff that would easily rot and break down elsewhere, especially organic materials. Egyptian geography created a stark dichotomy between preservative places – deserts and caves – and rotting places – the marshes and Nile Valley. Egypt was the land of the mummy for a reason; aridity allowed natural preservation that must have seemed an active agency to the ancient mind, as if the land itself could maintain a forever physical presence of objects within it that did not decay.

This notion of preserving the dead human body did not spring unaided into one particular Egyptian human’s mind, to be forever after embraced and replicated by others who witnessed this first miracle of preservation. Mummification was, instead, only possible as an extension of Egypt’s environment, particularly its deserts where extraordinary preservation occurs naturally with no human intervention whatsoever. It was this environment that created a cascade of notions connected to eternal corporeality. In other parts of the world where rain falls, mummification could not become culturally present; in such places we might see people choose to bury their dead in the wet ground with the intention of allowing bodily decay, or they might choose cremation of the corpse with its quick and visible bodily breakdown into ash. Environment plays an active part in cultural development of mortuary belief and ritual. By extension, the objects made within that environment have real power over human culture.

Bruno Latour states, “Consider things, and you will have humans. Consider humans, and you are by that fact interested in things” (Boivin 2008: 177–8; Latour & Porter 1993). Or we can look to Michel Serres who sees objects and the use of them as the main difference between human society and animal society (Serres 1995: 87). The object negotiates our social bonds. And it is essential to see the Egyptian coffin in this way, as an object that has changed the human approach to certain problems, like death, decay, and loss. Or, if we take into account objects we have around us today, like washing machines, we see that such inventions allow us to forego squatting by a river beating our garments upon rocks. In the same way, the coffin allowed the ancient Egyptians to delegate certain tasks, like transformation of the dead into a divinized and...
communicable form. And so, like the washing machine that makes our clothes clean, the coffin economizes the time and activity needed to continuously awaken, transform, and connect to the dead. The coffin was a stand-in for a series of time-consuming human rituals, its decorations and inscriptions representing a cognitively collected object power. Because the stakes of the actions provided by a coffin were so high (clothes can be cleaned again, but transformation of the dead can ostensibly only be done once and within a limited amount of time before decay set in), the coffin is entangled, fetishized, powerful, personalized, “sticky” in its meanings and associations, so sticky that the Egyptian coffin has power seemingly coming from its own side with, once crafted, unintended consequences of its own (Boivin 2008: 174–5; Cowan 1983).

2.1 Coffins as Social Objects

On the surface, a coffin seems an uncomplicated object that all humanity could share – because all humans die and all humans want to separate the dead from the spaces of the living. But the Egyptian coffin marked a particularly special human corpse that was treated so as not to decay. The decorated coffin broadcast which humans benefited from non-decay of the corpse. Not all Egyptians had access to the disposable income needed to craft a coffin, let alone to mummify a body. To have a coffin was to enter a “restricted sumptuary world” (Wengrow 2006: 144). The coffin in and of itself was a social separator. Some had them; most did not. The coffin was also a social indicator. Some deserved them; some did not.

The Egyptian coffin was used by society to divide those who lived forever in splendor within a divine communicable state and those who did not, separating those who became Osiris and those who became something else. The Egyptian coffin was the ultimate denial that human beings are organic animals, matter meant to return to the earth. The coffin advertised which bodies would not rot when they joined again with sand or mud. The coffin became a container for massive amounts of imported resin, elite conspicuous consumption displayed in rituals when priests liberally poured jar after jar of the precious stuff onto the mummy. Certain woods and resins have inherent anti-fungal and anti-bacterial properties, which were prized by those who could access them. Thus sycomore fig, acacia, and, of course, imported cedars and firs, were treasured for coffin production; ubiquitous palm wood was not. Natron salts are inherently desiccative and industries in support of their exploitation grew in Egypt’s western deserts. All of these activities were part of the coffin’s function to turn an otherwise soft and decaying body into a divine effigy of forever presence.
The crafting of mummies, coffins, and tombs formed Egyptian society’s view of the dead, and, by extension, of the divine. Coffins created controllable and rewardable ancestors for the few. Initially such ancestors were only strongmen—male leaders and close family. Ultimately, social access broadened as the balance of kingship and elite worked itself out. But the ability of a mere few to acquire scarce resources for the afterlife while others could not was essential to the formation of Egyptian economy, religion, and ideology, driving the construction of pyramids, sprawling necropolises, manufacturing public and visible rituals for special ancestors, and shaping understandings of what those ancestors could do for the living.

The coffin was a product of the “extended mind” of an intellectual elite, in which external aids were used to project one human’s ritual ability onto countless others, working over time and space, collecting and adding knowledge over generations (Clark & Chalmers 1998: 7–19; LeCain 2017: 112). In the Egyptian funerary world, the extended human mind created the Pyramid Texts from oral rituals, which stretched into the Coffin Texts, and then the Book of the Dead, and then the Underworld Books, and so on. The extended mind created the various iterations and styles of Egyptian coffins through time, adding and removing elements with a seeming teleological intent.

Some ancient Egyptians belonged to the society of the materialized extended mind; most were excluded to watch from the sidelines, participating only in what could be orally safeguarded, emulated, and copied. In the same way that some academics today cannot do proper research because they lack access to wealthy libraries—digital or physical—elite Egyptians cornered the market on literary education, funerary knowledge, ritual, religious thought, and temple spaces. And they monopolized the materials to make funerary things—the wood, minerals, resins. This extended mind worked with things, engaging with those functional and scarce commodities to reify social power. The coffin was one product of elite extended mind reified in physicality. As such, the coffin is indeed a remnant of living society, not a dead one. It was used to mark social place and enact human competition with one another. The coffin, and by extension the dead themselves, were manipulated by living people to manifest social value.

The Egyptian coffin was marked and individualized with names and images in paint. The complex decoration of Egyptian coffins changed through time, sometimes becoming more complicated, sometimes less, and Egyptologists have provided dense seriation typologies of coffins for the 3000 years in which they were made (Aston 2009; Barwik 1999; Ciampini 2017; Cooney 2014a; Elias & Lupton 2019; Grajetzki 2007; Kanawanti 2005; Myśliwiec 2014; Niwiński 1988; Peterková Hlouchová 2017; Taylor 1989; Willems