



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Non-elite bodies in the Old Kingdom

Towards a relational approach

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Abstract

The human body has been a site of much theoretical reasoning in the social and cultural sciences since the 1970s. Egyptologists too have explored the rich evidence from ancient Egypt and placed bodies back in history. The bulk of the Egyptological research literature is focussed on two- and three-dimensional representations that were predominantly produced and displayed in 'elite' contexts and on written evidence, such as healing instructions and ritual texts that exhibit little interest in situating bodies in a specific social milieu. This paper develops an alternative perspective and discusses evidence for bodies of the non-elite population. I adopt a relational approach to social modeling assuming that the social is a dynamic and context-bound process of positioning individuals relative to each other. My point of departure is a recently excavated non-elite cemetery at Zawyet Sultan. The discussion revolves around the positioning of bodies in changing iconographic and material contexts during the late fourth to the third millennia BCE. Bodies have a better potential than the terms 'individual' or 'person' for approaching the non-elite population of ancient Egypt because they raise questions on close social and physical relatedness that was presumably typical of non-elite contexts.

Keywords: body, social modelling, relational thinking, ancient Egypt, Old Kingdom

جساد عامة المجتمع في عصر الدولة القديمة: نحو نهج ترابطي

الملخص

أصبح الجسد البشري موضوعاً للكثير من التفكير النظري في العلوم الاجتماعية والثقافية منذ سبعينيات القرن الماضي. إذ قام علماء المصريات أيضاً باستكشاف العديد من الأدلة المتعلقة بالأجساد من مصر القديمة، وأعادوا وضعها في سياقها التاريخي. حيث يركز الجزء الأكبر من الأبحاث في علم المصريات على المناظر ثنائية وثلاثية الأبعاد التي تم تصويرها وعرضها في سياقات خاصة بالنبلاء بشكل رئيسي، بالإضافة إلى التركيز أيضاً على الأدلة المكتوبة مثل الكتابات الطبية والنصوص الطقسية، التي تُظهر اهتماماً ضئيلاً إذ إنها تشمل الأجساد، ولكن في سياق اجتماعي محدد. يسعى هذا البحث إلى تطوير منظور بديل ومناقشة الأدلة المتعلقة بأجساد فئة العامة من السكان. أُعمل في هذه الورقة على تبني منهج ارتباطي في عملية وضع النماذج الاجتماعية، حيث أُقترح أن الاجتماعية هي عملية متغيرة مرتبطة بالسياق، تعمل على تحديد وضعية الأفراد بالنسبة لبعضهم البعض. تتمحور نقطة بداية البحث حول مقبرة غير تابعة للنبلاء تم التنقيب عنها حديثاً في منطقة زاوية سلطان. يركز البحث على وضعية الأجساد في السياقات التصويرية والمادية المتغيرة خلال الفترة المتأخرة من أواخر الألفية الرابعة وحتى الألفية الثالثة قبل الميلاد. يوفر مفهوم "الأجساد" إمكانيات أفضل من مصطلحي "الفرد" أو "الشخص" لدراسة عامة المجتمع في مصر القديمة لأنه يثير تساؤلات حول الروابط الاجتماعية والجسدية الوثيقة التي يُفترض أنها كانت شائعة في سياقات العامة.

الكلمات الدالة: الجسد، النمذجة الاجتماعية، التفكير الترابطي، مصر القديمة، الدولة القديمة

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1 Introduction

Egyptology and cognate subjects are facing an elite bias in the preserved record and its interpretation (Bussmann & Helms, 2020). On the empirical side, objects that might classify as ‘non-elite’ were often made from perishable materials, and villages and low-status cemeteries were located in areas unfavorable for long-term preservation. At a theoretical level, the identification of an object or a site as ‘non-elite’ depends on the assumptions that researchers make. For example, inscribed stelae that counted a century ago as evidence of ‘the religion of the poor’ (Gunn, 1916) are today considered as expressing the views of low- to mid-ranking elites. The lines between elite and non-elite are also not very clear as, for instance, pyramid temples of kings that embody an elite institution were in reality sites of practices shared among a much wider population.

Research into ancient Egyptian bodies is affected by these considerations. An important early source for physical anthropology were mummies that arrived in European and American collections (D’Auria et al., 1988). Most of the examined mummies presumably stem, broadly speaking, from middle- and upper-class contexts whenever they were found in a decorated coffin or a larger inscribed tomb. Today physical anthropologists deal with skeletons from a wide range of contexts including lower status cemeteries, such as those around the North and South tombs at Amarna (Stevens, 2018). They are predominantly concerned with the lived realities that are archived in the human remains of deceased individuals, for example their diet, health conditions, biological sex, and age of death. Inquiries into cultural dimensions of the body place the focus on different types of questions relating among others to discourse analysis, phenomenology, and semiotics. They investigate, for example, how bodies were subjected to social order (Meskell, 1999: 24–32), how they functioned as instruments for selves to experience the world (Meskell, 2002), and how they were theorized in speculative thought (Nyord, 2009). Such analyses are usually based on textual and visual material. The bodies in these sources either appear according to elite conventions, such as in tomb painting and sculpture, or are socially not situated, as in healing texts, but are rarely accessible unambiguously from perspectives of ‘commoners’. Yet, bodies—and the material culture in which they were embedded within a burial—were important channels for the articulation of ideas in social contexts that operate beyond the scope of writing and art.

This paper confronts interpretive discussions of the body with the human remains of low-ranking individuals. It takes theories of relational thinking as a point of departure for setting a recently discovered cemetery at Zawyet Sultan, in Middle Egypt, in perspective. The tombs date to the early Old Kingdom (late Dynasty 3–early Dynasty 4), c. 2700–2600 BCE, the first zenith of political centralization in northeast Africa. The well-preserved skeletons are a major source of information about the deceased given that the burials were poorly equipped with objects. The paper offers some preliminary thoughts on what it means to classify these bodies as non-elite and how this may impact other aspects of social modelling.

2 Relational modelling

One way of approaching the non-elite is to imagine ancient Egyptian society as a matrix of positions—the king, the queen, the vizier, courtiers, provincial governors, workmen, farmers etc.—and associate them with specific objects, sites, and practices. A convenient mode for visualizing this approach is with a ‘social pyramid’, an example of which is critically discussed by Grajetzki (2010: fig. 10.6). The non-elite would be represented in such graphs somewhere in the field of farmers and unskilled workmen at the bottom. But finding ‘social structure’ along these lines has come under much critique in archaeology and the social sciences. Theoreticians of agency have argued that human responses to social order must be factored in, for example for an explanation of the dynamic exchange of ideas and practices between social groups and in order to appreciate the archaeological record as a lived context of the past (Barrett, 2001; Gardner, 2004; Kienlin & Bussmann, 2022).

Relational thinking offers further points of critique. The key idea here is that something only exists in

relation to something else. Entities are created by differentiation, and the way in which the difference between them is modelled gives shape to the entities (HARRIS, 2021a: 51). Methodologically, understanding an entity, such as the non-elite, requires shifting from the description of entities towards an analysis of the relations that constitute them.

Relational modelling has been adopted in Egyptology for the analysis of social networks which has its roots in sociology and anthropology. According to the anthropologist RADCLIFFE-BROWN (1940), what makes a person, i.e. a socialized individual, is the relationships he or she is embedded in. Social structure, in his view, is eventually a network of relationships. Social Network Analysis (SNA) and its derivative Historical Network Analysis (HNA) have taken up this idea (BRUGHMANS & PEEPLES, 2023; TERRELL et al., 2023) and are rapidly developing in Egyptology with network graphs visualizing types and quantities of relationships (DULÍKOVÁ & BÁRTA, 2020; TAMBS, 2022). SNA and HNA are designed to understand networks and the positioning of individuals (or other entities) in them but they use relations ('edges' in network terminology) as given analytical units instead of looking at how these create entities ('nodes').

Another branch of relational thinking that has become important in interpretive archaeology developed from discussions of agency. It criticizes anthropocentrism and places human beings, other beings, and the material world in a symmetrical relation instead of privileging human beings (WATTS, 2013). Human-thing entanglement (HODDER, 2012) is not the main question for this paper but the fact that bodies are embedded in the material world—not just as objects in burials but in a phenomenological sense—is significant for the discussion.

Marilyn Strathern reviews existing approaches to relational thinking in *Relations: An anthropological account* (STRATHERN, 2020: 1–21) which I summarize here to sketch out the wider field to which this paper might eventually pave the way. Relational thinking transcends the common idea, as expressed by Radcliffe-Brown, that 'culture' or 'society' is the sum of relations between entities, for example persons, institutions, or ideas. Rather, relational thinking is better understood as a tool in societies for organizing the world. Strategies used to this end vary from society to society. Some cosmologies place greater focus on relations and others on entities which cautions against mapping relational analysis unquestioned on indigenous ontologies. Irrespective of which of the two is foregrounded relations have a double function by separating and connecting entities at the same time. In the research literature relations are predominantly perceived as those between persons but definitions of a person might extend beyond human beings even if the latter are distinct in so far as they actively reflect on, change, and manipulate the relations in which they are engaged. Sets of relations have also been theorised as assemblages that assign new capabilities to entities and relations as they themselves change. Immediate contacts between entities might be termed 'connections' distinguished from abstract and mediated 'relations'. Strathern develops relational thinking in a comprehensive manner in the main chapters of the book with her primary incentive being perhaps best defined as an ontological inquiry into personhood.

Relational thinking raises a range of fundamental issues in cultural theory. The archaeologist Oliver HARRIS (2021b: 16–20) suggests for clarification distinguishing between 'relations as epistemology' (those that the studied societies or people consciously construct), 'relations as methodology' (those that researchers detect beyond the first group), and 'relations as metaphysics' (those questioned in Western philosophy, specifically post-humanism). According to his classification, this paper is predominantly concerned with 'relations as methodology'. It investigates how people were positioned relative to each other in specific historical, social, and material contexts. Relational thinking offers a more powerful model for interpretation than assuming that people defined themselves by relating to an invisible master plan, that is 'social structure'. The term 'non-elite' is, no doubt, problematic. It implies that elite standards were the norm in ancient Egyptian society, and it says little about the 'non-elite' apart from deviating from this norm. However, alternative terms, such as 'commoners', 'ordinary population' and even 'lower social groups', have deprecatative connotations that are inadequate. 'Non-elite' therefore seems better and, for the purpose of the argument in this paper, is a relational term that foregrounds the positioning of social groups relative to each other. The immersion of the

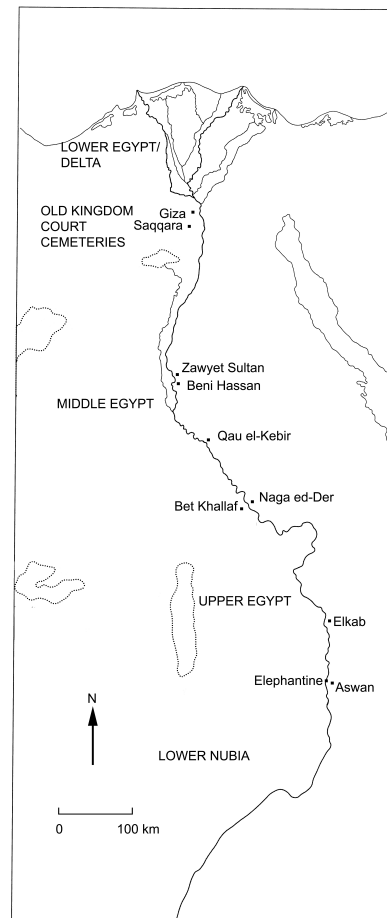


Fig. 1: Map of Egypt with sites mentioned in the paper. Compiled by the author.

body in the physical and social world holds specific potential for approaching the non-elite in ancient Egypt.

3 Non-elite burials of Zawyet Sultan

Zawyet Sultan, a village 10 km to the south of the modern city of el-Minya, is located next to an archaeological site with extensive remains dating from late prehistory up to the early Islamic period. The ancient Egyptian name of the site was Hebenu. Hebenu was a regional capital of an administrative district known in Egyptology as the Sixteenth Upper Egyptian nome (Figure 1) (Kessler, 1981: 209–224; Piacentini, 1993). King Huni, the last king of Dynasty 3, or his successor King Sneferu, the first king of Dynasty 4, had a small pyramid built at Hebenu, an attempt by the developing central state to anchor its power in the provincial hinterland of the early Old Kingdom (Seidlmayer, 1996: 119–127; Bussmann, 2018). Surveys carried out at the site since 2015 have revealed a cemetery from the same period (Bussmann et al., 2022). Three trenches were opened in the cemetery in 2022 and 2023 (Bussmann & Vanthuyne, 2023; Vanthuyne, 2023). The findings are not yet fully documented but enough has been excavated to raise broader questions for their interpretation. The pyramid and the early Old Kingdom settlement whose layers were hit in a deep trench in 2023 add local context to the cemetery but will not be discussed in this paper.

The cemetery is located on a gentle slope that rises from the river Nile up to the rock tombs high up in the desert escarpment (Figure 2). The main phases of occupation were the early Old Kingdom (late Dynasty 3

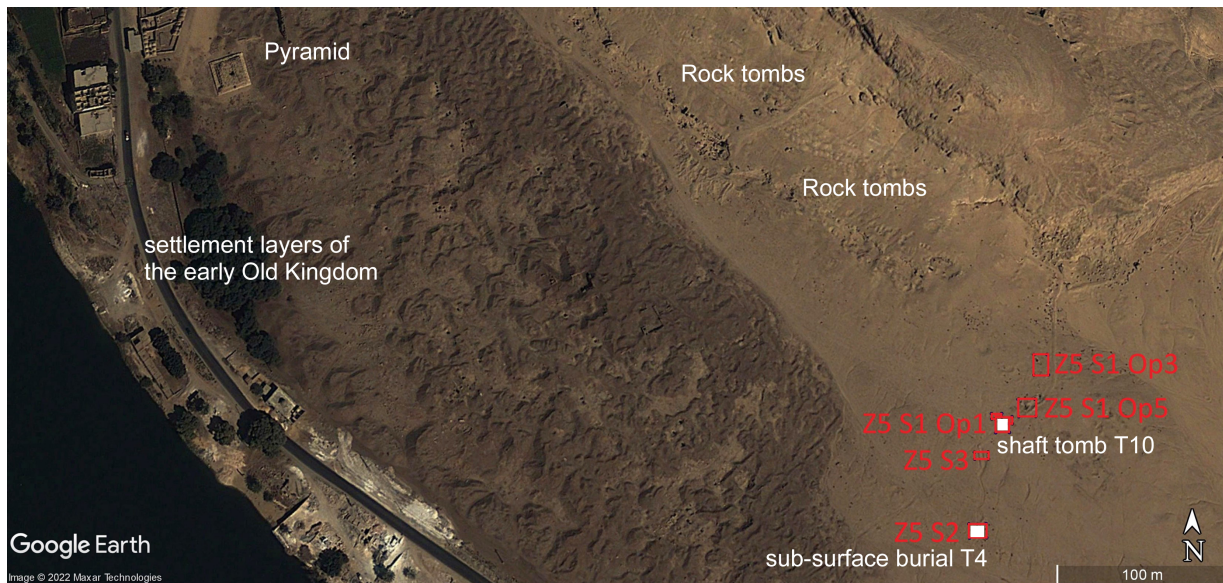


Fig. 2: Photo of zone 5, looking from the river to the desert escarpment. Compiled by Bart Vanthuyne and the author using Google Earth (Map data: Google, ©2022 Maxar Technologies).

and early Dynasty 4) and the late Old Kingdom plus early First Intermediate Period (Dynasties 6 and 7) with dispersed evidence for the reuse of the cemetery in the New Kingdom. The tombs of the early Old Kingdom comprise sub-surface burials and shaft tombs. The sub-surface burials are located on the lower fringe of the slope (Figure 3). Stone boulders arranged in a circle serve as visible superstructure for some of these burials. The shaft tombs were built a little bit higher up (Figure 4). Their superstructure is not preserved but it can be hypothesized from parallels that a mastaba, a rectangular structure with a niche for the deposition of offerings, was built over the shafts (ALEXANIAN, 2016). Pottery discovered in and around the shafts presumably derives from the funeral and is material evidence of ritual investment for the deceased individuals. The bodies both in the sub-surface burials and the shaft tombs were arranged in a flexed position, knees bent, hands before the face, placed on the side, with rather little burial equipment other than occasional faience beads and pottery vessels. The location of the tombs in the landscape, the differences of the architecture, and the greater material investment in the shaft tombs suggest that the sub-surface burials belong to individuals of lesser standing than those buried in shaft tombs.

Classifying the shaft tombs as belonging to a local elite needs some further thoughts. The tombs are still rather modest compared to the much larger tombs of Dynasty 3 and 4 found at other provincial sites, for example at Bet Khallaf and Elkab (ALEXANIAN, 2016: 40–52, 130–135). The number of excavated tombs at Zawyet Sultan is as yet rather low, which cautions against too far-reaching observations. However, the interpretation of the observed differences at Zawyet Sultan as a reflection of a ranked community, however flat the hierarchy was, can be supported with additional observations. As in the early Old Kingdom, the funerary landscape of Zawyet Sultan was physically and socially structured in a vertical fashion in the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period with the rock tombs of the local elite placed highest up, followed by large mastabas with multiple chambers located at the foot of the rock tombs and simpler graves further down the hill (BUSSMANN & VANTHUYNE, 2023). A similar arrangement of rock tombs and mastabas with multiple shafts is known from Beni Hassan, c. 20 km south of Zawyet Sultan, during the Middle Kingdom. The depiction of individuals on the walls of the rock tombs and the titles inscribed next to them and on objects found in the mastabas suggest that rank within the administrative apparatus was reflected in the size and position of the tombs of officials in the vertical landscape (SEIDLMAYER, 2007). None of the burials in Beni Hassan belongs to an individual of low-rank but simple sub-surface burials of the early Old Kingdom were discovered on the fringe of the desert in the entire region from north of Beni Hassan to Zawyet Sultan



Fig. 3: Sub-surface burial T4 of a female adult, early Old Kingdom. Zone 5, Sector 2, operation 1, tomb 4. Photo by Bart Vanthuyne. © Mission to Zawyet Sultan.



Fig. 4: Shaft tomb T 10 with burial of a male adult, early Old Kingdom. Zone 5, Sector 1, operation 1, tomb 10. Photo by Bart Vanthuyne. © Mission to Zawyet Sultan.

(VANTHUYNE, 2017). The well-known cemetery 500 to 900 at Naga ed-Deir, some 200 km south of Zawyet Sultan, contains shaft burials and large stairway tombs of the early Old Kingdom, the latter belonging to a higher-ranking group of local leaders that is absent from the currently known record of in this period at Zawyet Sultan (REISNER, 1932).

The sub-surface burials of Zawyet Sultan are non-elite not just because they contain little burial equipment. Rather, the comparison with the shaft tombs at this site and with other tombs and burials in the landscape of the region suggests that they belong to the relatively lowest ranking social group visible in the archaeological record. Moreover, positioning a tomb was done relative to other tombs, partially in an attempt to classify a deceased as belonging to a certain defined social group but also to place him or her in a relationship with others in the cemetery. Establishing the biological relations within the population would require DNA analysis which has not been performed on the bone material so far.

4 Bodies in the iconographic discourse

Burials have been interpreted as visual arrangements and final images of the deceased that express ideational matters (WENGROW & BAINES, 2004; STEVENSON, 2009: 177; DANN, 2021: 1043). SEIDLMAYER (2001) has shown in a wide-ranging discussion that the low-status burials of the late Old Kingdom discovered on Elephantine Island, opposite the modern city of Aswan, had iconographic properties that partially overlapped with visual representations in elite art of the time. He concludes that ideas that underlie non-elite burials were possibly shared more widely across society, a point that is often implicitly assumed but rarely demonstrated with evidence. DUBIEL (2008: 117) has argued that the position of seals placed on the deceased bodies of the low- to mid-ranking rural population in Middle Egyptian cemeteries of Qau el-Kebir reveals attempts in the early Middle Kingdom to stage the individuals as specific types of beings, as men involved in administration and women plus children requiring protection. The iconographic repertoire of seals and amulets was borrowed from votive objects that were offered in local shrines (BUSSMANN, 2010: 407–427). These case-studies suggest that images of non-elite bodies were situated in iconographic contexts and, therefore, need to be interpreted in the light of changing image worlds.

An iconographic approach to the burials of Zawyet Sultan needs to operate indirectly in so far as images of deceased bodies are rare prior to the New Kingdom and even in this period they were restricted, with some exceptions, to the mummy rather than the corpse itself. Flexed bodies recall the fetal position, an analogy that easily opens up the interpretation of the tomb as a womb in which the deceased is reborn for a life in the netherworld. This interpretation may, in fact, reflect ancient Egyptian views, for instance the wish to ‘rejuvenate in the burial’ that is expressed the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* (LICHTHEIM, 1973: 214, with footnote 5). However, the flexed position might have been preferred for practical reasons because it reduced the size of the coffin and the grave and thus saved material resources and space. Moreover, burial positions changed from flexed to stretched and finally supine in the course of the third and second millennia BCE in Egypt, a process that reflects changing ideas and ritual practices performed on the deceased body (SEIDLMAYER, 1990: 425–430; BOURRIAU, 2001). The main character in the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, for instance, would have been buried in a stretched position if the date of the manuscript in the late Middle Kingdom coincides with the date of its composition, but the stretched position does not evoke in any intuitive way the image of a fetus. For this reason, an interpretation of burials in flexed position will benefit from seeking contexts beyond intuitive notions of rebirth.

In the absence of texts and images that would help with an explanation, a potentially fertile approach is to compare the non-elite bodies of Zawyet Sultan to those in other burials. To begin locally, the deceased of the shaft tombs too were buried in a flexed position. Equally, hundreds of early Old Kingdom burials found in simple rock circle tombs of the wider region contained bodies in flexed positions (VANTHUYNE, 2017). Even the local leaders buried in Naga ed-Der were buried in this fashion (REISNER, 1932: 218 fig. 132 (N573), 229 fig. 156 (N599)). Apparently, flexed positions were the standard for everyone in the region during the early

Old Kingdom irrespective of gender, age, and rank.

The picture is radically different in the emerging courtly cemeteries around the royal tomb. The bodies of the deceased are often not preserved but the use of rectangular sarcophagi suggests that the deceased were buried in a stretched position from the early Old Kingdom onwards (ALEXANIAN, 1999: 115–117).

Preserved burials of the high Old Kingdom, the advanced Dynasty 4 and Dynasty 5, exhibit burials with the deceased placed on their back. Different from the flexed bodies in provincial Egypt, these bodies are presented as living beings. The corpse of a lady buried in mastaba G 2220 in Giza, for example, was bolstered up with linen, and even her nipples were modeled (REISNER, 1942: 452). She wears a V-necked dress just as she does on the sculptured reliefs of the tomb in which she is buried. The overlap of sculptured relief and the burial shows that the made-up body functioned as a three-dimensional image of the deceased (RIGGS, 2014: 77–108). This interpretation is corroborated by the ancient Egyptian term *twt* that signifies ‘to resemble’ and hence relates to both the ‘statue’ and the ‘mummy’ (NYORD, 2020: 9–12). The deceased bodies of the courtly elite were thus embedded in a developing iconographic discourse that unfolded across a range of media.

Tomb decoration, specifically sculptured relief and wall painting, was a prolific genre for the visual self-representation of high-ranking officials and the depiction of human bodies throughout pharaonic history. Early examples, of Dynasty 3, focus on the depiction of the tomb owner, but other individuals were soon added. Scenes in elite mausoleums developed into complex compositions that mirror the social statuses and relationships of the depicted individuals on many levels. Visual display is a particularly compelling genre for modelling social relationships, for example by expressing the rank of individuals and the focus of a scene through differential sizes of the body (tall versus short), or by positioning individuals relative to each other (close versus distant, groupings versus individual, inside versus outside a building). The body became a major tool for social differentiation. Gender differences were clearly marked by the shape of the body and by body related items, such as wigs, clothing, and jewelry. Children were usually depicted as shorter versions of adults but nakedness and the gesture of a finger placed to mouth were used in addition to demarcate young age.

An analysis of the richly decorated tomb of Ti, a high official of Dynasty 5, has shown that the iconography of the body was widely exploited for the representation of individuals of low social status (AUENMÜLLER, 2021). Different from Ti and his family, the workmen, fishermen, herders, farmers, bakers, butchers, and others are depicted engaged in manual activities, sometimes naked, unshaved, physically ‘deformed’ or suffering from visible diseases, having natural hair or a bald head instead of a wig, and with their bodies overlapping in a scene which suggests physical contact as opposed to the distanced and untouched tomb owner Ti (Figure 5; MAITLAND, 2018). The percentage of members within these groups that feature one of these characteristics varies. For example, 61.3% of marsh workers, 49.0% of fishermen, 46.3% of herders, 41.4% of fowling, 31.5% of farmers, 25% of merchants, and 7.95% of craftsmen have a bald head. Apparently, the ‘non-elite’ were not lumped together as one group but were distinguished according to performed activities and bodily characteristics. The individuals may have exhibited some of the depicted features in life, for example having a bald head, but the images relate to the physical reality in a typological fashion without rendering much detail that would allow for the identification of specific individuals. Depicting people engaged in hard physical labour with natural hair and their bodies intermingling very likely mirrors physical realities but is a deliberate artistic convention for making social distinctions explicit. It would have been possible to depict a fisherman in standing pose, with a staff of authority, wearing a wig, and perhaps with a caption that would identify him as a fisherman but the visual difference between him and Ti would have been marginal (BAINES, 2007: 3–30). Moreover, only very few situations in the life of Ti are pictured and the entire decoration is centered on his self-presentation. Non-elite bodies, almost all of them male, are presented according to the rules and ethics of elite decorum (BAINES, 2023). The relations established between the ‘non-elite’ and Ti through the bodily iconography oscillate between similarity and the deviation by the non-elite from the standard body as defined by elite ideals.

The images in the tomb of Ti are situated in broader social and visual developments. Prehistoric images offer limited evidence of the representation of human beings (HUYGE & VAN NOTEN, 2018; DÖHL, 2022).

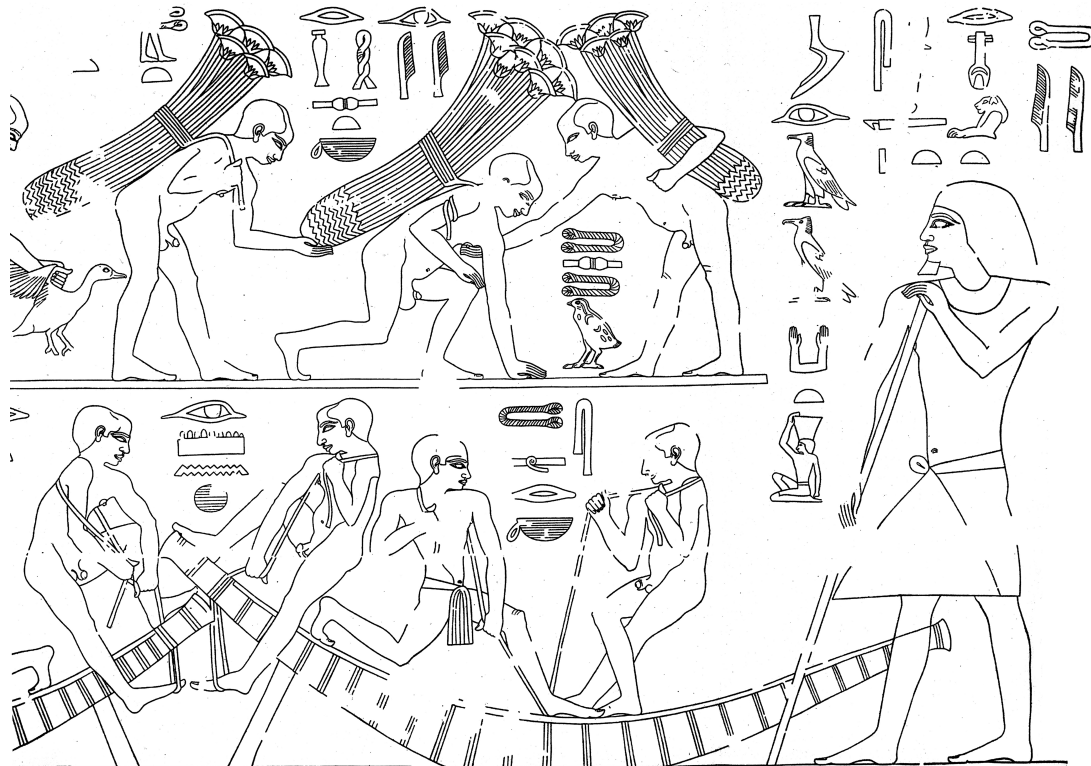


Fig. 5: Elite and non-elite bodies depicted in the tomb of Ti, Dynasty 5. After [WILD](#) (1953: pl. cx). © IFAO. Image used with permission.

The preserved examples exhibit little interest in demarcating the hierarchical status of the depicted human individuals other than being engaged in relations of physical violence and domination. In the Predynastic period, human beings are increasingly distinguished by their performed activities, bodies, clothing, and body-related features ([CAPART](#), 1905; [GRAFF](#), 2009; [PATCH](#), 2011). Thematically, ritual events, such as hunting and processions by boat (if this is what was depicted), dominate in the depicted scenes. Late Predynastic visual material embraces a wider array of themes which possibly relate to historical events, cosmological ideas, and the expression of new social arrangements ([DAVIS](#), 1992; [KÖHLER](#), 2002; [WENGROW](#), 2006: 176–217; [MORENZ](#), 2014). The ceremonial palette and mace-head of King Narmer—the most prominent objects in this group—picture complex interactions of human beings with clearly marked differences, including varying body heights that mirror hierarchical ranks. In the Early Dynastic period royal display is concentrated on the courtly community and the interaction of the king with the gods. A broader spectrum of people beyond the core elite was only depicted from Dynasty 4 onwards in non-royal elite display at court ([W. S. SMITH](#), 1946). Such themes arrived in the provincial hinterland in Dynasty 6, occasional exceptions set aside.

Stone statuary developed along similar lines ([W. S. SMITH](#), 1946: 1–104). The earliest monumental sculpture pictured kings and deities. Private sculpture emerged in Dynasty 3 and became more common in Dynasties 4 and 5 at court. Statues appeared more regularly in Dynasty 6 in the provinces, again with a few prominent earlier examples. However idealizing, statues resemble the physical outlook of the human body more closely than painting and two-dimensional art. They made it possible to multiply the bodies of the depicted in a radically new way. Old Kingdom ‘pseudo-group statues’, i.e. double or triple representations of the same individual ([VANDIER](#), 1958: 85–90, pls. 32.2, 33–34), scenes that show the making of statues ([EATON-KRAUSS](#), 1984), and the practice of hiding statues in walled-up chambers of the tomb ([BROVARSKI](#), 1984), the so-called serdab, make it clear that the new bodies of the courtly elite, i.e. statues, were the object of explicit reasoning over their meaning and function.

The above outline of iconographic developments is cursory but may suffice here for some preliminary conclusions. Egyptian society became more stratified during the late Predynastic period and the Early Dynastic period. Visual representations of commoners began later. A fine-grained visual language was developed for rendering their bodies, activities, and relationships. The images were not simply a delayed depiction of a reality that had already developed but reflect an attempt to classify, codify, and interpret society for the benefit of high-ranking officials. The deceased bodies of the courtly elite were bound up in these interpretive developments as ‘mummies’ of the courtly elite were related to depictions of the human body in painting and sculpture. In contrast, there were no authoritative alternative visual schemes that would have engendered a new ‘iconographisation’ of early Old Kingdom corpses at Zawyet Sultan.

5 Individuals, persons, and bodies

A widely used term, including in this paper, to designate what might be seen as the smallest unit of social analysis is ‘individual’. It looks neutral but has ramifications. Most Egyptological contributions to ‘the individual in ancient Egypt’ focus on those who have left a record of inscriptions or otherwise explicit expressions of self-representation, in other words elite individuals (PARKINSON, 1996; O’CONNOR, 2000). These individuals have volition, interests, strategies, and agency defined as the freedom and capacity to make decisions about their own actions. The non-elite appear predominantly in quantitative analyses as a group, and while non-elite agency is increasingly discussed in Egyptology (LE MOS, 2018: 188–206; S. T. SMITH, 2003: 188–206), non-elite individuals hardly ever are. The term ‘self’ adds a psychological dimension to the ‘individual’ but in empirical analysis it too is focused on comparatively wealthy individuals (MESKELL, 2002). Similarly, Radcliffe-Brown’s ‘person’ is socially laden. Adopting a definition by Niklas Luhmann, Gerald Moers, and Hans-Hubertus Münch have argued that ‘persons’ are only those that others recognize as belonging to their own social group (MÜNCH & MOERS, 2005; MOERS, 2005: 15–24) The exclusive dimension inherent in this definition principally applies to the elite and the non-elite, but the authors admit that relevant examples from ancient Egypt happen to come from the upper classes.

‘Individual’, ‘self’ and ‘person’ are, of course, not *per se* wrong terms for theorizing the non-elite, and modern languages other than English may offer further terms, but the body offers a specific potential for approaching the non-elite. The non-elite may not have had much private property and—to remain in the funerary context of Zawyet Sultan—were buried with few items but physically they had bodies of which the skeletons remain (some will prefer to say that they ‘were’ instead of they ‘had’ bodies). The skeletons are the most direct source for investigating the life histories of the deceased even if just those aspects that materialize in bones, such as nutrition and pathologies. Moreover, biological sex and the age at the time of death, both retrieved from human remains, correspond, if indirectly, to the social categories ‘gender’ and ‘age’ that are a particularly sensitive axis for the construction of identities in a group with comparatively weak internal hierarchies. The treatment of the corpse and the arrangements made for the tomb, including the transformation of the body into an image, are activities performed by others and show how individual life histories were leveled and subjected to social norms (SEIDLMEYER, 2001: 249).

The term ‘body’ evokes the immersion in the material world in a way that ‘individual’ does not. Phenomenology offers a route into the interplay of sensual experience and cognition but tends to suffer from a lack of historical and social context. Case studies developed in Egyptology that address differential experiences of elite and non-elite have studied life in the large, mid-sized and small houses of Amarna (ENDRUWEIT, 1989; SPENCE, 2011). Immersion is further apparent in the exchange of fluids and substances between bodies and their material surroundings. Healing texts address the exchange explicitly, such as placing herbs on the body, making the treated individual swallow something or bleed. When the physical treatment is accompanied by spells, the latter often circle around entities that are closely related to each other on a mythological level, typically Isis and her son Horus and others surrounding them (KOENIG, 1994; PINCH, 2006). The body was thus situated both in its immediate social and physical surrounding. Looking at society through bodies

from this angle means to study close and direct relationships rather than distant and abstract ones. For most Egyptians, that is the non-elite, body-related relationships were presumably the kind of social ties they were predominantly engaged in. Investigating the body thus foregrounds social relatedness of particular relevance in non-elite contexts.

6 Conclusion

Only a small proportion of the cemetery of Zawyet Sultan has been excavated so far and the interpretation of the site will have to await fuller documentation and analysis. This paper has used the sub-surface burials from Zawyet Sultan only as a hook for some wider thoughts on non-elite bodies in the Old Kingdom. Classifying the interred bodies as non-elite does not emerge in any direct way from the evidence. It is possible that these individuals were sufficiently privileged to be buried formally on the cemetery of the town instead of being disposed of elsewhere (BAINES & LACOVARA, 2002: 12–4). Formalism in this context means, for instance, being buried in a flexed body position, and this was typical also of burials in larger and more richly equipped tombs in Middle Egypt. Yet, the position of the sub-surface burials in the landscape, both at Zawyet Sultan and in the wider region, suggests that by the early Old Kingdom (if not earlier) a sensitivity had developed locally for who was to be positioned where in the landscape. The villagers and stone haulers mentioned in the preserved documentary evidence of Dynasty 4 (EYRE, 1999: 41; TALLET, 2017) might be the kind of individuals buried in the sub-surface burials.

Iconography is more explicit than documents about the human body but it was only in the high Old Kingdom that bodies were marked on the tomb walls of high officials as deviant from the elite norm. The thematic widening of the iconographic discourse makes it visible that the notion of something like a non-elite body exists at all. Individuals marked as non-elite by this definition were positioned in a relationship to the tomb owner as serving and being controlled but they were also positioned relative to each other, not always in predictable ways. The relationships made explicit in these images are defined within elite conventions. It would require further research to understand if they correspond to practiced modes of social organization in contemporaneous local communities.

Interest in differentiating bodies iconographically developed significantly in the late Predynastic period in sculpture and two-dimensional art. Preserved burials of courtiers in the Old Kingdom demonstrate that the made-up bodies of the deceased were placed in the same semantic contexts of art that revolved around the king and from which the flexed bodies of Zawyet Sultan were excluded.





This paper is inspired by relational thinking in so far as the body is understood as a site for defining social relationships. The increasing depiction of non-elite bodies on tomb walls lent an authority to high-ranking officials to intensify social relations, not least with the effect that Egyptologists recognize them as a field of inquiry for social analysis. On this basis and returning to the work of Strathern, advanced questions arise, such as of how the division into 'elite' and 'non-elite' separates and connects people, whether the relations between or the status of 'persons' (i.e. entities) were more relevant in ancient Egyptian thought, to what extent the material culture is vital for constructing personhood through assemblages in which individuals are positioned, and how a theoretical appreciation of relations may help with modelling the lived complexity of relations, direct and mediated. These themes are straddled peripherally in the discussion above but have potential for further research. Changes in the iconographic discourse show that such an undertaking would have to consider historical contexts. From the perspective of the non-elite burials in Zawyet Sultan, it remains to be seen how phenomenology and the immersion of the body in the material world, that have been put forward in this paper as channels for studying relatedness, can be modelled sensitive to social variability and diachronic change.


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