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ANCESTOR VENERATION

تبجيل الأسلاف

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ANCESTOR VENERATION

تبجيل الأسلاف

Renata Schiavo

Ahnenverehrung

Vénération des ancêtres

In ancient Egypt, deceased individuals were believed to continue to participate in the social life of the living and to influence mundane affairs. This belief—here termed ancestor veneration—encompassed interactions with the dead through domestic cults, dreams, and diverse ritual practices. The veneration of ancestors was closely connected with family continuity, fertility, and even claims over immovable property. Although less frequently represented in the surviving textual record, the evidence indicates that women, as well as men, could become recipients of ancestor veneration. The agency of the dead could affect the living in both benevolent and malevolent ways and ritual precautions are known for annihilating malevolent dead as well as for transforming potentially hostile entities into benevolent ancestors.

في مصر القديمة، كان يُعتقد أن المتوفين يشاركون في حياة الأحياء ويؤثرون في شؤونهم. ويشمل هذا الاعتقاد، الذي يُشار إليه هنا بمصطلح «تبجيل الأسلاف»، أشكال التفاعل مع الموتى عبر الطقوس المنزلية، والأحلام، والشعائر الدينية. وكان تبجيل الأسلاف مرتبطاً ارتباطاً وثيقاً باستمرار الحياة الأسرية، والخصوبة، بل وبالمطالبات المتعلقة بالملكية. وعلى الرغم من أن السجل النصي يمثل ذلك بدرجة أقل، فإن النساء، إلى جانب الرجال، كنّ أيضاً موضعاً لهذا التبجيل. وكان بإمكان الموتى التأثير في الأحياء بصورة نافعة أو ضارة؛ وقد عُرفت طقوس تهدف إلى القضاء على الموتى ذوي الأثر المؤذي، وأخرى لتحويل الموتى المعادين إلى أسلاف خيِّرين

For the Egyptians, deceased individuals retained the ability to exercise agency in the world of the living and some of them were regarded as powerful entities who could be called upon to address concerns including illness, infertility, and legal disputes (Harrington 2013: 146–149; Schiavo 2014; Troche 2018a; Schiavo 2023).

The living could interact with the dead in diverse settings, such as houses, tombs, and temples (Harrington 2013: 101–102; Troche 2018b: 469–471). These interplays involved various practices, often mediated by objects—stelae, offering tables, statuettes, lustration slabs, vessels, and bowls—that facilitated

communication with, or protection from, the dead (Harrington 2013: 40–62).

Among this material evidence, the *akh iqer en Ra* stelae and the so-called anthropoid busts are the most studied categories of objects. The stelae (fig. 1) are generally small, usually measuring less than 25 centimeters; they depict the deceased, designated by the epithet *sh jkr n R* (excellent spirit of Ra) seated before an offering table and holding a lotus flower to the face (Demarée 1983: 173–175). The busts, in contrast, depict the head and upper torso of an individual in three dimensions: they range from larger sculptures, generally 25–50 centimeters (fig. 2), to small examples that functioned as amulets (fig. 3)



Figure 1. Ancestral stela (*akh ijer en Ra*) of lady Webkhet, 19th Dynasty (c. 1292 – 1191 BCE). Painted limestone.



Figure 2. Bust of a revered person, Ramesside Period (c. 1300 – 1224 BCE). Painted limestone.

(Exell 2008: 1; Keith 2011: 1–5). Although Keith (2011: 3, 89) has cautioned against interpreting these statues exclusively as representations of ancestors, this remains the most widely accepted interpretation (Exell 2008: 2–3; Harrington 2013: 57–59; Weiss 2015: 111–112; Troche 2018b: 470).

Both anthropoid busts and *akh ijer en Ra* stelae are particularly well attested at Deir el-Medina and have been studied mainly in connection with the domestic religious practices of this community (e.g., Demarée 1983; Friedman 1994). However, neither category was unique to Deir el-Medina (Demarée 1983: 184; Keith 2011: 4; Troche 2018b: 469) nor restricted to domestic contexts; where their archaeological context is known, examples have also been found within tombs, temples, and private chapels (Demarée

1983: 182; Keith 2011: 14–25; Troche 2018b: 469–470).

Considered together with architectural remains and textual sources—such as the Letters to the Dead, the Appeals to the Living, wisdom texts, and magical and medical spells—these objects provide important evidence for reconstructing the interactions between the living and the dead and the various means through which such relationships were negotiated.

History of Research

Beliefs and religious practices centered on ancestors were long underestimated in Egyptology. This is already apparent in one of the earliest studies on one of our major sources testifying to the perceived importance

of the deceased: the first edition of the *Letters to the Dead*, published by Alan Gardiner and Kurt Sethe (Gardiner and Sethe 1928). Although the texts collected in this volume attest to beliefs in the superhuman powers of certain deceased individuals, the authors never used terms such as “ancestor cult” or “ancestor veneration” to describe these phenomena. This was not merely a terminological choice, but reflected a broader interpretive view that Gardiner would make explicit in a subsequent work, *The Attitude of the Ancient Egyptians to Death & the Dead* (1935: 7–8), where he openly denied the existence of an Egyptian ancestor cult.

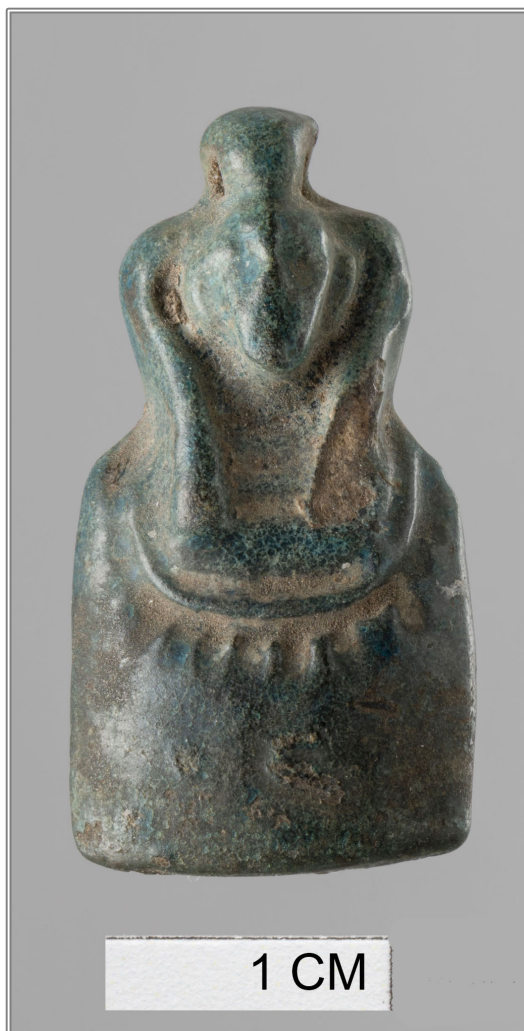


Figure 3. Ancestor bust amulet, New Kingdom (c. 1540 – 1076 BCE). Faience.

Gardiner’s position was far from exceptional. A certain strand of Egyptological studies that minimized or rejected the existence of an organized set of beliefs and practices focused on ancestors is clearly recognizable (Hall 1908: 440; Kees 1952; Wildung 1975: 111–112). This interpretative tendency should be understood in light of several intertwined factors, foremost among them the enduring influence of early evolutionistic anthropology. Scholars such as Edward Burnett Tylor regarded devotion to the spirits of the dead as one of the first stages in the development of religion and, consequently, as a characteristic feature of supposedly “primitive” societies (Tylor 1871: 377–453). Although such a model has long been abandoned because of its racial and ethnocentric assumptions and lack of empirical evidence, it exerted a lasting influence on the history of religions and, in particular, on Egyptology, where some of its underlying premises were assimilated and reproduced until relatively recently (Willems 2013). A second factor was the adoption of a narrow and ethnocentric definition of “ancestor,” understood exclusively as a forebear more remote than a grandparent (Gardiner 1935: 9; Wildung 1975: 111; see also Schulman 1986: 312 and note 43). Finally, Orientalist perspectives on Egyptian beliefs concerning post-mortem existence encouraged scholars to focus on notions interpreted as anticipating later monotheistic conceptions of a positive afterlife, rather than on the social and religious significance of relationships between the living and the dead (Baines 2011: 42; Weiss 2015: 179–180; Nyord 2018: 76–78).

The influence of this framework is evident even in the few studies published during the first half of the twentieth century that recognized the existence of an Egyptian ancestor cult, which describe the phenomenon as the survival of a primitive religious feature that had persisted, in modified form, into historical times (Hornblower 1930; Budge 1934: 4, 55, 319–320).

Two important exceptions stand out. Henri Frankfort's *Kingship and the Gods* examined the role of deceased kings in legitimizing royal ideology without interpreting the phenomenon through an evolutionary framework (Frankfort 1948: 90). More directly relevant to private ancestor veneration was Bernard Bruyère's study of Deir el-Medina. On the basis of the *akh iqr en Ra* stelae and anthropoid busts (*buste des laraires*) Bruyère explicitly identified devotional practices directed toward deceased members of the community as a form of *culte des ancêtres* (Bruyère 1939: 151–174).

Later study of Deir el-Medina's *akh iqr en Ra* stelae by Robert Demarée resulted in a decisive turning point. Drawing on Igor Kopytoff's critique of the ethnocentric categories of "ancestor" and "ancestor worship," Demarée proposed a broader conceptualization of "ancestor" based on continuing social relationships between the living and the dead (Demarée 1983: 213–218, 288 n. 40; Kopytoff 1971). This approach moved beyond the distinction between recently deceased individuals and remote ancestors, allowing the evidence from Deir el-Medina to be considered alongside other textual and iconographic evidence attested from the Old Kingdom onwards, including tomb inscriptions, the Appeals to the Living, and the Letters to the Dead (Demarée 1983: 198–274).

Demarée's work paved the way for broader investigations of ancestor-related practices in Egyptian religion, bringing under a common interpretive framework phenomena previously considered separately, such as the deification of prominent individuals whose cult extended beyond the family sphere and the posthumous cults of kings who received special forms of popular devotion (Baines 1987: 86–88; Fitzenreiter 1994; von Lieven 2010; El Shazly 2015a; Troche 2021).

Today, beliefs and practices concerning ancestors are recognized as a significant component of ancient Egyptian religion (Harrington 2013; Fitzenreiter 2018). Recent studies have emphasized the Letters to the Dead as evidence for a complex form of

ancestor veneration (Donnat Beauquier 2014; Schiavo 2014; Troche 2018a; Hsieh 2024), while the broader heuristic category "ancestor" has proved useful for investigating family organization, social relations, inheritance, status, and social cohesion (Willems 2014: 182–200; Weiss 2015: 179–186; Moreno García 2016; Weiss 2022; Schiavo 2023).

Modern Terminology

Egyptological literature has accumulated multiple labels to define and interpret the phenomena considered here. To describe the supernatural status and popular devotion gained by certain deceased individuals, terms like "Egyptian saints" or "deified humans" have been used (von Lieven 2010). Another similar term adopted in recent studies is "apotheosis" (Troche 2021). Moreover, in addition to "cult of the dead" and "ancestor cult," other expressions have been used with diverse nuances and meanings.

Martin Fitzenreiter distinguished between "cult of the dead" (i.e., ritual activities to maintain the post-mortem existence of an individual), "ancestor cult" (i.e., ritual activities to sustain the relationship between the living and the dead within a formal and enduring structure), and "ancestor veneration" (i.e., ritual activities aimed at maintaining interaction between the living and the dead in a less institutionalized context) (Fitzenreiter 2018: 54–55). Similarly, Lara Weiss, in her study of the Saqqara necropolis, preferred the term "ancestor veneration" over "ancestor worship" or "ancestor cult," as it better describes practices that were not fully institutionalized and were grounded in reciprocity between the living and the dead, as well as in social memory (Weiss 2022: 3–5).

The perspective adopted by Weiss reflects a broader shift within anthropology, where categories such as "ancestor" and "ancestor worship" have been criticized as misleading because of their ethnocentric assumptions (Kopytoff 1971: 140; Geertz 1973: 122–123; Singleton 2014; Harrington 2015: 73). Kopytoff, in particular, argued that the sharp distinction between the worlds of the living

and the dead fails to capture the conceptual framework underlying practices conventionally labeled as “ancestor worship.” Rather, these customs are grounded in the belief that the deceased retain their social status after death and continue to exercise agency through interactions with the living (Kopytoff 1971). Similarly, Singleton challenged the association of ancestor cult with “primitive religion,” shifting the focus to the active social role occupied by certain categories of dead within the community of the living (Singleton 2014).

Another important distinction is that between funerary and mortuary rituals and the related liturgical texts. The term “funerary” here refers to the acts performed at the time of burial, whereas the designation “mortuary” indicates practices periodically performed to praise the dead both at the necropolis and in other spaces, such as houses (Willems 2001: 224). This must, however, be understood as an *etic* distinction, since from the *emic* perspective the same text or the same ritual could be reworked and used in different contexts. The most striking example is Papyrus Berlin 10482, which contains a group of Coffin Texts spells, followed by a text akin in many respects to the Letters to the Dead. Significantly, the texts copied here were originally composed with verbs in the perfective form, later reworked into the imperfective. This feature reflects a shift in the nature of the ritual actions addressed to the deceased, insofar as the text, originally intended for funerary rituals, was reworked for the perpetuation of his posthumous cult (Regulski 2020: 330–331).

Emic Terms

Beyond these heuristic modern analytical categories, contemporary studies on the role of ancestors in ancient Egyptian religion converge on three fundamental features: the continuation of social bonds beyond death, the persistence of the deceased’s social status and agency within the living community, and the possibility of mutual interaction between the living and the dead (e.g., Toivari-Viitala 2001: 204–205; Schiavo 2014; Troche 2018b: 465; 2021: 44–45; Weiss 2022: 1; Bickel 2025:

164). These features lie at the core of ancestor-focused beliefs and practices, finding clear expression in the ancient Egyptian vocabulary used to refer to the dead and describe ongoing interactions with them.

The term *ꜥḥ* is among the most frequent designations for the elevated status attained by certain deceased individuals (Demarée 1983: 190–195; Donnat 2007; Janák 2013). Unlike *mwt*, which refers to the dead in general or malevolent spirits, *ꜥḥ* denoted a transfigured, effective entity capable of influencing human affairs through benevolent or detrimental actions (Donnat 2007). Textual sources attest to rituals called *sꜥḥw*, expressing the process of transforming the deceased into an *ꜥḥ* (Demarée 1983: 193; Janák 2013: 2), which seem to parallel those rites of passage, attested in diverse cultural contexts, aimed at transforming the dead into ancestors (Merlo and Xella 2001: 287; Donnat 2009: 90 n. 160; Teinz 2012). Ancient Egyptian beliefs, therefore, viewed death not as a rupture, but as a transformational process enabling certain dead to regain social agency and participate in human affairs.

The agency of the dead closely reflected their lifetime status. While in the societies analyzed by Kopytoff and Singleton prestige stemmed from gerontocracy—with old age being the primary criterion for authoritative status (Kopytoff 1971; Singleton 2014)—in ancient Egypt, the concept of authoritativeness mainly derived from specialized expertise and knowledge (*rh*) (Demarée 1983: 209–210). Textual sources show that a reputation as a “wise man” was central to securing authority in life and death (Demarée 1983: 193; von Lieven 2010: 3; Troche 2021: 72–79). This also explains the frequent occurrence of epithets like *jkꜣr* and *ꜥꜣr*, aimed at denoting certain special skills of the deceased (Demarée 1983: 210–213; Troche 2021: 43–44).

Terms of veneration additional to *ꜥḥ* reflect regional or historical variations. At Edfu, the nomarch Izi was titled *nꜥꜣr ꜥḥ*, “living god” (von Lieven 2010: 1). Similarly, Heqaib was venerated at Qubbet el-Hawa as *nꜥꜣr*, “god,” *nꜥꜣr njwtj*, “local god,” *sꜥḥ*, “honorable one,”

and, from the Middle Kingdom onward, as *tnj*, “the august one” (Franke 1994: 27, 71, 130–140). During the Late Period, titles such as *hrj*, “the exalted one,” and *hsj*, “the praised one,” emerged, while *ntr* ʕ, “great god,” was increasingly applied even to non-elite individuals (von Lieven 2010: 1–2).

Comparing the Letters to the Dead and the so-called Loyalist Instructions allows for reconstructing the terminology that described the relationship between the living and the deceased (Fischer-Elfert 1994; Schiavo 2014). This vocabulary highlights the existence of that pact of mutual aid which frequently underlies ancestor-related religious beliefs in diverse cultural contexts (Tsukimoto 1985: 229–233; Xella 1987: 121–122). Specifically, the verb *ḥz* (“to fight”) denotes defending loved ones, while *mkj* (“to protect”) highlights the ancestors’ obligation to safeguard their living relatives or servants, mirroring how a household head protects his family; conversely, verbs like *hbn* (“to destroy”) or *wš* (“to ruin”) express the consequences of unjust conduct by ancestors or the family chief that led to the household’s destruction (Fischer-Elfert 1994; Schiavo 2014). For the ancient Egyptians, therefore, interactions between the living and the dead were regulated by the same norms that ensured social coexistence under the principles of *maat*, emphasizing the active agency of the deceased within the community of the living (Schiavo 2014).

Interactions with the Dead

Evidence reveals various settings and occasions for interaction with the dead. While tombs, necropolises, and sacred places certainly played an important part, substantial evidence highlights the primary role of domestic areas; an important role was also played by dreams, which were perceived as a liminal space between the human and the superhuman sphere.

Tombs, necropolises, private chapels, and temples

Tombs and necropolises constituted privileged settings for interactions between the living and the dead. Tombs were equipped with architectural features, such as funerary chapels, false doors, or courtyards, that

enabled access to the visitors, while necropolises functioned as socially integrated spaces in which the dead remained connected to their communities (Harrington 2013: 86–90; Weiss 2022: 189–192). Statues and representations of the deceased provided a medium for interaction, as did several busts found in funerary contexts (Keith 2011: 22–24; Harrington 2013: 89–90). The latter could also depict deceased individuals other than the tomb owner, as illustrated by two sculptures resembling anthropoid busts found in niches at the entrance of the tomb of Amenmose (TT 373) that depict his parents (Harrington 2005: 74–75).

Interactions with the dead found their most significant expression in offerings and gifts, presented in both funerary and domestic contexts (Mota 2019: 57–58; Weiss 2022: 155–156). Such practices not only ensured the postmortem sustenance of the deceased, but also maintained their presence within the social world and reinforced reciprocal relationships between the living and the dead (Weiss 2022: 134–135). The deposition of objects not intended as offerings is also well attested; their placement in tombs and necropolises, whether to harness the power of the dead or protect the living from potentially harmful influence, further illustrates the multifaceted nature of these interplays (Pinch 2003: 445).

Necropolises also provided settings for ritual practices and festivals that strengthened bonds between the living and the dead. These included the Wag Festival, attested from the Old Kingdom onward (Goedicke 1986: 1135–1140); festivals associated with deified nomarchs, such as Heqaib/Sokar at Elephantine (Raue 2014: 12); and the Haker Festival, which linked the dead with Osiris and gained prominence during the Middle Kingdom (Végh 2021: 322–336). New Kingdom data further shows how during the Beautiful Festival of the Valley families would visit necropolises and gather in tomb chapels and forecourts (von Lieven 2015: 298–299; Bickel 2025: 164).

Forms of contact with the dead also took place in temples or private chapels. At el-

Amarna and Deir el-Medina, the latter are well attested and served primarily cultic functions, sometimes associated with the veneration of private and royal ancestors (Bomann 1991: 57–74; Harrington 2013: 98–99; Gestoso Singer 2022: 140–142). During the New Kingdom, statues portraying deified high officials, such as Amenhotep son of Hapu, placed in accessible temple areas, show that certain authoritative dead could be petitioned to intercede with the divine sphere (Galán 2003; Harrington 2013: 99–100). Moreover, anthropoid busts and *akh ijer en Ra* stelae found within both private chapels and temples further support the fact that ancestors could also be venerated within these settings (Keith 2011: 24; Harrington 2013: 98–100).

Houses

Evidence for domestic practices associated with ancestor veneration is already attested in the Middle Kingdom. At el-Lisht, a mudbrick domestic altar was found together with a stela erected by a son in honor of his deceased father, while niches and small altars associated with stelae dedicated to deceased relatives have been identified in domestic contexts at Askut in Nubia (Mota 2019: 49–51). At Kom el-Fakhry near Memphis, a stela depicting a seated deceased man in an attitude comparable to that depicted on the *akh ijer en Ra* stelae, holding a lotus flower before his face and accompanied by a woman in the same pose, was found together with an offering table and a small seated-couple statue, apparently representing the individuals shown on the stela (Mota 2019: 52–53). The earliest known domestic wall painting associated with ancestor veneration, from el-Lahun, similarly depicts a seated figure receiving offerings (Mota 2019: 51–53).

New Kingdom settlements likewise confirm that ancestor veneration played a major role within domestic contexts. At Edfu, an early Thutmoside villa contained a domestic altar with an offering table, a limestone anthropoid bust, and a stela depicting a man and woman, together with other ritual objects (Bertini 2019). Anthropoid busts have also been recovered from domestic areas at Amara West

and Memphis (Giddy 1999: 48–49; Spencer, Stevens, and Binder 2014: 31).

Ancestor veneration played a significant role even during the Amarna Period. The cult of the Aten may be interpreted as a sublimated form of royal ancestor veneration, with Akhenaten presented as the son of the solar disk and the Aten itself understood as the embodiment of the entire line of royal predecessors (Johnson 1996; Stevens 2006: 5). Furthermore, Akhenaten's religious reform assigned a special role to the reigning royal family: Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and their daughters acted as mediators between the human and divine spheres, and household stelae depicting them fulfilled a function comparable to that of representations of royal ancestors or the *akh ijer en Ra* stelae at Deir el-Medina (Stevens 2006: 131, 215–216; Fitzenreiter 2008).

Elongated niches, recalling the so-called false doors found in domestic contexts at Deir el-Medina, have been identified in approximately 136 Amarna houses; what remains of their decoration points to a particular emphasis on royal ancestors, such as painted reliefs showing the worship of the royal family, inscriptions containing the hymn to Aten, and scenes of adoration of the Aten cartouche (Stevens 2006: 235–238, 286). Significant are the inscriptions on a stone doorway and on the false doors found in the transverse hall of the house of Ranefer: rather than merely identifying the owner of the house, the texts presented the man as would have been done in a funerary monument, portraying the head of the household as a figure whose authority and spiritual prestige already anticipated his postmortem authoritative role (Kemp and Stevens 2010: 507). In this regard, scholars have argued that the term “ancestor” could be somewhat misleading in this context since it implies a status acquired only after death, whereas the evidence points instead to a gradual process through which respect accumulated during life culminated in postmortem veneration (Kemp and Stevens 2010: 507). Yet, if the concept of the ancestor is understood in the sense proposed by Kopytoff and Singleton



Figure 4. A *lit-clos* structure built of mudbrick inside a house (NE VI) at Deir el-Medina.

(Kopytoff 1971; Singleton 2014)—as an individual whose social identity, status, and agency continue beyond death—then the Ranefer evidence constitutes a particularly significant expression of this belief.

Domestic areas at el-Amarna have also yielded stelae depicting deceased individuals according to the same iconographic conventions as those shown on the *akh iqer en Ra* stelae, as well as statuettes portraying the deceased in the same attitude (Stevens 2006: 145–149, 293–294). These finds are complemented by anthropoid busts, for which el-Amarna constitutes the second-largest corpus after Deir el-Medina (Stevens 2006: 41; Keith 2011: 106, 250–254).

Deir el-Medina provides the most extensive archaeological evidence for ancestor veneration within the domestic sphere, particularly through the large number of *akh iqer en Ra* stelae and anthropoid busts recovered from the site (Demarée 1983; Keith 2011). It should nevertheless be noted that

only a small proportion of these objects can be securely associated with domestic areas: of the 55 stelae catalogued by Demarée, only five were found in houses, while only 11 of the 71 anthropoid busts known from Deir el-Medina were recovered from domestic contexts (Demarée 1983: 182; Keith 2011: 11). This apparent scarcity is very likely attributable to the abandonment of the village between the reigns of Ramesses IX and Ramesses XI, which resulted in the removal or displacement of certain categories of domestic equipment.

The role of ancestor veneration within the domestic sphere must therefore be assessed primarily through permanent architectural installations, and then by supplementing the information derived from these cultic emplacements with the few objects preserved in their original contexts (Weiss 2009: 195–196; 2015: 23–25). The so-called *lits-clos*, fixed mudbrick installations primarily located in the first room of the houses and often provided with a small flight of steps (fig. 4), represent

the most distinctive examples. Recent studies largely agree in identifying these structures, which find similar parallels in domestic contexts at other New Kingdom sites, including Malqata, Medinet Habu, and el-Amarna, as domestic altars (Stevens 2006: 234; Weiss 2009: 196–197; Harrington 2013: 74–77). Although partially preserved, their decoration emphasizes regeneration and fertility, including Bes-figures, childbirth scenes, dancing women, marshes and boats, while other fragmentary compositions remain more difficult to interpret (Stevens 2006: 234; Weiss 2009: 202). In this regard, Lara Weiss has argued that a scene commonly interpreted as a representation of a “morning toilette” may instead depict a banquet of the type frequently represented in tombs of the 18th Dynasty and linked to the veneration of ancestors (Weiss 2009: 199–200). The few movable artifacts linked to these installations could further confirm a connection to ancestor veneration. On the *lit-clos* of Deir el-Medina House NE XI, two fragmentary statuettes, perhaps portraying the royal ancestors Amenhotep I and Ahmose Nefertari, and a headrest were found (Weiss 2009: 203–204). As permanent architectural installations, the *lits-clos* may therefore have served, among other religious purposes, as places for the veneration of ancestors in a broad sense. Their function would have extended beyond the commemoration of the dead to encompass concerns with family continuity and fertility, ensuring the birth of new heirs who would perpetuate the care and ritual obligations owed to their ancestors (Weiss 2015: 189).

“False doors” are niches enriched with decorative elements, so called because of their resemblance to actual doorways. These structures are well attested from the Old Kingdom onward and mainly occur in funerary contexts, where they provided the interface through which the deceased tomb owner could interact with living visitors (Harrington 2013: 60). The appearance of rather similar structures within Deir el-Medina houses, where they predominantly appear in the second room, is therefore significant (Bruyère 1939: 67; Stevens 2006: 238;

Harrington 2013: 59–60, 65–71). These structures may have functioned as points of passage between the realm of the living and that of the dead, or more generally as interfaces with superhuman entities (Weiss 2010: 197; 2015: 54). An inscription associated with a false door discovered in House NE XV connects this architectural feature with Amenhotep son of Hapu, a deified high official of the 18th Dynasty who was the object of widespread veneration in the Theban area (Weiss 2015: 39–40, 50–53). Even clearer evidence comes from House SO V, where a scene of adoration of Ahmose Nefertari’s cartouche has been discovered (Stevens 2006: 238; Harrington 2013: 68; Weiss 2015: 52–53). The so-called “false doors,” therefore, may have served, among other functions, as loci for forms of veneration directed toward a special category of the dead.

Wall niches were also incorporated into houses at Deir el-Medina and may have served multiple purposes, including cultic functions (Weiss 2015: 63). Finds from Houses NE XIII and C VI show that niches were used to display anthropoid busts together with other objects associated with ancestor veneration, including *akh iqer en Ra* stelae (Harrington 2013: 77–79; Weiss 2015: 87–90).

All this evidence suggests that at Deir el-Medina ancestor veneration included deceased members of the family lineage—in some cases, extending beyond the two immediately preceding generations (Weiss 2025: 183)—as well as individuals whose posthumous reputation transcended the boundaries of the family sphere, as in the case of Khamuy, Pennub, and lady Webkhet (see fig. 1), the individuals to whom the largest number of *akh iqer en Ra* stelae were dedicated (Demarée 1983: 281–283 and note 11; Troche 2018b: 471). The familial veneration of the dead was also closely intertwined with the devotion directed toward certain deified kings, queens, and princes (El Shazly 2015a: 159–160). This is evident in the prominence accorded to certain members of the Ahmoside line who enjoyed a widespread posthumous cult and



Figure 5. Stela (recto/verso) of Nebetitef with Letters to the Dead, First Intermediate Period (c. 2100 BCE). Painted limestone.

were considered the patron saints and founders of the village (El Shazly 2015a: 195–220; 2015b). Besides the aforementioned scene of Ahmose Nefertari associated with a false door in House SO V and the statuettes found in House NE XI, several stelae depict deceased individuals venerated as *akh iqr en Ra* alongside members of the Ahmoside dynasty (Demarée 1983: 173–174; El Shazly 2015a: 141–159). Indeed, Prince Ahmose-Sapair himself was venerated as an *sh n Rʿ/sh jkr n Rʿ*, as demonstrated by stelae and offering tables dedicated to him that either bear these epithets or depict him with the iconography typically associated with an “excellent spirit” (Demarée 1983: 112–114, 167–168; El Shazly 2015b: 427–428).

Dreams

In ancient Egypt, sleep was associated with death, while dreaming was understood as a form of awakening comparable to the rebirth of the deceased in the afterlife. Oneiric visions were therefore perceived as a liminal space where the living could interact with supernatural beings dwelling in the netherworld, including the dead (Szpakowska 2003: 21–28).

This conception is clearly reflected in two Letters to the Dead from the First Intermediate Period. In P. Naga el-Deir 3737, a man, Heni, appeals to his deceased father for protection against the actions of a *dt*-servant named Seni, who was perhaps himself deceased and causing disturbing dreams to the petitioner (Szpakowska 2003: 23–28; Donnat Beauquier 2014: 48–51). Similarly, Stela Michael C. Carlos Museum 2014.033.001 (fig. 5) preserves two letters in which a female ancestor is asked to appear in a dream and fight (*h3*) on behalf of a sick woman in order to heal her (Szpakowska 2003: 23–28; Donnat Beauquier 2014: 53–56).

The intent of these documents has been compared to that of incubation rituals, which involved sleeping in a sacred place or tomb to obtain healing or inspired dreams—a practice well attested only from the Late Period onward (Renberg 2016: 714–716; Troche 2018a: 6). While this comparison is compelling, the considerable chronological gap suggests that these Letters to the Dead may be more appropriately considered within the context of certain Egyptian nocturnal rituals attested since the Middle Kingdom.

Although these rituals did not necessarily involve dreaming, they created a context in which the living could interact with the dead while sleeping or spending the night (*sdr*) in a sacred space (Willems 1988: 145–150; Végh 2021: 330–337). A similar pattern of beliefs is attested, from the New Kingdom onward, in Scenes 9 and 10 of the Opening of the Mouth Ritual; here, a son sleeps (*sdr*) before the statue of his deceased father in a secluded sacred area, the Golden House, in order to see him in a dream (*kdd*) (Szpakowska 2003: 147–151).

Some scholars have proposed that headrests may have been used in rituals to facilitate communication with the dead through dreams, a practice that finds parallels in traditional African contexts (Hellinckx 2001: 92–93; Keith 2011: 92; Harrington 2013: 36 and note 69). However, clear evidence for such a function is lacking (Szpakowska 2003: 172–173). Headrests have nevertheless been found in cultic contexts, predominantly in tombs, and, in some cases, within domestic settings (Szpakowska 2003: 171–173; Weiss 2009: 203–204). In such contexts, the presence of decorative motifs characterized by apotropaic elements, such as Bes figures and knife-wielding demons, has led scholars to propose a protective function (Szpakowska 2003: 171–173). At Deir el-Medina, one headrest was found within the *lit-clos* of House NE XI, while a second, preserved only fragmentarily, was recovered from the *lit-clos* of House CVII (Bruyère 1939: 256, 312). Given the possible association of the *lit-clos* with fertility (Weiss 2009: 202) and the belief that the dead could cause miscarriages (Harrington 2013: 140), the presence of a headrest in such a context may have served to protect against the harmful influence of the dead.

Legal Aspects

Throughout the anthropological literature, ancestor veneration has long been linked to claims over inheritances and property (Goody 1962: 412; Morris 1991; Harrington 2013), a framework also borne out by the Egyptian evidence.

According to Egyptian customary norms, both funerary and mortuary rituals were closely tied to property rights, since the individual who performed the funerals and provided for the posthumous care of the dead also held the right to inherit from them (Janssen and Pestman 1968; Pestman 1969; Lippert 2013: 4). Moreover, at Deir el-Medina, oracular consultations involving the royal ancestor Amenhotep I were preferred to settle disputes over real estate, despite the availability of judicial procedures before the *knbt* court (MacDowell 1990: 114–127). A comparable case is attested at Abydos, where the oracle of Ahmose I was consulted to solve a dispute over land ownership (MacDowell 1990: 122). This association between mortuary sphere and legal matters is further reflected in the practice of inscribing legalistic texts, many concerning property disputes, within tombs and funerary chapels (Strudwick 2005: 187–208; Loktionov and Alexandrova 2025: 18).

Within this broader legal framework, the Letters to the Dead merit particular consideration. Attested from the late Old Kingdom onward, these documents have been regarded by several scholars as precursors to later oracular practice (Moreno García 2010; Donnat Beauquier 2014: 34, 40–41, 70–71; Schiavo 2014, 2023). At least three examples (Cairo JdE 25975; UC 16163; P. Brooklyn 37.1799 E) explicitly petition an ancestor to intervene in disputes concerning the inheritance of immovable property (Schiavo 2014: 160–161; 2023: 58), while three other documents (UC 16244; Pitt-Rivers inv. 1887.27.1; Cairo JdE 91740) somewhat concern property or inheritance issues (Schiavo 2023: 58–59). Several elements suggest that these documents may have had an actual legal function. Given that the administration of justice, particularly before the New Kingdom, was largely grounded in customary norms (Lippert 2012: 2–3), religious ceremonies performed in public settings and before witnesses—including funerary rituals and festivals for the dead—may have provided a framework for negotiating and resolving legal disputes (Schiavo 2023: 65). This interpretation finds further support in Wente’s (2017) study of

Coffin Text spell 149, which argues that this text may originally have been associated with a ritual performed at the entrance of a tomb to solicit the assistance of a deceased father in legal proceedings.

Women

Women could become the recipients of ancestor veneration both within the familial sphere and on a broader regional scale (Demarée 1983: 27–28, 110–111; von Lieven 2010: 3). The surviving evidence, however, particularly relating to the familial dimension, is strongly weighted toward male ancestors. Only seven of the 55 known *akh iqr en Ra* stelae commemorate women (Demarée 1983: A6, A39, A41, A44, A45, A51, A52) (see fig. 1), while most Letters to the Dead are addressed to adult men (Donnat Beauquier 2014: 97–98). A similar pattern emerges from the Appeals to the Living: among the 192 texts collected by Shubert, datable from the Old to the New Kingdom, only two are appeals made by women and, remarkably, they are addressed to male visitors (Shubert 2007: 313).

This imbalance can be explained by the social and institutional structures of ancient Egyptian society, which were largely patriarchal, organized around the senior male of the household and the transmission of household authority from father to son (Franke 1986: 1034–1035; Lippert 2013: 3; Donnat Beauquier 2014: 97–98). Since ancestor veneration was closely connected to the continuity of the family lineage and to the transmission of property and the succession of social roles, practices centered on male ancestors may consequently have been more likely to leave a visible documentary and archaeological record.

One must also consider the role of literacy in shaping the surviving evidence. Although Egyptian women enjoyed a comparatively privileged social position, literacy was considerably less widespread among women than among men, particularly at the higher levels of reading and writing required for the independent production and interpretation of texts (Baines and Eyre 2007: 83–89; Zinn

2012: 3). This disparity may have affected women's access to forms of knowledge transmitted through writing, while also contributing to their relative underrepresentation as ancestors in certain categories of objects and monuments. On the other hand, oral knowledge was important in ancient Egypt, and a suitable theoretical framework can help identify traces of certain ritual practices involving women in the archaeological record (Baines 1987: 79; Zinn 2018: 68).

In this regard, Harrington argued that most anthropoid busts may represent deceased women, as they depict individuals wearing a tripartite wig, a hairstyle identified as a feminine feature (Harrington 2005: 77–78; Exell 2008: 2). They may therefore have served as anepigraphic female counterparts to the inscribed, male-focused *akh iqr en Ra* stelae (Harrington 2005: 78; Exell 2008: 2). Although this interpretation is not universally accepted (Keith 2011: 85–86), it is supported by the very small number of known inscribed busts exhibiting tripartite wigs, all of which explicitly identify them as women through their inscriptions (Keith 2011: 70–72).

This general framework was not static and underwent significant changes over time. From the seventh century BCE onward, commemorative and funerary inscriptions dedicated to women are attested, showing a special emphasis on the ethical and emotional qualities of the deceased, including religious devotion, beauty, eloquence, and charitable acts performed at their own expense (Panov 2018: 7–8). The Ptolemaic Period also saw the production of statues of deceased women, which were originally placed within temples and inscribed with Appeals to the Living exhorting passersby to remember their names. One example is noteworthy for addressing exclusively the female personnel of a temple, constituting the only known case of an Appeal to the Living made by a woman to other women (Quirk and Ibrahim 2021).

The veneration of female ancestors may have occupied a more prominent place in contexts beyond the domestic sphere. The participation of women holding prominent

religious positions in institutional cultic activities involved forms of ritual practice more visible in written evidence. In such contexts, ancestor veneration may have extended beyond biological kinship to include women who had previously held the same office as that of the worshipper. Ayad (2016: 93), for example, has suggested that the ritual care of deceased female predecessors may have contributed to the legitimization of priestly offices such as that of the God's Wives of Amun. This represents an intriguing avenue of research that remains insufficiently explored and finds significant parallels in the Mesopotamian evidence (MacDougal 2017: 270–271).

Malevolent Dead and Rituals of Appeasement

The ordinary dead (*mwt*) could be perceived as potentially dangerous beings, capable of harming the living by causing illness, nightmares, or miscarriages (Harrington 2013: 22–27). The same could apply to the deceased transmuted into *šhw*: when neglected or offended, they could turn against the living and exert a harmful influence (Donnat 2007: 3). It is therefore unsurprising that a substantial corpus of magical and medical texts addressed the protection of the living from the dead, whether *mwt* or *šhw*, and sought to neutralize their harmful influence (Donnat 2007: 4). Such practices could involve severe forms of intimidation. In a Saitic amuletic papyrus, for instance, a hostile deceased is threatened with having his tomb set on fire if he does not desist from harming the living (Koenig 1979).

Alongside such strong measures against hostile dead, several sources testify to rituals intended to appease deceased individuals, vengeful because of unfortunate deaths, and transform them into benevolent entities. Such practices may foreshadow the apotheosis, widely attested in later periods, of individuals who had died under exceptional circumstances, such as from a snakebite, or from drowning in the Nile (von Lieven 2010: 3). Given the high mortality associated with childbirth and its complications (Dupras et al. 2015: 58–59), women who died thereby may

have constituted an important category of recipients for these practices.

This apotropaic concern underlies the Oracular Decree for Neskhons, written to placate and transform into a benevolent divine entity the young wife of Pinedjem II, who died in childbirth or from related complications (Smith 1912: 107–109; Gunn 1955). The deliberate mutilation of the statue of Ahmose-Sapair, a royal prince who died at a very young age, may provide further evidence for such practices: the decapitation and probable subsequent reattachment of the head, together with the application of red pigment to parts of the statue, may have served to neutralize the potentially dangerous agency of the dead and transform him into a benevolent ancestor (Barbotin 2005).

Three Letters to the Dead addressed to women—the stela Michael C. Carlos Museum Acc. No. 2014.033.001 (see fig. 5), the Berlin Bowl (discussed below), and P. Leiden AMS 64/I 371—suggest a similar conception. Textual analysis indicates that the letters sought to placate the anger of the deceased women and restore them to a benevolent role within the family network (Donnat Beauquier 2014: 53–57; Schiavo 2020: 203–206). The texts also imply that the perceived anger of these deceased women may have arisen from jealousy toward other women living in their household who had assumed, or were assuming, social roles previously occupied by them (Donnat Beauquier 2014: 53–57; Schiavo 2020: 203–206), a conception comparable to that implied in Coffin Text I158a–159b [38], where the deceased father, jealous of his living son who is about to assume his position as family head, threatens to drag him into the realm of the dead (Willems 2001: 268–270).

The Berlin Bowl (fig. 6), Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung Inv. No. 22573, offers further evidence for the possible apotropaic dimension of these documents. Its text runs in a circular arrangement—a disposition used to ward off evil entities and documented in some magical and medical spells (Waraksa 2009: 136 and note 614; Harrington 2013: 36)—around a female figure



Figure 6. Line drawing of the Berlin Bowl by Kurt Sethe.

resembling a two-dimensional representation of an anthropoid bust, but interpreted as a hieroglyph for “woman,” mutilated for apotropaic purposes (Schiavo 2020: 207).

Ostrakon Louvre 698, a highly poetic funerary text composed in verse by the scribe Butehamun at the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period (Donnat Beauquier 2014: 158–160), may reflect a similar interpretation. The text is addressed to the *fdt* of his deceased wife, Ikhtay. The term *fdt* is translated as “coffin,” but could also designate a box for storing personal documents, including letters (Demarée 2006: 24). Although the document could be interpreted as an expression of grief and love for a deceased spouse (Goldwasser 1996), Frandsen has suggested that the text could hide an attempt to resolve an unspecified problem (Frandsen 1992: 37–38). This seems very compelling in light of certain information about Butehamun that we know from other sources: Ikhtay died leaving him with young children, while another woman, Shedemdua—possibly a second wife or a female relative who assisted him in caring for the children—

subsequently joined his household (Schiavo 2020: 206). Further suggestive evidence is provided by a letter sent to Butehamun by his father, Thutmose, that mentions a black *fdt* in connection with a malevolent deceased and, perhaps, with a magical spell or amulet intended to protect its owner from harmful influences (Demarée 2006: 24; Schiavo 2020: 206).

Some evidence suggests that anthropoid busts may have also played a role in rituals to appease angry deceased women. A bust from Deir el-Medina, now in Cairo (JE 43980), shows the name of a justified woman, Khandjer, on its base, where it would not have been visible, leading to the suggestion that the object was used to establish contact with chthonic entities (Keith 2011: 70–71). Keith has also noted that the bust appears to depict a woman but bears red-painted flesh, a color traditionally associated with men but also with apotropaic practices aimed at eliminating harmful influences (Keith 2011: 70–71, 204–206; Weiss 2015: 74–76). Moreover, the object also seems to have undergone deliberate mutilations. The combination of these features may cautiously suggest that the bust was involved in an apotropaic ritual comparable to that performed on Ahmose-Sapair’s statue (Barbotin 2005).

Similarly, the numerous “female figurines” recovered from tombs, temples, and domestic contexts (Waraksa 2008: 2) display deliberate breakages and decorations with red pigment, elements that indicate their involvement in apotropaic practices (Waraksa 2008: 2; 2009: 1–2, 117). Such actions have been linked to the promotion of fertility, rituals concerning the deceased’s rebirth in the afterlife, and healing/prophylactics practices (Desroches-Noblecourt 1953: 42–44; Waraksa 2009: 117–123; Weiss 2015: 141). Nonetheless, they may also have served to neutralize the malevolent influence of certain deceased women.

Ostrakon Gardiner 61 from Deir el-Medina may provide further evidence of propitiatory rituals performed in connection with dead women. The document records that a man celebrated a “personal festival for Hathor” in

connection with his wife's death (Kitchen 1982: 596, 15–16). Given the mythological paradigm associated with Hathor, particularly the pacification of her dangerous aspect as the Solar Eye, this celebration may have served as a ritual means of appeasing an angered

deceased woman. This interpretation may also be relevant to an anthropoid bust from Deir el-Medina catalogued by Keith (2011: 71–72, 199–201), which depicts a woman and bears a dedication to Hathor-Nebet-Hetepet.

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Demarée's monograph devoted to the *akh iher en Ra* stelae remains a fundamental point of reference for approaching the subject of ancestor veneration (Demarée 1983). Several subsequent studies have examined the role of ancestors in Egyptian religion (Moreno García 2010, 2016; Harrington 2013; Weiss 2022). The veneration of certain deified humans, both royal and non-royal, can likewise be understood as an expression of ancestor veneration (von Lieven 2010; El Shazly 2015a, 2015b; Troche 2021). Among the most significant sources are the so-called Letters to the Dead, which provide valuable insights into the relationships between the living and the dead in ancient Egyptian religion and society (Donnat Beauquier 2014; Troche 2018a; Hsieh 2022; Schiavo 2023).

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- Figure 1. Ancestral stela (*akh iqr en Ra*) of lady Webkhet, 19th Dynasty (c. 1292 – 1191 BCE). Painted limestone. (Turin, Museo Egizio, Cat. No. 1542. © Museo Egizio, Torino. https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/it-IT/material/Cat_1542/.)
- Figure 2. Bust of a revered person, Ramesside Period (c. 1300 – 1224 BCE). Painted limestone. (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Object No. 66.99.45. Purchase, Fletcher Fund and the Guide Foundation Inc. Gift, 1966. Open Access image [CC0], courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545914>.)
- Figure 3. Ancestor bust amulet, New Kingdom (c. 1540 – 1076 BCE). Faience. (Turin, Museo Egizio, Cat. No. 1231. Open Access image [CC0], courtesy of Museo Egizio, Torino.)
- Figure 4. A *lit-clos* structure built of mudbrick inside a house (NE VI) at Deir el-Medina. (Photograph by C. Gobeil; used by permission.)
- Figure 5. Stela (recto/verso) of Nebetitef with Letters to the Dead, First Intermediate Period (c. 2100 BCE). Painted limestone. (Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Acc. No. 2014.033.001. Image courtesy of the Michael C. Carlos Museum.)
- Figure 6. Line drawing of the Berlin Bowl by Kurt Sethe. (Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung Inv. No. 22573; Gardiner and Sethe 1928, pl. V. Image in the public domain.)