



# EGYPTOLOGY IN DIALOGUE

**Historical Bodies in Relations,  
Comparisons, and Negotiations**

**Edited by**

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Egyptology in dialogue:  
Historical bodies in relations, comparisons,  
and negotiations

Edited by Camilla Di Biase-Dyson, Rune Nyord, Leire Olabarria, and Reinert Skumsnes

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SUMMARY ARTICLE

## Introduction: Egyptology in dialogue

### Historical bodies in relations, comparisons, and negotiations

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#### Abstract

Though scholarship broadly acknowledges that understandings of the body are historically situated, such an idea has not yet been appraised in a sustained manner by Egyptology. By drawing on recent archaeological and anthropological theory, this volume recognizes that every society understands the human body in its own way, that the body not only has a history and a culture-specific logic but also that it is relationally contingent. Relations are imperative, be they those foreground relations that are explicitly described in the records between people, bodies of different kinds, and entities inside or outside bodies, or those more diffuse past, present, and future background relations to other bodies, situated contexts, taken-for-granted assumptions and categorisations. Comparisons and negotiations place further emphasis on these relational encounters, between what can be described as spatially and temporally fractal positions, perspectives, and records. Through these concepts, this special issue includes conversations that extend well beyond the discipline, enabling us to engage with Egypt's rich archaeological record with new methodological awareness. The concern of the different chapters is to question and unsettle what we think we know to create the conditions under which one can see things that one would not otherwise have been able to see. This includes both critique of dominant paradigms and positive formulations of alternatives that further our knowledge about bodies in ancient Egypt but also force us to reflect critically on current assumptions and categorisations.

**Keywords:** dialogue as method, historical bodies, body worlds, relations, comparisons, negotiations

لمقدمة: علم المصريات في سياق حوارات تاريخية: أنماط من المقارنات والتفاعلات التفاوضية

#### الملخص

على الرغم من الاعتراف العام في الدراسات الأكاديمية بأن فهم الجسد يرتبط بالسياقات التاريخية، إلا أن هذا المفهوم لم يُتناول بعمق واستدامة في مجال علم المصريات حتى الآن. من خلال الاستفادة من النظريات الأثرية والأنثروبولوجية الحديثة، يقر هذا العدد بأن كل مجتمع يمتلك تصورات الخاصة عن الجسد البشري، حيث لا يقتصر الأمر على أن للجسد تاريخاً ومنطقاً ثقافياً مميزاً، بل إنه يتشكل أيضاً من خلال العلاقات المتبادلة. هذه العلاقات أساسية، سواء كانت مباشرة وواضحة في السجلات التاريخية بين الأشخاص، أو بين الأجساد والكيانات داخلها وخارجها، أو ضمن الروابط غير المباشرة التي تربط الماضي بالحاضر والمستقبل، والسياقات المحيطة، والمسلمات والتصنيفات. تُضفي المقارنات والمفاوضات بُعداً إضافياً على هذه العلاقات التفاعلية، مع التركيز على التداخل بين المواقف، المنظورات، والسجلات التي تمتد عبر المكان والزمان. وبالاعتماد على هذه الأطارات المفاهيمية، يهدف هذا العدد الخاص إلى تجاوز حدود التخصصات الأكاديمية التقليدية، مما يتيح التفاعل مع السجل الأثري الغني لمصر بوعي منهجي متجدد. تركز الفصول المختلفة على مراجعة

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وتحدي ما نعتقد أننا نعرفه، بهدف خلق ظروف جديدة تكشف عن رؤى لم تكن ممكنة من قبل. يتضمن ذلك نقد النماذج التقليدية وتطوير بدائل إيجابية، تُثري معرفتنا بمصر القديمة، وتدفعنا إلى التفكير النقدي في الافتراضات والتصنيفات الحالية. الكلمات الدالة: الحوار كأسلوب، الهياكل التاريخية، عوالم الجسد، علاقات، مقارنات

## 1 The context of this volume

This volume brings together an international team of scholars in a collaborative effort to investigate historical bodies in relations, comparisons, and negotiations and in so doing to engage in dialogue beyond disciplinary boundaries. The authors have been asked to explore four specific concepts: John Robb and Oliver Harris' body worlds (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013; HARRIS & ROBB, 2012), Marilyn Strathern's relations (STRATHERN, 2004; STRATHERN, 2014; STRATHERN, 2018; STRATHERN, 2020), Matei Candea's comparisons (CANDEA, 2016; CANDEA, 2018; CANDEA, 2019), and Marie Sørensen's negotiations (SØRENSEN, 2000; SØRENSEN, 2007), to ascertain whether they can be useful tools for thinking through patterns (similarity) as well as change and variation (difference) in the ancient Egyptian cultural output as pertains to human and other bodies. The volume thus draws on theoretical paradigms developed within anthropology and archaeology to gain more holistic perspectives on conceptualisations of the human body in ancient Egyptian contexts.

In many ways, it provides something of a follow-up to HOWLEY and NYORD (2018), which sought an encounter between Egyptology and anthropology, as well as other, earlier works seeking to do the same (e.g. LUSTIG, 1997). Where this volume differs is that it engages in explicit dialogue beyond disciplinary boundaries through the encounter between four concepts and a single, quite specific case study—the idea of 'historical bodies' in ancient Egypt.

This volume includes contributions originally presented at a two-day workshop at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, in November 2022. The call for this conference encouraged theoretical input from other disciplines and methodological awareness when engaging with the rich archaeological, visual, and textual record of ancient Egypt. Participants were asked to orient their papers towards the larger dialogue, towards method- and/or theory-focused issues of interest to scholars beyond Egyptology. We welcomed syntheses that critically assessed and integrated research on the body, as well as examinations of the history, and explorations of the interdisciplinary potential of this specific area of research. The conference sought the multi-layered processes by which patterns, change, and variation are developed and potentially contested, both within the past and in relation to the present. It was hoped that the concepts—body worlds, relations, comparisons, and negotiations—would stimulate a conversation that extended well beyond the discipline. This being said, instead of being concerned with ready-made models, with social constructions (culture) as opposed to a biological baseline (nature), the concern of the workshop was to question and unsettle what we think we know and seek to create 'the conditions under which one can "see" things ... that one would not otherwise have been able to see' (HOLBRAAD & PEDERSEN, 2017: 4).

The contributors to the workshop (Figure 1) included scholars working not only in Egyptological institutional contexts but also in other disciplines, including art history, linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, culture, and gender studies. More importantly, although most of the contributors would probably define themselves as Egyptologists, their theoretical and substantive interests also reach beyond and, in fact, blur, disciplinary boundaries.



Fig. 1: Workshop participants in front of the Egyptian galleries at the Michael C. Carlos Museum (affiliations reflect the time of the photograph). Left side, from the front: Reinert Skumsnes (University of Oslo/Emory University), Willeke Wendrich (UC Los Angeles), Margaret Maitland (National Museums Scotland), Rune Nyord (Emory University), Edward Scrivens (Egypt Exploration Society), Jordan Miller (University of Oxford), Leah Neiman (Brown University), David Wheeler (UC Berkeley), and Richard Bussmann (University of Cologne). Right side, from the front: Leire Olabarria (University of Birmingham), Camilla Di Biase-Dyson (Macquarie University), Emily Whitehead (Emory University), Matei Candea (Cambridge University), Kathryn Howley (New York University), Thais Rocha da Silva (University of Sao Paulo/University of Oxford), and Oliver Harris (Leicester University). Dina Serova (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) participated online and is therefore not present in the image. Photo by Linnea Wicklund, courtesy of Reinert Skumsnes.

The two keynote lectures were devised to facilitate interdisciplinary contact and develop the workshop's themes from the perspective of theoretical archaeology and anthropology. Archaeologist Oliver Harris' talk was titled '“Nobody knows what a body can do”: on difference, relations, and body worlds'. In their volume *The Body in History*, **ROBB** and **HARRIS** (2013) developed the notion of 'body worlds' to explore how particular corporeal regimes emerge in specific historical contexts. From the hunter-gatherers of the Palaeolithic through to medical workers today, different body worlds emerge in the intersection of architecture, technologies, practices, and beliefs. In his lecture, Harris reflected on the concept of the 'body world' and its usefulness, and explored how the idea of the body world changes once we stop thinking of difference (between bodies, between periods) as negative and instead approach that difference as a positive and creative force. Here the broader relational notion of the body world encountered the differential philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, before returning to one of Deleuze's, and his inspiration Baruch Spinoza's, key questions: what can a body do? This question was explored through a number of empirical snapshots of different bodies in differing body worlds.

Anthropologist Matei Candea's talk was titled 'Comparing bodies of knowledge: units, intensities and disciplines'. This paper reprised some of the enduring ways in which the necessity and impossibility of a 'comparative method' has haunted anthropology, and asked how these intra-disciplinary conundrums might feed into an inter-disciplinary conversation with Egyptology. Candea focused on the dreaded 'problem of units' (what constitutes an interesting, workable, or legitimate unit of comparison?), and suggested some of the ways the problem might be turned on its head, once we accept that comparison is not merely a solitary intellectual endeavour but actually an immanent, worldly, and relational practice. Whilst this insight can be applied to the comparative investigation of bodies, it can also be brought to bear on the comparative investigation of disciplinary knowledges. Revisiting recent explorations of the relationship between Egyptology and anthropology and their differing relations to theory, the paper asked in closing what might happen if anthropology were seen not as a donor, but as a recipient, of theoretical insight in that relationship—how, in other words, might anthropological comparison be enriched by Egyptological concepts?

The papers of all other discussants were arranged around the ideas developed by the keynotes, and connections between the papers were further developed via round-table discussions dedicated to the four key concepts of body worlds, relations, comparisons, and negotiations. The dialogue from the workshop continues in this volume, with interconnections between the different contributions developed by commentaries offered by the keynote speakers, Harris and Candea. The phrase 'in dialogue' in the title of this volume is here intended to draw attention to the collective practices of knowledge production, including the many partial connections behind these practices, between different national traditions, research programmes, thematic and regional specialisms, within and beyond disciplinary boundaries.

## 2 The aim of this volume: dialogue as method

This volume uses the case study of 'bodies in history', specifically, bodies in ancient Egyptian contexts, to explore the untapped explanatory value of dialogue with concepts that transcend disciplinary boundaries. The choice of the case study of 'bodies', specifically, historical bodies, is grounded in the necessity to engage with two key elements. The first element—historical—recognises the body's potential for difference, whilst the second element—the plural form bodies—reveals our primary focus on how bodies and bodily differences in the ancient Egyptian material context emerge through mutually determining relations. The body is central to how we conduct our lives, including how we use, live through, think, and talk about our bodies, as well as how we 'project our hopes and fears about the future on the body' (**ROBB & HARRIS**, 2013: 2).

Each contribution thus engages with one or more of the following questions:

- How did the ancient Egyptians perceive/conceptualise the body?
- How did the ancient Egyptians perceive/conceptualise bodily difference?

- What are the key affective environments to past and present perceptions/conceptions of the body and bodily difference in ancient Egypt?
- Are the records in unison, or are there contradictions?
- To what extent can the concepts body worlds, relations, comparisons, and negotiations be useful as heuristic tools for the study of bodies, historically situated in ancient Egypt?

The prevailing idea is that these questions can best be answered in dialogue with frameworks that transcend disciplinary boundaries. Though this statement may no longer be avant-garde, a review of the discourse demonstrates how uneasy the relationship between the discipline of Egyptology and (especially theory-building) ideas developed in other fields has traditionally been. This might come as a surprise to many outside the field, since on the one hand, as an area study defined by its focus on a particular time and place in human history, it stands to reason that Egyptology would need to draw on the expertise of other disciplinary traditions to understand phenomena like religion, economy, etc. On the other hand, however, theory-driven interdisciplinarity has been regarded with a certain skepticism within Egyptology. This might be due to a combination of the 19th-century empiricism that is still very much part of the discipline's ethos and a general skepticism towards frameworks that have often been developed based on much more recent source material. This inherited tension has begun to diminish over recent decades—as indicated also by the launching of the present journal in 2021.

However, significant challenges remain in this area. Firstly, there has been a tendency to think of 'theory' as something necessarily coming from outside of Egyptology in line with the self-understanding of the discipline as strongly empirical and fundamentally bottom-up. This means that the significant number of theories developed within the field have not only tended to avoid reflection as seemingly derived directly from the extant sources, but they have also ended up being incommensurable with theoretical ideas about the same topics developed outside of Egyptology. Secondly, while theoretical frameworks from other disciplines have increasingly been shown to hold relevance for Egyptological concerns, this has tended to be a one-way street: While frequently mentioned, the potential of ancient Egyptian data to inform broader interdisciplinary theorisation has only been very sporadically realised (eg. [NYORD](#), forthcoming). The design of the workshop and this special issue aims explicitly at taking a step towards overcoming these two obstacles via engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue.

The intention of this volume is not to provide theories simply to be applied in a top-down manner. On the contrary, we posit that theory should either function as a disruptive and critical tool that incites reflexivity and challenges assumptions and established paradigms, or as a sort of hypothesis, ultimately to be confirmed or rejected by the research. To this end, the concepts body worlds, relations, comparisons, and negotiations are intended as heuristic tools ([HENARE et al., 2007](#); [VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2016](#); [HOLBRAAD & PEDERSEN, 2017](#)), concerned with the in-between (and often taken-for-granted), with how conceptions of bodies and bodily difference emerge and become. Thinking with these concepts is a question of method, compelling us to reflect critically on what we know, how we know it, what makes it possible, and what interests it may serve. Specifically, while body worlds draw attention to processes of causation, scale, and change, to the constant (dis)assembling of fragments ([HARRIS, 2021: 111–154](#)), comparisons and negotiations are concerned with considerations of differences and similarities between entities, and the interaction between entities and how they affect one another, respectively. Body worlds, comparisons, and negotiations can all be argued to denote specific kinds of relations rather than being hierarchically on a par with relations ([STRATHERN, 2020: 19, 45–68](#)). Relations can, in fact, be imagined as an overarching concept, in some way encompassing all the above concepts.

Through these concepts, we recognise that it is impossible to encounter archaeological remains from some sort of objective, apolitical, and atheoretical standpoint. As pointed out by [HARRIS \(2021: 3–4\)](#), 'we are always already caught up in the process of interpreting what we find, from before the first scrape of the

trowel'. By inviting influential current thinkers in archaeological and anthropological theory to be part of the discussion, we are aiming to encourage a two-way conversation between Egyptology and larger, more strongly theorised fields interested in bodies in history and culture.

### 3 Concepts that facilitate dialogue

Thinking (and engaging in dialogue) with the concepts body worlds, relations, comparisons, and negotiations has compelled the contributors to reflect on how these approaches facilitate dialogue within and beyond Egyptology. By exploring bodies in their temporal, spatial, and relational contexts and by interrogating the frameworks under which they have been studied in their own contexts, the volume traverses territory on a number of different analytical levels, at once historical and historiographical. The special issue starts with case studies tied to bodies, bodily differences and their respective interpretive potential (Harris, Bussmann, Skumsnes), before moving to more theoretical, historiographical explorations of how bodies in their relational networks have been described (Di Biase-Dyson, Miller, Olabarria). New ways of approaching categories relating to bodies, such as gender, ethnicity, and nudity, are then explored (Scrivens, Serova) before the discussion extends outwards to relationships between human and non-human bodies (Wendrich, Whitehead). A reflective piece (Candea) rounds out the volume. The fact that each paper in this volume touches on almost every concept in a different way demonstrates at once both the interrelationship between the concepts as well as the productivity of such a multifaceted theoretical approach.

#### 3.1 Body worlds

The concept 'body world' is described as 'a heuristic tool for thinking through the omnipresence of bodies in human lives' (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 215) and defined as 'the totality of bodily experiences, practices and representations in a specific time and place' (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 3). Robb and Harris recognise how body worlds, and individual bodies, have histories and culturally specific logics, but also how they emerge through history as historical agents, making certain developments possible while forestalling others. The key tenet of Robb and Harris' work is the co-constitutive nature of body and world (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 17): 'in producing the world, people produce their bodies at the same time, it is through learning to move, talk and act in specific ways that those ways themselves are sustained and taught to others'.

In order to understand apparently incommensurate perspectives on the body, HARRIS and ROBB (2012: 668) draw attention to the problem of translating ontological categories, which they describe as 'a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and how these relate to each other'. They also underline how conceptions and experiences of the body are the locus of multiple, situational and often conflicting perspectives (what ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 20–21, define as 'multimodality'), and that the idea that there ever was a simple, unproblematic time before our current confusion is part of the myth of the natural body (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012). Only by looking critically at our own suppositions and attitudes and, in particular, the rules, habits, and bodily practices that make up daily life (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 7) can we get a glimpse of alternative conceptions and experiences, namely, more nuanced ideas of bodies as historically configured entities.

Harris and Robb's 'body worlds' (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012) works as a concept within our enquiry because we acknowledge the existence of different bodies and body conceptualisations in history. ROBB and HARRIS (2013: 2) point out that 'every society understands the human body in its own way'. The body is situated historically: it is both in history and history itself (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 4).

Contributions to the special issue that touch on body worlds being distinct through time and space engage with how bodies are perceived and categorised, what a body does, and what a body is. Camilla Di Biase-Dyson, for instance, explores the validity of Emma Brunner-Traut's notion of bodily fragmentation as a model to

explain ancient Egyptian body worlds. The success of the theory might be due to its attempts to account for an ancient ‘body world’, which is in essence the right direction, though the approach and appraisal include highly problematic value judgments about the Egyptian mindset. A reappraisal of the evidence leads Di Biase-Dyson to shift our attention to ideas of wholeness, noting that this should not be seen as a simple counterpart to fragmentation. Instead, wholeness needs to be understood in relation to ideas of healthiness, which indicates the problematic nature of translation. Viveiros de Castro’s notion of ‘controlled equivocation’, which considers the perceptual apparatus of both analyst and culture under analysis (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2004: 4–5), offers a solution of great heuristic value for such a process.

‘Controlled equivocation’ also emerges as a powerful tool in approaches to body worlds as pertaining to relatedness. Leire Olabarria uses an expression often translated as ‘(his) bodily son’ to raise questions about the role of the body in both Egyptian and Egyptological understandings of kinship. Through this example, she proposes that the body can be used as an expression of hierarchy rather than as a proxy for a relationship that is to be understood as biological.

Like the study by Olabarria, Dina Serova investigates the textual interface with a specific aspect of Egyptian body words, namely, nakedness and nudity. By considering the meanings of four different terms in the Egyptian lexicon pertaining to the semantic category of [EXPOSURE], she illustrates how our understanding of these concepts is best approached relationally, by sketching the semantic relationships between the terms. By exploring these semantic fields as a case study, Serova provides us with a tool to gain insight into a ‘totality’ of bodily experience around this specific phenomenon. The relations revealed by verbs related to the unclothed body remind us once again of the notion of controlled equivocation, and the problematic nature of a search for linguistic equivalences, which are more accurately expressed by means of relational maps.

Reinert Skumsnes’ study of healing texts of the Middle and New Kingdoms explicitly engages with the notion of body worlds to emphasise the historically and relationally contingent perspectives and layers that are accessible through these sources. Although a differentiation between bodies is present in the sources explored, for example, in texts describing sex determination in unborn children, the resulting picture does not map neatly onto modern categories, highlighting the effect and role of different body worlds on our interpretations of ancient evidence. The recognition and acknowledgement of multiple ontologies facilitates a more nuanced study of ancient sources on healing.

Just like healing is based around body knowledge, so are practices related to making. Willeke Wendrich’s article engages with (ancient and modern) body worlds as an arena for praxis-based reasoning. Using the chaîne opératoire approach, Wendrich explores how embodied cognition, and specifically embodied knowledge, are communicated and remembered across time and space, between objects, makers, users, and other people, including researchers. The theoretical implication of such an approach is the necessity to reconsider the Western epistemic model, which is based mainly on a Cartesian split between body and mind, in favour of a relational approach that is sympathetic to the existence of differing, sometimes complementary, body worlds. A theory of embodied cognition rejects Cartesian dualism, blurring any boundaries between knowledge and experience.

In her article, Emily Whitehead advocates for an expansion of the concept of ‘body worlds’ to encapsulate the interaction between human and non-human bodies. To this end, Whitehead’s approach draws on assemblage theory, which entails understanding entities as continuously unbounded and emerging. As a case study, she proposes an analysis of a ‘solar boat’ currently kept at the Michael C. Carlos Museum (Emory), a body assembled over time from pieces of other boats. By highlighting the process of ‘becoming’, Whitehead proposes a multi-scalar analysis of a model solar boat that takes into account both the time of its creation and deposition and its modern re-assembling into an object for display.

### 3.2 Relations

The concept of ‘relation’ has been developed by Strathern as an expository device or tool. By tracing the academic as well as vernacular uses of this concept through time, she draws attention to the way such generic terms behave. She looks at how relation as an abstract concept is configured in the English language (with roots to Latin via old French) and how it has been used in the context of both kin- and knowledge-making practices (STRATHERN, 2014: 3). Rather than simply prescribing particular versions of the concept, Strathern is concerned with how ‘kin relations are bound up with knowledge of the world in such a way that “the world” comes to seem their (only, principal) horizon of reference’ (STRATHERN, 2020: 181).

As an object of exposition, an experimental exercise of complex and critical reflection, the concept of relation invites us to challenge the foundations of instituted phenomena. The concept is described not only as a scaffolding device but also as an attractor with mediating effects: it is ‘a term that engages other terms, a concept in a field of concepts, an idea that draws in values and disseminates feelings, a substantive from which adjectives (relational) and abstractions (relationality) can be made exactly as though everyone knew what was meant’ (STRATHERN, 2020: 2). A key idea, then, is the conceptual primacy of relations in the sense that entities come into being through their relationships, rather than the other way around.

When anthropologists talk about relations, human beings usually take centre stage, though they are inevitably enmeshed in a relational world with things, other beings (human and non-human) and entities (material and non-material) that together form their environments (STRATHERN, 2018: 2). Though Strathern encourages links to many other concepts, such as (but not limited to) assemblages (RABINOW, 2003; RABINOW, 2011), companion species (HARAWAY, 2003), networks (LATOUR, 2005), apparatuses and phenomena (BARAD, 2007), she also elucidates the potential of interconnections. In particular, ‘entities expose features previously unknown, then, as functions of relations with others, so that these features can never be exclusively properties of the entities themselves; relations open up the capacities of properties in unexpected ways and capacities come into existence through new relations’ (STRATHERN, 2014: 4; cf. STRATHERN, 2020: 15). It follows that, in addition to the more traditional approach of identifying relations in structures, systems of classification, co-variation, and so forth, the concept can also be ‘applied with equal force to new objects of knowledge, emergent configurations, or co-constructions, and not only in a passive sense (everything is connected), but in the active sense of the observer-writer making phenomena appear, illuminating them, through the concept’ (STRATHERN, 2020: 26; cf. STRATHERN, 2014: 5). Relations thus enable the scholar to be reflexive, suggesting ‘an ongoing role for the ever-unfinished nature of the relating that keeps it in play, unfinished in that knowing and not-knowing perpetually create one another. Companion to our knowledge of ourselves as much as companion to our knowledge of the world’ (STRATHERN, 2014: 8; cf. STRATHERN, 2020: 28).

Relationality has been productively employed in several distinct ways by the contributors to this volume. Some employ it as a heuristic device, seeking to extract distinct relationships between discrete elements of their data, others consider relational structures within elements of the ancient culture itself, and some do both. Amongst the scholars considering relationality as an analytical tool, Dina Serova considers analysts’ attempts to establish relationships both between a word and a broader word field as well as between individual words. She notes, for example, how the notions of relations-between and relations-within work well in the context of semantic analysis, as they draw attention to the processes of attribution of meaning and to the connections between a given lexeme and the object to which it refers. In this sense, both the creation and the interpretation of meaning can be productively approached within this relational framework. Her article makes use of graphic representations of potential semantic networks that illustrate connections between lexemes to visually showcase their inherent relations.

A similar approach has been taken with respect to object studies, which foreground the relationality between objects and the people who interact with them. Emily Whitehead’s chapter on the ‘solar boat’ offers an opportunity to reflect on this relationship through the lens of assemblage theory. Her article advocates a post-anthropocentric approach that theorises the emergence of objects as a relational undertaking that

affects not only their physical form but also their interpretations in scholarship. Likewise, Willeke Wendrich's paper on embodied cognition reconsiders a particular kind of relational model, namely, the *chaîne opératoire* model, to examine its employment in relation to archaeological material. While the model as traditionally understood fits expectations of a linear system to reconstruct processes of making, experience demonstrates that such processes can be linear only in hindsight, as the making itself is often complicated by unexpected circumstances that cannot be mapped out easily in the archaeological record. Relations in their broader sense are a more productive way to reconsider transfer of knowledge, and, for that reason, she proposes to adapt the model of a *chaîne opératoire* to focus on relations and interactions between objects and people, rather than on fixed sequences of actions.

Finally, Di Biase-Dyson's article takes on relations from a historiographical angle, seeing relations, as defined by HARRIS (2020: 16) from three different perspectives, namely, 'as epistemology', taking on board a scholar's background (i.e. Brunner-Traut and her intellectual forebears), 'as methodology', investigating how the comparative method is applied to ancient sources in relation to the 'aspective' model, and 'as metaphysics', concerning a scholar's theory of culture (e.g. the 'axial age' theory proposed by JASPERS, 1953) as related to the sources they use.

As described above, several scholars employ the concept of relationality to explain structures within the culture under study itself, considering, for instance, what such relations are and how such relational structures are built. In his contribution, Richard Bussmann focuses on the value of relational perspectives to assess social dynamics in the early Old Kingdom and beyond. As opposed to a simplistic focus on a 'social pyramid', relational modelling allows for an explicit recognition of the relative positioning of people and groups in any kind of social analysis. In this sense, he notes, 'non-elite' is an essentially relational classification that relies on the recognition of the existence of 'elite' as a meaningful category. A focus on the body highlights different strategies of social differentiation that can only be understood when approached from a relational perspective, that is to say, in opposition to the iconographic and material treatment of 'elite' bodies.

A similar approach is adopted by Olabarria, who explores different ways to understand kinship as a relational hierarchy. The seeming similarity of the idea of the 'bodily son' with the Western perspective—namely, the association between biological connection and legitimacy of relation—belies different ways of understanding the articulation between embodiment and relatedness in modern and ancient cultures. The degrees of differentiation between 'intensities' (following Miller, this volume) of relatedness can be mediated through bodily connections, which, Olabarria argues, need not be understood as genealogical positioning.

Jordan Miller lastly explores a number of relational perspectives within his source material. He considers, for instance, the way in which fused names of deities represent a 'linking of associations' as well as the way that stone statues of deceased humans might be 'interfaces for relations' with human visitors within the framework of perspectivism.

### 3.3 Comparisons

Comparison is a method employed across the humanities and social sciences, not least within anthropology, where this method has been theorised to a sophisticated degree. For instance, Candea describes two modalities of comparison, lateral and frontal comparison, not just as elementary structures of anthropological arguments but as linked pair of comparative heuristics, 'a conceptual device for introducing a broader picture of multiply anchored robustness' (CANDEA, 2019: 327). Both heuristics work from and with entities which are assumed to be distinct enough to be compared, but they do this work in different ways and to different effects (CANDEA, 2018: 366).

In frontal comparison an unfamiliar ethnographic entity (e.g. an ethnographic 'other') is contrasted to a putatively familiar background (e.g. the ethnographer's own 'background'). This type of comparison requires that we postulate—heuristically—an 'us' and a 'them', bracketing the possibility of multiplicities within these

categories (CANDEA, 2016: 99). It therefore introduces a constitutive asymmetry between the terms of comparison. The point is ultimately to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (CANDEA, 2018: 350–352). In lateral comparison two or more symmetrical entities (e.g. different anthropological studies) are laid side by side (CANDEA, 2016: 94–95), with the anthropologist’s own perspective either outside the frame or as the frame itself (CANDEA, 2018: 349). Three variants can—heuristically—be outlined: the first involves the classic move of building an abstract model by drawing on the commonalities of a diverse and carefully chosen sample of ethnographies within the region in which this model is supposed to apply. The second operates similarly, but in the opposite direction, to highlight differences within a broader shared domain. In a third variant, distant analogies are repurposed to allow locally-derived concepts to travel and do local work in different contexts without ever having to pay the price of generalisation (CANDEA, 2018: 358–366).

In relation to the ontological turn, CANDEA (2016: 90) argues that frontal comparison has been retooled for a postplural research imaginary (which refuses to characterise the world in terms of fixed entities which could be neatly laid side by side and compared), whereas lateral comparisons have stubbornly resisted such postplural reconfigurations:

while frontal comparison has monopolized anthropologists’ epistemic attention and concern over recent decades, methodological and epistemological discussions of lateral comparison were—with a few notable exceptions—relegated to the doldrums of an outdated positivism. The ‘rise’ of frontal comparison is partly an effect of this unequal exposure—lateral comparison continues apace, of course, operating mostly under the epistemic radar to support and counterbalance its more showy frontal counterpart (CANDEA, 2018: 344).

Candea brings lateral comparison back into focus, arguing that

the two heuristics cannot do without each other. Their failures as much as their strengths complement and support each other. Frontal comparison relies on lateral comparisons for its broader points of extension; by lateral comparisons it travels, is limited and judged. Lateral comparison begins and ends with frontal challenges to its ever reimagined framing devices. In frontal comparison we put ourselves to the test. In lateral comparisons we put each other to the test. The two moves are mutually constitutive (CANDEA, 2018: 368).

Good comparisons are comparisons that object, that can interfere with our initial hunches and desires and tend to give us more than what we aimed for. This is why, according to CANDEA (2019: 353), we ought to build comparisons which have their own resistance, independent of our ends.

Like with relationality, contributors to this volume engage with different aspects of comparison, either using it to compare entities within the body of evidence they have collected (i.e. structures within the culture), or by operationalising it at a higher level to consider how comparison works as an analytical tool. When it comes to comparing structures within the culture, several scholars have interrogated the frontal comparisons established by other scholars that place modern categories against purported Egyptian categories. For instance, Olabarria takes issue with the use of under-theorised frontal comparison when it comes to assessing kinship practices from Egypt. Modern Western categories pertaining to filiation patterns are sometimes transposed to ancient Egyptian contexts uncritically. This exemplifies not only an epistemological limitation, but also an ontological problem that can only be redressed by taking ancient sources seriously.

The article by Skumsnes presents a similar criticism of the uses of frontal comparison, which is still dominant in many scholarly assessments of healing texts. For example, he notes how the claim that Egyptians could only have a very limited knowledge of anatomy assumes that there is a single way of understanding the body and its treatments. This is exemplified in the assumption of a masculine model for these healing practices, when an analysis of the sources demonstrates that an alternative feminine model focusing on creation and fertility is also plausible. Rather than a simplistic comparison with modern Western modes of medical

praxis, it is interesting to focus on the role of connections and analogies between patients' bodies and other entities, something which can be done, for example, with reference to language features (like gender).

The article by Miller straddles thinking about comparison within a culture and considering its role as an analytical tool. For the former aim, he surveys modes in which Egyptians engaged in the practice of comparison, using the overlapping notions of images and bodies, for instance, the intermediate humanity of sculptures, as a case study. Miller demonstrates that comparisons in Egyptian sources are presented in very concrete terms, something that contrasts with the much more abstract statements presented in Egyptological discourse. In this sense, Miller not only reviews the role of comparison in Egyptian thought, but also its heuristic impact on Egyptology. In this way, he is able to consider relations both between image and body 'intensities' (a kind of scalarity in ontological terms) as well as between interiority and physicality of entities.

One scholar that explicitly considers the role of comparison as an analytical tool is Edward Scrivens, who uses iconographic and textual depictions of the goddesses Qadesh, Anat, and Astarte to interrogate, via lateral comparison, allegedly binomial constructs such as 'foreign' vs 'local' and 'male' vs 'female'. In this study, it emerges that there is no clear-cut distinction between these apparently opposed categories, highlighting the value of negotiation as an analytical tool in order to find a balance between these poles. In conducting this comparison, it becomes clear that Scrivens is likewise considering the extent to which researchers' categories must be interrogated, and in so doing he considers comparison both as a method of analysis as well as an analytical construct.

This level of meta-comparison showcased by Miller and Scrivens is also present in the article by Di Biase-Dyson, who dissects the historiography of the use of the concept of the 'fragmented body', coined by Emma Brunner-Traut, and its parent theory, aspective representation. On the one hand, Brunner-Traut engages in frontal comparison by assessing Egyptian art in relation to modern representational principles. On the other, lateral comparison is also deployed as a method to present bodies in ancient Egyptian visual culture as 'fragmented' in opposition to those in classical Greek art, for example. These problematic comparisons, supposedly supported by selectively chosen neurocognitive studies, are used to support evolutionary interpretations that assign an ethnic and developmental basis to these representational differences. This review reminds us of the importance of engaging critically with the methodological basis of widespread theories that essentially disguise an 'Us-and-Them' mentality, presenting difference as a fact rather than as a driver for a comparison.

### 3.4 Negotiations

'Negotiations' as a category and concept was adopted and developed by Sørensen, who defines them as a constitutive practice. This viewpoint entails that social life is affected by competing interests (SØRENSEN, 2000: 61), and that negotiations are 'processes through which people strive to reach agreed/accepted understandings of the world' (SØRENSEN, 2007: 41). She argues that 'these agreements are based upon, and performed in relationship to, the allocation of rights and responsibilities, and that these in turn are reached and understood in relationship to material things' (SØRENSEN, 2007: 41).

Sørensen is concerned with how gender, specifically, is part of these constitutive practices. The central point for SØRENSEN (2007: 45) is that

gender refers to constructions that exist at different temporal scales, ranging from the moment to generations. Gender, furthermore, is brought into being through the ways that norms and conventions aimed at particular groups set them up in terms of identities, and in terms of how individuals orient and express themselves with regards to these.

Sørensen's idea of 'constructions' is, crucially, framed as a verb rather than as a noun, to highlight its 'reference to the becoming, to an act, which is concerned with the making of gender' (SØRENSEN, 2007: 46).

In sum, SØRENSEN (2000: 60–73) describes gender as situated difference, meaning that it is ‘constituted by context insofar as it does not exist per se but is produced by practice’ (SØRENSEN, 2007: 45).

Gender negotiation refers to the continuous process ‘that takes place within society between internalized, embodied selves and externalized, learned, and confirmed social identities’ (SØRENSEN, 2007: 46). The crux for SØRENSEN (2000: 74–95) is how this understanding of gender negotiation creates a direct link to materiality, with resources—including every stage of the chaîne opératoire, from production to distribution and consumption—as the tangible and material medium ‘through which such agreements are routinely made and through which they are understood and experienced’ (SØRENSEN, 2007: 47). Material culture (in the widest sense) provides the medium for practices of gender (social articulation) as well as the location for its negotiation (material manifestation).

The contribution to this special issue most openly engaging with Sørensen’s framework of negotiations is that by Scrivens, who explores the characterisation of three ancient Near Eastern goddesses in Egyptian sources. Crucially, one of these goddesses is an Egyptian creation rather than a foreign import, but she is presented iconographically in a way that highlights her otherness, for example through frontal representations or through nudity. Although references to these goddesses were meant to disrupt some (gender-based and cultural) conventions, there are also normative structures embedded into these representations, for instance in terms of compositional dominance. These combinations of unusual and standard readings are, according to Scrivens, a clear example of negotiations at play, as their alleged otherness is nuanced through Egyptian normative representations, especially in terms of gender roles.

However, in addition to the focalisation on gender, ideas of situated difference sit at the core of negotiations as an analytical category. From this space, a number of other papers contribute distinct ideas about how this category works at the theoretical level. Negotiation at the material level can be theorised, for instance, at the level of the whole body and its interaction with the world, and that world’s structuring paradigms, not only of gender, but of hierarchy and of representation. For instance, Bussmann’s contribution allows for an exploration of how negotiation can be used as an analytical category outside of explicit discussions about gender. He explores a portion of the cemetery at Zawyet Sultan to reflect on the relative positioning of bodies within the cemetery and in comparison with other sites. This analysis shows that a sense of who was positioned where within a mortuary landscape already existed in the early Old Kingdom as a material expression of that relational understanding of social classifications and interactions. In this context, Sørensen’s ‘agreed understandings of the world’ are demonstrated through those codified processes of establishment of hierarchy in the mortuary landscape.

Whitehead’s idea of assemblages and how objects emerge also touches on negotiated relationships between people and objects through history. For example, the existence of pastiches trying to reconstruct a ‘complete’ or ‘original’ object relies on the notion of an idealised object that needs to be replicated, as well as on the agreement that such a reconstruction is preferable to a partial product. The perceived importance of human figures is crucial in this context, as these were supplied to fit with a preconceived interpretation of what these models were meant to do, namely provide for the needs of the deceased in the hereafter. It was conceived that such a task could only be achieved by means of human actors, and hence figures were added to ensure that the model would be effective. This is indeed the result of a tension between different body worlds, which are essentially negotiated categories at play.

One could also argue for the existence of visual negotiations, for example between onlooker and image, as demonstrated by Miller in his notion of ‘intensities’ when characterising images and bodies. His example of a text from the *Amduat*, where differences between the images and the body of the sun god are dissolved, shows that these should not be perceived as separate and bounded categories within Egyptological discourse.

The editors hope that this volume, with its explicit attempt to create an interdisciplinary dialogue around questions on the ancient Egyptian body, offers food for thought. We also hope that it generates more dialogue in turn.

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INVITED COMMENTARY

## What can an ancient Egyptian body do?

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### Abstract

In this commentary I reflect on how archaeological theory opens up new possibilities for thinking through ancient Egyptian body worlds. By bringing the papers in this special edition into comparison with one another, and into conversation with some contemporary concerns in archaeological thought, we can explore what ancient Egyptian bodies could do, how they could relate, and what they could become. These possibilities, in turn, create the potential for further comparison, conversation, and collaboration between Egyptology and the wider world of archaeological theory.

**Keywords:** archaeological theory, bodies, relations, ontology

ماذا يستطيع جسد مصري قديم أن يفعل؟

الملخص

في هذا التعليق، أُسلط الضوء على كيف تفتح النظريات الأثرية آفاقاً جديدة لتفسير مفهوم عوالم الجسد عند المصريين القدماء. بمقارنة الأوراق البحثية في هذا الإصدار الخاص ببعضها البعض، وإدخالها في حوار مع بعض الاهتمامات المعاصرة في الفكر الأثري، يمكننا استكشاف ما يمكن أن تفعله أجساد المصريين القدماء، وكيف يمكن أن ترتبط، وما هي ماهيتهم. هذه الفرص، بدورها، تخلق إمكانية لمزيد من المقارنة والحوار والتعاون بين علم المصريات وعالم النظريات الأثرية الأوسع.

الكلمات الدالة: النظريات الأثرية، الأجساد، العلاقات، علم الوجود

## 1 Introduction

For many years working in the archaeology of Europe I have gazed longingly across the Mediterranean to Egypt. Who amongst archaeologists has not thought romantically of pyramids and pharaohs, of texts that enliven understandings, of access to a world that reveals difference but offers answers in a manner that our own silent stones, bones and monuments seem to deny? Yet these covetous glances have always focused on the material, rather than its interpretation. With notable exceptions (e.g. [MATIĆ](#), 2021; [MESKELL](#), 2004; [NYORD](#), 2020), it has not been the intellectual resources of Egyptology that have impacted upon the wider discipline so much as its role in the collective histories of the subjects we study. In the deep past of Europe, specifically the Neolithic and Bronze Age where I work, we have sought inspiration in places as far afield as ethnographies of Melanesia or Madagascar, in the metaphysical manifestations of German and French

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philosophers, even in the challenges provoked by quantum physics. Egyptology, however, has not proved a source of theory. It has sometimes seemed, both from without but perhaps also from within, that with the great volume of resources available to researchers theory is an unnecessary distraction. Why would Egyptologists need theory anyway? It was from this position, largely of ignorance of course, that the request to be a keynote at an Egyptology conference came to me in 2022.

As the papers here show, and as I have increasingly come to appreciate, the increase in evidential data does nothing to diminish our need for theory. Our acts of translation, the familiarity of names from childhood, the long-term immersion of our world in a zeitgeist coloured in conjunction with Egypt, risks rendering understandings of this place all too familiar. It stabilises and fixes the way we think about this world, making new ideas harder to come by, new thoughts more challenging to dominant narratives, and makes the work of embedding new concepts more difficult. This means theory offers us an essential tool for destabilising and denaturalising the way we think about Egypt, and really about anything we take for granted, as Edward Scrivens (p. 130) points out in his paper for this volume. Theory offers us a tool for creating cracks in the edifice of the thought we take as common sense, or as good sense (DELEUZE, 2015). It makes thinking something new, possible.

When I was invited to take part the conference organisers, and editors of this special edition, hoped, I think, to draw on the wider work I had conducted thinking about the history of the human body in Europe over the long term (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013). In *The Body in History*, John Robb and I developed the concept of the body world, the notion that bodies emerge located in specific historical contexts. Working closely with a team of co-authors, we explored the changing nature of body worlds from the Upper Palaeolithic through to the contemporary world of modern medical technologies. This posed questions of ontology (what can a body be?), scale (at what scale does a body world work?), and historical change (how does one body world become another?). These questions continue to fascinate me (e.g. HARRIS & ROBB, 2025; ROBB & HARRIS, 2018), but in entering into dialogue with the Egyptological world I wanted to bring other concerns to the fore.

In archaeology more widely, there has been increasing concern with ontological issues (ALBERTI, 2016; CRELLIN et al., 2021; HARRIS & CIPOLLA, 2017) and with a turn away from human centred, or anthropocentric approaches (CIPOLLA et al., 2024; CRELLIN, 2020). These concerns have arisen in part to allow the alterity of alternative historical worlds to come to the fore, in part out of a desire to decentre the Humanist notion of man, and in part to allow non-humans to play a more dynamic role in the archaeologies we write. Under a multitude of guises (variously referred to as new materialism, posthumanism, the ontological turn and more), new approaches are transforming the problems archaeology is seeking to wrestle with. In my keynote at the conference, I wanted to bring this into dialogue with the central concerns of bodies and body worlds that emerged in my earlier work. As Emily Whitehead (p. 184) perceptively notes in her paper in this volume, there might seem to be a tension between the anthropocentric concern with the human body and the more univocal emphasis on non-humans present in these contemporary approaches. As her paper shows, however, this can be a productive tension allowing us to discuss human bodies in post-anthropocentric ways.

Let us turn then to the papers presented here and consider them in the light of discussions of both body worlds, and some of the other emergent ideas that these articles explore. To do this I want to talk about the papers in relation to three questions, or perhaps better, three problematics. First, what can a body do? Second, how can a body relate? Third, what can a body become? In each case I will foreground the theoretical concerns and discuss them in conjunction with the different approaches.

## 2 What can a body do?

What can a body do? This is the question, inspired by Baruch Spinoza, that the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze asks us to return to (DELEUZE, 1988; O'DELL & HARRIS, 2022; HARRIS, 2021). Deleuze's work is increasingly having impact in archaeology, both in relation to assemblage theory (see Whitehead, this volume)

but also in connection with questions of bodies and difference (e.g. **BICKLE**, 2020) From the perspective of both Deleuze and Spinoza, bodies are not fixed but rather emergent. Deleuze's work decentres subjectivity as we traditionally conceive it. Rather than prefigured and bounded individuals, **DELEUZE** (2004: 100) writes of 'larval subjects' always in the process of becoming. The centrality of bodies acting and doing is clear in many of the papers in this volume. As Willeke Wendrich shows in her paper (this volume), bodies act in the world in a way which thoroughly integrates traditional categories like 'mind' and 'body'. She demonstrates how thinking about process and movement, which she locates in the language of a chaîne opératoire, helps us open up an understanding of the kinds of embodied action that were possible in the past. Richard Bussmann (p. 31) emphasises how these actions included hard labour, and how that labour itself was marked onto bodies both visually and in daily life. Non-elite bodies, in his account, were defined by the actions they carried out on a daily basis, which differentiated them from others.

One question we can ask from this starting point explores how forces and flows might shape bodies and challenge their boundaries in ways we don't expect. Bodies here are not human necessarily, nor are they neatly bounded. As **DELEUZE** (e.g. 1988: 124) shows us with his analysis of Jacob Von Uexkull's discussion of a tick, even this most simple of creatures lives its life orientated around three affects: a sensitivity to light; to the smell of a mammal; and to the heat-topography of that mammal's skin. Affects stretch beyond the living and beyond the organic too—such an approach can embrace the vibrancy of matter, as Jane **BENNETT** (2010) would put it. What counts as a body, then, does not prefigure the historical worlds we find, but rather emerges through our engagement with them. What would it mean, in an ancient Egyptian world, for example, to consider a sarcophagus, a piece of papyrus, or another piece of material culture as a body? How can bodies of architecture affect and be affected by the routine daily lives of humans?

This approach leads Deleuze, both alone and with Félix Guattari, to define bodies along two dimensions: latitude and longitude (**DELEUZE**, 1988: 127; **DELEUZE & GUATTARI**, 2004: 283). The former refers to the affects of which a body is capable, its intensive virtual capacities. The latter refers to the specific extensive actual relations of movement and rest that a body undergoes. By defining these two aspects, Deleuze argues, we can define what a body can do. This allows Deleuze to claim that bodies can have much in common with one another, without necessarily being of the same order or species. The plough horse, he comments, has more in common with an ox than with a racehorse (**DELEUZE**, 1988: 124).

By defining bodies in terms of these two geographical dimensions, the logical conclusion is that the route towards understanding what it is a body can do is to map them in particular contexts. Bodies are always on the move, they are nomadic, and so only a cartographic method, as the posthumanist feminist Rosi **BRAIDOTTI** (2019) has defined it, can produce an understanding of them. This is post-anthropocentric, emergent, relational and immanent with an emphasis on becoming. As such it takes the concept of the body world, disrupts it, sets it in motion and asks it to become ever more open to what might count as a body and what those bodies can do. We can have bodies that are human that emerge from the intersections of non-humans, and bodies that are non-human that emerge from the intersection of humans.

Whitehead explores this in relation to the Model Solar Boat, in which she expands the notion of the body world to include these non-human bodies. She rethinks the solar boat not merely as a representation revealing 'symbols' which 'stand for' something else, but an active element in an assemblage of active elements within the grave. In her paper, each of the non-human bodies on the solar boat are important not for what they represent, but instead for the manner in which they act—adjusting rigging, keeping watch and more (p. 193). These bodies are active in the world. Her paper takes a cartographic approach that maps the relations present in the solar boat both in the past and present. To do this, she also brings in other solar boats revealing how our traditional notions of biographies may not be suitable for such analyses. The concept of biography, rooted as it is in individual and bounded human lives, rules out the notion that the stories we tell might cross from one body to another, enlivening them in the complex myriad of events that each embodies (cf. **TSORAKI** et al., 2023).

A helpful example of the latitude of bodies, the intensive affects of which a body is capable, comes from

Jordan Miller's contribution to this volume. Miller argues that bodies and images are both better thought of as 'intensities' (p. 93), that is that as bodies enter into relation with one another, new capacities for action are brought to the fore. The bodies of gods or kings here are intensities of a different order of magnitude, their capacity for action, their affects, the latitude of their bodies was different to others. Statues of gods were capable of inhaling powerful smells or complaining about them. They took different places, different locations, different movements in society and this combination, where they could be found (longitude) and what they could do (latitude), changed their bodies fundamentally. As Miller points out in Egyptian religious contexts, depending on what a body does, it can become more of a body or more of an image with neither being a stable state—both are in the process of becoming. The art of Miller's paper is in showing us that this is not merely a question of ancient Egyptians imputing life to inorganic matter, but rather of different bodies being capable of doing different things, an ontological claim we return to below.

### 3 How can a body relate?

What a body can do, however, is not something that emerges in isolation but rather in relation to the world around it. As these papers emphasise, thinking relationally has become increasingly important in archaeology. Beginning with phenomenological thinking in the 1990s and moving through the developments of discussion of personhood in the 2000s, relations have become critical elements of numerous forms of archaeological thinking (see [HARRIS & CIPOLLA](#), 2017). Thinking relationally frees us from an emphasis on ahistorical essences, towards a way of thinking that allows us explore how specific social and material contexts work collectively towards the production of history.

In many ways, all of the papers in this volume emphasise the importance of relations. Wendrich, for example, shows the importance of starting with a relational approach as a means, as she puts it, to 'map out experience' (p. 172) and to think about how we can include important considerations of the embodied engagement people in both the past and present have with the world around them (cf. [TILLEY](#), 1994). Bussmann in his paper takes this further by showing how relational thinking offers a superior starting point to transcendent notions like 'social structure' (p. 25). In his engaging account, Bussmann explores how non-elite bodies were always relationally entwined in image worlds, and thus as those images change the possibilities for how bodies could relate also changed. In a similar manner, Whitehead shows how the range of relations in which the solar boats she studies were enmeshed, including with gods and kings and ancestors, allowed these objects to act in specific ways. Perhaps just as importantly, the changing histories of relations allows Whitehead to trace how the Solar Boat becomes capable of different things at different times, and how in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century CE these bodies took on new qualities; in the world of collections they could do different things. This reveals beautifully how an emphasis on relations always leads us to an understanding of becoming, that is how things change through time, rather than emphasising what a thing is.

We often in our contemporary society think of relations primarily in kinship terms (I often start off by teaching relations through familial concepts), and Leire Olabarria takes this as her starting point. Rather than revealing the familiarity of Egyptian kinship terms, however, Olabarria challenges us to think more critically about what counts as a relation in what context, and where we may have been too quick to dismiss certain forms of connectivity. Her emphasis that the relation 'bodily son' need not be biological emphasises the manner in which it is all too easy to presume forms of kinship in the past were oriented through not only contemporary understandings of biology, but also via an ahistorical concept of what counts as family life ([DELEUZE & GUATTARI](#), 2013). Rather than seeing non-biological kinship as 'fictitious' or 'less-than', Olabarria reminds us that these are moments in which our own assumptions about what is 'natural' all too easily overcode what the past is trying to tell us.

Both Olabarria and Dina Serova emphasise the different forms relations can take. Serova explores the linguistic emphases on nudity and nakedness, and in particular contrasts relations between already existing entities and relations that constitute entities. The latter are relations 'within' an entity (p. 152) as she puts

it. Critically, she notes how the former, external relations, act back on the terms they connect, they are outside them but still shape and change them. They thus are not only external but also help to constitute the terms they relate (SMITH, 2005: 140). Indeed, relations are also a question of scale. In many ways what appears to be an interior relation of connection at one level (a relation which gives rise to an entity) is an external relation of disjunction at another (a relation which reveals or records the difference between two pre-existing things (DELEUZE & GUATTARI, 2013: 93ff). This stresses how both processes of change and becoming within entities need to be considered (whether these entities are the linguistic terms Serova studies or a material object, site, or piece of architecture), and we need to consider how the creation of new external relations also changes what it is something can do.

Serova's discussion of relations of nakedness leads us to the relations revealed in the artistic depictions of Qadesh, Min, and Reshep as discussed by Scrivens. Rather than looking at the symbolism of the lotus, or the snakes, depicted, Scrivens points out that it is in the relations between the three beings and the different objects that understandings can emerge. Notions of the power of these figures and the forms of gender they reveal emerge in the active 'negotiation' (p. 139) or the creation of relations that Scrivens maps. Indeed throughout his paper, he cleverly maps how different concepts of gender, foreignness, and 'otherness' emerge not through any form of fixed essence, but rather through complex interplaying relations.

As a final example of the critical nature of relational approaches to the bodies under discussion we can mention Camilla Di Biase-Dyson's important paper. Not only does Di Biase-Dyson use relational thinking to show that the concepts of the body and the relations between parts and wholes may not be what we expect, she reminds us that the importance of relations does not only extend to the past. Instead, she shows how we need to attend to the relations of research in the present. By excavating the context of the sources on which Emma Brunner-Traut drew to develop her respective theories, Di Biase-Dyson reveals the problematic connections, and underling racism, that this understanding rests upon.

#### 4 What can a body become?

If we take the question of what a body could do, on the one hand, and the relations in which it is enmeshed on another, we open new vistas onto past worlds. More than this, such an approach requires us to start thinking more radically about what those past worlds were. If bodies could do different things, if they are not limited to the bodies of humans, if they can form new kinds of relations, then to what extent might thinking like this open up a different set of questions about what a body can become?

Here we are drawn into recent archaeological discussions both of ontology (what exists in the world) and ontological difference (how we can comprehend variation in this). The discussions on ontology are varied, as Craig CIPOLLA (2021) has mapped, both in terms of how archaeologists and anthropologists have used the term and the extent to which its more dramatic implications have been appreciated. At one end, some use ontology in effect as another way of describing cultural difference (what Cipolla calls ontology as worldview). At the other, archaeologists inspired by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro seek to think through specific moments of radical difference to access the alterity of past worlds. Thus Ben ALBERTI (e.g. 2016) the most notable proponent of this, has explored how we might ask very different questions of figurative ceramics from the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE in Argentina if we treat them not as depictions of bodies, as representations of bodies, but actually as bodies. For archaeologists like Alberti, the aim is not to explore alternative ontologies as separate and contrasting worlds from our own, but rather to draw on specific moments of difference to explore the questions this brings to the fore for our Eurocentric concepts. As Scrivens shows this requires us taking 'seriously' (p. 130) the role of deities in the processes that created the Ancient Egyptian world.

Different ontological conceptions underlie Reinert Skumsnes' account of the sexed body. This requires thinking about what a body can do (indeed, at one stage what an onion can do (p. 47) and the different relations that make up a body. Bringing these together allows the ontological to emerge. Skumsnes traces the

connections within and between bodies, as well as the powers and affects of different parts of the body, especially its fluids. As Skumsnes shows elegantly, the way to appreciate the complexity of these understandings is not to start with modern medical conceptions, but rather to explore the ontological logics in their own contexts by combing an open-minded mapping of what a body could do with the relations in which it was enmeshed. Skumsnes maps how bodies connect relations, how these might diverge into different bodies (humans and non-humans) and how these could conjoin once again in a moment of conjunction that synthesised the ancient Egyptian body world.

Critical here, as Olabarria shows in her paper, is how we deal with notions of translation. Olabarria is concerned with translation in a specific sense, that is how to render a term like ‘his bodily son’ in a way that does justice to its complexity. By translating too quickly, we can, as Olabarria shows, simply assume that this relates to how we would think of the terms body and son, rendering the relation biological. In contrast, by drawing on the concept developed by Viveiros de Castro of controlled equivocation, Olabarria shows that we can maintain a critical difference between the Egyptian concept and our own. This difference is productive, it is a space in which the alterity of a different world can be allowed to subsist, to exist, without being domesticated to our own concepts. In her potent question of how to translate a term that is both ‘generic yet culturally specific, vague yet incredibly nuanced’ (p. 122), I am reminded of Deleuze’s discussion of Leibniz (DELEUZE, 1993: 88). How is it that the sea is composed of countless relations of water molecules, flows, gravitational pulls and more, each one generating the waves that crash on our shore, and yet as we sit and listen to it, we hear only the singular sea? The answer must lie in holding steady the difference between the overarching meanings one draws (what Deleuze would call molar which are clear, yet emerge from the confusion of multiple smaller relations) and the complex relations that make it up (which are indistinct but separate, and which Deleuze would call molecular) (e.g. DELEUZE, 1993: 87; cf. SMITH, 2005: 141–142).

Translation is also key in Di Biase-Dyson’s piece. Words we translate, such as ‘wholeness’, do not conform to the category as we think about it in English. The key here, as she points out, is not to render this as completely ‘other’, or to simply devolve into our own categories of understanding. Instead, we need to stay with this moment of trouble, to hold this difference steady for a moment and use it to think with. In a different context Darryl WILKINSON (2017) makes a similar point: it is our lack of understanding that these moments reveal, that is our confusion in the present, and the trick is to keep that in mind. As Di Biase-Dyson notably emphasises ‘Egyptian ideas of relationality between body parts might look different to what we expect’ (p. 66).

A different approach to ontology emerges in Jordan Miller’s account of images. Miller draws on Phillippe Descola’s four-fold approach to ontology to characterise the Egyptian world as mixture of animistic and analogistic concerns. As we noted above, his paper uses the concept of intensity (cf. DELEUZE, 2004: 144) to explore how potentials become actualised in differing ways in objects, people, images and ‘meta-persons’. Miller’s paper is hugely productive as it gives us tools to think with, concepts to think through. These allow us to explore elements including the potential transfer of qualities from image to body, and the capacity of metapersons to be located in natural or anthropogenic objects either in themselves in conjunction with other materials like light and water. I do wonder if Descola’s original schema offers the most productive starting point, however. As Bruno LATOUR (2009) has pointed out, one of the powers of an ontological approach is not merely that it offers us the chance to typologise the world, but that it explodes our expectations. In contrast, Descola’s types risk rather defusing this power. As noted, Miller argues for the blend between analogist and animist ontologies in ancient Egypt, and as such the force of his approach goes beyond Descola’s; his excellent paper escapes from these types to create something new in our thought.

## 5 Conclusion: from comparison to collaboration and contamination

A key theme in the papers, and in the conference, came from my other keynote speaker Matei Candea. CANDEA (2018), as many of the papers show, raises the critical issue of comparison, and distinguishes


between frontal comparison (usually between ‘us’ and ‘someone else’ in anthropology) and lateral comparison (between multiple ‘others’). In my contribution here I have undertaken a form of lateral comparison between the papers in this volume, mapping their shared concerns with what a body can do, with relations and with ontology in ancient Egypt.

One can also conduct a frontal comparison, however, between these papers as a whole, standing in for Egyptology, and my own discipline of European archaeology. This moment of comparison has much to teach me and for me take away to work through in my own context, not least Serova’s point that the same relation can be different in both function and nature when looked at from an emic and etic perspectives. That reminds those of us working in worlds where texts are not available how multiple even a single relation can be. Serova’s paper stresses how the relations we engage with must always be situated within what she terms a dynamic conceptual field. **DELEUZE** and **GUATTARI**’s (1994) term for this would be a plane of immanence or a plane of consistency; the horizon of possibility for thought and action. These papers together show archaeology how much Egyptology has to teach us about the sophisticated manner in which theoretical concepts can be paired with rich data to open up an understanding of these radically different planes, and how through an engagement like this, the bodies, relations, and ontologies of past worlds can come to life once more. If there is one final step I would like to see from this dialogue between archaeology, archaeological theory, and Egyptology it is that we collectively move past comparison towards collaboration; that these dialogues are the start, not the end, of an ongoing conversation. What this might lead to, through shared work, shared exploration and shared thinking may go beyond interesting and diverting comparisons to something much more significant, and something that is much harder to shift, to what Anna **TSING** (2015) might call contamination, rather than comparison. It is in the mixing of thought that new understandings come to light, that once perceived can never be separated again.

## 6 Acknowledgments

It is enormously exciting, if a little intimidating to be invited to be an outsider joining in a conversation in a different discipline. I am enormously grateful to the organisers of the conference, and the editors of this volume, Camilla Di Biase-Dyson, Rune Nyord, Leire Olabarria, and Reinert Skumsnes for their thoughtful invitation. Learning from them and the other workshop participants was a huge privilege. My comments here draw, of course, on wider connections, and I am lucky to have learned a lot about bodies, relations and ontology from Ben Alberti, Rachel Crellin, Yvonne O’Dell, John Robb, and Darryl Wilkinson amongst many others.

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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 focused 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

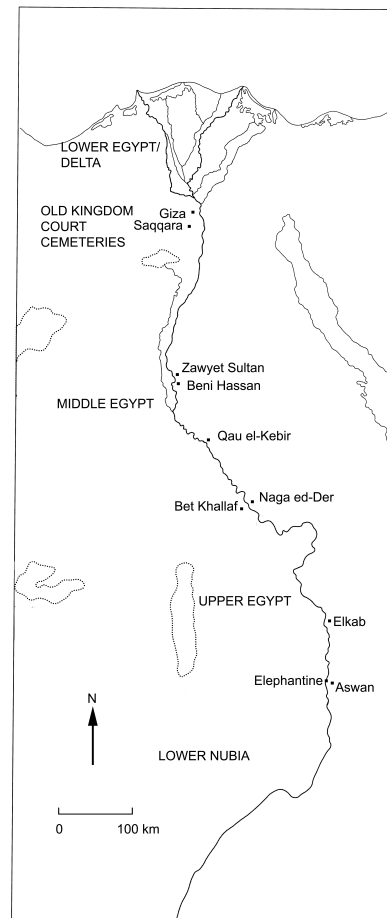


Fig. 1: Map of Egypt with sites mentioned in the paper. Compiled by the author.

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

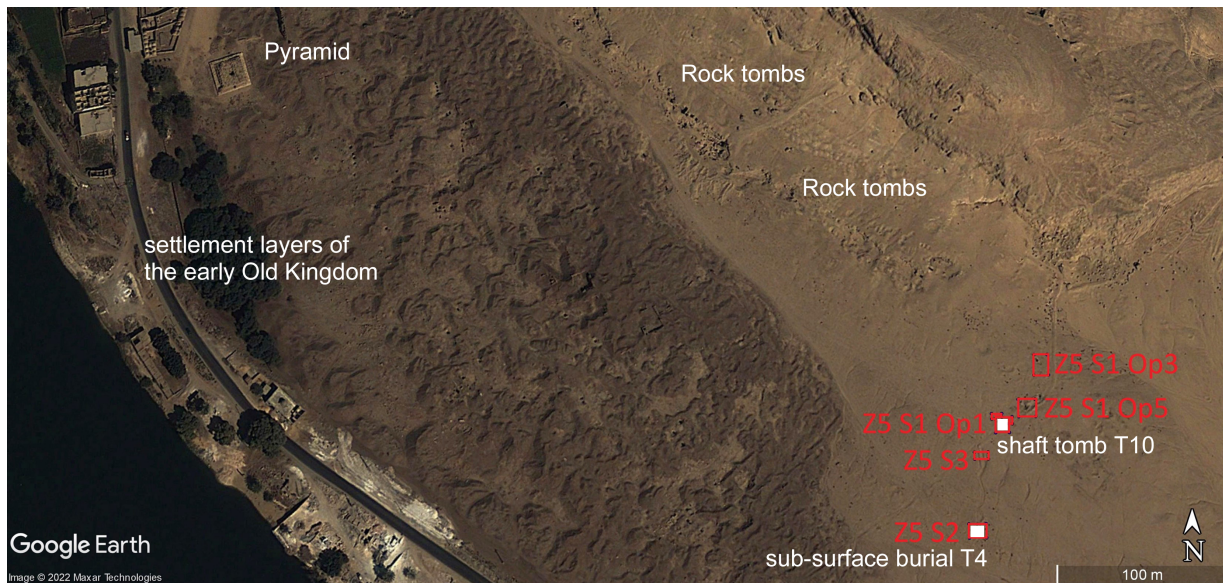


Fig. 2: Photo of zone 5, looking from the river to the desert escarpment. Compiled by Bart Vanthuyne and the author using Google Earth (Map data: Google, ©2022 Maxar Technologies).

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).

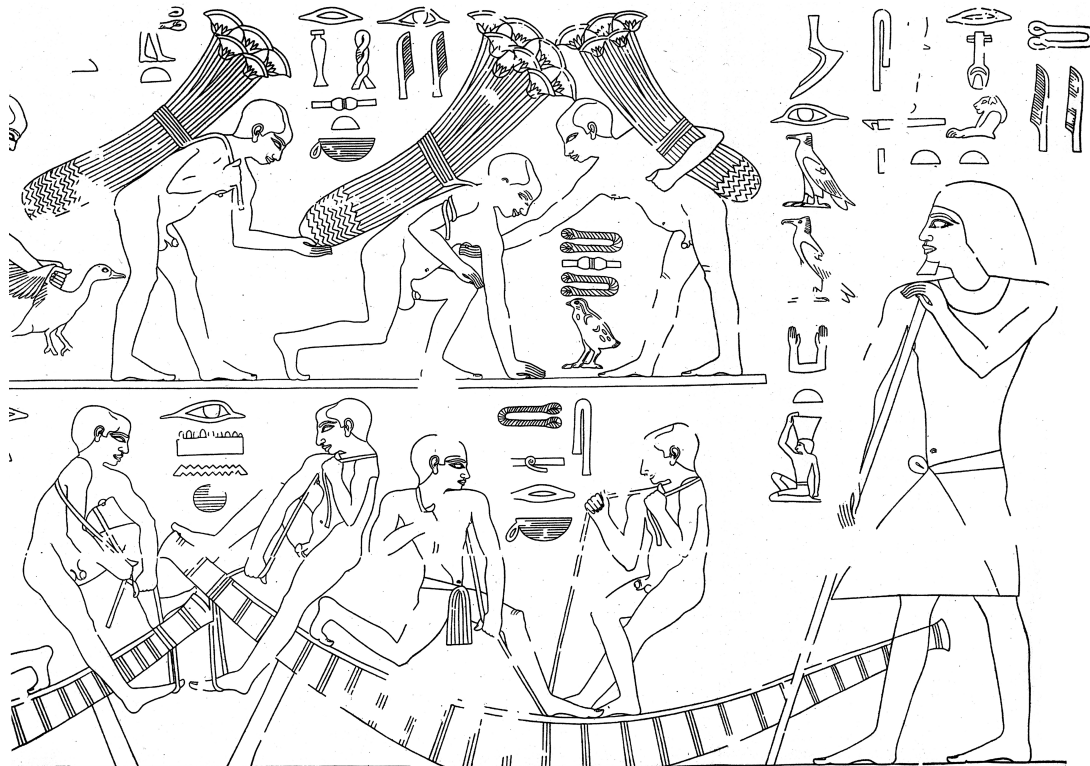


Fig. 5: Elite and non-elite bodies depicted in the tomb of Ti, Dynasty 5. After [WILD](#) (1953: pl. cx). © IFAO. Image used with permission.

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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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Alternative body worlds in ancient Egyptian healing texts

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## Abstract

The ancient Egyptians usually placed great care in differentiating between men, women, and others, and the corpus of healing texts is no different from other textual and visual sources in this regard. Among the numerous prescriptions concerned with fertility and pregnancy we even find some few examples that seek to determine the quintessential question: is the child male or female? But ambiguity remains and, because our own expectations are heavily coloured with multiple associations from other sources as well as more recent medical traditions, there is reason for caution. This article takes the concept of 'body worlds' as a lens in an attempt to not only see through but also mediate between multi-layered positions, perspectives (past and present), and records to explore and complicate how bodies were conceptualised and demarcated by the ancient Egyptians. Instead of simply confirming the present in the past, or judging the level of truth compared to modern western notions, this article seeks to elicit alternative (historically and relationally contingent) perspectives of the sexed body, to contextualise sexual difference within the ontological logics of ancient Egyptian healing texts from the Middle and New Kingdoms.

**Keywords:** ancient Egyptian healing text, body worlds, sexual difference, diverging conceptions and experience

## عالم الجسد البديلة في النصوص الطبية المصرية القديمة

### الملخص

عادة ما كان المصريون القدماء يحرصون بشدة على التمييز بين الرجال والنساء وغيرهما، وكذلك في النصوص العلاجية، إذ نجد نفس العناية بالتمييز بين الجنسين كما في المصادر النصية والبصرية الأخرى. من بين العديد من الصفات التي تتناول الخصوبة والحمل، نجد بعض الأمثلة التي تسعى إلى الإجابة عن السؤال الجوهرى: هل سيكون المولود ذكراً أم أنثى؟ لكن الغموض لا يزال يحيط بإجابة هذا السؤال من منظور المصري القديم، ولأن توقعاتنا للإجابة عنه متأثرة بمعلومات من مصادر أخرى، بالإضافة إلى التقاليد الطبية الأحدث، لذا يجب توخي الحذر. حيث تتخذ هذه المقالة من مفهوم "عالم الجسد" عدسة، في محاولة لا تقتصر على الرؤية من خلالها فحسب، بل تعمل أيضاً على التوسط بين المواقف ووجهات النظر متعددة الطبقات (الماضية والحاضرة) والسجلات، لاستكشاف وفهم كيفية تصور المصريين القدماء للأجساد وترسيم حدودها. كما تعمل المقالة على بدلاً من مجرد تأكيد وإثبات مفاهيم الحاضر في الماضي، أو الحكم على مستوى الحقيقة مقارنة بالمفاهيم الغربية الحديثة، تسعى هذه المقالة إلى الوصول إلى وجهات نظر بديلة (تتسم بالطابع التاريخي والترابطي) للجسد ذو الجنس المعروف، لوضع الاختلاف الجنسي في سياقه المنطقي الوجودي في النصوص الطبية المصرية القديمة من الدولتين الوسطى والحديثة.

الكلمات الدالة: لنصوص الطبية المصرية القديمة، عالم الجسد، الاختلاف الجنسي، التصورات والتجارب المتباينة

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## 1 Introduction

The corpus of ancient Egyptian healing texts is relatively poorly represented in the extant source material. It has nonetheless received considerable attention, usually by scholars attempting to identify diseases and determine treatment effects from an etic perspective, often through the lens of modern western medicine or other foreign medical traditions such as classical medicine (e.g. [BRADLEY et al., 2021](#); [COCKITT & DAVID, 2010](#); [DAVID, 2008b](#); [EBEID, 1999](#); [ESTES, 1989](#); [HALIOUA & ZISKIND, 2005](#); [NUNN, 2002](#); [STEPHAN, 2011](#); [STROUHAL et al., 2014a](#); [STROUHAL et al., 2014b](#)). Although this asymmetrical comparative approach (what [CANDEA \(2019: 350\)](#) describes as frontal comparison) surely has had its advantages in making ‘ancient Egyptian medicine’ more accessible, the assumption that proper translation can only be done by scholars trained in both Egyptian language and modern medicine ([BARDINET, 2020: 194](#); cf. [GRAPOW, 1956: 64–68](#)) has also had some less fortunate effects. Not only is the difference between ancient Egyptian and modern medicine flattened out, the ‘magical’ elements (spells, amulets, invocations, etc.) of the former have often been considered as primitive and irrational. While [NUNN \(2002: 136–138\)](#) has argued that treatments were empirical rather than rational, highlighting the placebo effect of what is otherwise described as ineffective treatments, others have differentiated between treatments, grouping them into empirico-rational medicine on the one hand and magico-religious texts on the other.<sup>1</sup> From an emic perspective, however, [WEEKS \(1995: 1787\)](#) has pointed out that ‘to call one treatment an objective application of rational knowledge and another nothing more than mindless gibberish does an injustice to the complex relationships that existed between the elements of Egyptian culture and forces on the ancient Egyptians a system of thought quite foreign to their mind’. Trying to let go of modern notions or, at the very least, being more reflexive about the consequences of the asymmetrical comparative approach is an important first step towards acknowledging that the distinction between medical and magical, and between rational and irrational, would make little sense to the ancient Egyptians (e.g. [DAVID, 2004: 133–135](#); [DIELEMAN, 2011: 92–93](#); [FORSHAW, 2014](#); [SCHNEIDER, 2000](#); [SWEENEY, 2005](#); [WALKER, 1990](#)). The solution for some has therefore been to fuse the two concepts into one, as medico-magical ([PRICE et al., 2016: part II](#)), while others argue that we should not use such etic concepts at all because of the many inappropriate connotations they carry with them (e.g. [NYORD, 2019: 7–14](#)). Despite an increasing number of studies attempting to elucidate ancient Egyptian healing texts from the perspective of their own concepts and environments (e.g. [LEITZ, 2005](#); [NYORD, 2020c](#); [POMMERENING, 2020](#)), the asymmetrical comparative approach remains by far the most dominant. Nowhere is this more visible than in the assumption that the tradition of mummification and butchery automatically made ancient Egyptian concepts resemble modern concepts (e.g. [BEDNARSKI, 2000: 15](#)), as if ultimately there is or can only be one real way—the etic way—of conceptualising the body and its inner workings.

[THOMAS \(2004: 235–241\)](#) argues that opening ourselves up to the alterity of the past is an ethical move. But how can we understand apparently incommensurate notions of the body? This question draws attention to the problem of translating ontological categories which, according to [HARRIS and ROBB \(2012: 668\)](#), ‘is a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and how these relate to each other’. They continue to underline how experiences and conceptions of the body is the locus of multiple, situational and often conflicting perspectives (what Harris and Robb define as multimodality), that the idea that there ever was a simple, unproblematic time before our current confusion is part of the myth of the natural body. Through its unique focus on scale, time depth and historical process, the authors of the volume *The body in history*, define the concept of body world as ‘the totality of bodily experiences, practices and representations in a specific time and place’ ([ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 3](#)). The different contributions not only recognise how body worlds and bodies themselves have histories and culturally-specific logics, but also how they emerge through history as historical agents in their own right, making certain developments possible while forestalling others. The key tenet of [ROBB and HARRIS](#)

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that the 8-volume *Grundriß der Medizin der alten Ägypten*, which is still the recognised standard reference work on ancient Egyptian medicine, has glossed over much of the magical content ([GRAPOW, 1954–1973](#); cf. [WESTENDORF, 1999](#)).

(2013: 17) is the co-constitutive nature of body and world: ‘in producing the world, people produce their bodies at the same time, it is through learning to move, talk and act in specific ways that those ways themselves are sustained and taught to others’. What the study of ancient Egyptian healing texts can draw from this is, among others, that although conceptions and experiences of particular bodies may seem familiar, and make perfect sense, there is reason for caution. By being more attentive to our comparative methodologies, not just in terms of individual self-experimental rigour but also in terms of collective identification of objects, predicates, and relations (CANDEA, 2018: 325–346, cf. STRATHERN, 2004; STRATHERN, 2020), we may recognise how bodies (past and present) are neither univocal nor static and most likely include contradictions, individual expression, and dissent. Bodies affect and are affected (BENNETT, 2010), meaning that they are in a continuous process of becoming with things, other beings, and entities (HARAWAY, 2016), always entangled in mutually determining relations that together form assemblages of affective environments (e.g. CRELLIN, 2020; CRELLIN et al., 2021; HARRIS, 2021: 61–65). The concept body worlds allows me to sidestep habitual analytical distinctions: instead of simply confirming the present in the past or judging the level of truth compared to modern western notions of the body, this article takes a critical look at some of those mutually determining relations between things, other beings, and entities that together make up ancient Egyptian body worlds (NYORD, 2020b: 77; NYORD, forthcoming), seeking to elicit alternative perspectives of the sexed body in order to contextualise sexual difference within the ontological logics of ancient Egyptian healing texts from the Middle and New Kingdoms. It does so by taking the differential terminology of the human body as a starting point, before adjusting the lens to the particularity of the female body (as opposed to the default form), focusing on three aspects: the process of making connections, the body as microcosmic field, and, finally, the power of bodily fluids. My argument includes references to literary (mythological) texts to address the generally accepted claim that creation, the creative role, was thought to be a male prerogative, and argues that the number of gynaecological texts, the use of contraception, together with attitudes towards menstrual blood and breast milk, may suggest diverging conceptions and experiences.

## 2 The differential terminology of the human body

It remains rare to consider the more immediate thoughts and experiences of the ancient Egyptians (BUSSMANN, 2015: 7–11; NYORD, 2009; RIGGS, 2010), in particular those apparently incommensurate notions of the human body found in the corpus of healing texts. This is curious because despite the scarcity of healing texts surviving from ancient Egypt, the formulas that are preserved tend to follow rather fixed templates (the more elaborate usually include a heading, description of physical examination, diagnosis/prognosis, and instruction) and can roughly be grouped into *ššw*-examinations, *phrt*-recipes, *r- / šnt*-utterances, *rh-* / *si-* / *m3-*-prognosis, and thematic compilations of knowledge (e.g. ALLEN, 2005: 13; NYORD, 2017: 24–25; POMMERENING, 2014: 22–23; WESTENDORF, 1999: 80–100). While some formulas are unique in form and content, the New Kingdom corpus contains a substantial number of parallels (some being as good as identical), illustrating clearly that healing knowledge was shared, possibly even compiled and standardised (SCHIÖDT, 2020: 21–25; cf. DAWSON, 1967). The information that can be gleaned from these texts is partial, no doubt, but nonetheless contain historically situated knowledge about the body, provided to the wise (*rhw-ih*) and the physician (*swnw*) by the gods (e.g. pEbers 1 (1.1–11) and pHearst 78 (6.5–11), GRAPOW, 1958: 530–532), and gained as practical experience transferred among practitioners and others (POMMERENING, 2020: 390; cf. DAVID and FORSHAW, 2023: 23–96). Beyond what is indicated by the texts themselves, it is impossible to ascertain who had access to what knowledge.

The corpus of healing texts describes the patient in many ways (GRAPOW, 1956: 72–82). Although reference to a man is in the majority among the cases that indicate the sex of the patient, very few of these can be claimed to be solely dedicated to men and male issues. In fact, we should not rule out the possibility that the use of the noun *s* and the pronoun suffix *.f* is meant more generically, to refer to ‘a man’ in the neuter, as ‘patient’ (GRAPOW, 1956: 43), ‘any person, including women and children’ (STROUHAL et al., 2014a: 24),

‘someone’ or ‘anyone’ (GARDINER, 1957: §102). But it remains a puzzle then why some twenty prescriptions (see Table 1) from different healing texts, describe the patient explicitly as ‘a man or a woman’ (*s st r-pw*) in the heading or in the instruction that follow.

In these cases, there seems little doubt that the noun *s* refers to the male sex only. However, the mention of ‘a woman’ is less common in the instructions than in the heading, and only pEbers 167 (34.7–10, GRAPOW, 1958: 205) refers to the patient as a man or a woman in both heading and instruction. There is also an example where ‘or a woman’ is added after the full description (pEbers 154 (32.17–33.1), GRAPOW, 1958: 250), as well as inconsistencies in the use of pronouns, such as ‘until he (not they) recovers’ (*r snb.f*) in pEbers 93 (24.1–3, GRAPOW, 1958: 425). Further layers of complexity are added when pHearst 150 (10.11–12, GRAPOW, 1958: 525) refers to the patient, using the collective noun *rmṯ* with male and female classifier in the heading, and the singular noun *s* with male classifier only in the instruction that follows. It is also curious that pEbers 67 (20.23–21.7, GRAPOW, 1958: 204), instead of the more common *s st r-pw*, refers to ‘a man or a woman’ as *hmt ṯy r-pw*. The point here is not to provide an exhaustive list of all examples but, rather, to underline how difficult it is to identify any consistency, beyond suggesting a male standard, a default form of referring to all bodies in writing, most often referred to as *s* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 695–698). It is also observed that when singled out more specifically, men are on occasions (though certainly not always) referred to as *ṯy* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 963–964). It is striking, for instance, that *ṯy* is used in prescriptions that seek to determine the sex of the unborn child (pBerlin 3038 199 (vs. 2.2–5), GRAPOW, 1958: 474; cf. pCarlsberg VIII 3; SCHIÖDT, 2024a: 55–56).

There is, in fact, only a handful prescriptions that are dedicated explicitly and exclusively to male patients. These are usually concerned with the male genitalia and related body parts/organs, and for instance include the treatment of *sr*-disease (e.g. pEbers 780 and 781), regulation of urination (e.g. pEbers 269, 270 and 272) and possible impotence (e.g. pEbers 663; cf. POMMERENING, 2010). Although pEdwin Smith—the only substantial surgical handbook that survives from ancient Egypt—may surely deal with injuries suffered by male patients during warfare or at a building site (DAVID, 2008a: 189; DAVID, 2018: 4), and one of the injuries to the cervical vertebra is indeed said to affect the male genitalia explicitly (pEdwin Smith 31 (10, 12–22); GRAPOW, 1958: 330–331), it is problematic to assume that, simply because of the severity of the injuries, pEdwin Smith must relate to men only.

The treatment of women, on the other hand, takes up a relatively large space in the corpus of healing texts (see Table 2). pKahun (= pUC 32057)—the oldest of the extant ancient Egyptian healing texts—is often labelled as the gynaecological papyrus. pEbers also stands out, as it alone contains about 70 prescriptions dedicated exclusively to women and female issues. Not only does the use of the noun *st* and the pronoun suffix *.s* refer to ‘a woman’ specifically, a significant number of prescriptions in the corpus of healing texts from the Middle and New Kingdoms—such as pEdwin Smith, pBerlin P 3038 (= pBrugsch), pLondon (= pBM EA 10059), pCarlsberg VIII, pRamesseum III and IV, and pBerlin P 3027 (= pMutter und Kind)—are concerned with female body parts/reproductive organs, and touch on questions related to fertility, contraception, pregnancy, birth, and postpartum.<sup>2</sup> Other texts—such as pHearst, pLouvre–Carlsberg (= pLouvre E 32847 + pCarlsberg 917) and pChester Beatty VI (= BM EA 10686)—do not touch on specific female issues, but refer to the patient as ‘a man or a woman’.

Although primarily referred to as *st* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 698–700), women are on

<sup>2</sup>There are not nearly as many prescriptions for children as there are for women. The two are often combined, as in pBerlin P 3027 and pRamesseum III and IV, or in close proximity to one another, as in pEbers, and only rarely (in the same formulas) are they found under the corresponding subject groups for adults (pEbers 262; pEbers 272–273; pRamesseum III A 30–31; pBerlin 30). Treatments could be age-specific, intended either for elder children (pRamesseum III B 12; pRamesseum III B 14; pEbers 273), or newborns and infants. In the case of newborns and infants, the prescribed remedies were often said to be ingested by the mother (pEbers 272; pBerlin P 3027 H), so that the active substance could be absorbed through the breast milk (GRAPOW, 1956: 47; WESTENDORF, 1999: 439–440). It is, nonetheless, healing methods that include spells, amulets, invocations, etc. that predominate in the treatment of children (KOLTA & SCHWARZMANN-SCHAFHAUSER, 2000: 133–136).

Tab. 1: Overview of prescriptions that describe the patient explicitly as ‘a man or a woman’ in the heading or in the instruction that follow. Table is based on **VON DEINES** and **WESTENDORF** (1962: 695–698 (h)), **GRAPOW** (1956: 43–45) and **SCHJØDT** (2020).

	Heading <i>s st r-pw</i>	Instruction <i>s st r-pw</i>	Added <i>st r-pw</i>	Inconsistency in noun or pronoun
pEbers 67 (20.23–21.7)		<i>hmt tꜣy r-pw</i>		
pEbers 93 (24.1–3)		x		x
pEbers 99 (24.14–18)	x			
pEbers 103 (25.8–11)	x			
pEbers 154 (32.17–33.1)		x	x	
pEbers 162 (33.13–15)		x		
pEbers 167 (34.7–10)	x	x		
pEbers 212 (43.15–19)		x		
pEbers 251 (47.15–48.3)				x
pEbers 300 (52.15–17)	x			
pEbers 458 (65.18–19)		x		
pEbers 705 (86.4–5)	x			
pEbers 709 (86.10–11)	x			
pHearst 13 (1.12–13)	x			
pHearst 37 (3.7–8)		x		
pHearst 83 (6.16–7.2)	x			
pHearst 133 (9.11–12)	x			
pHearst 134 (9.12–13)	x			
pHearst 139 (9.16–17)	x			
pHearst 150 (10.11–12)				x
pHearst 151 (10.12–13)	x			
pHearst 232 (15.11–13)	x			
pChester Beatty VI 10 (5.8–12)	x			
pChester Beatty VI 11 (5.12–6.1)	x			
pChester Beatty VIII vs. 5.1–3)	[...]	x		
pBerlin P 3038 38 (3.12–4.1)		x		
pBerlin P 3038 42 (4.3–4)		x		
pLouvre-Carlsberg rt. B9, x+6	[...]	x		
pLouvre-Carlsberg vs. x+6 (23–25)		x		
pLouvre-Carlsberg vs. x+9 (26–27)	[...]	x		x

Tab. 2: List of all healing texts referred to in this article, including provenance, date and key references.

	Provenance	Date	Key References
<b>pKahun</b> (= pUC 32057)	El-Lahun (settlement context)	c. 1850 BCE, Dynasty 12, Middle Kingdom	<b>GRIFFITH</b> (1898), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>BARDINET</b> (1995), <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999) and <b>COLLIER</b> and <b>QUIRKE</b> (2004); UCL Petrie Museum (accessed 09.01.2024).
<b>pEbers</b>	Theban necropolis? (possible funerary context)	c. 1550 BCE, Dynasty 17, Second Intermediate Period	<b>EBERS</b> and <b>STERN</b> (1875), <b>JOACHIM</b> (1890), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>BARDINET</b> (1995), <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999) and <b>POPKO</b> et al. (2021); Universität Leipzig (accessed 09.01.2024).
<b>pEdwin Smith</b>	Theban necropolis? (possible funerary context)	c. 1550 BCE, Dynasty 17, Second Intermediate Period	<b>BREASTED</b> (1930), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>BARDINET</b> (1995), <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999), <b>ALLEN</b> (2005) and <b>SANCHEZ</b> and <b>MELTZER</b> (2012)
<b>pBerlin P 3038</b> (= pBrugsch)	Sakkara necropolis (funerary context)	c. 1250 BCE, Dynasty 19, New Kingdom	<b>WRESZINSKI</b> (1909), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>BARDINET</b> (1995) and <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999); Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (accessed 09.01.2024).
<b>pLondon</b> (= pBM EA 10059)	Unknown	c. 1350 BCE, Dynasty 18, New Kingdom	<b>WRESZINSKI</b> (1912), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>BARDINET</b> (1995), <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999) and <b>LEITZ</b> (1999); British Museum (accessed 09.01.2024).
<b>pCarlsberg VIII</b>	Unknown	1400–1200 BCE, Dynasties 18–19, New Kingdom	<b>IVERSEN</b> (1939), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999), <b>SCHJØDT</b> (2024a) and <b>SCHJØDT</b> (2024b)
<b>pRamesseum III and IV</b> (=pBM EA 10756 and pBM EA 10757)	Ramesseum, Theban necropolis (funerary context)	c. 1800 BCE, Dynasty 12, Middle Kingdom	<b>GARDINER</b> (1955), <b>BARNES</b> (1956), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>BARDINET</b> (1995) and <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999); British Museum (accessed 09.01.2024).
<b>pBerlin P 3027</b> (= pErman = pMutter und Kind)	Theban necropolis (funerary context)	Dynasty 18, New Kingdom	<b>ERMAN</b> (1901) and <b>YAMAZAKI</b> (2003)
<b>pHearst</b> (museum no. 6-9259)	Deir el-Ballas?	c. 1550 BCE, Dynasty 17, Second Intermediate Period	<b>REISNER</b> (1905), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>BARDINET</b> (1995) and <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999); Hearst Museum of Anthropology (accessed 09.01.2024).
<b>pLouvre–Carlsberg</b> (= pLouvre E 32847 + pCarlsberg 917)	Unknown	Dynasty 18, New Kingdom	<b>BARDINET</b> (2018) and <b>SCHJØDT</b> (2020); Musée du Louvre (accessed 09.01.2024).
<b>pChester Beatty VI</b> (= BM EA 10686)	Theban Necropolis (funerary context)	c. 1250 BCE, Dynasty 19, New Kingdom	<b>GARDINER</b> (1935), <b>GRAPOW</b> (1958), <b>BARDINET</b> (1995) and <b>WESTENDORF</b> (1999); British Museum (accessed 09.01.2024).

occasion also referred to as *hmt* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 597) or *mwt* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 363–364), or even rarer with the combined form *st-hmt* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 703).<sup>3</sup>

Beginning of the *phrt*-recipe made for *hmwt*-women, causing the *st*-woman to stop conceiving (*n hmwt r-dit ib st iwr*) for one year, two years or three years: *kꜣ*-part of acacia (*šndt*), carob (*dꜣrt*), dates (*bnr*), to be ground with one *hnw*-measure of honey (*bit*). Moisten the *ftt*-cloth and place into her *iwf* (pEbers 783 (93.6-8), GRAPOW, 1958: 476).

pEbers 783 above include both the plural noun *hmwt* (women) and the more usual singular noun *st* (woman) in the same sentence, suggesting a possible significance to the distinction between the different forms beyond singular and plural: while the nouns *s* (man) and *st* (woman) are differentiated by the feminine *t* ending as well as male and female classifiers, the nouns *tꜣy* (man) and *hmt* (woman) are arguably also differentiated by references to (pro)creation: *tꜣy* is written with an ejaculating penis. *hmt* is written with a well of water, as a possible reference not only to the womb but also the creative potential of the primeval waters of Nun and the river Nile (AUDOIT, 2020; AUDOIT, 2022; MANNICHE, 2006; MANNICHE, 2022; SCRIVENS, 2021).<sup>4</sup> The term *hmt* is used to define not only a woman but also the female reproductive organs, obviously differentiated by the classifiers. COLLOMBERT (1995: 205–208), drawing on LORET (1896: 196–209) and GARDINER (1947: II, 258–262), has even suggested that *hmt* may specifically refer to a fertile woman/woman with child. In the next section, the conceptual differentiation between men and women will be explored from the perspective of the female body, drawing further attention to the significance of the female reproductive organs.

### 3 The particularity of the female body

It has been argued that the ancient Egyptians only had basic and unsophisticated knowledge about anatomy and physiology (WEEKS, 1995: 1789–1790), that they ‘did not and could not know about biology’ (SWEENEY, 2005: 145; cf. KOLTA & SCHWARZMANN-SCHAFHAUSER, 2000: 127–128; NUNN, 2002: 56). Such claims are caught in an epistemological dilemma, surely true from an asymmetrical comparative approach, without taking seriously the radical difference that exists between modern and ancient Egyptian conceptions and experiences (e.g. NYORD, 2018; NYORD, 2019; NYORD, 2020c). The precise use and meaning of specific concepts are complicated by a highly specialised terminology, including many rare and unattested words. It is not always clear what body parts, organs, substances or processes are meant, and overlap in use between different concepts causes considerable confusion. For example, while pEbers 789–794 (93.18–94.7, GRAPOW, 1958: 486–487) is said ‘to cause the *mwt-rmꜥ* of a woman to descend/return to its place’ (*nt rdit hꜣ mwt-rmꜥ nt st r st.s*), pEbers 795 (94.7–8, GRAPOW, 1958: 486) is said ‘to cause the *hmt* to descend/return to its place’ (*nt rdit hꜣ hmt r st.s*). While both *mwt-rmꜥ* and *hmt* may refer to the female reproductive organs, *mwt-rmꜥ* (lit. the mother of people) is also argued to refer to specific parts of the reproductive organs, possibly some temporary fetal organ such as the placenta (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1961: 364; cf. WEEKS, 1970; VON DEINES, 1956), and *hmt* can refer to both external and internal genitals more broadly (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 597–600; cf. NYORD, 2009: 291; ČERNÝ, 1976: 122; FAULKNER, 1962: 35; GARDINER, 1957: 566). The two concepts also overlap in use with additional concepts, such as *kꜣt* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 894–895) and *iwf* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1961: 30–32), which further complicates what body

<sup>3</sup>Children are referred to exclusively as *hrd* (VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 693–694), sometimes combined with other terms to indicate the sex or age of the child.

<sup>4</sup>It is usually argued that the primeval waters of Nun (and the annual return of these waters as the river Nile, personified by the god Hapy) was androgynous / not sexually differentiated, and thus very different from all the following stages of creation (HORNUNG, 1982: 171).

parts, organs, substances or processes are meant. This is ultimately because ‘no one-to-one correlation exists between any two languages, and translation is often further complicated by cultural differences between source and receptor, which is naturally amplified when attempting to translate centuries or millennia-old texts’ (SCHJØDT, 2020: 5; cf. IMHAUSEN & POMMERENING, 2010; QUACK, 2003). But this should not prevent us from trying to identify the local backgrounds of ancient Egyptian body worlds.

In accordance with pEbers 854–854a (99.1–5, GRAPOW, 1958: 1), the inner body was conceptualised around the heart, its movements, and a system of *mtw*-cords that connected every body part to it. pEbers 856h (103.16–18, GRAPOW, 1958: 17) explains, more specifically, that ‘all (the *mtw*-cords) come together in his heart (*iw iw r ꜣw n ḥꜣty.f*), divide by his nose (*psš n šrt.f*) and join together in his rectum/hind parts’ (*dmd r ꜣw n pḥwy.fy*). This system of vessels not only connected the different organs, but also transported various substances. It is not always clear which vessels carried what, nor how the different substances interacted, but it seems that what we might label as respiratory, digestive and reproductive systems were all considered part of the larger system of *mtw*-cords (e.g. GRAPOW, 1956: 59–71; RITNER, 2006; STROUHAL et al., 2014b: 178–200; WESTENDORF, 1999: 108–138, 328–360). pEbers 854i (100.7, GRAPOW, 1958: 4), for instance, describe that ‘there are two *mtw*-cords to his testicles, and they deliver *mtwt*-semen’ (*iw mtw 2 n ḥrwy.fy nt.sn dd mtwt*). This statement indicates conceptions about the origins of semen in the male body, in particular the perception of a connection between the *mtw*-system and the male reproductive organs.

But reproductive knowledge was not limited to the male body. The ancient Egyptian healing texts were, as we have already seen, very concerned with reproduction, and keen to determine fertility, pregnancy, the viability, and sex of the unborn child. They did so by explaining particular signs on the female body, such as the colour of her eyes or the condition of her *mtw*-cords, by providing various methods for testing and observing (POMMERENING, 2020: 383–389). pCarlsberg VIII 5 (vs. x+II,x+4–x+6, SCHJØDT, 2024a: 57–59; cf. GRAPOW, 1958: 469), for instance, prescribes an onion to be placed inside the woman’s *iwf* overnight: ‘If a smell appears from her mouth, she will give birth/is pregnant (*ir ḥpr sty m r.s iw.s r msy*). If [there is no smell, she will not give birth/is not pregnant]’. The rationale was presumably to determine whether there was any kind of blockage in her vessels that would prevent the smell from reaching her mouth. Other similar examples include prescriptions to be taken vaginally or orally, to see if the woman would vomit or become flatulent (e.g. pKahun 27; pBerlin P 3038 193; pBerlin P 3038 194; pCarlsberg VIII 6; pCarlsberg VIII 8). We see that the mouth (and larger digestive system) was considered part of, or at least in some way, connected to the female reproductive organs. This understanding is probably connected with funerary beliefs, evoking particular conceptions about the body of the goddess Nut in the eternal solar-Osirian cycle: The sun-god Re travelled over the sky in his solar bark every day, set in the western horizon, before he was swallowed by his mother, the sky goddess Nut, every evening. He journeyed through her body (known as the underworld/beyond) every night, to unite briefly with the god Osiris, before being reborn by his mother at sunrise. He emerged from between her thighs in the eastern horizon, in the red colour that comes from the sun-disc at dawn (VON LIEVEN, 2007: 378), whereupon he again sailed up into the sky (BILLING, 2002: 18–21; cf. WILKINSON, 2003: 160–163). Any blockage to this journey would be detrimental and therefore had to be fought by all means.

The various conditions attributed to the female reproductive organs in the healing texts, include anything from issues with the reproductive organs themselves (e.g. pKahun 4; pEdwin Smith vs. 20.13–21.3), to issues in any other body-part, from teeth, eyes, ears and neck, to feet and legs (e.g. pKahun 1–17). We also find more abstract problems described as reproductive organs gone wandering (*m ḥp*) (e.g. pKahun 2 (2.5–8); COLLIER & QUIRKE, 2004: 58; GRAPOW, 1958: 458), in need of being returned/descend (*ḥꜣ*) to their place (e.g. pEbers 789–795 (93.18–94.8), GRAPOW, 1958: 486–487). The causes are explained through what can be observed, but also more theoretically as ‘it is an obstruction (*šnw*) of blood in her *ḥmt*’ (pEdwin Smith vs. 20.13–21.3; GRAPOW, 1958: 466), ‘it is discharges / *ḥꜣw*-substances of the *ḥmt* in her eyes’ (pKahun 1 (1.1–5); COLLIER & QUIRKE, 2004: 58; GRAPOW, 1958: 457–458), ‘it is terrors / *nryw*-substances of the *ḥmt*’ (pKahun 8 (1.25–27); COLLIER & QUIRKE, 2004: 59; GRAPOW, 1958: 460), ‘it is an overflow / *nmsw*-substances of the *ḥmt*’ (pKahun

2 (2.5–8); COLLIER & QUIRKE, 2004: 58; GRAPOW, 1958: 458). It is important to notice, moreover, that the issue of movement, including blocked or misplaced organs and substances (AUDOIT, 2021; AUDOIT, 2022), is not limited to the female reproductive organs. Similar descriptions also exist in relation to the heart and the rectum/hind parts. We find descriptions that include a turning (*tf*) *ib*-heart (pEbers 855f (100.16–17), GRAPOW, 1958: 8–9), a falling (*ndḥdh*) *ib*-heart (pEbers 855i (101.2–5), GRAPOW, 1958: 7), turning (*n*) in the rectum/hind parts (pChester Beatty VI.9 (5.7–8), GRAPOW, 1958: 220), and causes are explained as ‘it is the *ḥty*-heart weakening (*wgg*) from the heat of the rectum/hind parts’ (pEbers 855f (100.16–17), GRAPOW, 1958: 8–9), ‘it is the *ib*-heart drowning/overflowing (*ḥt*) in the *ḥty*-heart’ (pEbers 855i (101.2–5), GRAPOW, 1958: 7). These formulations indicate the theoretical possibility of movement, being blocked or misplaced, as something that heart, rectum/hind parts and female reproductive organs had in common, but also that problems anywhere in the body could be caused by or at least in some way be related to these specific organs, connected vessels and substances. They indicate particular thoughts and experiences about the body in general, but also the female body in particular, its processes and functions, that immediately raise questions about ‘what is literal, what is metaphorical, and what is analogical’ (NYORD, 2017: 13; cf. NYORD, 2020a; POMMERENING, 2017). We also get a sense of how ‘the conceptual patterns of “substances” understood as moving among and affecting the different parts of the body [were] conceptualised by means of projections from a wide range of experiential domains’ (NYORD, 2017: 39–40). In the next section, I will extend the scope beyond the patient’s body to draw further attention to the treatment process—what I describe as processes of making connections—and how the patient’s bodily symptoms became entangled in mutually determining relations between patient, healer, choice of ingredients and mythical precedents, which together formed assemblages of affective environments.

#### 4 The processes of making connections

Ancient Egyptian conceptions and experiences were not limited to the physical boundaries of the body, but also include the larger assemblages of affective environment. The manufacturing process has been pointed out as a ‘central part of the treatment, connecting the ingredients—imitating symptoms and counterparts—and patients’ (POMMERENING, 2017: 526; cf. HSU, 2020). In addition, when there was a mythical precedent for that which the patient was suffering from, we see that he/she could identify ‘with the divine victim and then call upon the appropriate divine healer to cure them as had been accomplished in the myth’ (WALKER, 1993: 95). Making connections beyond the patient’s body, between particular entities/properties, could also be achieved through linguistic details, such as in the below treatments concerned with eye disorders.

Another (recipe for not letting hair grow into the eye after it is removed): Fluid from the flies of a dog (*mw nw ḥw n ṯsmw*), 1. [The hair is cleared]. To be [placed] in the eyes of a man (*m irty n ṯy*). It (the hair) will never grow (again). The correct method (pCarlsberg VIII 12 (rt. x+II,x+5–6), SCHIÖDT, 2024b: 20–21).

Another (recipe for not letting hair grow into the eye after it is removed): Milk from a frog (*irtt pgg*), 1. The hair is cleared. [To be placed in the eyes] of a woman (*[m irty] n ḥmt*). It (the hair) will never grow (again). The correct method (pCarlsberg VIII 13 (rt. x+II,x+6), SCHIÖDT, 2024b: 21–22).

SCHIÖDT (2024b: 31–32) has identified grammar to be one possible explanation for sex-differentiated treatments, pointing out that the two formulas above consist of one drug each. The first one, employing *mw nw ḥw n ṯsmw* (fluid from the flies of a dog) to prevent hair from growing into the eye of a man, is made up of masculine nouns (pCarlsberg VIII 12, above), whilst the second one, using *irtt pgg* (milk from a frog) to treat the same or a similar condition in women, is made up of feminine nouns (pCarlsberg VIII 13, above). Similar patterns, of making connections through language and grammar, are also found in two parallel birth prognoses, where the woman is instructed to urinate on a bag of barley and a bag of emmer every day: If

both grow, she will give birth/is pregnant. If only the barley (masculine noun) grows, it is a male child (*ir rdw it tꜣ pw*). If only the emmer (feminine noun) grows, it is a female child (*ir rdw bdt st pw*). If neither grow, she will not bear a child/is not pregnant (pBerlin P 3038 199 (vs. 2.2–5), **GRAPOW**, 1958: 474; cf. pCarlsberg VIII 3, **SCHIÖDT**, 2024a: 55–56; cf. **GRAPOW**, 1958: 474). However, grammar cannot be the only explanation. In fact, a very similar treatment as prescribed to females with an eyelash disorder in pCarlsberg VIII 13 (above) is not sex-specific in pLouvre–Carlsberg (below). This indicates that although ‘milk from a frog’ may have been considered particularly effective as remedy to treat this kind of symptom in women, in other contexts, it was also thought useful in treating similar symptoms regardless of gender. **SCHIÖDT** (2024b: 32) even speculates whether these treatments may originally have been gender-specific and only later developed into more generic treatments.

*phrt*-recipe [for] not [letting hair] grow into the eye after it is removed: Milk from a frog (*irtt nt pgg*), left in dew overnight with oil. To be placed on the place of the hair after it is removed from the eye (pLouvre–Carlsberg vs. x+10,25–x+11,2, **SCHIÖDT**, 2020: 457–463).

It is curious to note that another recipe for preventing hair from growing into the eye, also found in pCarlsberg VIII 8 (rt. x+II,x+1–3, **SCHIÖDT**, 2024b: 14–15), includes ingredients such as *snf ꜣt* (blood from a female donkey) and *snf srit* (blood from a female sheep). The numerous ingredients involved consist of both masculine and feminine forms, and the fact that the sex of the patient is unknown, makes grammar a less obvious explanation. In terms of connecting the different ingredients—imitating symptoms and counterparts—and patients, we could speculate whether the significance of blood from a female donkey/sheep may be related to the potential powers of menstrual blood (which we will return to later), but we again find similar recipes elsewhere in the corpus of healing texts, whose ingredients instead include *snf n ꜣ* (blood from a donkey) and *snf n r* (blood from a goat) (pEbers 425 (63.14–18), **GRAPOW**, 1958: 98; cf. pLouvre–Carlsberg rt. A3, 9–10, **SCHIÖDT**, 2020: 239–240). While this may obviously reflect nothing more than variation within the corpus of healing texts, it could just as well have to do with particular patient groups, bodily properties, or substances that under particular circumstances could be considered in particular ways.

The above formulas may also be rooted in the principle of treating like with like and opposite with opposite (**LEITZ**, 2005). It has been argued that it was the shape, texture, colour, and smell of drugs, their appropriation, together with the larger treatment process (**POMMERENING**, 2017), that turned the drugs into affective substances (**SCHIÖDT**, 2020: 20–21). Although ‘milk from a frog’ cannot be meant literally—frogs do not have milk but may secrete substances perceived as similar to milk in both texture and colour—the use of milk as a drug more generally may reference Isis as the archetypal healer setting a divine precedent for healing (see Section 6). Milk as cure to eye disease, specifically, may also be a reference to Hathor when healing the eye of Horus with breast milk in the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*. The significance of ‘fluid from the flies of a dog’ is even less clear. The dog may be a reference to Seth, who was the one who wounded Horus’ eye in the first place. In fact, many of the drugs used in pCarlsberg VIII are closely connected to Seth.<sup>5</sup> Not only do they consist of components of animals that this deity could transform into, they are also specifically hairless animals, which is the case for both frog and flies, with the possible rationale of treating opposite with opposite, transferring the property of hairlessness onto the patient (**SCHIÖDT**, 2024b: 32). We recognise a general way of thinking in terms of analogies and interconnected structures, where the choice of ingredients was often ‘oriented to the present appearance of the illness and knowledge of the process of development of the illness’ (**POMMERENING**, 2020: 391; cf. **LEITZ**, 2005).

While the above section has focused on symptoms and treatments through processes of making particular connections between patient, healer and ingredients, the scope is now extended to also include the body as

<sup>5</sup>The different active substances can be grouped into categories: agricultural substances were associated with Osiris, animal with Seth, mineral substances with Hathor. In addition, substances such as beeswax and honey, oils and ointment were specifically associated with Re, beer with Horus, wine with Shemu. Several substances such as oils and textiles could also be associated with multiple gods (**WALKER**, 1993: 98–99).

microcosmic field. We return to the question of reproduction, to explore how particular connections could be assembled (or in fact disassembled) by also evoking specific natural and mythical events, also considered part of the larger affective environments.

## 5 The body as microcosmic field

Menstruation is often associated with the Nile flood (R. M. JANSSEN, 2021: 44; PEHAL & PREININGER SVOBODOVÁ, 2018: 116). The uterus was, according to Audouit, perceived as ‘an organic receptacle that opened and closed continuously—opening to expel menstrual blood, opening to receive sperm, closing for fecundation, and reopening for birth’ (AUDOUIT, 2020: 385). In pregnancy, moreover, Leitz has pointed out that the ancient Egyptians believed that ‘the menstrual blood flowed into the inside of the body, and they feared the reverse of the process, which would lead to miscarriage’ (LEITZ, 1999: 67). It seems obvious that the use and placement of different fibre items, mentioned in the below formulas, were intended as bandages or tampons, as physical barriers to prevent bleeding. But the additional elements of colour, material, number and kind of knots, other active substances, reciting and sometimes writing incantations, also combine into what DIELEMAN (2015: 24–29) describes as ‘a complex amuletic apparatus’.

I am Anubis, who dams a dam. I am Anubis, and through me Isis is released. My arms [...] my bandages. Turn back! Isis will come forth to shoot on you. This *r*-utterance is to be recited over a *stp*-cloth of fine linen. This *r*-utterance is to be written on it in its entirety and given to the woman (at) her rectum/hind parts (pLondon 39 = 27 (IX.7–9), GRAPOW, 1958: 497; LEITZ, 1999: pl. 34).

(Another *r*-utterance to) repel the attack of a dead person or a god [with] the *ḥkꜣw*-powers of Anubis (*ḥsf tr n mwt n ntr [m] ḥkꜣw inpw*). The Nile flood encroaches on the sandal of Tait, but what lies within will remain (*ḥrt imyt*). Words to be recited when you have placed two *ṯswt*-knots of linen of *r-ḥꜣt*-fabric at the opening, inside her *iwf*, to repel that which is done against her (*r ḥsf irwt r.s*) (pLondon 42 = 30 (X.1–2), GRAPOW, 1958: 482; LEITZ, 1999: pl. 35).

These amuletic apparatuses were mobilised by the interplay between the different elements and their different symbolic meanings (without privileging one over the other), and functioned as potent objects of entanglement, connection and protection (WENDRICH, 2006: 252; cf. PINCH, 2006: 81–84, 104–119). Specifically, to dam a dam, through the use of knots, is synonymous with preventing the free flow of fluids (DOBBIN-BENNETT, 2021: 311), not just to protect and maintain what was within the womb but also creation itself, evoking the *ḥkꜣw*-powers of Anubis to repel any attack by a dead person or a god. The larger amuletic apparatuses include multiple layers, potentially making connections with the Valley and Drunkenness Festivals and the much-anticipated flooding of the Nile, when torrential rains in Ethiopia sent fertile red clay with the Nile, not only making the river red like blood but also on occasions higher than usual, potentially causing poor harvests or even crop failure, death and suffering across the entire land (e.g. ROBERTS, 1995: 10–12). In the mythical counterpart—*The Book of the Heavenly Cow/ Destruction of Mankind*—humans had rebelled against the gods. Re was angry and sent his daughter Hathor in the form of the fierce lion-goddess Sekhmet, to teach them a lesson. However, because she grew more blood thirsty every day, Re and the other gods grew weary of total destruction and therefore decided to trick her by pouring a mix of mandrake and beer (or variously just beer coloured red) over the country. Sekhmet drank the blood-like substance, became docile and forgot about destroying humanity (LICHTHEIM, 2006: 197–199; SIMPSON, 2003: 289–298). pLondon (above) explicitly refers to the mythical event of blocking the Nile flood from reaching the sanctuary of Tait, who was the goddess of weaving, associated with Isis and Nephthys in providing mummy bandages. Isis and Nephthys also ‘knotted together’ the body of Osiris after he had been murdered and dismembered by his brother Seth. The significance of Anubis may, similarly, be ‘his presumed intimate knowledge of knotting, as he also was

involved in wrapping the mummy' (WENDRICH, 2006: 250; cf. PINCH, 2006: 108). But he was also capable of fighting off Seth, and as 'the assessor of hearts' and 'overseer of the tribunal', he was also the gatekeeper between the world of the living and the beyond. He controlled who could transverse between worlds.

The amuletic apparatuses concerned with preventing bleeding and miscarriage are often said to be placed on the woman's rectum/hind parts, on or inside her *iwf*, indicating that the immediate threat was directed towards these particular body parts/orifices. pLondon 40 = 28 (IX.9–14, GRAPOW, 1958: 482–483; LEITZ, 1999: pl. 34), for instance, conceptualises the interplay between male and female intruders, and the rectum/hind parts as gateway into the body experienced as a vessel into and out of which various substances and entities could move (e.g. NYORD, 2020a: 91). The purpose of the amuletic apparatus was to maintain/retain bodily balance, not just to prevent/stop bleeding but also, specifically, 'to allow the egg to grow strong and to not see dreams' (*srwd swḥt pw tm mꜣ rswt*). Not seeing dreams draws attention to the perceived connection between being in the egg and sleeping, the experience of a miniature descent into the netherworld (PINCH, 2006: 107), a state of liminality, when all people, men and women, young and old alike, not only could interact with but also were more vulnerable to attacks from the beyond (e.g. SZPAKOWSKA, 2003; SZPAKOWSKA, 2011; SZPAKOWSKA, 2020). These attacks were often identified as the breath or wind (e.g. *tꜣw, nšny, nft*) of disease bringing entities, the justified dead (*ḥt/w*) or other deceased humans (*mwt/t/w*), or a whole array of other liminal beings, such as enemies (*ḥfty/t/w*), intruders (*dꜣy/t/w*), wanderers (*šmꜣyw*), messengers (*wpwtyw*), slaughterers (*ḥtyw*), etc. (MEGAHED, 2020; SASS, 2020). While connections have been drawn between these entities and Sekhmet (GRAVES-BROWN, 2018: 3, 69–71), the name of the disease they bring is often followed by a Seth classifier (e.g. SWEENEY, 2005: 146; TE VELDE, 1967: 22–23). In several of the pLondon formulas, the healer takes the role of Anubis, bringing forth Isis (possibly the mother) to protect and heal the patient (fetus/child), who was effectively projected into the role of her son Horus, who quarrelled with his uncle Seth over the throne of Egypt (SZPAKOWSKA, 2009: 800). The ingredients in pLondon 40 = 28 includes hair from a donkey and liver from a pig, which reinforce the impression that Seth was the perceived god behind the threat (WESTENDORF, 1966: 145). Particular mythical themes also appear in the same formula, such as the association with the gods at the head of Heliopolis. These gods played a decisive role in protecting the sun-god Re as he travelled through the night sky, standing at the prow of the solar bark, driving away the forces of danger/chaos (see Section 3). This aligns well with an understanding of 'the egg' as a metaphor for womb and fetus that in a configurative sense refers back to the time of the first creation (e.g. MANNICHE, 2006: 97–104; PINCH, 2006: 23; WALKER, 1993: 91).

From the perspective of specific mythical context, we may recognise that recipes with the apparent intention to prevent conception are numerous in the corpus of healing texts. They consist of different mixtures, among others acacia, carob, dates, and honey added to a piece of cloth and placed inside the *iwf* of a female patient (pEbers 783: see Section 2), while other more ambiguous methods include ingredients such as crocodile excrement (e.g. pRamesseum IV C 2–3; pKahun XXI). The intention behind these prescriptions may surely have been to block the passage of the sperm, to prevent fertilisation (e.g. DE-WHYTE, 2018: 29; NUNN, 2002: 196; ROBINS, 1993: 79–80; STROUHAL et al., 2014a: 156–158; WATTERSON, 1991: 88), but using crocodile excrement may also be associated with the uterus being represented symbolically as a crocodile, whose own habitat was the primeval waters of Nun (MANNICHE, 2006: 100). While the crocodile is often associated with Sokar,<sup>6</sup> there is also a clear connection between animals, excrement, and Seth, who in several myths is described as spreading his semen unproductively (e.g. the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*).<sup>7</sup> And because Seth sought to injure Isis during her pregnancy with his future adversary Horus, he may also have been considered dangerous to pregnant women, as well as those in childbirth (TE VELDE, 1967: 28–29). It has also been suggested that references to Seth potentially were intended to 'coerce the compliance of an afflicted womb considered to possess an independent and contrary will' (RITNER, 1984: 221). The fact that

<sup>6</sup>In the funerary literature/cannibal hymns, Sokar is referred to as one who eats his twin/brother/other gods, who arguably feeds on magic contained within the belly, and reverse creation (NYORD, 2009: 389–392).

<sup>7</sup>Note also that Seth's only known offspring, Maga, was a crocodile (RITNER, 1984: 216).

the eternally pregnant goddess, Taweret, is also partially represented as a crocodile is further indication that protection of mother and child from malevolent forces was the ultimate goal (e.g. **BORGHOUTS**, 1982: 15–19; **CERUTI**, 2020; **GABLER**, 2017: 7; **LOEBEN**, 2021). pRamesseum IV C 17–24 can be understood similarly. It is concerned with things to be done for the child on the day of his birth, starting with determining his viability: ‘Take a piece of [*mwt-rmt...*] rub in milk and give to him over three days. If he vomits it, he will die (*ir kꜣꜣst mt.fpw*). If [he swallows] it, he will live (*ir [ꜣm.f] st ꜣnh.fpw*)’ (**BARNES**, 1956: pl. 18; **GRAPOW**, 1958: 500–501). The rationale is probably similar to those mentioned earlier: to detect any kind of blockage in the child’s bodily vessels. The active substance *mwt-rmt* (lit. mother of people) refers to (specific parts of) the female reproductive organs, possibly some temporary fetal organ such as the placenta (see Section 3; cf. **VON DEINES**, 1956; **VON DEINES & WESTENDORF**, 1961: 364; **WESTENDORF**, 1999: 203, 222), but its exact nature is as of yet uncertain. It seems beyond doubt, however, that together with milk (which we will return to in the next section), it was ascribed great significance, arguably considered as a double of the new-born individual that after birth could function as some sort of talisman (e.g. **MANNICHE**, 2006: 104–109; **MANNICHE**, 2015; **STROUHAL** et al., 2014a: 106). The protection formula that follows supports this, as it seeks the protection of both mother and child, by identifying the malevolent entity by name: ‘Your breath is the-screamer-who-takes-away-the-fragrance (*tꜣw.k wgb-iti-nḥnh*)’ (**BARNES**, 1956: pl. 18; **GRAPOW**, 1958: 500–501). This implies that knowing and, more importantly, making known the identity of that which was the cause of the threat could have a significant impact on the outcome. The healer identifies the malevolent entity in the air, as a smell in the wind that takes away the good (divine/protective/procreative) smell of incense. And further down in the formula, he is also recognised as someone who is dead, as someone who brings his phallus and by way of *ḥkꜣw*-powers also seeks to have intercourse, impregnate and embrace during the night, and kiss during the day. **NYORD** (2020c: 9) argues that,

illnesses brought on by the dead fall in two main categories depending on whether the deceased is thought to inject fluids into the body of the patient or rather attack the surface of the body directly. This distinction is shown in turn to correspond to two fundamental ways in which humans experienced their own bodies, and the treatment can be seen to focus symbolically on the strengthening of the corresponding aspects.

In the case of pRamesseum IV C 17–24, the healer not only identified the threat but also called upon the creator gods, who had fashioned the *ḥmt* (the female reproductive organs), in order to strengthen the bodily boundaries of the woman and, perhaps more importantly, the fetus (in the egg) who seemingly was the immediate target of the assault (**NYORD**, 2020a: 98).

pRamesseum IV C 17–24 includes a final element: an utterance to be recited over an image of the child, arguably with the desired effect to induce change, by bringing certain potentials inherent in the pregnant woman and her unborn child to actualisation. Following **NYORD** (2020b: 64–77) and **NYORD** (forthcoming), the aim would be for the material image to become potent enough to ward off the influence of the dead person by acting as the patient’s substitute, transferring and absorbing the influence of the dead person from the patient’s body. By specifically seeking to place the nose of the dead person at the back of his head and make his semen ineffective, the image would (if successful) reverse the malevolent influence and make sure that the childbirth went smoothly, with mother and child out of danger. When considered together with the earlier cited formulas, it seems that the treatment of the patient could be sought by eliciting and fixing powers inherent in particular objects. By virtue of their material, shape, locality and other connections, linen bandages with text, amuletic knots of fabric/hair or the image of a child held the potential of making as well as affecting higher-level connections, between individual bodies, natural events and cosmic forces.

So far, I have examined the differential terminology of the human body, the particularity of the female body and, last but not least, the body as microcosmic field, drawing attention to how specific bodily symptoms and treatment methods could be conceptualised and experienced by evoking particular connections not just within but way beyond singular bodies, including patient and healer, ingredients and amuletic apparatuses,

natural and mythical events. In the last section, I will add yet another layer to the body worlds of the ancient Egyptians—the power of bodily fluids. Through the observation that the most important ingredients with human origin in the healing texts are female, I recognise how multiple diverging conceptions and experiences about sexual difference and creation continue to emerge from the ancient Egyptian material in its relations with the present.

## 6 The power of bodily fluids

Roth claims that ‘women were not credited with creating new life. Instead, the creative role is attached exclusively with the male sex’ (ROTH, 2000: 189; cf. BRYAN, 1996: 44; COONEY, 2009: 101–102). But how can this be? We have already seen how both male and female, human and non-human, had the ability to make the necessary connections for creation, to affect and maintain creation. Funerary literature provides more specific information in this respect, referring to the procreative process as placing the *ib* of the man towards that of the woman (NYORD, 2009: 55–143, 419–478; cf. VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1961: 35–42; VON DEINES & WESTENDORF, 1962: 577–582). The offspring of any procreative act was thus not simply the grown seed of the father but was arguably also the product of the joining of the father and mother’s *ib* (BRYAN, 1996; MÜLLER, 1966). According to later sources such as pJumilhac XII (22–25), we even find that the soft parts of the human body were attributed to the milk of the mother, while the bones/spine were attributed to the semen of the father (SAUNERON, 1960; YOYOTTE, 1962). It is interesting to note, moreover, that while male bodily fluids figure prominently in the funerary context, the most important active substances with human origin in the healing texts are female.

Another šnt-utterance for a burn on the first time: Your son Horus is burnt in the desert. Is water there? There is no water there. Water is in my mouth and the Nile is between my thighs. I come to extinguish the fire. Words to be recited over milk from (a woman) who has given birth to a male (child) (irtt nt mst tꜣy), gum and hair from a ram. To be placed on the burn (pEbers 499 (69.3–5), GRAPOW, 1958: 373).

Milk from a woman (who has given birth to a male child) is the most common among these bodily fluids, arguably because it had greater healing powers than any other fluid (AUDOUIT, 2020: 49; FORSHAW, 2014: 31; JEAN & LOYRETTE, 2010: 136–140; POMMERENING, 2015; RITNER, 2001: 328). It could be used against ailments anywhere on/in the body, applied as an ointment directly to the pain location, or absorbed and directed towards the actual problem by the *mtw*-cords (e.g. pEbers 642 (80.15–17), GRAPOW, 1958: 27). In the above example, the patient is referred to as Horus who is burnt for the first time in the desert. As the desert is often associated with the environments of Seth, this might very well be another analogy to the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*. It may also be a reference to the myth of the *Distant goddess*, which is synonymous with drought/death, followed by the *Return of the goddess*, which is synonymous with the coming of the flood (DARNELL, 1995; DARNELL, 1997; ROBERTS, 1995: 10–12). Other variants of the above formula describe Horus as alone ‘in the nest when fire had fallen into his body’ (*m-hnw sš pꜣ hr m hꜣw.f*). His mother Isis is said to be in the weaving-house with her sister Nephthys while his father Osiris is away with Hapy/the river Nile. Isis eventually comes to his rescue, quenching the burn with her milk, also described as ‘the healing waters within my breasts’ (*mw snbw imytw mndw.i*) (pLondon 46 = 34 (XIV.8–14), GRAPOW, 1958: 372; LEITZ, 1999: pl. 35). Isis is also said to have come from ‘within the sole lake’ (*m-hnw šꜣ wꜣ*) (pLondon 48 = 36 (XV.2–4), GRAPOW, 1958: 374; LEITZ, 1999: pl. 36). The key element here is that because there was no water available, Isis used fluids from her own body as remedy to cure the burn. Not only were her bodily fluids capable of extinguishing malevolent forces from the patient’s body, Isis can also be understood, similar to the distant and returning goddess, as an embodiment of the flood, and thus of creation itself. This is further substantiated by the description of the mythological event in which Isis and Nephthys suckled their dead brother, Osiris, in order to bring him back to life after he had been killed by his brother Seth (TYLDESLEY, 2011: 203).

Another potent bodily fluid was blood (from she whose first menstruation has come). According to PEHAL and PREININGER SVOBODOVÁ (2018: 121), menstrual blood falls into the same category as milk, as ‘female fluids nourishing the child. The difference is that one nourishes the child in the womb before birth, the other after parturition. When blood escapes, it does not fulfil its purpose any more. The role of milk is, in contrast, fulfilled only when escaping the body’. We thus see that menstrual blood and milk can be conceptualised as analogues as well as opposites implying each other (JEAN & LOYRETTE, 2010: 184–15, 323–335). Both are arguably evoked by pEbers 808:

The beginning of a *phrt*-recipe to prevent the breasts from going down (*tm rdi hꜣy bnty*): They (the breasts) shall be drenched with **blood from she whose first menstruation has come**, (NB!) the first of it (*snf n iw ꜥsmn.s m tp m tp ir.f*). Her belly and her thighs shall be smeared likewise, so that *gsw*-disease cannot arise in her (*nn ꜥpr.n gsw r.s*) (pEbers 808 (95.1–3), GRAPOW, 1958: 491).

One reading of this formula is that clotted breasts overproducing milk could ‘be cured by the application of a substance that is in certain aspects contextually its structural opposite. At the same time, however, as analogues, the very first unobscured flow of menstrual blood simultaneously stimulates the free flow of breast milk’ (PEHAL & PREININGER SVOBODOVÁ, 2018: 121). While blood from she whose first menstruation has come may imply menarche, we should not rule out the possibility that it could also imply blood from parturition (also known as lochia), carrying similar significance to that of the placenta (see Section 5; cf. JEAN & LOYRETTE, 2010: 181–184; J. J. JANSSEN, 1980: 141–143). It should also be added that, for the milk/blood analogy to make any sense, it seems reasonable to assume that the blood in question would have to come from the same body as the one lactating.

In addition to the inside/outside dualism, it is also argued that the potency of menstrual blood had a dual character (DOBBIN-BENNETT, 2021: 305; R. M. JANSSEN, 2021). From being considered a positive, creative and nurturing force as long as it stayed inside the female body (with Nut/Hathor/Isis as the prototype), it could arguably, when flowing out, turn into something polluting and impure, even potentially dangerous to the creational forces of the cosmos (with Sekhmet/Mut/Tefnut as a prototype) (e.g. JØRGENSEN, 2015; NIFOSI, 2019: 178; WILFONG, 1999). Frandsen explains that during menstruation the potency of blood was considered exceptionally strong, so much that it could actually ‘counteract the vital processes associated with creation’ (FRANDSEN, 2007: 103; cf. O’ROURKE, 2010: 45). When pEbers 808 is read through such a lens, it seems reasonable to also suggest that applying to the body blood from the first ovulation after birth was potentially intended to stop lactation altogether and, more importantly, boost fertility and creation. We have to remember that, according to the instructions of Ani, lactation could last up to three years (LICHTHEIM, 2006: 141). Blood from the first ovulation after birth may thus have been a much-anticipated signal that the body was ready to resume procreation. Applying it to the body from which it came may therefore have had a particular significance, intended to reinforce the natural flow between womb and breast (VON DEINES, 1976). *gsw*-disease may even refer to the bodily side-effects of having carried and nurtured numerous children, amplified by gravity and age. Although menstrual blood was potentially harmful when outside the body, its potency could possibly also be harnessed, not just to reverse the already reversed cosmic order (O’ROURKE, 2007: 171), but also to affect procreational and bodily aging processes.

## 7 Conclusion

While BARDINET (2020: 194–195) and others insist that current medical knowledge is necessary in order to recognise what he describes as the ‘pathological real’, the approach of this article has been the exact opposite. It has been an attempt to not only be more attentive to the consequences of comparative methodologies, relying as much as possible on what the ancient Egyptian healing texts from the Middle and New Kingdom can tell us about the local backgrounds of ancient Egyptian body worlds, but also to move away from one-dimensional flat descriptions and explanations. What I found was that the ancient Egyptians differentiated

conceptually between bodies, between men and women, between different kinds of men and women, young and old, human and non-human, but their concepts and ontological logics do not always fit neatly onto those of the present. Although the mythical prototype of Horus as patient and Isis as healer is often alluded to, possibly explaining why the reference to ‘a man’ is in the majority among the cases that indicate the sex of the patient, it is not always clear what bodies, body parts/organs, or processes are meant. Affective overlap between concepts, between natural and mythical contexts in this world and the beyond indicates that bodily boundaries were considered more fluid, in a state of flux, making absolute categorisations difficult, perhaps even beyond the point. The particularity of the female body is a case-in-point. Instead of focusing on single bodies alone, the corpus of healing texts seems more concerned with the processes of making connections, while simultaneously also disconnecting unwanted relations, between body parts, organs and substances, male and female, human and non-human, language and grammar, everyday life and beyond. I argue that bodies were considered to be in continuous processes of becoming, always in some way entangled in mutually determining relations that together form assemblages of affective environments, including multiple diverging conceptions and experiences that continue to emerge from the ancient Egyptian material in its relations with the present. The best example of this is perhaps the claim that creation was thought to be a male prerogative. Not only does the corpus of healing texts strongly indicate that both male and female, human and non-human, had the ability to make the necessary connections for creation, for affecting and maintaining creation. The numerous gynaecological texts, the use of contraception, together with attitudes towards menstrual blood and breast milk also points towards a recognised creative potential, not only connecting with conceptions about the goddess Nut (overlapping with other gods and goddesses), her celestial body as prototype and medium of creation but, crucially, also the primeval waters of Nun and the river Nile. It is my claim, therefore, that conceptions about ancient Egyptian body worlds, how sexual difference may have been conceptualised and experienced by the ancient Egyptians, will necessarily have to be formed in ontologically multimodal ways, not just including the familiar, that which resembles our own body worlds, but also the radically different, including a variety of expressions used to describe bodies and specific body parts, experienced bodily symptoms, their explanations and treatment methods.


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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The 'fragmented body' theory in Egyptology

## An ontological framework with a shadow side

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### Abstract

This paper takes as its point of departure the theory that the ancient Egyptian lived body was conceptualised as a 'fragmented' entity, a 'Gliederpuppe [jointed doll]'. The idea was proposed by Emma Brunner-Traut in 1988 in relation to her earlier work on 'aspective', the still dominant theory of Egyptian visual representation. Factors potentially influencing the inception, development, and impact of the 'fragmented body' theory are considered here. Concerning inception, the basis of the theory in various types of Egyptian cultural output and its interdisciplinary focus made it a compelling ontological framework. Regarding impact, we will see that early approval and the subsequent expansion of the theory led to a degree of longevity in scholarship, though parallel traditions might have also emerged. This success of the theory, I suggest, has to do with the fact that it attempts to account for the historical situatedness of body concepts—in other words, an ancient 'body-world'. However, a closer look at the sources reveals misleading interpretations and a comparative framework with evolutionist, even racist undertones. It thus becomes necessary to reconsider whether the 'Gliederpuppe' hypothesis has any residual value as a middle-range theory for Egyptology, whether the theory of 'aspective' on which it is based requires revision or rehabilitation, and what kind of models and methods we could use to describe the Egyptian lived body going forward. A lexical analysis of words we tend to think of as meaning 'whole', might, for instance, not be expressing that concept at all, thus requiring a reframing of 'wholeness' and 'fragmentation' in an Egyptian context.

**Keywords:** fragmented body, body world, aspective, Egyptian art history, body ontologies

نظرية "الكيان المجزأ" في علم المصريات: إطار وجودي ذو جانب مظلم.

### الملخص

تستند هذه الورقة البحثية إلى نظرية ترى أن الجسد الحي في مصر القديمة كان يُفهم باعتباره كياناً "مجزأً"، يشبه "الدمية المفصّلية". قدمت إيما برونر-تراوت هذه الفكرة في عام ١٩٨٨، مستندةً إلى عملها السابق حول المفهوم المنظوري، الذي لا يزال يُعد النظرية السائدة في تفسير التمثيل البصري المصري. تستعرض الورقة العوامل التي ربما أسهمت في نشأة هذه النظرية وتطورها وتأثيرها. من حيث النشأة، تعتمد النظرية على مجموعة متنوعة من الإنتاج الثقافي المصري القديم وتتميز بنهج متعدد التخصصات، مما جعلها إطاراً فلسفياً جذاباً. أما من حيث التأثير، فقد أدى القبول المبكر لها وانتشارها لاحقاً إلى استقرارها كمرجع أكاديمي، رغم احتمال ظهور أعمال موازية. يجذب أن نجاح النظرية يعود إلى محاولتها فهم السياق التاريخي لمفاهيم الجسد، أو ما يُعرف بـ"عالم الجسد" القديم. ومع ذلك، يكشف التحليل المتعمق للمصادر عن تفسيرات قد تكون مضللة، وإطاراً مقارناً يحتوي على إشارات تطورية وربما عنصرية. وعليه، يصبح من الضروري إعادة تقييم مدى صلاحية نظرية "الدمية المفصّلية" كنظرية متوسطة المدى في مجال علم المصريات. كما يجب النظر فيما إذا كانت النظرية التي تستند إليها بحاجة إلى مراجعة أو إعادة صياغة، بالإضافة إلى استكشاف النماذج والأساليب المناسبة لدراسة وتمثيل الجسد الحي في مصر القديمة مستقبلاً.

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الكلمات الدالة جسد او كيان مجزأ، عالم الجسد، منظوري، تاريخ الفن المصري، تجسيد علم الوجوديات

## 1 Introduction

Egyptologists have long been invested in addressing how ancient Egyptians thought about, depicted, and described their bodies. This is not surprising: Egypt has been known since antiquity as a place in which corpses were turned into mummies, and for this reason the body question continues to generate interest and speculation. However, when we move away from mortuary presentations and conceptualisations, what of the lived, experienced body? From a methodological perspective, we might ask: Can we find ways of modelling bodily conceptualisation and experience in an ancient context? We will see that some Egyptological theories about bodily conceptualisation might be imposing a body world that misrepresents the Egyptian mindset.

Some recent studies explicitly address the potential of accessing conceptual structures of the ancient Egyptians via their textual record (e.g. [NYORD](#), 2013; [DI BIASE-DYSON](#), 2023). As concerns bodily experience, some studies on phenomenology within Egyptology attempt to address this issue. We could refer to Rune Nyord's work on the conceptualisation of the body in the funerary corpus known as the Coffin Texts ([NYORD](#), 2009a), or his work on the way that the Egyptian word *ḥ3.ty* 'heart', came to encompass embodied experience beyond the physical organ, as part of the 'felt body', or *Leib* ([NYORD](#), 2009b: 73). In this way, *ḥ3.ty* encroached on the semantic territory of *jb*, the primary term used for the felt body. Also relevant in this discussion is Richard Bussmann's idea of the 'body horizon', the conceptual sphere of religious practice, experience, and post-mortem expectations on 'the scale that individuals understand as within their reach' ([BUSSMANN](#), 2015). But what of the ancient Egyptian idea of *the body itself*? Was it a whole, or the sum of its parts?

For the purposes of this brief overview, I am going to focus on a contribution by German scholar Emma Brunner-Traut, 'Der menschliche Körper—eine Gliederpuppe' [The human body—a jointed doll] ([BRUNNER-TRAUT](#), 1988). This work did not appear in a vacuum: Brunner-Traut's prior work on aspective in Egyptian visual culture had already set in train the notion that *there is no idea of bodily wholeness in Egyptian thinking*.<sup>1</sup> Brunner-Traut's theory thus attempts to interrogate different types of Egyptian—written and visual—data to uncover a uniquely Egyptian approach to bodily experience. This theory was—and in unexpected ways, seems to be still—influential, despite being highly problematic, so this paper will unpack it and in so doing attempt to account for its popularity.

I shall review Brunner-Traut's theory in several steps. Firstly, I consider what brought this idea of conceptual difference into being. To do so, I will give an overview of the 'fragmented body' or '*Gliederpuppe*' theory, following which I will consider its potential intellectual foundations, from Egyptological art history to neuroscience. As mentioned, Brunner-Traut's own theory of 'aspective' in Egyptian visual culture is key to this, so it bears investigating as a foundational theory of the 'fragmented body' theory. Following this, I will review appraisals of the '*Gliederpuppe*' theory, especially the role of Jan Assmann in developing and disseminating it ([ASSMANN](#), 2001; [ASSMANN](#), 2005) and then suggest some reasons for its enduring popularity. One reason might be that the theory attempts to account for a body concept that is historically situated ([ROBB & HARRIS](#), 2013: 4). Lastly, I will discuss the theory's empirical foundations and its implicit structuring paradigm, comparison ([CANDEA](#), 2018). It turns out that both the empirical foundations as well as the structuring paradigm prove to be problematic. In closing, I will propose some ways forward. I will suggest that an alternative for the term 'aspective' be used and I will posit methods of pursuing more ontologically informed reappraisals of 'bodily fragmentation', discussing potential methods for considering what 'wholeness'

<sup>1</sup>The idea was first posited by Brunner-Traut in her epilogue to [SCHÄFER](#) (1974: 442), in which she posits that 'aspective' in Egyptian thought can be seen, amongst other places, in science, which is list-based. Thus, Egyptian thought does not consider the interdependence of constituent elements, instead treating body parts separately in a canonical order. It was applied more explicitly to the human body by [BLERSCH](#) (1972: 3) and described to its fullest extent in [BRUNNER-TRAUT](#) (1988), as we will see (§2).

viz-à-viz 'fragmentation' could mean in an Egyptian context.

From a theoretical perspective, the paper attempts a move that involves at least three different cases of comparison, which in turn entail three different types of relationality: relations as epistemology, as methodology and as metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, I consider how Brunner-Traut herself compares the Egyptian visual style both with that of her own and with that of other cultures, which involves the epistemological relations of her intellectual background as well as the methodological relations of her comparative method. Her synthesis also attempts to relate numerous phenomena to a unified theory of culture, a set of metaphysical relations. I then consider how her work can be compared to approaches within and outside Egyptology that attempt to come to terms with the 'alterity' of ancient Egyptian body concepts. We could consider this step to involve the epistemological relations of other Egyptologists as well as the metaphysical relations they posit as an addition to or alternative to Brunner-Traut's. This study thus takes a historiographical approach to the comparatively-driven 'Us-and-Them' thinking inherent to the anthropological gaze (CANDEA, 2019) that is also visible in Egyptology. In so doing, the analysis 'reads relations backwards' (STRATHERN, 2014), by demonstrating and acknowledging the danger in applying relations like comparison 'forcefully... to any new object of knowledge' (STRATHERN, 2014: 5). It is hoped that this exploration can motivate more methodological awareness regarding body worlds and body concepts in an ancient context. We need to consider that the 'fragmented body' theory might be imposing a body world (with its attendant ontological frameworks) that does not do the Egyptian mindset justice (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012: 668). Egyptian ideas of relationality between body parts might look different to what we expect.

## 2 An overview of the theory

The 'fragmented body' theory is a 'middle-range theory'<sup>3</sup> developed by Brunner-Traut as a subset of another theory of hers that revolutionised Egyptological art history: 'aspective'. It will be argued here that the original 'aspective' theory, as well as its derivate, rely on assumptions about not only the 'mindset', but also the 'mental development' of ancient peoples that is, from today's standpoint, very problematic.

Brunner-Traut's treatise on 'aspective' was published as an epilogue to the fourth edition of Heinrich Schäfer's 1919 work *Von ägyptischer Kunst*, which she had edited after his death (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1963: 395–428). Aspective became widely disseminated thanks to the English translation of the fourth edition by John Baines, which bears the title *Principles of Egyptian Art* and includes the epilogue (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1974: 421–446). Though the 'fragmented body' theory itself was published on its own as 'Der menschliche Körper—eine Gliederpuppe' in the *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988), it was also referred to in Brunner-Traut's entry 'Aspektive' for the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 474–488) and formed the basis of her book, *Frühformen des Erkennens* (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1992; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1996).<sup>4</sup>

To understand the genesis of the 'fragmented body' theory, we must first consider the foundations of its parent-theory, 'aspective'. The central, as we will see, somewhat spurious idea, derived from, but different to Schäfer's work (SCHÄFER, 1919: 5) is that pre-Greek, here specifically Egyptian, representational style is stylistically different to and ergo developmentally preceding the breakthrough achieved in Greek art. BRUNNER-TRAUT (1974: 428) describes this pre-Greek style as 'aspective', i.e. without perspective. 'Perspective' is, broadly, 'a method of representing the illusion of space and volume on a two-dimensional plane,

<sup>2</sup>HARRIS (2020: 16) presents three kinds of relationality as being used in archaeological theory, all three of which are active here: 'worldviews', which he calls 'relations as epistemology', methods like comparison, which are 'relations as methodology' and conceptualisations of networks as 'building blocks of the world', which he calls 'relations as metaphysics'.

<sup>3</sup>'Middle-range theory', a term borrowed from sociology (MERTON, 1968), refers to theory construction reliant on developing hypotheses that can be empirically tested, as distinct from the generalising and abstract nature of 'grand theory'.

<sup>4</sup>Since the ideas are represented similarly (sometimes even verbatim) across all the works by Brunner-Traut cited here, any of the works can be drawn on for illustrating the theory.

observed at a particular time and from a fixed position' (PECK, 2015: 372). In 'aspective', on the other hand, an image of an entity is created 'part for part' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1974: 424) in such a way that the component parts stay resolutely in two dimensions without giving an illusion of the third dimension. Specifically, the artist, 'for the purposes of representing an object, picks out all the aspects that would be regarded as desirable' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 477).<sup>5</sup> Thus, in aspective, the whole is captured based on manageable, meaningfully delimited, and paratactically (i.e. adjacently) placed aspects of an object, while in perspective, the object is recognised hypotactically (i.e. placed lower) in its depth as a whole (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 474). In this way, in aspective the artist can show elements of a scene turned away from or hidden from the viewer (like the other side of a pack on the back of a donkey) and illustrate things that could not even be seen, like water surrounding the fish lifted above the water to show that they were in the water while being speared (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 477). Though capable of conveying great animation, the separation of an individual part from its context that aspective ensures means that 'it loses its relational values, i.e. it simultaneously loses both its relationship with its surroundings and modifications this relationship may produce' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 478).

Most of these ideas are also summed up in the terms used by Schäfer, 'geradansichtig-vorstellig' (SCHÄFER, 1930: 97) or the later, abbreviated 'geradvorstellig' (SCHÄFER, 1963).<sup>6</sup> Where Brunner-Traut's replacement term, aspective, presents a real departure is that it transcends being a fundamentally representational form that was connected somehow (in a way never specified) to the 'conceptual' foundation of representation.<sup>7</sup> Aspective is, by contrast, an 'epistemological designation of the Egyptian state of mind' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 474). Tying representation to an entire way of perceiving and thinking about the world is ambitious, to say the least, so to ballast this, Brunner-Traut in works following her epilogue to Schäfer's volume draws on types of cultural output beyond the representational, such as mathematics, history writing, onomastics, religion, and literature and even the human body (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 480, 487; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990).

When aspective is applied to the conceptualisation of the human body, BRUNNER-TRAUT (1975: 480) contends that '[t]he human body is not a structure linked to a middle point, it is rather composed of its 'limbs' (there is no singular word for body), that depending on the question can be combined in different ways or given different names'. Though Brunner-Traut in her 1988 work acknowledges, contrary to her earlier statement, that the heart is indeed represented as a centre of something, she nonetheless insists that the body is appraised as a 'Gliederpuppe' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10), whose limbs are juxtaposed, rather than meaningfully bound. Thus, the body is seen 'not as an organism but as a composite of its limbs' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 9).

More worryingly, aspective and its sub-theory are, in sum, not merely theories of a 'state of mind', as mentioned above, but also phenomena illustrative of 'a grade of mental development' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 487; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990: 12. 40–70). This standpoint is purportedly drawn from theories within psychology and neuroscience of the day (§3). Specifically, in comparison with the Greeks, BRUNNER-TRAUT (1990: 158–164) asserts that in the ancient Egyptian brain the less logical right side of the brain predominated, whereas in brains from cultures in the so-called 'axial age' (§3) the logical left side of the brain predominated.<sup>8</sup>

Brunner-Traut is not alone in attempting to recreate an ancient mindset. Theoretical archaeology has attempted for some time to establish conditions for leaps in human cognition: When, for instance, did humans become 'behaviourally modern' (ROBERTS, 2016: 10), if at all (LATOUR, 1993: 10)? The kinds of benchmarks

<sup>5</sup>All translations from German in this article are, apart from when explicitly quoting translated editions (like John Baines' English translation of the fourth edition of SCHÄFER, 1974), by the author of this paper.

<sup>6</sup>The terms relate to the component elements being 'rectilinear' (geradansichtig), i.e. being shown from the front, from the side or from above (never from an oblique perspective), as well as being 'conceptual' (vorstellig).

<sup>7</sup>The term 'geradvorstellig' is a coinage linked to 'Vorstellung', or 'idea' specifically, not of how an object looks in a defined context, but how it is in general (SCHÄFER, 1930: 94; SCHÄFER, 1974: vxii).

<sup>8</sup>This theory is discussed in §3 below.

set for discerning ‘modern’ behaviour have been hotly contested (ILIPOULOS & MALAFOURIS, 2014), with the very setting of such benchmarks being criticised as teleological. As we will see (§6), this type of criticism applies equally well to the work at issue here.

### 3 The intellectual background of the theory

A key influence on Brunner-Traut’s work was of course Schäfer, whose own political persuasions, as we shall see, seem to have coloured his interpretations of Egyptian visual culture more than is generally known. They also seem to have accorded with Brunner-Traut’s own convictions. As previously mentioned, after Schäfer had died with the fourth edition of *Von ägyptischer Kunst* unpublished<sup>9</sup> Brunner-Traut not only edited it for publication but also added the epilogue. Baines, in his translator’s foreword to the English edition, argues that Schäfer demonstrated at times a ‘patriotism verging on chauvinism’ (SCHÄFER, 1974: xii). Indeed, as we shall see, some of his appraisals of Egyptian sources could indeed relate to a National Socialist agenda, extending as they do from intellectuals affiliated with the movement. For this, Baines cites Schäfer’s reference in his fourth (posthumous) edition to Erwin Guido Kolbenheyer’s (KOLBENHEYER, 1935: 129) ‘biological’ (i.e. ethnic) explanation for the emergence of perspectivism (SCHÄFER, 1974: xii n. 3, referring to p. 270 of the translated volume). Indeed, an investigation of the correspondence between the two men after the publication of Schäfer’s third edition (SCHÄFER, 1930) reveals Kolbenheyer’s position in more detail, namely, that the Egyptians are by no means less developed than the Greeks, but that based on their ethnicity saw their reality differently from other peoples (letter from Kolbenheyer to Schäfer in 1931, in PEUCKERT, 2017: 132–133). Allusion to this idea appears for the first time in the fourth edition of 1963.

This new standpoint, reflecting an ethnic basis for representation, represents a departure from the third edition, in which Schäfer seems to attempt to avoid value-judgements about the representational form (SCHÄFER, 1930: 249). This is perhaps a response to 19<sup>th</sup> century derision of the Egyptian style (see WIEDEMANN, 2020: 35). It also shows a shift from other publications of his (SCHÄFER, 1936: 33; SCHÄFER, 1944: 105–106), in which he likewise emphasises that exclusively ‘historical’ explanations should be sought for the development of perspectivism. Indeed, perspective is ‘the result of a unique historical event’ (SCHÄFER, 1930: 249). Any uptake of the style must therefore not be called ‘development’ but rather (cultural) ‘dissemination’ (SCHÄFER, 1930: 250). In the 1930 edition, Schäfer takes the reader through Ancient Near Eastern texts that describe far-away objects as being small to demonstrate that ‘it is wrong to assume that around the year 500 BCE people had not noticed perspective foreshortening’ (SCHÄFER, 1930: 83–85). It is important to remember, too, that even with the newly-introduced ‘ethnic’ perspective on aspective representation in the fourth edition, Schäfer is not implying that a lack of perspective implies some kind of developmental hindrance. Given all this, it might seem like Brunner-Traut’s notion that these same representational features illustrate ‘a grade of mental development’ (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1975: 487) contradicts Schäfer’s view. However, this would be seeing this seminal, highly scientific work of Schäfer’s as representing the sum-total of his opinions on the topic. As we will see, this is not the case, at least, not in the late 1930s.

In a 1938 article ‘Ungewöhnliche ägyptische Augenbilder’, he compares the Egyptian visual style to that of children, the psychologically-disturbed, ‘stone-age peoples’ and so on (SCHÄFER, 1938: 35–41), citing NIERHAUS (1935) (see VERBOVSEK, 2011: 377), without, however, drawing clear conclusions from the comparison. In any case, Schäfer’s manifest indecision about biological/ethnic reasons for artistic style, and his occasional (contradictory) acknowledgement of developmental forces on Egyptian visual style turn out to be the very things that Brunner-Traut chooses to adhere to. About his term ‘geradvorstellig’ she says: ‘In this way, he hits on a salient symptom of aspective representations, but not on the intellectual constitution of their authors, which I am trying to understand’ (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990: 11).

<sup>9</sup>The fourth edition had been burnt in a bombing attack in 1944 and had had to be completely reworked towards the end of the war (PEUCKERT, 2017: 122)

This 'intellectual constitution' was partly resolved with reference to theories of historical development, such as the 'axial age' theory of **JASPERS** (1949) (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 159–164). According to this theory, the time of Confucius, Lao-Tse, the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, and the Greek philosophers (c. 800–200 BCE) was a time in which 'lies the deepest incision in history. The human emerged, with whom we live today' (**JASPERS**, 1949: 19). Though the idea persists in the historical sciences, the axial age paradigm has been severely undermined by deeper, more exact historical analyses of the cultures and times in question, which do not reveal a homogenous picture of times of peak breakthrough across cultures (e.g. **A. SMITH**, 2016; **MULLINS** et al., 2018). A further critique can be seen in the evolutionist take Jaspers has on pre-axial cultures, including Egypt: such cultures are 'unawakened', with 'a magical religion destitute of philosophical enlightenment' (**JASPERS**, 1953: 12; see **REES**, 2017: 223–224). Such an idea is also well-developed in Brunner-Traut's work, who draws on selected neuroscientific research to address the question of whether the 'axial age' has a biological background (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 159). To be specific, the 'axial age' represents to her a triumph of the left hemisphere of the brain over the right, as is apparently demonstrated by, for instance, the increasing predominance of left-to-right scripts over that of right-to-left scripts, like Arabic (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 163–164).

The (pseudo-)neurological basis of Brunner-Traut's theory can be observed in the idea that two hemispheres of the brain ostensibly fulfil very different functions. The right hemisphere is represented as prioritising intuition and creativity and the left hemisphere is associated with logic and rationality (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 162), though Brunner-Traut admits that the picture of brain function and hemisphere interaction is far more complex than this (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 161). From a developmental perspective, Brunner-Traut claims that the left hemisphere is underdeveloped in children under the age of ten (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 159, 163). Additionally, some psychological illnesses, or their treatments, result in cases in which communication between hemispheres is difficult or non-existent, such as in cases of 'split-brain syndrome' (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 160).

Additionally, from a cultural level it is claimed to be 'proven', on the basis of a single article (**ROGERS** et al., 1977), that 'Hopi Indians and black people rely more for cognitive processing on the right hemisphere than the left hemisphere, as compared to white people' (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 161). Tying all these statements together is the idea that these groups apparently draw without perspective, for which reason she calls them 'geistesverwandt' or 'likeminded' (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1990: 13). It has already been pointed out that these conclusions represent highly selective applications of neuroscientific literature to fit problematic theories: as **NYORD** (2013: 141 n. 1) also points out, no mention is made in the Rogers et al. article of 'black' people, nor are comparisons made with 'white' people, as Brunner-Traut argues (see also **STADLER**, 2009: 19–22). It could be added that the synthesis of ideas is pseudo-scientific: though current neuroscience acknowledges slightly different features in the two hemispheres in terms of processing different kinds of information (for an overview, see **WICKENS**, 2014: 222–223), neuroscience has long—since the 1860s, thanks to the work of John Hughlings Jackson—disavowed the idea that hemispheric specialisation is apparent across individuals or groups (**WICKENS**, 2014: 222–223).

Though in her preface, **BRUNNER-TRAUT** (1990: x) claims that the work is apolitical, this overview suggests that work on Egyptian visual language from the 1920s and early 1930s (including Schäfer) was less value-laden than works from the time of National Socialism and after. Moreover, the very scholars with whom this review is concerned can by no means be regarded as 'apolitical', either in word or deed. Schäfer is shown to have been influenced by intellectuals favoured by the National Socialist movement, such as Kolbenheyer and Nierhaus. Moreover, the affiliation Emma Brunner-Traut with the NSDAP is known (**BECKH**, 2006; **SCHNEIDER**, 2012: 214–216). Given that *Frühformen des Erkennens* dates only to the 1990s this legacy of ethnically based value-judgments could be seen as being long-lived.

#### 4 Dissemination and appraisal of the ‘fragmented body’ theory

Brunner-Traut’s ‘fragmented body’ theory was influential in unexpected ways. Within theology, her work continues to be cited in works handling cognitive approaches to the Bible<sup>10</sup> and in some recent works of evolutionary anthropology (e.g. **OESTERDIEKHOF**, 2015: 10) her work is also positively appraised. In Egyptology, on the other hand, as we shall see, though Brunner-Traut’s ideas were heavily criticised by some German Egyptologists (e.g. **STADLER**, 2009; **VERBOVSEK**, 2011), it seems that in many cases (especially in non-German academe), scholars either attribute the fragmentary body thesis to Assmann or do not cite a source for the theory. Therefore, this paper shall discuss the theory and its development (together with related theories) and also attempt to account for its popularity (and tenacity).

Because the ‘fragmented body’ theory itself is only represented in a brief article, academic reactions are not easy to trace. There was, however, one review of the work: Robert **RITNER** (1989: 42) drew attention to a misreading of some of the sources, which will be discussed below (§5). Regarding ‘aspective’ itself, some (little) pushback can be found in review articles and works of the time. Though not explicit, Whitney **DAVIS** (1989: 57) emphasises that Egyptian visual style is indicative only of ‘a way of drawing and not a (natural, innate, instinctive) way of seeing’, a statement which might be a reaction to Brunner-Traut, as **NYORD** (2013: 142) suggests. More decisively, Bruce Trigger, in his review of Baines’ translation of Schäfer’s *Von ägyptischer Kunst* (**SCHÄFER**, 1974), has to say of Brunner-Traut’s appendix on ‘aspective’: ‘I regret that an excellent translation of a work of such great historical interest should have included Brunner-Traut’s unsubstantiated and probably unverifiable speculations, particularly when these are so alien in temper to Schäfer’s own objective studies’ (**TRIGGER**, 1975: 484–485). The ongoing currency of the term ‘aspective’ to this day, as we shall see (§7), indicates that Trigger’s misgivings were (unfortunately) not considered sufficient to call the whole theory into question.

In any case, most contemporary reviews of Brunner-Traut’s work on ‘aspective’ and the related ‘fragmented body’ theory were positive, though it may be telling that there seem to be no reviews by psychologists or the like. We see positive appraisal in the (German, Egyptological) reviews of the latest, and fullest, exemplar of the broader theory of aspective, the 1990 book *Frühformen des Erkennens*. Walter **REINEKE** (1991) casts an approving eye over her work, particularly as it concerns the interpretation of his area of specialisation, ancient Egyptian mathematics. The problematic, racist tenets of the argument, far from being pushed back upon, are claimed to be ‘supported by relevant publications of the disciplinary literature’ (**REINEKE**, 1991: 248 n. 4). The only other review that could be found, by Jürgen **VON BECKERATH** (1991: 425), is only half a page long. Despite mentioning the central tenet, namely, the ‘likeminded’ connection between Egyptian artists and ‘Naturvölkern, Kindern und sogar Geistesgestörten [primitive peoples, children and even the mentally disturbed]’, he saw nothing to criticise, apart from it having ‘occasional contradictions’, which he did not expand on. His generally positive view may have meant that he favoured the aggregation of data that supported the theory of development from ‘pre-axial’ to ‘axial’ cultures, since this is the conclusion he mentions.

Beyond peer-review, the theory of ‘fragmentation’ as it pertained to a psychological state connected to ‘aspective’, came to be adopted by other scholars. Hartmut Blersch, in applying aspective to healing texts, sees in the writings of Egyptian practitioners ‘the final form of a conceptual development’ that have ‘no direct development in the medicine of classical antiquity’, as encapsulated by the *Corpus Hippocraticum* (**BLERSCH**, 1972: 3). This conclusion is based on the fact that the texts focus on ‘single aspects of body parts’, like *h3.ty* and *jb* for ‘aspects’ of the heart (**BLERSCH**, 1972: 7) or *h3.w* and *jwf* for ‘aspects’ of the flesh (**BLERSCH**, 1972: 15).<sup>11</sup> As we shall see (§5), this represents a very partial view of Egyptian words for the human body.

<sup>10</sup> Amongst others, **LASINE**, 2012; **DE HULSTER** and **LEMON**, 2014; **STAUBLI** and **SCHROER**, 2017; and **WAGNER**, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> **NYORD** (2009a: 60, n. 233) interprets Blersch’s ‘Aspekte’ as being at times like the ‘Leibesinseln’ in his own, phenomenologically focused work. He concludes that: ‘This suggests that several of the differences between aspectivity and perspectivity with regard to the view of the body may in fact be explained as inherent in the terminology used for parts of the Leib as opposed to modern biomedical terminology referring to the Körper’.

A positive appraisal can likewise be seen in the (unpublished) dissertation of Herbert **SPIESS** (1991), who, in his discussion of the god Thoth, applies aspective to explain the Egyptian conceptualisation of deities, seeing individual aspects of the god as separate rather than connected with each other. This approach was criticised by Martin **STADLER** (2009: 21–22) for not reading the sources sufficiently in context to see manifest connections.

The scholar who most ensured the ongoing impact of the ‘fragmentary body’ theory was Jan Assmann, to whom, incidentally, *Frühformen des Erkennens* was dedicated. Assmann at once developed the theory (in some respects changing it drastically) and disseminated it via his influential works, particularly *Tod und Jenseits im Alten Ägypten* (**ASSMANN**, 2001; **ASSMANN**, 2005).<sup>12</sup> By leaving the theory of a ‘fragmented body’ unchallenged **ASSMANN** (2001) created an environment for further reception of the theory, whether Brunner-Traut was actively cited or not (e.g. **HOFFMANN**, 2012, who only cites Assmann). Assmann is critical of some parts of the theory, acknowledging that the ‘cognitive-psychological interpretation is too one-sided’ (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 35; **ASSMANN & ASSMANN**, 2005). However, he does not comment on the value-judgments that are key to this interpretation,<sup>13</sup> nor does he attempt to interrogate the empirical basis of the theory. On the contrary, he asserts that ‘It is right that the Egyptian had a dissecting view of the world; simultaneously, however, he is concerned with the connective principles. These are principally what matter to him’ (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 35).

Assmann’s ‘Connectivity Principle’ or ‘konnektives Denken’ relates principally to the mortuary sphere, but it also informs other levels of existence (the centrality of the heart in connecting to other body parts and ensuring their health, for instance, **ASSMANN**, 2001: 36–37). Tied to death is both the Egyptian conceptualisation of the body, which is claimed to concern ‘fragmentation and attachment’ and the Egyptian conceptualisation of social structure, tied to ‘isolation and connection’ (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 36). One would think that such an idea, of individuals, communities, institutions, bound together in meaningful networks would render ‘fragmentation’ as a central organising principle untenable.

The inherent value of Brunner-Traut’s theory must, then, derive from elsewhere. It is possible, for instance, that what Assmann sees as principally worthy of transmission is her argument about the absence in pharaonic Egyptian language and culture of large-scale terms for meta-categories (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 36). This reflects the ‘axial age’ preoccupations of Brunner-Traut, as discussed above (§3), which, since they were shared, though heavily adapted, by scholars like Assmann (e.g. **ASSMANN**, 1992: 291; **ASSMANN**, 2008),<sup>14</sup> may have also been a driving principle for the theory’s popularity.

Though Assmann’s (and by proxy Brunner-Traut’s) claim is in some cases indisputable—there are no words for, e.g. literature, religion, or science in Egyptian (**ASSMANN**, 2001: 35)—it can just as easily be argued that this idea itself requires revising. Just because the Egyptians did not have Eurocentric meta-categories by no means implies that they had no meta-categories whatsoever. It is a rather unjust claim, taken from the perspective of anthropological linguistics,<sup>15</sup> to expect cultures and languages to ‘behave’ the way we want them to and conform to our categories. In essence, it is more probable that large-scale ideas were simply differently labelled. Possible candidates are words like *mdw-nṯr*, *sbꜣyt*, *sšꜣt* or *ššꜣw*, none of which have been adequately translated by terms like ‘(hieroglyphic) script’, ‘teaching’, ‘secret’ or ‘wisdom’.<sup>16</sup> We will return to this issue later (§8), when considering the role that an ontological view of the material might afford us. Suffice it to say for now that the absence of a word should not be equated with the absence of a way of thinking, just like, as we will see (§8), the presence of a word roughly equivalent to a foreign word does not entail the presence of a foreign concept. Thus, we can ascribe to Assmann in turn a Eurocentric perspective on the

<sup>12</sup>The ideas here are repeated, sometimes even verbatim, in other texts as well, such as **ASSMANN**, 2004, **ASSMANN**, 2009, **ASSMANN**, 2012, and **ASSMANN** and **ASSMANN**, 2005.

<sup>13</sup>This mildness towards the theory is also pointed out by **ALLOLIO-NÄCKE** (2023: 189).

<sup>14</sup>For instance, Assmann has emphasised that pharaonic (i.e. pre-axial) Egypt supplied precedents for future revolutions in thinking.

<sup>15</sup>For a good and current overview, see **HAUCK**, 2022.

<sup>16</sup>e.g. for *mdw-nṯr*, **ALLON**, 2023: 196; for *sbꜣyt*, **SHUPAK**, 1993: 31–34; for *sšꜣt* (or rather, the causatively-marked *sšꜣt*), **EL-SAYED**, 1984: 131–132 and **FITZENREITER**, 2022: 465 and for *ššꜣw*, **WESTENDORF**, 1999: 82–83 and **POMMERENING**, 2014: 9.

material, however much he attempts to disentangle himself from other judgements of Brunner-Traut.

The final reason for the tenacity of 'fragmentation' in Assmann's work could be tied to its relevance for specific bodies of material. For mortuary material, for instance, his Connectivity Principle (and the 'fragmentary body' thesis on which it is based) works particularly well (ASSMANN, 2001: 36). After all, bodies do rot and fall apart, as illustrated in funerary spells (e.g. EATON, 2018). Assmann likewise approves of Brunner-Traut's term '*Gliederpuppe*' in relation to the so-called *Gliedervergottung*, texts in which parts of the creator-god are associated with limbs to protect them, presumably via mythical precedent (ASSMANN, 2004: 267; ASSMANN, 2009; ASSMANN, 2012).<sup>17</sup> However, also here he renovates the theory somewhat, claiming that this partitive description is not 'because the Egyptians were unable to conceptualise it [the body] as an organic whole, but because it mattered to them that the connection of the parts made a whole, according to the *Principle of Connectivity*, in which the body decomposed into pieces could be brought together again to a whole' (ASSMANN, 2004: 267). One might ask, then, once again, given the necessity of refurbishing the theory so much, why Assmann bothered to maintain (and in so doing, preserve) the term '*Gliederpuppe*' (or 'marionette' in David Lorton's translation).

Not until the work of STADLER (2009) did a discussion of the racist basis of the theory of 'aspective' appear in print. Similar misgivings have been expressed by Alexandra VERBOVSEK (2011), who has attempted to move beyond 'aspective' to new terminology (§7). Surprisingly, these critical appraisals have not caught on as much as expected.

Reinhard SELINGER (2012) refers to the 'fragmented body' theory in relation to his work on prosthetics. Following a catalogue of prosthetics, used both in life and after death (SELINGER, 2012: 26–29), he is critical of claims that prosthetics were used to establish bodily integrity on the grounds that '[d]ie Idee eines ganzheitlichen Körpers lag den Ägyptern allerdings fern [the idea of a whole body, however, was far from the Egyptians' minds]'. For this, he simply cites Brunner-Traut's work, without reflecting explicitly on what this contradiction implies for his own study. In other words, if prosthetics were not used for the sake of making the body more whole, what were they used for?

Other recent Egyptological works covering 'cognitive-anthropological' approaches to the body in an Egyptian perspective cite the 'fragmentary body' theory without citing Brunner-Traut at all. An example is the work of Friedhelm HOFFMANN (2012) on pBerlin P. 10472 A + 14400, a text describing statues. The 'subdividing and dissecting view of the body' (HOFFMANN, 2012: 482, 498) is seen as the clearest characteristic of the Egyptian body conceptualisation, and though ASSMANN (2001: 116–159) is cited, the language sounds more like that of Brunner-Traut. The description of statues as the sum of specific 'parts' is seen as demonstrating this view (HOFFMANN, 2012: 498), but since the 'parts' referred to are not body parts but instead features like type, posture, and dress, one might wonder whether the theory is pertinent here.

Aside from German-speaking Egyptology, the reception of Brunner-Traut's ideas in related disciplines in the German-speaking world has been the most positive and productive. Bernd JANOWSKI (2012) uses the 'fragmentary body' theory as the pivot for research on 'Alttestamentlicher Anthropologie', which seeks to uncover an 'anthropology of the body' in Near Eastern and Biblical Texts. However, by republishing and referring to Brunner-Traut's '*Gliederpuppe*' and Assmann's work on connectivity as a way of framing the discourse for Near Eastern and Biblical scholars, JANOWSKI (2012: 13) is fundamentally uncritical in his reception of both. He briefly addresses STADLER (2009) criticism of Brunner-Traut's idea of 'aspective', arguing that 'If, however, "aspective" is used to describe the ability to break down an overall phenomenon into individual aspects and to represent it through these, one can certainly retain the expression, which points to an analytical talent of the Egyptians, and see in it something like a regulative idea' (JANOWSKI, 2012: 13 n. 19). This is, sadly, not further explored. Moreover, since the connected '*Gliederpuppe*' theory was not criticised by Stadler, its problems remain unresolved. Janowski himself uses Assmann's term 'konstellative Personenbegriff' to explain the multidimensionality of the concept of 'human' in the Old Testament: on the one hand a

<sup>17</sup>See DUQUESNE, 2002.

body composed of different parts (here the effect of Brunner-Traut) and on the other hand a being connected in a social structure, more à la Assmann (JANOWSKI, 2012: 14). Though this application showcases the applicability of such theories outside of Egyptology, it would be interesting to see whether calling into question the empirical basis of the 'Gliederpuppe' theory destabilises its applicability once and for all.

Andreas WAGNER (2023: 149) likewise applies the broader theory of 'aspective' (by which he means 'additive') ways of thinking, to ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament phenomena. Contrary to Janowski, the critiques of the theory from Egyptology are not engaged with at all, nor are the theories subjected to any critical appraisal of their own accord or based on new source material. The representation of a pre-perspective period of thinking is moreover associated with the pre-axial age (WAGNER, 2023: 162) without engagement with the issues prevailing with Jaspers' theory. The different aspects of 'aspective' theory, from the 'fragmentary' body to an 'additive' mathematical system, are seen as an 'extraordinary convergence' of factors, the breadth of which affords the theory 'comprehensible evidence' (WAGNER, 2023: 168). As for his own evidentiary base, Wagner concentrates on *parallels membrorum*, a rhetorical strategy used in Old Testament (and Egyptian) texts to great effect: the problem I see is taking a highly effective poetic style as an index of a way of thinking. This would be tantamount to us saying that poets think differently to other humans because they occasionally use meter to shape their phrases.

The description of human qualities with reference to individual body parts in the Old Testament is also seen as being different to the systemic clarity of Classical Greek models of the body (WAGNER, 2023: 170–171). This thinking, based on art, religion and literary style, is extended to the entire Ancient Near East and even tied to that most tendentious claim of Brunner-Traut's: that it represents right hemisphere dominance and pre-axial thinking (WAGNER, 2023: 176–178). Rather than contest this claim by making reference to psychological research, he simply throws the question back—is asymmetrical brain development possible (WAGNER, 2023: 177)? As a way of adhering to Brunner-Traut, 'aspective' is likened to a mentality, in line with the historical anthropologist Christoph WULF (1997: 13–14), or to a 'kognitives oder epistemologisches Ordnungsmuster [cognitive or epistemological ordering pattern]' (WAGNER, 2023: 181). Lars ALLOLIO-NÄCKE (2023: 192) reflects on the outdated, *Annales* basis of 'mentality' models, which have been entirely eclipsed by modern anthropology. To this one could add that Wagner's new-fashioning takes on both the ideas of historical development and cultural differentiation that Brunner-Traut's theories imply (WAGNER, 2023: 179), which, one could argue, retains their most problematic aspects. Only at the end is there a reflection on the simplification that these large-scale comparisons bring about, but the doubt is quickly pushed away by saying that it is heuristically useful (WAGNER, 2023: 182).

In the same volume, Lars Allolio-Näcke contests the psychological basis of aspective, suggesting instead that it relates to 'expressions and conventions' different from our own (ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2023: 185). Allolio-Näcke claims that Brunner-Traut's manifold examples make the theory plausible (but see §5), but the theory becomes problematic with the application of brain research (ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2023: 187). He argues that ancient outputs like list-making are not primitive organisational principles, but particular representational forms; moreover, the lack of abstract terms is insufficient evidence for lack of abstract thinking (ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2023: 194), in line with my own statements to this effect above. The pejorative comparisons behind aspective are, he claims, 'inherent' to the theory and not able to be distanced from it (ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2023: 194–195).

A response to this paper by Michaela Bauks attempts again to 'divest the terms [aspective and axial] from their originally evolutionary perspective and see its logic in the sense of a cultural-historical feedback loop' (BAUKS, 2023: 201) due to their usefulness as heuristic tools. The basis of this is a complete re-formulation of both concepts, 'axial age' to 'cultural crystallization' (BAUKS, 2023: 203) and 'aspective' to a 'feedback loop' (BAUKS, 2023: 201). One might ask why these paradigms must be retained if not only their judgmental theoretical basis but also their contours and even implications must be changed.

Anglophone Egyptology presents more of a problem when it comes to an appraisal of Brunner-Traut's theory, as no scholar seems to cite it overtly. Some might have come to broadly similar ideas independently,

whereas others may have encountered the theory via **ASSMANN** (2005) and never read Brunner-Traut's work, most of which was never translated into English.<sup>18</sup>

James **WALKER** (1993: 83), for instance, presents a very similar idea to Brunner-Traut without referring to a single other scholar. Whether the idea was therefore his own, or simply uncredited is impossible to tell: 'Throughout the entire duration of the civilisation of ancient Egypt the Egyptians perceived the body of a human being or animal as being constructed and functioning not as a complex single organism but more as a corporation, a loose association, of separate anatomical entities.' Since the source base of this statement is connected by the texts known as the *Gliedervergottung*, in which body parts are associated with deities, we can accuse Walker of wildly overstating his sources in relation to ideas of cognition, but not of more problematic ideas. This work may well be an indication of a parallel theory that sees fragmentation as a mythological trope, rather than a conceptualisation of the lived body, in the lines of Alfred Herrmann's work on the religious bases of mummification (**HERMANN**, 1956), which, incidentally, Walker also does not cite.

Similar in theme to **WALKER** (1993), Lynn Meskell and Rosemary Joyce in their study of embodiment in ancient contexts (**MESKELL & JOYCE**, 2003), emphasise the theory of separability and independence of body parts without reference to other fragmentation theories (by the likes of Brunner-Traut, Assmann or Herrmann). They see fragmentation to be the preserve of divinities and the dead: 'through language, member divinization undoes the body and returns it to a fetish' (**MESKELL & JOYCE**, 2003: 16), establishing a clever, if not very apt, allusion to Barthes' *S/Z*, in which a female body is rendered by the male gaze as a disassembled mass of body parts (**BARTHES**, 1974: 112). The Egyptian spells 'ensured the body's intactness and potency', reflecting a view of the body as 'a unity of separately functioning body parts' (**MESKELL & JOYCE**, 2003: 70). This, like Walker, seems to be taking the *Gliedervergottung* at face value without analysis of the source at a deeper level.

Christina **RIGGS** (2010: 3), in her article on the 'Body' for the UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology, also talks about 'the fragmentation of the body in Egyptian thought' without citing Brunner-Traut or anyone else: 'The Egyptians readily conceived of the body as a multitude of discrete parts—hair, head, skin, sensory organs, internal organs, arms, legs, blood, and so on—which must be bound together in both life and death for completeness' (**RIGGS**, 2010: 3). Riggs goes on to say that 'Physical fracture is also at the core of the hieroglyphic writing system, where human body parts (displayed in Gardiner sign-list section D) are even more numerous than animal body parts; the former are chiefly limbs and facial features, while the latter are internal organs' (**RIGGS**, 2010: 3). It might be worth noting here that since the Gardiner codes are restricted to the most frequent forms (**GARDINER**, 1957: 438) and since the D group is mainly comprised of different things being held in the hand, this comment about relative amount might be seen as trivial. In any case, by its (implicit) mention in a highly visible piece of work, a theory relating to the fragmented body, whether attributable to a source or not, has gained canonical status, simply as common knowledge.

We might ask ourselves why, in addition to reflecting on the ongoing currency of works cited favourably by Jan Assmann, the 'fragmentary body' theory was considered good enough to keep alive, whether its progenitor was known or not. Most likely, its popularity is due to Brunner-Traut's premise being good. Though implicit, her position is to acknowledge the historical situatedness of body concepts across a range of cultural outputs, which conforms with contemporary approaches of historical anthropology and theoretical archaeology (**ROBB & HARRIS**, 2013: 4). In other words, it is seen to have uncovered a uniquely Egyptian (i.e. emic) conceptualisation of bodily experience—an ancient 'body world' in short, which takes in 'the totality of human experiences, practices and representations in a specific place and time' (**ROBB & HARRIS**, 2013: 3). However, in addition to the problems it faces due to its implications, the generalising power of the theory is also seriously undermined by the very sources that are purported to support it.

<sup>18</sup>The only exception is of course Baines' translation of Brunner-Traut's excursus on 'aspective' in **SCHÄFER** (1974), but the 'fragmentary body' theory was not fully developed at this stage.

## 5 The empirical basis of the theory

Though the evidence called on to support this theory is multifaceted and multimodal, the nature and quality of this evidence, and its use to support the theory require a more thorough investigation. Much of the evidence is textual and derived from a range of genres and time periods.

From literature, Brunner-Traut draws on a unique text from the Egyptian literary corpus *The Contendings of the Body and the Head* (most recently **MATHIEU** (2020) and **DI BIASE-DYSON** and **STOCK** (2023)). The fact that the Body/Torso<sup>19</sup> and Head are in court fighting for primacy in the bodily hierarchy is seen by **BRUNNER-TRAUT** (1988: 9) as an indication that they take themselves for 'two independent beings'. The problem is that Brunner-Traut does not take into consideration the fact that this is a humorous piece, like other, equally humorous 'Contendings' to which genre it belongs (*Horus and Seth; Truth and Falsehood and Wine and Beer*) (**MATHIEU**, 2011; **DI BIASE-DYSON** & **STOCK**, 2023). The fact that it is funny—and of course physically impossible—that a body would take its head to court, casts doubt on the idea that this text reflects Egyptian ideas about the body and connections between body parts. This is even more likely given, firstly, that this depiction of the body is unique in the textual record and secondly, that it conforms entirely to the 'Contendings' genre in which two paired entities are placed in opposition to each other.

Scepticism is also necessary given that Brunner-Traut's work was written before Frank Kammerzell's ground-breaking translation of the text (**KAMMERZELL**, 1995). Thus, her reading misconstrues some of the content. She says, for instance, that the Head is represented as having its own belly, arms, and heart (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1988: 9), which Kammerzell's analysis (**KAMMERZELL**, 1995) has shown to not be the case (for an overview, **DI BIASE-DYSON** and **STOCK**, 2023). She also claims that, in contrast to apparently later 'versions' from classical antiquity, the dependence of the body parts on each other is not thematised (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1988: 9). This misses the fact that the (feminised) Body/Torso, trying to prove her pre-eminence, explicitly makes claims about the fact that it is upon *her* and not the (masculine) Head that the other body parts lean and thus depend (tTurin CGT 58004 lines 3–4; in **DI BIASE-DYSON** and **STOCK**, 2023: 68, 61–62). Lastly, a closer textual analysis shows that it is by no means certain that this humorous piece bears any relation to later fables from Greece and Rome (**DI BIASE-DYSON** & **STOCK**, 2023: 58–59). Thus, it is unwise to present it as a less-developed precursor.

The idea of fragmentation is then explored within the language. **BRUNNER-TRAUT** (1988: 9) sees specific words for the body as evidence for fragmented conceptualisation. She lists *wt* (pl., 'limbs' and also *h'wt* (pl. 'limbs', which she indicates is 'torso' in the (feminine?) singular, though I think she is actually referring to the masculine *h'w*, *Wb.* III 37.5–39.13). She concludes from this that 'the body is seen as the sum of its parts' (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1988: 10). However, it is unclear why these examples undermine the body's existence as a whole; in English, the various words referring to 'body' and 'limbs' are often synonymous, as in Egyptian. This synonymy is evidenced by the description in *The Teachings of Ptahhotep* of: *h'w=k df* 'your limbs (i.e. body) are nourished'.<sup>20</sup>

Some examples are included in a way that is hard to draw conclusions, due to the brevity of their treatment. Brunner-Traut claims that (human) inner organs, limited representationally to hieroglyphic signs, are often depicted with connecting parts (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1988: 10). The idea here seems to be that the connection is to the neighbouring organs rather than to the whole, but the idea is, honestly, bizarre. If a body part (the heart, for instance) is being depicted, what else would the artist feasibly depict apart from the heart with some of the veins and arteries that protrude from it? The second point, that organs derive invariably from non-human animals (**BRUNNER-TRAUT**, 1988: 10), is not developed beyond this observation. Does she mean that there is little awareness by artists/scribes about the human body's interior? Presumably this has more to tell us about what might be seen as 'decorum' (**BAINES**, 2007: 14–17) inherent to Egyptian representation of human

<sup>19</sup>The word *h.t* is polysemous via a PART/WHOLE metonymy and could refer to either.

<sup>20</sup>*The Teachings of Ptahhotep*, pPrisse = pBN 186–194, 8.8, **ŽÁBA**, 1956: 35 §D241.

bodies than it does about any ideas about body parts and organs being unconnected and not interdependent (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10).

Brunner-Traut argues that the Egyptian conceptualisation of time is also different, with a lifetime seen as being composed of distinct ‘phases’ of life (childhood, adulthood, old age), rather than as a whole process (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10–11). The apparent lack of awareness of transitory phases is said to be evident in the description of healing, whereby illness is presented as a condition which can immediately be reversed. This is seemingly indicated by statements in the healing texts like ‘he will heal immediately’ (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10–11). However, this generalisation again neglects the finer details: that beyond such statements are other more progressive descriptions of treatments over several days (GRAPOW, 1955: 72; WESTENDORF, 1999: 485; DI BIASE-DYSON et al., 2023).

The fact that the illness is said to be removed ‘from all limbs’ is allegedly also an indication that bodies are healed ‘piece by piece’ (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 11), though one might think that it could also imply, contrary to Brunner-Traut’s claim, that an illness in any limb might affect the whole organism. The source base invoked for this idea is the so-called *Gliedervergottung*, i.e. a list in which body parts are associated with different gods for ritual purposes. However, as Robert K. Ritner has pointed out, (RITNER, 1989; RITNER, 1993: 40 n. 181) listing individual body parts in a *Gliedervergottung* does not necessarily indicate that the body was seen as an ‘addition of its parts’ (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 12): this text might rather have highlighted the eventual functionality of the whole. Such an idea of functionality might be espied in the (Late Period recension of the) Osiris Myth, in which the body parts are mapped onto all 42 nomes of Egypt and show unity of the whole land in a symbolic, potentially metaphorical way (QUACK, 2012a: 25). Nevertheless, even if the *Gliedervergottung* were to be seen as describing the body as the sum of its parts, the circumscribed context in which this depiction appears means that we are far from being able to deduce a whole somatic conceptualisation based around it.

In relation to healing texts, the claim is made that ‘their [i.e. healers]’ consideration of the individual limbs led (in medicine) via a high degree of specialisation ultimately to rigidity and not to an understanding of the organism’ (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 11). This situation was apparently only changed ‘am Umbruch der Zeiten’, in other words, the ‘axial age’, with Hippocrates (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 11). Without wanting to dispute that medical knowledge developed as antiquity progressed, not least under the influence of Hippocrates,<sup>21</sup> several ideas require reconsideration. Firstly, medical specialisation is not well-attested in Egyptian medicine after the Old Kingdom (GHALIOUNGUI, 1973: 73). Secondly, the allegedly piecemeal approach to the body ignores the focus in the healing corpus on *connections* within the body, as also mentioned by ASSMANN (2001: 37–38). For this, we can consult the treatise on the *mtw*, the connecting strands throughout the body, and the heart (pEbers 99.1–102.16 [Eb 854–855], WESTENDORF, 1999: 92–93, 691–698), which details the kinds of illnesses resulting from blockages to these vital connectors. Similarly, the representation that the brain was ‘ignored’ in life and death (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 10) insufficiently considers evidence attesting to the importance of the brain for manifold faculties, as seen in a trauma manual (pEdwin Smith 3.2–4.18 [Cases 7 and 8], BREASTED, 1930: 175–216).

Regarding another source of evidence, mummification, it is said that while limbs can fall from the body after death, they can be kept together via mummification in the way they had already been ‘joined in the egg’, i.e. the womb (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 9, 12, ref. to *Coffin Text* Spell 148, CT II, DE BUCK, 1938: 212b). However, in the passage Brunner-Traut is referring to as evidence of this idea, *tꜥz* is not referring to ‘joining limbs’ at all, but rather to ‘forming’ the whole ‘shape’ of the god: *tꜥz.n-ḏj jr.w ntr m swḥ.t* ‘I (Isis) have formed (lit. tied) the shape of the god in the womb’. Thus, the meaning and associations of *tꜥz*, when referring to ‘making’ a human and bringing them to life, are not tied to limbs, as happens when talking about death

<sup>21</sup>For an overview of Hippocratic innovations, such as patient-oriented treatment, record-taking and holistic approaches, see TSIOMPANOU and MARKETOS, 2013. The authors also point out, however, that Hippocrates was an anomaly in medicine in his time and thus does not represent healing practices in Classical Greece in general.

and revivification after death, e.g. 'his head is tied to his bones' (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1988: 12).<sup>22</sup> Rather, *tʒ* in relation to a human coming into being is being used in a much looser sense, of 'forming' the whole 'shape'. Thus, Brunner-Traut is conflating two situations unnecessarily and ignoring what is interesting in the example, namely, that 'tying' can be used to create a whole shape. In sum, since sources used to build this theory are routinely misinterpreted, the theory loses its generalising power.

## 6 The use of comparison via cultural evolutionism

In addition to the poor empirical ballast of the theory, the method itself can also be seen as wanting. The implicit structuring framework of the theory is comparison, employing comparative methods that are frontal (in which a foreign culture is compared to one's own, CANDEA, 2018: 30) and lateral (a comparison of structures across societies, CANDEA, 2018: 31).<sup>23</sup> When used reflexively, both can offer unparalleled occasion to consider both the material studied and the method of studying it (e.g. DESCOLA, 2001: 109).<sup>24</sup> However, in the case of Brunner-Traut's analysis, frontal comparison resulted in the conclusion that Egyptians think like 'primitive' and uneducated peoples, children, and people with neurodegenerative mental disorders today (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990: 7). Lateral comparison helped establish the idea that Egyptian thinking was like that of its neighbours of the time: pre-axial cultures vs. axial cultures (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1990: 59–60; JASPERS, 1949). Thus, both comparative angles can be used to support evolutionary ideas, when used poorly, as has been already pointed out by other scholars (see NYORD, 2013: 142).

In addition to the specific problems of Brunner-Traut's application of the comparative method, comparison itself is in general rife with problems. For one, the discovery of some 'latent underlying form of a society or culture' is itself an 'imaginative construct' (CANDEA, 2018: 30). Three main problems emerge: 'problems of mapping', i.e. that scholars cannot rid themselves of Western paradigms (CANDEA, 2018: 34–40), 'problems of communication', i.e. that scholars rarely avoid the Western descriptive apparatus (CANDEA, 2018: 40–47) and 'problems of purpose', i.e. that scholars commonly adhere a Western agenda (CANDEA, 2018: 47–51). When it comes to art theory, we can see that this is absolutely the case. Recent studies emphasise, for instance, that contrary to perspective being the default category of representation, perspective is rather the *outlier* in representational style in pan-cultural and pan-historical perspective. Indeed, after its allegedly spontaneous emergence in classical Greece, it only re-emerged in the Renaissance when ancient classical images again gained influence (BOL, 2005: 84). When it comes to languages the same holds: using language to attempt to uncover a cognitive baseline is hindered by the over-reliance of cognitive science on English (BLASI et al., 2022). This makes it hard when comparing other languages or cultures, because it forces the analyst to ask whether divergent outcomes are signs of (cultural/cognitive) uniqueness or whether the features are only appraised as divergent because a robust enough comparative corpus is non-existent (see also §4).

In short, a very 'Us-and-Them' mentality has driven cultural, cognitive and art-historical approaches to how the Egyptian lived body is conceptualised. This mentality is well-expressed (though not uniquely) in the work of Brunner-Traut. Such an approach makes poor use of the comparative method it champions and moreover represses the possibility that an Egyptian conceptualisation of relationality (for which see STRATHERN, 2014) looks different to what our mindsets condition us to expect. Thus, indigenous relationality is ignored in favour of a Eurocentric model of fragmentation. This is not an isolated problem: ontological categories are often poorly translated in historical material (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012: 668), which might lead

<sup>22</sup>Brunner-Traut is presumably referring to *Pyramid Text* Spell 355, SETHE, 1908: §572c, though she does not cite it.

<sup>23</sup>In lateral comparison, the anthropologist's own perspective is either outside the frame or is the frame itself (CANDEA, 2019: 349). Of course, where it is the former, as in Brunner-Traut's case, the methodology is highly suspect, as it 'others' without awareness of the analyst's own gaze.

<sup>24</sup>As CANDEA (2019: 368) sees it, '(l)ateral comparison begins and ends with frontal challenges to its ever reimagined framing devices. In frontal comparison we put ourselves to the test. In lateral comparisons we put each other to the test. The two moves are mutually constitutive'.

not only to false categories, but false ‘body worlds’.

## 7 Is there a future for ‘aspective’?

Egyptologists have long grappled with the idea of ‘aspective’, some, though not all, seeing the necessity of replacing the term. Many Egyptologists, e.g. those mentioning ‘aspective’ in Melinda Hartwig’s edited volume *A Companion to Ancient Egyptian Art* (HARTWIG, 2015),<sup>25</sup> and some more recent, theoretical works,<sup>26</sup> present ‘aspective’ as what Valérie ANGENOT (2015: 100) calls a ‘depiction mode’. In this benign form, which runs completely counter to Brunner-Traut’s own framework, as we have seen (§3), most scholars have not questioned the validity of the term (also §4). However, in light of what has been presented here, one might ask whether that should continue to be the case. Key to this is the question of whether the term is indispensable, since several alternatives have presented themselves over the years.

Petra VOMBERG (2004: 48) suggested ‘Objektive’, but as VERBOVSEK (2011: 377–378) points out, this sets up an opposition with subjectivity, a tension that is not key to the visual style, whose character can be better characterised as the interaction between form and meaning.<sup>27</sup> Verbovsek suggests instead ‘Semantisierendes Gestaltungsformular’ or ‘Semiospektive’, which ‘emphasises the interaction between the visual sign, its referent and its interpretant, through which the actually intended meaning of the Egyptian depictions is generated’ (VERBOVSEK, 2011: 378). One might question the extent to which the interpretant’s/viewer’s perspective should be considered. Such an idea is countered, for instance, by BAINES (2007: 213), who, expanding on the work of Schäfer, presents Egyptian visual culture as ‘object-centred’, ‘because [...] representation should not be presumed to imply a viewpoint unless specific evidence suggests one’.

We could consider more seriously Frandsen’s re-positioning of Egyptian representation as a composition of the salient ‘inalienable’ and ‘interactional’ properties of an entity (FRANDSEN, 1997). Nyord takes this idea further to show how such properties can be linked to sensory cognition that was a feature of its spatial and temporal context (NYORD, 2013: 163–164). Nyord’s inspired integration of Merleau-Ponty’s work on the ‘complete object’ (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962: 79) that reconciles multiple viewpoints to look as if ‘seen from everywhere’ (NYORD, 2013: 144) demonstrates a re-imagining of the conceptual aspect of Schäfer’s work<sup>28</sup> and thus provokes the question of why Brunner-Traut’s term ‘aspective’ has any place left in the discussion. Perhaps Axelle Brémont’s term ‘multispective’ fits the gap best, as Brémont, like Nyord, is concerned with the plural perspectives key to Egyptian iconography (BRÉMONT, 2016: 27).

However, short of supplying alternate words for ‘aspective’ itself,<sup>29</sup> no scholar has posed a corrective for the ‘fragmentary body’ hypothesis. Thus, I will attempt to sketch one way of approaching the material to hopefully generate a more ontologically informed reappraisal of the concept. Since this analysis is ongoing and beyond the scope of this paper, the results will appear in a future study.

<sup>25</sup>The exception is VERBOVSEK (2015: 146–147). It is perhaps telling that the only scholar raising this issue in the volume is German, since responses to the theory have predominantly been in German and never translated.

<sup>26</sup>For an overview of the term in Francophone art theory, see BRÉMONT (2016: 25–26).

<sup>27</sup>Vomberg’s work (VOMBERG, 2004: 47) somewhat twists the meaning of Baines’ term ‘object-centred’ (BAINES, 2007: 313).

<sup>28</sup>As discussed above, ‘geradvorstellig’ is a coinage linked to ‘Vorstellung’, or general ‘idea’ (SCHÄFER, 1930: 94; BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1974: xvii), though the conceptual basis of Schäfer’s model remained distinctly under-theorised, meaning that it could be easily co-opted by more ambitious middle-range theories like ‘aspective’.

<sup>29</sup>To which can be added others, for which the list by Baines in BRUNNER-TRAUT (1974: xvi–xvii) can also be consulted.

## 8 The future of Egyptian body ontologies

Emerging from a critical appraisal of the ‘fragmentary body’ model, one might posit that to understand Egyptian body ontologies<sup>30</sup> at all, we need to rid ourselves of imposed interpretive structures and develop completely new approaches to the source material. In other words, we need to consider whether fragmentation and wholeness are even valid concepts within the mindset. Such studies must start *carte blanche* regarding how the body was composed. Was it conceived of as a whole entity, as a mass of discrete parts, as a connected system? Was the body ontology rather multimodal (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012), incorporating numerous perspectives? If so, what kinds of contexts (related to ritual, healing, etc.) led to certain body ontologies being foregrounded?

Such approaches would contribute meaningfully to the so-called ‘ontological turn’: ‘the dual movement towards, on the one hand, exploring the basis of the Western social and intellectual project and, on the other, of exploring and describing the terms in which non-Western understandings of the world are grounded’ (COURSE, 2010: 248).<sup>31</sup> Ontological perspectives have already been successfully applied in Egyptology: NYORD (2018), for instance, considered what aspects of ancient Egyptian mortuary culture we could ‘take seriously’, drawing on scholars like Eduardo VIVEIROS DE CASTRO (2011). Such an approach involves acknowledging that even words we think can be translated exist in a relationship of what VIVEIROS DE CASTRO (2004: 9) calls ‘equivocation’, which, in an ethnographic context in which living subjects are involved, refers to ‘a communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same thing, and know this.’ This can be profitably co-opted to talk about translation of Egyptian terms ‘to avoid losing sight of the difference concealed within equivocal “homonyms”’ (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2004: 7).

We can see from this the necessity of conducting research into Egyptian body terminology, without relying on translations that would constrain (and potentially mislead) the analytical process, while keeping sight of how such terms have been translated in the past. To such an end, a favoured approach is lexical semantics, which analyses word meanings and systematic meaning-related connections between words (e.g. CRUSE, 2004).

If looking for groups of lexemes within distinct word-fields, like ‘fragmentation’ or ‘wholeness’, we consult works dealing with relevant meta-categories, if such exist,<sup>32</sup> and dictionaries to find the requisite glosses. Words that might cover the ‘wholeness’ semantic field include, for example, *wḏ* ‘whole, intact’ (*Wb.* I, 399.14–401.2), *twt* ‘perfect, full’ (*Wb.* V, 259.13–260.10) and *km* ‘complete’ (*Wb.* V, 128.3–130.2), though not all might be used explicitly to refer to the body.

Taking one of these words as an example, *wḏ* (which has 445 instances in the online corpus, the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* v2), we can see that the gloss alludes to multiple meanings: ‘whole’, ‘hale’, ‘intact’ (physically, also reputationally).<sup>33</sup> Since these meanings might change over time, the examples below are derived from a constrained time period, the New Kingdom to Third Intermediate Period (c. 1550–712 BCE), from a range of genres.

When referring explicitly to the body (and not to the character),<sup>34</sup> *wḏ* is used in funerary texts to refer

<sup>30</sup>An ‘ontology’ has been broadly defined as ‘a cross-connected network of relevant concepts, which makes explicit, classifies and organizes the assumptions and terms of the domain in question’ (SCHALLEY et al., 2014).

<sup>31</sup>The ontological approach is not without its pitfalls, for which see ALBERTI et al., 2011: 901; CANDEA, 2016: 88, 97; HEYWOOD, 2017.

<sup>32</sup>The work of ZANDEE, 1960: 147–158 on bodily mutilation might be noteworthy here.

<sup>33</sup>The diachronic dimension is also interesting: in Coptic *wḏ* came to be associated with salvation, as well as health (FRANKFURTER, 1999: 82).

<sup>34</sup>The idea of moral intactness can be found in wisdom literature, such as *The Teaching of Ani* (pBoulaq 4, 22.1, QUACK, 1994: 114–115, 324: *wḏꜥk r nꜣyꜥf wgg(.w) qn.w* ‘You will be (morally) unscathed (lit. hale) in relation to his numerous misdemeanours (lit. harmfulness)’. It also appears in funerary literature to refer to behaviours in life, e.g. *Book of the Dead* Spell 7 (pBM EA 10477, 5, LAPP, 1997: pl. 64) *n.jpꜥj wḏꜥkw* ‘I have not been investigated: I am unscathed (lit. hale)’.

either to ‘wholeness’ or ‘haleness’. Cases in which ‘wholeness’ is foregrounded as a meaning rather than ‘haleness’ proved to be difficult to find. Even the few cases cited here might well be read as ‘hale’. One is the quite rare *Book of the Dead* Spell 161, which reads: *wḏꜛ n.ty m ḏbꜛ.t* ‘Whole/hale is the one who is in the sarcophagus’.<sup>35</sup> The likewise rare *Book of the Dead* Spell 168 [a.k.a. *Book of the Twelve Caverns*] has: *nh̄ bꜛf wḏꜛ ḥꜛ.tꜛfm ḥrt-ntr* ‘(so that) his *ba* might live and his corpse be whole/hale in the hereafter/necropolis’.<sup>36</sup>

In healing texts, the meaning of *wḏꜛ* is related to ‘haleness’ (which may at times also be related to ‘wholeness’ or ‘intactness’) of the living body (or body parts). The trauma manual in Papyrus Edwin Smith has: *gmmꜛk gmꜛf wḏꜛ(.w)* ‘It is (in the condition of being) hale/whole that you find his temple’.<sup>37</sup> Understandably, the idea of being ‘hale’ or ‘healthy’ is expressed in letters, one of which asks of the recipient: *nꜛ twꜛtn wḏꜛ nꜛ mwtꜛtn* ‘Are you hale? Are you dead?’<sup>38</sup> which sets up an interesting dichotomy of ‘haleness’ against ‘deadness’.

Several intriguing issues have emerged already from this preliminary study: it does not look like the Egyptians made a sharp distinction between ‘hale’ and ‘whole’, which by turn implies firstly, that the distinction we establish between the mundane and mortuary realms in terms of some body conceptualisations might be non-existent for Egyptians and secondly, that their categories might look nothing like ours.

At the root of this very different idea of ‘wholeness’ might be the mythical dimension. A derivation of *wḏꜛ* is *wḏꜛ.t*, the ‘Udjat eye/Eye of Horus’ (*Wb.* I, 401.12–402.2),<sup>39</sup> which, according to myth, was injured by Seth and healed by Thoth (GOEBS, 2002: 45; GRÄSSLER, 2017: 31). In medicine and mathematics, each piece of the eye corresponds to part of a geometric progression which is also a unit of measurement (1/2, 1/4, 1/8, 1/16, 1/32 and 1/64).<sup>40</sup> When added—actualising mathematically the mythic precedent—the resulting fraction is 63/64, not 1 (POMMERENING, 2010: 135). It will be interesting to see the interconnection between the mythic and the linguistic in this case, namely, that wholeness as such is not the object—haleness (related to near-intactness?) seems to have been primary focus.<sup>41</sup> A thorough lexical semantic study would thus generate reflection on whether ‘wholeness’ corresponds to an emic category in the Egyptian language at all and take on the cultural and especially mythical weight of each lexeme, considering, for instance, the Eye of Horus myth as well as the Osiris myth (ASSMANN, 2001: 29–34; M. SMITH, 2008). On this basis we can revisit current Egyptological hypotheses about Egyptian ideas of the body, for instance, that wholeness/intactness was aspired to in life and death, but known to be impossible, due to the permeability of the ‘porous phenomenal body’ (MESKELL & JOYCE, 2003: 19) and the inevitability of bodily decay.

In sum, it seems possible that ‘wholeness’ does not even conform with the English category: because Egyptians know that the body is never completely ‘whole’ in our sense of the word, *the word itself does not mean ‘whole’ the way we think it does*. This recharged understanding of ‘wholeness’, additionally entails, when thinking about linguistically-encoded relationality, that ‘wholeness’ potentially does *not* form a clear counterpoint to ‘fragmentation’, which will require us additionally to remodel what the Egyptians might have represented as being partitive or fragmentary in their own bodies. Vivieros de Castro’s idea of ‘controlled equivocation’ (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2004: 7) can thus be seen to be a productive heuristic for these processes of reframing.

This text-based analysis could then be integrated with an archaeological point of view on bodies becoming ‘fragmented’, e.g. losing parts via ritual or accident. How did Egyptians deal with limb loss in life, based

<sup>35</sup>pLouvre 3092, 504.2–503.2, BUDGE, 1898: 407; RATIÉ, 1968: pl. XIV. Incidentally, a Ptolemaic text witness, OIM E9787J, SCALF, 2017: 244, has *wr* (‘mighty’) instead of *wḏꜛ*.

<sup>36</sup>pBM EA 10478 = Piankoff pBM I, 9.1.3b [9<sup>th</sup> Cavern, offering text H], BUDGE, 1898: 425; (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, 2016: 83, 224).

<sup>37</sup>pEdwin Smith, 7.9 [Case 18], BREASTED, 1930: 271.

<sup>38</sup>pLeiden I.365, vs. 3–4, KRI III, KITCHEN, 1980: 233.

<sup>39</sup>Other derivations that may be connected to this are ‘amulets’ (*wḏꜛ.w*, *Wb* I, 401.10–11) and a ‘udjat-measure’ (*wḏꜛ.t*, *Wb* I, 402.3–4).

<sup>40</sup>See POMMERENING, 2010: 132.

<sup>41</sup>Connected to this is the use of *wḏꜛ* in the so-called ‘conceptual triad’ *nh̄ wḏꜛ snb* ‘may he live, prosper and be healthy’, as discussed by GRIFFITHS (1992: 224–225).

around what we know about amputation (DUPRAS et al., 2010) and prosthetics (REEVES, 1999; NERLICH et al., 2000)? What about other 'losses' of 'parts', via circumcision (QUACK, 2012b), or even hair loss (e.g. in WESTENDORF, 1999)? How do these phenomena fit with ideas about 'well-being' (QUIRKE, 2015: 177)?

## 9 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper offers us the opportunity to collectively rethink ancient Egyptian body-worlds, particularly relating to alleged 'fragmentation' of the lived body. Brunner-Traut's theory of 'fragmentation' as a means of modelling ancient Egyptian body awareness and body knowledge(s) has been shown to be too problematic to have currency, both from an epistemological perspective as well as a methodological one. As a middle-range theory, the 'fragmentary body' hypothesis does not hold up; but nor, now we come to look at it again, does its framing theory of 'aspective'. Plausible alternatives for both, either from a theoretical, methodological, even terminological perspective have been offered and now require consideration and further analysis.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Comparing images, bodies, and ontologies in ancient Egypt and in Egyptology

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## Abstract

Anthropological concepts of lateral and frontal comparison are used to examine how and why both ancient Egyptians and Egyptologists make comparisons when discussing ancient Egyptian religion, as well as what it is they compare. The case studies used in the article centre on relationships between images and bodies. These relationships are based in different ontologies and are structured by different discursive frameworks. Conceiving image and body as intensities rather than categories suggests ways in which Egyptology may engage more closely with anthropological frameworks and perhaps help to refine them.

**Keywords:** analogism, animism, comparison, ontology, religion

مقارنة الصور والأجساد والأنطولوجيات في مصر القديمة وعلم المصريات

الملخص

تُستخدم المفاهيم الأنثروبولوجية للمقارنة الجانبية والامامية لفحص كيف ولماذا يقوم كل من المصريين القدماء وعلماء المصريات بإجراء المقارنات عند عن الديانة المصرية القديمة، وكذلك مع التركيز على ما الذي يتم مقارنته. تعمل دراسات الحالة المستخدمة في المقال على التركيز على العلاقات بين الصور والأجساد. حيث تستند هذه العلاقات التي ينصب التركيز عليها إلى أنطولوجيات مختلفة إذ يتم تشكيلها وفقاً لإطارات منطقية متنوعة. إدراك الصورة والجسد على أنهما كثافات بدلاً من مجرد فئات، هو النهج الذي يُقترح كطريقة يمكن لعلم المصريات من خلالها التفاعل بصورة وثيقة مع الإطارات الأنثروبولوجية وربما يساعد في تحسينها.

الكلمات الدالة التشبيه، الروحانية، المقارنة، الأنطولوجيا، الدين

## 1 Introduction

Comparison is a method central to ancient Egyptian religious discourse and to Egyptologists' engagement with it, but in those two different contexts it is based on different principles and rooted in different discursive frameworks. By highlighting parallels and contrasts between Egyptological and ancient Egyptian practices of comparison, I consider how Egyptology may become aligned more closely with interdisciplinary approaches and thus introduce ancient Egyptian data more strongly into wider debates.

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Questions of ontology—what things exist and how they relate to one another, in various cultures around the world—have become major topics of research in anthropology and archaeology. They have also been addressed in Egyptological research over the past decade (e.g. [LUCARELLI](#), 2023; [MATIĆ](#), 2018; [NYORD](#), 2020b). They offer a good basis for exploring issues of comparative method. My point of departure in this article is the four-part scheme of ontologies developed by the anthropologist Philippe [DESCOLA](#) (2013a: see below). Ancient Egyptian and Egyptological treatments of bodies and images can be analysed productively through it, although Descola's parameters were not designed for ancient materials and do not capture the full range of ancient understandings.

First, I examine the roles played by frontal and lateral comparison in Egyptological studies of images and bodies. According to Matei Candea, frontal comparisons are those where the perspective of the scholar is 'one of the terms of the comparison'. In Egyptology, the terms foreign to the analyst are in the ancient sources. Lateral comparisons take two different foreign cases and place them side by side, framing them with the scholar's own perspective ([CANDEA](#), 2019: 349). I then consider how similar kinds of comparison were central to knowledge production in ancient Egyptian religion. Ancient Egyptian comparisons are represented in verbal expressions, visual configurations, and material practices. Examples include composite forms of divine beings, fusions of divine names, and practices surrounding statues and other sacred items. Examples may be characterised as 'image-bodies', a term that brings out gradations of subjectivity, a 'controlled equivocation' which holds the tension between emic and etic terms in view ([VIVEIROS DE CASTRO](#), 2004). A brief discussion of the Egyptian words *hꜣt* and *sšmw* in one religious text helps to illustrate the point. By focusing on that tension, I hope to highlight the different functions of comparison in Egyptian religion and Egyptological interpretations of it, as well as to outline the discursive frames in which these comparisons operate.

I limit my discussion to sources produced by and for restricted groups of literate elites. Non-elite contexts are harder to access; conventions probably differed at the interfaces of institutions and social groups ([BUSSMANN](#), 2016; [HARRIS & ROBB](#), 2012: 670). My examples cluster in the second millennium BCE, with some outliers from other periods. The selection reveals the range of approaches even among ancient elites ([MESKELL](#), 2004: 143–146), and consequently a potential for fine-tuning the anthropological models which underpinned frontal comparison of ancient and modern practices in the first place.

## 2 Terms of Egyptological comparisons

Through a synthesis of ethnographies spanning the Arctic to Australia, Descola proposed that every human society is structured around one of four modes for identifying and interrelating beings in the world: animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism. Modes are distinguished by features of interiority and physicality. Interiority designates immaterial aspects of consciousness, will, and spirit; physicality refers to the envelopes, from flesh to stone, each of which has specific sensory and material affordances, that encase interiority. For animists, similar interiorities are distributed across dissimilar physicalities; for totemists, similar interiorities connect with similar physicalities; naturalists claim that interiorities differ despite the physical similarity of all things; and analogists discern an innumerable range of interiorities from correspondingly diverse physicalities ([DESCOLA](#), 2013a: fig.1). I treat naturalism, analogism, and animism in this article, omitting totemism.

For the most part, Egyptological research into these topics is not overtly theorised. Organic flesh and tissue are at the heart of research into ancient Egyptian bodies and their cultural associations, from surveys of anatomical terms and studies of lineage and kinship (e.g. [WALKER](#), 1996) to histories of Egyptian mummification and its reception ([RIGGS](#), 2014; [STIENNE](#), 2022). Behind this focus lies a naturalist ontology that underpins Western intellectual history. Naturalism characterises humanity by its 'reflective consciousness, subjectivity, an ability to signify, and mastery over symbols and the language by means of which [humans] express those faculties'. Such interiorities are held to be absent from nonhuman elements of 'nature' such as animals, plants, rocks, and manufactured things, despite their shared atomic substance with humans. Naturalism's dichotomy between physical body and immaterial interiority 'objectivises physicality' and 'subjectivises

interiority’ (citations from **DESCOLA**, 2013a: 173–174, 188–189). Only humans can be subjects, because only they have mind or consciousness—a state of affairs that conditions how living humans relate to other elements in the world, from dead humans to animals, plants, and minerals. Subjects and objects were often conceptualised differently in ancient Egypt.

Growing numbers of theoretically-minded studies in Egyptology address such issues, outlining a broadly analogistic ontology for Egypt from the Old Kingdom to the Graeco-Roman period and in many spheres of social and cultural life (**BRÉMONT**, 2018; **NYORD**, 2020b). Analogism ‘divides up the whole collection of existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances separated by small distinctions and sometimes arranged on a graduated scale’ (**DESCOLA**, 2013a: 201). Analogistic ontologies are found worldwide and across time, for example in the ‘great chain of being’ of medieval and Renaissance European thought (**DESCOLA**, 2013a: 202–207).

To reconcile analogism with a focus on the ancient Egyptian body as the seat of subjectivity and nexus of social relations, Egyptologists have widened their net and identified as bodies things that are often classed in Western terms as images. Many are characterised in ancient sources as autonomous subjects with *bꜣ* (‘spirit’) and *ḥ* (‘power’) of their own (**FROOD**, 2019; **NYORD**, 2020b). Some shabti figurines deposited in graves alongside organic bodies were additional bodies through which the deceased could perform required labour in the afterlife (**NYORD**, 2017: 341–349). In this way, they are comparable with some larger statues, shown performing various actions, that were set up in places such as temple courtyards to enact lasting participation in religious activity; texts inscribed on them call them shabtis as well (**FROOD**, 2023: 164).

Frontal comparisons underpin such analyses in Egyptology, where Egyptian words and concepts are translated in various ways to bring out contextual nuances. Frontal comparisons are often supported through lateral comparisons with other cultures. For example, Egyptologists have noted parallels between Egyptian and Mesopotamian understandings of statues (e.g. **NYORD**, 2020b: 27–28), citing the work of the Near Eastern art historian Zainab Bahrani, who has herself drawn the comparison in the opposite direction (**BAHRANI**, 2014: 145–172). Lateral comparisons strengthen one another. Aggregating them fosters networks of relations through which finer translations may be made, ideally to triangulate a foreign concept’s ‘hidden centre, toward which all relevant statements point from their respective directions, and in which everything thus coheres’ (**BONNET**, 1999: 183).

This method assumes that frontal comparison occurs between commensurable discursive frames, and that the terms compared are stable. Neither criterion is necessarily valid. Valuable analyses that engage with anthropology and art history may miss the mark by treating images and bodies as partially overlapping but still bounded conceptual categories grounded in relations of representationalism, form, and substance (e.g. **MESKELL**, 2004; **MESKELL & JOYCE**, 2003). In such a framework, images are divorced from, and usually subordinated to, the ‘real’ things they depict. Ancient Egyptian examples suggest otherwise. In the cosmographic treatise known as the *Amduat*, the sun-god announces his entry to the underworld, declaring, ‘I have come here to see my corpses (*ḥꜣwt*) and to inspect my *sšmw*-images which are in the underworld’ (*jy.nꜣj ꜣꜣ mꜣꜣ ḥꜣwtꜣj sꜣꜣꜣ sšmwꜣj jm(w) dwtꜣ*; Hornung 1987–1994 [i]: 332–333).<sup>1</sup> Both *ḥꜣwt* and *sšmw* may refer to pictures drawn on a manuscript or on a tomb wall that represent figures from an underworld realm (**HOFFMANN**, 1996). However, in another passage, the treatise states that ‘these reproductions are the equivalent of the great god himself’ (*nw n sntyw mjty nꜣꜣ ꜣꜣ dsꜣꜣ*; Hornung 1987–1994 [i]: 170–171). Just as the ritual actions of Egyptian kings identify them as more-than-human actors (**BAINES**, 2021; **HORNUNG**, 1967: 131), boundaries between image and body are partially dissolved in the *Amduat*. The drawings are *ḥꜣt* (‘corpses’) at the same time as they are man-made things. The relation also runs in the opposite direction: in the early second millennium, shabti figurines which extended the presence of a person through time and space (see above) were designated *sšmw* (**NYORD**, 2017: 342). The subjectivity of drawn and sculpted figures ‘is of the same nature as that of humans’, even if it has different physical locations and comes into existence through different processes

<sup>1</sup>Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

(DESCOLA, 2013a: 188).

One may speak of assorted beings as possessing agency comparable with, and perhaps more powerful than, that of humans. ‘Metaperson’, as introduced by the anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber, is a useful designation of such beings because it acknowledges human sensory experience and social life as the essential yardstick for subjectivity (SAHLINS, 2022: 70–123). Within this framework, image and body are better understood as intensities. By intensities, I mean intrinsic potentials that are actualised to different extents depending on how particular things relate to other things: how much of a mountain is this specific mountain, and how does it compare with other rocky massifs around it? How divine is the king, and which properties of divinity result in his degree of godliness (CANDEA, 2018: 227)? As intensities, image and body may be approached in terms of function, setting, and visual and material features. Since the English word ‘image’ refers to many different things—a pencil sketch, a marble sculpture, an architectural blueprint, a group of pixels on a screen—any two of which may ultimately share no feature (CANDEA, 2018: 37–38), thinking in terms of intensities facilitates comparisons between ancient Egyptian terminology and the mostly Western vocabulary of Egyptologists. As I discuss below, a metaperson could be more image than body, or more body than image, and these weightings could shift.

### 3 Structures and bases of ancient Egyptian comparisons

I now build a frontal comparison between ancient Egyptian and Egyptological framings of the relationships between images and bodies in religious contexts. When thinking about the range and relations of metapersons in the world, ancient Egyptians made comparisons that are structurally homologous with anthropologists’ lateral and frontal comparisons. To avoid equating emic approaches with etic methods, I refrain from simply terming the Egyptian practices lateral or frontal comparisons. They do not involve perspectives outside Egyptian culture (brief discussion in section 4, below).

The comparisons work along axes of ‘image-ness’ and ‘body-ness’. Just as members of a kin group may be connected not by logical relations but by lived practice of kinship (DESCOLA, 2013a: 112–115; OLABARRIA, 2020: 76), the degree to which something is an image or a body is based on what it does. The examples discussed below indicate that neither image nor body is a ‘stable state’ of being (CANDEA, 2018: 236) The body of a given metaperson can be very much an image, but for another metaperson an intense image status may be associated with, but not necessarily be the reason for, a lack of body status. Useful entry points to these relationships are depictions of deities in composite figural form, the fusion of divine names, and materials or items considered to be manifestations of metapersons. These represent a shared “‘language” of religious meaning’ (BAINES, 1999: 205).

Descola cautions that his four-part scheme of ontologies is not intended to be prescriptive: people often make ‘different kinds of inference about the identities of beings in the world’ (DESCOLA, 2014: 277). Some modern Westerners trust in analogistic horoscopes, and most would not let naturalism overshadow enjoyment of fictional stories about anthropomorphised animals. In the ancient Egyptian case, evidence speaks to an ontology between analogism and animism. Animism involves attributing human-like interiority to nonhumans such as other animals and plants. However, ‘this humanization is not complete, since in animist systems these, as it were, humans in disguise (i.e. the plants and animals) are distinct from humans precisely by reason of their outward apparel of feathers, fur, scales, or bark—in other words, their physicality’ (DESCOLA, 2013a: 129). The affordances of different physicalities constrain interaction between types of metaperson. Animists consider many types of metapersons to have similar interiorities, but analogists accept that interiorities can be very different. I suggest that ancient Egyptian ontology has properties similar to perspectivism, a kind of animism identified in some Amerindian collectives (see below).



Fig. 1: Scene from a magical papyrus, depicting a pantheistic Bes and the solar god as a serpent with attached human limbs, possibly from Elephantine. 664–525 BCE. Brooklyn Museum 47.218.156a-d. Bequest of Theodora Wilbour from the collection of her father, Charles Edwin Wilbour. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum (Public Domain). <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/objects/60794>.

### 3.1 Comparisons within analogism

Visual representations of ancient Egyptian comparisons include composite figures, which amalgamate two or more things or elements of things—often the body parts of humans and animals, but sometimes also inanimate objects—to create a single entity that combines the associations of its components (overview of global traditions: [DESCOLA](#), 2021: 303–331). The most common configurations combine animal head and human body or vice versa; others include zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures with added limbs or wings, as well as multi-headed forms often termed ‘pantheistic’ or ‘polymorphic’ (Figure 1; [FIRST](#), 2014).

The diversity of composite figures raises two interrelated issues: the stability and ranking of ancient Egyptian terms; and the dynamics of interiority and physicality in a context where image and body potentials are fluid. Do pantheistic figures have many ‘heads’, as they are typically understood, or do they rather possess a single, complex top usually rendered as a human or animal head and sometimes as an inanimate object? Support for the latter interpretation may come from an apotropaic text inscribed on the sarcophagus lid of the Dynasty 26 official Menekhibnekau at Abusir, which refers to the top part (*tp*) of a god as bearing numerous faces (*hrw*):

*tp pw nn n r ntt hr hr(w) 7*  
*j rmt ntr[w 3hw mwtw] hmwt-r jm=tn shm tp pw n r ntt hr hrw 7*

This is the top part of Re, which bears seven faces. O humans, god[s], [transfigured spirits and condemned dead], et cetera, may you not have power over this top part of Re which bears seven faces! ([LANDGRÁFOVÁ](#) et al., 2022: 11, translation mine, following their restoration of the lacuna).

Dynamics of interiority and physicality are similarly uncertain for a statue of Hathor(s), possibly of Ramessid date, which assembles figures of cow, lioness, seated woman with bovid ears, and human-headed cobra (see for example the statue of Hathor in four forms, from Deir el-Medina in the Musée du Louvre (E26023 [↗](#)); [VANDIER](#), 1969). Does Hathor, as the statue, have one complex body and one corresponding interiority? Does she have four interiorities that change between contexts, or which may coexist ([GOEBS & BAINES](#), 2018: 648)? Or does the statue bring together bodies for four Hathor-beings, each with their own distinct interiority? The last interpretation may be supported by mentions of the ‘seven Hathors’ who assign human destinies, depicted one by one and described in ritual and literary texts from the New Kingdom on-

wards (**SPIESER**, 2011: 75–77) (e.g. *Tale of the Doomed Prince*: P. D’Orbiney = British Museum EA 10183,9, 8–9 **GARDINER**, 1932), and more indirectly from the genre of ritual text termed the ‘divinisation of body parts’, where deities are incorporated as parts of humans or other gods (**NYORD**, 2009: 510–523; **TARASENKO**, 2020).

Other possibilities are illustrated by ancient verbal comparisons. These include the fusion of divine names such as Amun-Re or Ptah-Sokar-Osiris. Stephen Quirke’s use of ‘fusion’ relates specifically to names; the entities involved continue to exist separately (**QUIRKE**, 2015: 33–34). Egyptologists describe the phenomenon as ‘syncretism’, a specialised usage distinct from its more common reference to the mixing of religions (**CLACK**, 2011). Hans Bonnet understood fused names as marking the temporary and dissoluble indwelling or inhabiting (*Einwohnung*) of one god by another, similar to their indwelling of cult images (**BONNET**, 1999: 189; for indwelling, see, e.g. **ASSMANN**, 2003). His interpretation was echoed, though not much cited, in later studies of Egyptian religion (**BAINES**, 1999), not least through the work of Erik Hornung who explored its implications and elaborated a brief typology in his *Conceptions of god in ancient Egypt* (**HORNUNG**, 1982: 91–92).

The concept of indwelling claims that transcendent beings suffused inert representations. It was developed in an era of Egyptology which was heavily structured by Judaeo-Christian beliefs (**NYORD**, 2025), and its central claim fits that framework well. Although indwelling aptly characterises some late religious contexts, as when Graeco-Roman temple inscriptions describe how cult statues were brought out of dim crypts to ‘merge with the sun-disc’ on the roof (*hnm jtn*: **RICKERT**, 2019; **WAITKUS**, 1995), evidence from earlier periods is scant. The early second millennium *Instruction for Merikare* simply equates processional images with divine bodies:

*trꜣtw nꜥr hr wꜣtꜣfjr.w m ꜣt ms.w m hmt*

One should show respect to a god on his path, whether he is made of precious stone or fashioned from metal (**HELCK**, 1977: 77–78; **QUACK**, 1992: 74–76).

Fused names identify metapersons through comparison with others. Each deity possesses a set of qualities or relations. Since the same divine force could be encountered through many, often recurrent, forms, fused names represent not the merger of entities but the linking of associations, even though the resulting bundle is conceived as a discrete subject (**SILVERMAN**, 1991: 17–18; **ZIVIE-COCHE**, 2019: 32). When defining the scope of a god encountered in a particular context and involved in certain relations, ancient Egyptians compared the scope with existing conceptions. The name Re-Atum represents a bundle of qualities summing up and perhaps going beyond those defining Re and Atum individually that can also enter into further relations, as with more complex names such as Re-Horakhty-Atum. More elaborate representations of such relationships occur in the Roman-period temple at Esna, in which the names of the closely-linked pairs Neith and Tatenen or Khnum and Menhyt are sometimes written as anadromes, where the spelling of one deity’s name may be read in reverse as the name of the other (**KLOTZ**, 2023: 138–144). The gods were not impersonal abstractions; they were venerated as beings who exerted tangible effects on people’s lives. However, fusions of divine names, along with the creation of divine genealogies and family groups, helped to organise the gods’ properties and relations into workable units. In this way, ancient Egyptian practices run parallel to anthropological ones, where a concept, say *mana* or, for Egyptology, ‘Atum-ness’, is ‘sharpened to a conceptual point, without ever being “abstracted” into general comparative categories’ (**CANDEA**, 2018: 232)

Related visual practices include ‘analytic personifications’ in iconography. These are instances where an entity such as *jmntt* ‘west’ substitutes for a goddess who plays the role of ‘west’, usually Hathor or Isis. Thus, ‘syncretism involves grouping with a superior or parallel being, the second element in a syncretistic pair, and [analytic] personification with an inferior one whose claims to separate existence are slight’ (**BAINES**, 1985: 26–27). Bonnet prefigured this understanding of relations, noting that ‘absorption and syncretistic union lie along the same path of development. The distinction between them is one of degree and can become less marked’ (**BONNET**, 1999: 189). Name fusion occurs across horizontal relations—though not quite

equal ones, since the second term is usually but not always higher in status than the first—and analytic personification through vertical relations.

A prominent exception to fused name formulas connects with issues of interpretation exemplified by the Louvre statue of Hathor(s). The union of the sun-god and Osiris in the night extends the bodily metaphor of indwelling by likening the sun-god to the *bʿ* and Osiris to the corpse (HORNUNG, 1982: 96; HORNUNG, 1992: 107–110). The resultant being is not termed ‘Re-Osiris’, but *dbʿ-dmd*, which may be translated as ‘composite whole’ to capture its sense of total, albeit transitory, integration. Iconographic representations bring together attributes of its constituents (TARASENKO, 2006). In Descola’s terms, it seems that a single physicality encloses a double interiority, rather than two interiorities temporarily merging into a single metaperson. A variant form, *bʿ-dmd* ‘composite *bʿ*’, is addressed in the plural and occurs alongside deities with more common fused name formulas, such as Re-Horakhty, that are not described as having more than one *bʿ* (‘spirit’) (SMITH, 2017: 302–303, with n. 192). Whereas fused names and anadromes explicitly define entities in relation to others, (*d*)*bʿ-dmd* eschews reference to its constituents and thus offers an unusual level of abstraction.

Analogism underlies these comparisons, which exemplify an ancient Egyptian discursive framework for articulating image–body relations. As exemplified by the Louvre statue of Hathor(s) and the union of Re and Osiris, the body is a container for powers or qualities (NYORD, 2009: 487–488 and *passim*: references in religious texts). Those qualities were not worded abstractly, but brought out through use of parallel terms, which are the names of gods. Evident in all cases is a process of capturing ideas from tangles of relations and combining them to create entities that are primed for further interrelations (CANDEA, 2018: 229).

### 3.2 Comparisons approaching animism

Analogism is evident in ancient Egyptian approaches to materiality and sensorial experience, where features of an animist ontology are also frequently present. Ancient Egyptians who viewed and manipulated sacred items understood them to possess subjectivity similar to that of living humans. Comparisons between human and nonhuman interiorities have the character of frontal comparisons employed by anthropologists.

The potential of something to be a body could be glimpsed in shape and appearance, and it could be intensified or weakened through human handiwork or contact with powerful substances. Jasper pebbles and flint nodules were identified as manifestations of deities because they looked like sacred animals or embalmed bodies, while the fivefold symmetry of urchin shells resembles the star hieroglyph, which had divine associations (VON LIEVEN, 2013; 2016; on pareidolia more generally, see ROGNER, 2020). Comparable transformations could be effected by humans. Extracted and crafted into jewellery or figurines, metals and minerals could be suitable bodies for nonhuman metapersons, ‘icons more real in a sense than the more inscrutable, uninterpreted original [raw material]’ (DARNELL, 2020: 29–38, quote from p. 30). Image and body potentials work to produce interiorities. Dynamics of subjectivity varied between metapersons because of the affordances of different materials. The Classic Maya viewed cherts as solidified traces of the rain-god with his lightning-weapon, and they often knapped the mineral into his likeness (AGURCIA FASQUELLE et al., 2016), but in Egypt, fulgurites—friable formations of vitrified debris created when lightning strikes the ground—could not be worked similarly; they may have been identified as emanations of the power, but perhaps not bodies, of the god Min (OLETTE-PELLETIER, 2022: 41–46).

In other contexts, subjectivities changed or emerged not through metamorphosis of the base matter, but through their contact with external elements such as water and light. Examples include figurines of the solar creator-god in the form of water serpents, which are described in a religious treatise inscribed on the walls of the Dynasty 27 tomb of Iufaa at Abusir. The aquatic physicalities of these solar image-bodies may explain why temple staff kept them in flower-filled pools, placing offerings for them in the water (LANDGRÁFOVÁ et al., 2017: 615–617). Elsewhere, the ephemerality of some powerful elements implies transient or periodic metamorphosis. Just as denizens of the underworld ‘breathe’ when the radiant sun-god briefly passes through their dark abodes (DARNELL & MANASSA DARNELL, 2018: 6, and *passim*), so too may sculpted figures in

tombs and temples temporarily come to more vivid animacy when suffused with invigorating sunlight (PRICE, 2020: 147–148).

Animist tendencies are foregrounded in contexts where properties of image-bodies that are constructed through complex webs of analogy are central to their relationships with other metapersons. Lateral comparisons between Egyptian and non-Egyptian practices help to bring out implications of these relations between image and body intensities on the one hand, and the dynamics of interiority and physicality on the other hand. Discussing Ifá divination of Yoruba derivation in Afro-Cuban religion, Martin HOLBRAAD (2007: 208) describes how motile, unstructured powder is swept across on a board, creating shapes that embody divine beings. Turquoise provides a valuable Egyptian parallel. A Dynasty 12 inscription at Serabit el-Khadim in the Sinai commemorates the opening of a turquoise mine named ‘The seeing of the *nfrw* of Hathor’ (*ptrt-nfrw-ḥwt-ḥr*: GARDINER & PEET, 1917: pl. 18, no. 56, line 1), *nfrw* meaning the perfect presence of the goddess (DONNAT, 2021; MORENZ, 2014: 48–54; NYORD, 2020b: 16–21). Part of Coffin Text spell 486 seems to identify the goddess with striations of turquoise in golden rock:

*sd ḏw psš jnr wbʒ qrrwt wn ʒht jʒbtt n(t) ḥwt-ḥr prs m mfkʒt nm(s).t(j) m nmsʒs*

Breaking the cliff, sundering the rock, revealing the caverns, opening the eastern horizon of Hathor, that she may emerge in/as turquoise, draped in her *nemes*-headcloth (CT VI, 631–64c, version of B2L).

The visibility of turquoise varied seasonally. Miners bemoaned excessive light and heat, which concealed the gemstone by dehydrating and bleaching it (VALBELLE & BONNET, 1996: 120):

*jw mfkʒt m ḏw r nhḥ jnm pw whʒ r tr pn jw pʒn sdm m mjtt bjʒw jj r tr pn jnm ms pw gʒ rʒs m tr pn qsn n šmw*

Turquoise is forever in the mountain. What is sought at this season is the colour! We have heard the like before. Mining work has been productive<sup>2</sup> at this season, but what is completely lacking in this difficult season of summer is the colour! (GARDINER & PEET, 1917: pl. 26, no. 90, west face, lines 9–12).

By contrast, the correct environmental conditions could reveal mineral veins, such that discoveries were sometimes attributed to divine favour:

*dwʒ nswt mʒ ḥprwt nʒf ḏww ḥr ššmt ntt jm shḏʒsn jmnt jmtʒsn ḏww ḥʒswt ḥr ʒwtʒsn jtʒf gb ḥnkʒf st ḥr [...] tʒ-tnn*

Adore the king! See what happened for him! The mountains were manifesting (*ššmtʒ*) what was there, illuminating (*shḏ*) what was hidden in them, the mountains and hillsides bearing their gift. His father Geb presents it on the [...] Tatenen (GARDINER & PEET, 1917: pl. 17, no. 53, lines 10–12).

Just as the motility of powder in Ifá divination enables it to take on a range of divine properties and thus to embody assorted divine beings, visual metamorphoses could temporarily or permanently alter the extent to which Hathoric turquoise instantiates a Hathor-body (CANDEA, 2018: 227). Latent subjectivity is brought out or concealed through visual properties. The difference between the Ifá and Egyptian examples is the potential range of metapersons embodied by the material. For Ifá diviners, powder could be many gods, but in the Sinai mines, turquoise was almost always Hathor. Materiality was similarly significant for king Horemheb’s temple

<sup>2</sup>This phrase following KURTH (1996: 59).

restorations of the New Kingdom, in which ‘he begat *sšmw*-images in all *dt*-bodies, correct in every precious stone’ (*kmꜣf sšmw m dtw nb mty m ꜣt nb špst*; Museo Egizio, Turin 1379, **GARDINER**, 1953: pl. 2, line 23).

Throughout ancient Egyptian history, comparisons were made between the interiorities of humans and those of metapersons in other physicalities; such comparisons are homologous with frontal comparisons made by anthropologists. Hathor, as ‘lady of the good colour’ (*nbt jnm nfr*) in the Middle Kingdom mines (**DARNELL**, 2020: 33), is maximally manifested through substances whose properties enabled the finest, most vivid analogies. Narratives of royal conception and birth, such as that of Hatshepsut in the New Kingdom, describe how gods assume physicalities that enable human actions:

[*jr*].*nꜣf hprwꜣf* [*m*] *hm* [*n*] *h(y)ꜣs pn nswt-bjty ꜣ-hpr-kꜣ-rꜣ*  
 [*gm*].*nꜣsn n s(y) sndmꜣs m nfrw nw ꜣhꜣs*  
*rs.nꜣs hr st ntr sbtꜣꜣs> hft hmꜣf*  
*sw šmꜣf hrꜣs hrꜣ sw hꜣdꜣf rꜣs sw rd jbꜣf rꜣs sw rd mꜣꜣs sw* [*m*] *jrꜣf n ntr m-ht jwꜣf tp-jmꜣs*  
*hꜣ.tj m mꜣꜣ nfrwꜣf mr(w)tꜣf hpꜣs m hꜣwꜣs*  
 [*h* *bꜣh.w m st ntr hnmwꜣf*] *ꜣnbw m pwnt*

He (Amun) [had transformed into] the Person [of] her (the queen’s) husband, the dual king Aakheperkare (Thutmose I). They [found] her resting in the innermost chamber of her palace. She awoke at the scent of the god and smiled before his Person (*hmꜣf*). He came immediately to her, he became aroused at her, he put his heart toward her, he made her see him [as] the active form (*jrꜣ*) of a god, after he had come into her presence. She rejoiced in seeing his phallus as love of him suffused her limbs. [The palace was flooded with the scent of god;] all his [aromas] were of Punt (**NAVILLE**, 1896: pl. 47; restoration of lacuna after **GAYET**, 1894: pl. 63).

Metapersons blend into each other. The king and the god are addressed in the plural (*gm.nꜣsn*; compare the plural address to *bꜣ-dmd*, above), but the text also says that the god has transformed (*jr.nꜣf hprw*) into the physical form (*hm*) of the king, which is the means through which the god can act (*jrꜣ*). Yet the blended metaperson’s scent (*st*) betrays an interior divinity. Physicalities constituted of divine substances such as electrum and frankincense, which evoke sensuous aspects of human skin and semen (**MATIC**, 2018: 44–48), generate interiorities homologous with but not identical to human ones.

Following Sahlins, the comparisons which underpin analogism in these contexts serve an overarching animism. Gods, spirits, and humans share qualities to differing extents, and they are mainly sorted into hierarchies. Such hierarchies could temporarily dissolve ‘depending on the context in which the nonhuman persons figure: whether mythical, ritual, magical, technical, or shamanic; collective or individual; dreamed or experienced; and so forth’ (**SAHLINS**, 2014: 281–288, quote from p. 282). However, I would not go as far as Sahlins in suggesting that analogism is reducible to a variety of animism in all ancient Egyptian contexts. Rune Nyord discusses how blue faience hippopotami decorated with aquatic motifs may embody qualities of transformation and actualisation through comparison with the emergence of wet, camouflaged hippopotami from water. The figurines are not metapersons. Placing them next to an embalmed human body was a way for the deceased to incorporate the qualities they evoke (**NYORD**, 2020a: 29). Similarly, the *hnr*-troupe in Hathoric ritual wore beaded jewellery, some of which was blue and probably evoked Hathoric turquoise, and they performed acrobatic dances in which they raised their skirts and held mirrors to reflect sunlight—all elements that enabled them to channel Hathor’s regenerative powers for the benefit of others (**MORRIS**, 2011). Depending on the terms and relations involved, ancient Egyptian ontologies may be located between Descola’s archetypal analogism and Sahlins’s characterisation of analogy as a device for organising an animistic world.

### 3.3 The perspective of images

The strongest animistic statements assign human interiorities to nonhuman metapersons. In a description of solar knowledge attested from the mid-second to mid-first millennium, baboons who chatter at the rising sun are said to acclaim the sun, just like humans, but in their cries:

*jw NN rh(.w) mdw pw štꜣ dd bꜣw jꜣbtt ḥsꜣsn tjꜣ n rꜣ wbnꜣf ḥꜣf m ꜣḥt*

NN knows this mysterious speech, which the *bas* of the east speak when they sing cries to Re, as he rises and appears in the horizon (ASSMANN, 1970: 17).

A fragmentary relief of the reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II (170–124 BCE) on the base register of a temple wall in Karnak may expand the scope of these comparisons to plants (Figure 2). It is an unusual composition where a horizontal text seems to caption a group of emblematic figures below. Transfigured spirits (*ꜣḥw*), humankind (perhaps *ḥnmmt*), subjects (*rhꜣyt*), trees, and aquatic plants praise Amun-Re with outstretched human arms:

*jmj jꜣwꜣn n pꜣ sr ḥꜣꜣ ntrw jmn-rꜣ [...] sdm nh(w)t sꜣnhꜣf n mj jrrꜣf(?)*

Give our praise to the ram,<sup>3</sup> ruler of the gods, Amun-Re [...] who hears prayers, that he may enliven us in accordance with what he does(?)<sup>4</sup> (AUFRÈRE, 1991: 307–309; BARGUET, 1962: 238, pl. 31b).

These examples approach, but do not quite fit, the character of perspectivism, which is a subtype of animism identified by the anthropologist Eduardo VIVEIROS DE CASTRO through ethnographies of Amazonian societies (1998; 2014). In these systems, different types of metapersons are constrained in their relations depending on their physicalities—that is, their skin or clothing. Since a physical form equips a being with particular sensory capacities, the world of a human person is different from that of a nonhuman animal person. This ‘multinaturalist’ framework contrasts with the ‘multiculturalism’ of modern Western societies, in which other animals and plants are not ‘people’ but inhabit a single objective world alongside humankind. The consequence of perspectivism is a radical relationalism: ‘animal or human appearance depends primarily on the eyes of the person who is looking’ (VILAÇA, 2005: 454). Jaguars see humans as peccaries—to a jaguar, human blood is beer—while peccaries may see humans as jaguars, or as allied or rival humans depending on context (LIMA, 1999: 121–122; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1998: 470–471).

Most ancient Egyptian descriptions of human metapersons in nonhuman physicalities stop short of this ‘somatic’ perspectivism which turns on perceptions of physicality: ‘nonhumans placed in the subject perspective do not merely “call” themselves “people”; they see themselves anatomically and culturally as humans’ (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1998: 477, 480, emphasis in original). Egyptian sources do not say whether stone statues and solar baboons perceived humans as statues or baboons. However, Elizabeth FROOD’s (2019) suggestion that ‘statue-ness’ should be conceived as a distinct status alongside humanity and divinity provides some evidence for such perceptions. The blending of analogistic and animistic features in ancient Egypt raises the possibility of developing a modified perspectival system that would complement body potential with image potential. Viveiros de Castro’s concept allows for degrees of intensity: certain nonhumans can actualise subjectivity more than others, even being ‘more human than humans’ (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2014: 57–58).

Statues inhale the aromas of offerings and complain about the stench of rotting food (RIZZO, 2004). They are made of stone, but inscriptions on Ramessid examples referring to their sides (*drww*), backs (*psꜣw*), and

<sup>3</sup>I follow Sydney Aufrère and Paul Bargaet’s reading ‘bélier’. Both authors transcribe the sign as a recumbent lion, but recurved horns are just visible in Bargaet’s published photograph.

<sup>4</sup>Aufrère and Bargaet suggest that the rectangular block next to the aquatic plants may represent stones or minerals that also venerate the god. However, it does not have attached arms and is smaller than the other adoring figures; it may simply depict a marshy pool.



Fig. 2: Temple base register composition depicting spirits, humans, and plants praising Amun-Re, from Karnak, Thebes. Reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, 170–124 BCE. Photograph by Jordan Miller.

noses (*fndw*) are written with signs classifying them as ‘flesh’ (FROOD, 2019: 4, 14). Their viewpoints are not different from those of humans but rather expanded. The choice of classifier signs emphasises that they are both stone and flesh: a ‘real alterity’ and a ‘virtual identity’ (LIMA, 1999: 120–121). An opposite play on classifiers occurs on a roughly contemporary wooden scribal palette, where the word *mrj* ‘beloved’ is written with a blank space where a classifier would go, drawing attention to the palette’s *mrj*-wood material (SEIDLMAYER, 1991: 320–324). Taking a similar idea further, Old Kingdom tomb statues which appear to emerge waist-up from the floor of their false doors elaborate on the door as a nexus of communication between differently-bodied metapersons (Ankh-haf, Dynasty 4: BOLSHAKOV, 1991: figs 1, 10; Idu, Dynasty 6: SIMPSON, 1976: pl. 29a–c). There is resonance here with Descola’s characterisation of West African wooden ancestor effigies as ‘neither completely dead nor fully alive, and endowed because of this with an agency of [their] own in spite of [their] apparent immobility’ (DESCOLA, 2013b: 45). The smiling countenances of the statue-bodies, facing the kneeling visitor, ‘must have produced a very deep and sympathetic impression’ (BOLSHAKOV, 1991: 13). As with Amun and the king in the account of Hatshepsut’s conception, Ankh-haf and Idu’s stone forms constitute interfaces for relations with visitors in organic, but otherwise similarly human, bodies. Roughly contemporary ritual texts express wishes for the deceased (Pyr. 221–224, 1300c, 2119): ‘may you be clothed with your body’ (*wnh.tj dt=k*) or ‘may your body be clothed’ (*wnh.t(w) dt=k*). Jan ASSMANN (2003: 10–11) suggests that these exhort the spirit to return and inhabit the statue, but the phraseology more closely parallels understandings of skins, clothing, and bodies in Amazonian perspectivism; it may reference the emergent subjectivity of the image-body rather than the spirit’s indwelling of an inert material.

Additional support for a modified perspectivism comes from relations of written graphs with human and divine metapersons. Graphs were often termed *tjt*, a word usually translated ‘sign, symbol, image’ (*Wb.* V, 239.1–240.11), but in some contexts a *tjt* could be a ‘god’ (*ntr*): an inscription in the tomb of the Dynasty 4 official Nefermaat claims that ‘he is one who made his gods in writing/drawing that cannot be erased’ (*swt jrr ntrw=f m sh n sjn=f*; STAUDER-PORCHET, 2010: 155; further examples: BAINES, 1985: 30–36). The logic of analogism meant that carved or painted signs could benefit or threaten deceased people, whose bodies were eviscerated and reconstituted with pigments, resins, and masks. As suggested by Dimitri MEEKS (1991: 7), *Coffin Text* Spell 578 seems to implore the deceased to relax their organic face and let the mask, their godly countenance, glimpse the divine:

*sh hr hr hw nnw hr=k pn št.w(y) dgg=k jw hnmnm=f (...) sh.tw r pn m-hnw hr n sst3 m sst3 n hry-hbt smsw*

**Writing on the face (i.e. mask):** ‘O, may this face of yours be inert! How mysterious is what you see, as it (i.e. the mask) glances here and there! (...)’ **This utterance is to be written inside the face of the mystery (i.e. the deceased in Osirian form), as a mystery of the Elder Lector** (CT VI, 194b–h).

In its designated context on the insides of masks, inscription of the spell would have confronted the face of the deceased. The spell belongs in the broader Old to Middle Kingdom practice of inscribing religious texts in coffins and burial chambers, which surround and sometimes progress toward bodies of the deceased. To protect the deceased, copyists often omitted or truncated signs depicting dangerous or impure beings (ALVAREZ, 2022: 125–127, 134–136). Later, in the New Kingdom, Tutankhamun’s restoration stela at Karnak describes how the king fashioned a statue-body for the god Amun, which is called a *tjt*:

*wnn.hr hm=f hr w3w3 sh hnc jb=f hr d=r sp nb mnh hr hhj 3hwt n jt(=f) jmn hr mst tjt=f špst m dmw m3*

His Person was then taking counsel with his heart, searching for every effective deed, seeking what was beneficial for his father Amun, fashioning his noble *tjt* in true electrum (Cairo CG 34183, lines 11–12 BENNETT, 1939: 8; GRALLERT, 2001: 308–309).

Comparison with Classic Maya treatments shows how these relations can run both ways, illustrating the value of comparing a perspectival system outside Egyptology. The stairway on the east side of the

palace's East Court at Palenque in Chiapas, Mexico, 'become increasingly steeper as one descends. (...) If these stairs were used as the entrance to the East Court, dignitaries trying to keep a towering headdress balanced while descending the stairs, much steeper than normal, would have had a difficult time'. This uneasy experience, which ran the risk of flouting courtly etiquette if visitors missed their footing, would have mirrored the inconsistent proportions of painted reliefs depicting prisoners, which lined the court's east and west walls (ROBERTSON, 1985: 61–69, figs 285–315). Carved on tilted, sloping blocks of possibly imported stone, the images offered distorted views of prisoners' bodies and underlined their non-local identities and less-than-human status (EARLEY, 2023: 255–257; MILLER & MARTIN, 2004: 203–204). Assimilated with three-dimensional, captioned imagery, visitors were subordinated to the local lords who observed their discomfort (SPENCER, 2015). By contrast, lordly regalia cast royal bodies as microcosms (BAUDEZ, 2000); as with the physical presences of gods, those of Maya rulers were both maximally image and maximally body. Possible parallels include Old Kingdom Egyptian pyramid complexes, where near-lifesize, three-dimensional prisoner statues were positioned in relation to reliefs of the king smiting enemies (PRAKASH, 2022).

The aim of this rapid survey of ancient and modern comparative practices through the concepts of image and body has been to highlight alternative ways of relating those concepts within anthropological frameworks. Such an approach offers possible avenues for refining Descola's conception of interiority and physicality, which derives from Western dualism and representationalism in spite of his claims to its universality. Engaging directly with theoretical issues underlines Egyptology's potential for advancing interdisciplinary approaches that it also adopts.

#### 4 Conclusions: aligning practices of comparison

In ancient Egypt and in Egyptology, comparison is used to create concepts, sharpen them, and then to cut them down to size for heuristic purposes. The bases of these comparisons, however, are not equivalent (VILVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2004: 17). Egyptological statements about composite figures, fused names, and powerful materials involve a level of abstraction that is rare in ancient Egyptian sources but is the mainstay of Western discourse on such topics (BAINES, 1984: 30–31; 2007: 309–310). Challenges of translating between these discourses arise from differences in knowledge systems that have been developed out of corresponding ontologies.

In the ancient contexts I have considered, discourse is implicit in negotiations of bodies, beings, and images for a range of metapersons, within the context of mortuary and commemorative practices (see also BAINES, 1984: 30–32). Image-bodies do not always constitute metapersons wholly or definitively (FROOD, 2019: 15; VILAÇA, 2005: 460). They enable metapersons to interact in ways that would otherwise be impossible, transcending spans of space and time or inserting them into other 'matter-realities', in which substances are experienced differently through alternate bodies and logics (MATIĆ, 2018: 48). Moreover, not all image-bodies were equal. Visual and material properties affected the range of metapersons that a given image could embody, and the degree to which it could do so. Stones and organic flesh could embody gods and humans alike, but mountains and lightning could manifest only gods. According to Sahlins's universalist definition of metapersons, Egyptian kings, the transfigured or condemned dead, and so-called 'demons' would occupy intermediate points on this continuum, their powers often being delegated from greater gods (SAHLINS, 2022: 131).

Attempting to place Egyptological and ancient Egyptian treatments side by side, albeit from an Egyptological and therefore nonobjective position of my own, brings out a difference between the naturalist and the partly analogist, partly animist ontologies operating within the originating institutions, that is the modern academy and ancient groups of religious initiates. The naturalist presumes that inorganic stone lacks interiority, whereas the analogist-animist contemplates how a stone image-body possesses a transformed interiority. The issue at hand is a disconnect between ways of organising terms: the divisory, taxonomic bent of much Western-style discourse structuring Egyptological frameworks; as opposed to the tendency of Egyptian dis-

course to work with intensities. The desire to categorise, to define unities and their parts, is characteristically Western, born out of elements including a history of Christian theology, Classical logic, and the eventual dominance of the scientific method (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012: 671). Establishing categories was not the end-goal of knowledge in Egyptian religion. Categories represented by divine names, forms, and materialities helped temporarily to stabilise the world and make sense of it (CANDEA, 2018: 229). Frontal comparison depends on whether terms can be mapped onto one another. It is more difficult when terms on either side of the comparison are unstable to begin with.

However, this does not mean that ancient Egyptian and Egyptological discourses are incommensurable. Whether ancient Egyptians made lateral comparisons in Candea's anthropological sense is difficult to discern from the sources, but there is evidence for ancient frontal comparisons. Examples include the co-option of non-Egyptian deities into Egyptian cults (ZIVIE-COCHE, 2018; detailed case studies, referencing earlier literature: MOURAD, 2021: 113–218), as well as the fusion of separately developed Egyptian religious ideas. In the so-called Memphite theology inscribed on a basalt slab in Dynasty 25, a conception centred on Ptah subsumes rather than refutes parallel ideas surrounding Atum (OCKINGA, 2010: 102):

*ḥpr m ḥṯy ḥpr m ns m tjt tm*  
*jw wr ʿ pth [swd ntrw nb] k3w=sn sk m ns pn ḥṯy pn*  
 (...)
 *ḥpr[n.js] psdt tm m mtwt=f m dbw=f*  
*psdt ḥm pw jbḥw spt m r pn mṯ rn n ḥt nbt pr.n šw tfnt jm=f*

That (it) came into being in the heart and on the tongue was as the *tjt*-image of Atum. August and great is Ptah, who delegated to all the gods and their kas thus with this tongue and this heart.

(...)

So it happened that the Ennead of Atum came into being through his semen and fingers; but the Ennead are the teeth and lips in this mouth, which proclaimed the name of everything, from which Shu and Tefnut came forth (British Museum EA 498: BREASTED, 1901: cols 53–55; SETHE, 1928: 50–59).

Such examples highlight shared features of ancient Egyptian and Egyptological knowledge production. Ancient Egyptian approaches dovetail with Marilyn Strathern's frontal comparison of Melanesian social life and anthropological discourses, in that there is:

the solid knowledge that present formulations are only fleeting concepts and present exercises but partial studies. (...) we produce infinite complexity out of complexity. We become aware of creating more and more gaps. Hence our activities forever magnify a background of potential significance against which—whatever the scale—we try to actualise subtle re-imaginings, and build models that will take everything important into account (STRATHERN, 2004: 119).

A lateral comparison can be made with Egyptological scholarship. In an article titled 'Bricoler avec les dieux'—adopting the 'bricolage' of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who mentored the 'neostructuralist' Descola (KAPFERER, 2014)—the Egyptologist Christiane Zivie-Coche characterises ancient Egyptian approaches to religion by:

[un] choix délibéré de ne rien abandonner en route, de ne rien oublier, car ce n'est que par le biais de cette pluralité que les Égyptiens ont pensé et espéré être susceptibles d'approcher incomplètement, mais au mieux, le monde des dieux qui leur échappait et dont ils étaient tributaires. Ainsi ils n'ont cessé d'adapter, d'ajuster, de bricoler pour bâtir des systèmes divins qui se superposaient les uns aux autres, toujours avec un léger décalage pour que chacun garde sa spécificité (ZIVIE-COCHE, 2019: 36).



These final comparisons reinforce the value of an anthropologically-engaged Egyptology. As mentioned above in the discussion on alternative perspectivism, such an Egyptology could help to develop a conceptual vocabulary that will connect categorical and intensive approaches to the natures of beings, the better to situate itself among studies of other cultures and to advance the theory they employ. It may not be possible to look ancient Egyptians in the eye, but similarities between practices of comparison show how Egyptologists may be looking in the same direction as them, through different sets of eyes (CANDEA, 2018: 216, 328).

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
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## 'His bodily son'

### Embodiment and relatedness in ancient Egypt

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#### Abstract

A dichotomy between nature and nurture has long been at the heart of definitions of kinship in the humanities and the social sciences. While an oscillation between biological and socio-cultural constructions of relatedness may feel superseded in favour of a more integrative approach, it is still implicit in works that take a relationship mediated by the body as the basis of kinship. For example, the expression *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* is often translated as 'his bodily son' and understood as indicating a legitimate heir. The implication here is that a biological relation, conveyed through bodily connections, is somehow more real than one that is not labelled as such. This reading comfortably maps onto (mainly Western) expectations about the expression of kinship through a biological body. However, this interpretation disregards the fact that there are different ways of understanding the articulation between embodiment and relatedness in modern and ancient cultures. In this article, I take *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* as a case study to explore ancient Egyptian 'body worlds' and to challenge some of the assumptions regarding relatedness often found in Egyptological scholarship.

**Keywords:** relatedness, body worlds, Old Kingdom, *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*

الابن الجسدي: مفهوم التجسيد وصلات القرابة في مصر القديمة

#### الملخص

لطالما شكّلت الثنائية بين الطبيعة والتنشئة محوراً أساسياً في تعريفات القرابة ضمن العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية. ورغم أن التناقض بين التفسيرات البيولوجية والبناءات الاجتماعية والثقافية للقرابة يبدو أنه أفسح المجال لنهج أكثر شمولية وتكاملاً، إلا أن هذا التباين لا يزال يظهر ضمنياً في الدراسات التي تعتبر الجسد وسيطاً أساسياً في تكوين علاقات القرابة. على سبيل المثال، يُترجم التعبير *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* عادةً إلى "ابنه الجسدي"، ويُفهم على أنه يشير إلى وريث شرعي. ينطوي هذا التفسير على افتراض أن العلاقة البيولوجية، التي تُعبّر عنها من خلال الروابط الجسدية، تحمل نوعاً من الواقعية أو الأصالة أكثر من العلاقات التي تفتقر إلى هذا الوصف. يتماشى هذا الطرح مع التوقعات (التي غالباً ما تكون غربية) التي تربط مفهوم القرابة بالجسد البيولوجي. ومع ذلك، يغفل هذا التفسير عن حقيقة وجود طرق متعددة لفهم العلاقة بين الجسد والقرابة في الثقافات القديمة والحديثة على حد سواء. في هذه الدراسة، أُستعرض تعبير *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* كدراسة حالة تحليلية لاستكشاف "عوالم الجسد" في مصر القديمة، ولإعادة النظر في بعض الافتراضات التقليدية المتعلقة بالقرابة، والتي لا تزال تسود الدراسات المصرية حتى اليوم.

الكلمات الدالة: صلة القرابة، عوالم الجسد، الدولة القديمة، *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*.

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## 1 Introduction: relations and body worlds

A dichotomy between nature and nurture has long been at the heart of definitions of kinship in the humanities and the social sciences. While an oscillation between biological and socio-cultural constructions of relatedness may feel superseded in favour of a more integrative approach, it is still implicit in works that take a relationship mediated by the body as the basis of kinship. In such works, the body is understood as a proxy for genealogical connections, and social interpretations of kinship are overlaid on top of a biological approach. The body, however, does not only have a biological dimension. The idea that the ‘true’ body is our ‘natural’ body in opposition to a supposedly ‘less true’ sociocultural body is known since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but, as **HARRIS** and **ROBB** (2013: 2, 16) note, there is very little that is ‘natural’ about this interpretation. In fact, it should be understood as a representation of a particular body world. In their work, **HARRIS** and **ROBB** (2013: 3) use ‘body world’ as an analytical category to refer to the ‘totality of bodily experiences, practices, and representations in a specific place and time’. Hence, the body is a historical agent, and the role it plays in the definition of relations needs to be contextualised. Expressions of relatedness can be a fascinating way of approaching different body worlds.

Relations were perceived as essential to the identity and constitution of a person or a group in ancient Egypt. References to relatedness abound as part of one’s self-presentation in monumental inscriptions. Together with an individual’s name and titles, their connections to other people are often displayed as part of their identity. Elsewhere I have explored some Egyptian idioms of kinship relations, particularly those we refer to as kinship terms (**OLABARRIA**, 2020: 63–74), but the ways in which relations are conveyed in writing go beyond the mention of individual terms. Sometimes we may find additional phrases that are used to characterise the social relations that exist between two persons or groups of people. For example, the expression *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*, often found in monumental inscriptions of the Old Kingdom,<sup>1</sup> is a unique yet complex case study to explore a purported relationship between kinship and the body. While it has traditionally been translated as ‘his bodily son’ and assumed to denote a ‘real’—as opposed to a symbolic—filial relationship (e.g. **JUNKER**, 1931), other authors have remarked that this expression may not be indicative of any kind of genealogical link (e.g. **SCHMITZ**, 1976). As such, it provides an opportunity to focus on the effect that ideas of the body had on the definition and delineation of kinship in written formulations in ancient Egypt as well as on modern scholarly interpretations of such formulations.

In this article, I present a brief overview of the use of *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*—and its variants—in the primary sources, with a focus on its connection with royal filiation. The different components of this genitival construction are analysed individually in order to attain a more nuanced understanding of this self-presentation device. The ways in which this expression has been studied and interpreted provide an eloquent example of how our own personal experience shapes our approach to ancient Egyptian body worlds. In particular, I argue that the translation ‘bodily son’ reflects our own concerns with biology as the basis for kinship, obscuring other possible meanings that may have been associated with an individual’s insertion within a coetaneous social group.

## 2 The expression *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf*: variants and usage

The phrase *zꜣfn ḥtꜣf* is relatively common in self-presentation inscriptions, especially in a funerary context. The early Dynasty 5 chapel of Kaninisut, found *in situ* in his mastaba in Giza’s western cemetery (G 2155) and currently kept in Vienna (KHM Vienna ÄS 8006), features an excellent example of its use (**JUNKER**, 1931; **HÖLZL**, 2005).

<sup>1</sup>In this article I follow the standardised Leiden Unified Transliteration system developed in 2023.

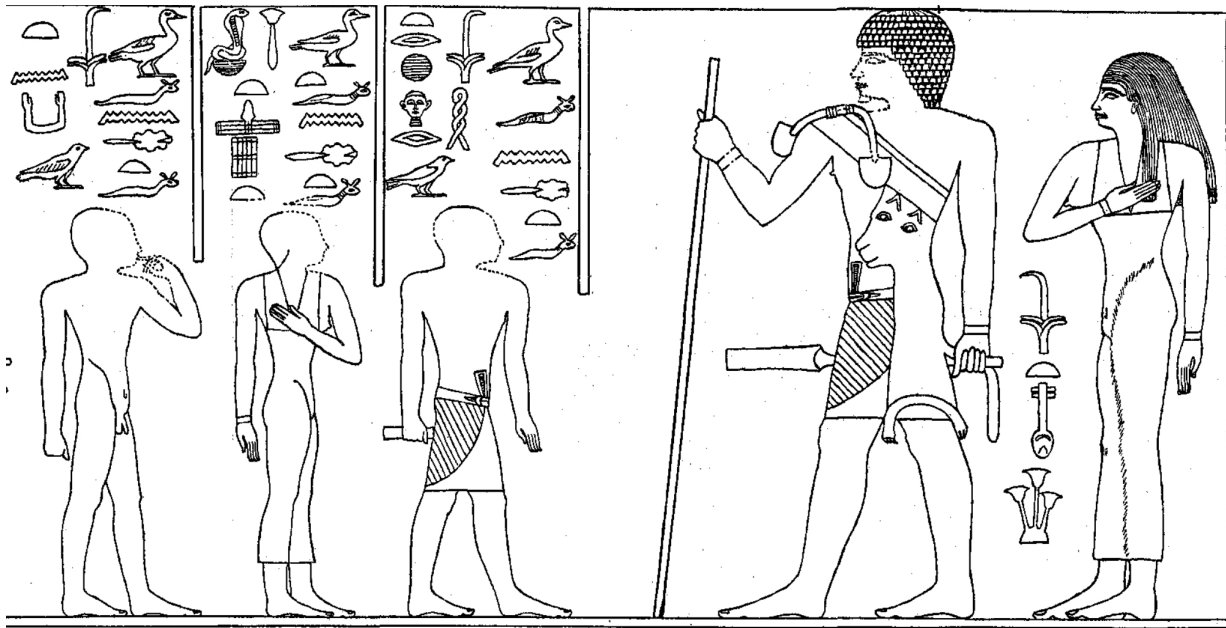


Fig. 1: Line drawing of the relief between false doors, west wall of chapel of Kaninisut, Giza. Line drawing following [JUNKER](#) (1934: pl. 18). Image cropped and used with permission.

In Figure 1<sup>2</sup> we see the mastaba owner Kaninisut standing on the right, with his wife Neferhanisut behind him. Opposite them are three people depicted at a smaller scale and captioned as his ‘bodily’ children. The first one is *z3:f n ht3:frh-nswt hr-wr*, ‘his bodily son the royal acquaintance Horwer’, who is followed by *z3:t3:f n(t) ht3:f w3:dt-htp*, ‘his bodily daughter Wadjethetep’, and *z3:f n ht3:f k3:-nswt šri* ‘his bodily son Kaninisut the younger’. This inscription is illustrative of the most common usage of this expression, namely as a caption identifying one or more filial relations within a larger scene. We see also that one individual could be said to have more than one ‘bodily’ child, and that the phrase is not only reserved for sons, but it can also be applied to daughters. Indeed, other attestations confirm that *n ht3:f* could also accompany a more encompassing term denoting filiation such as *msw*. For example, an inscription on the west wall of the interior chamber of the mastaba of Seshemnefer in Giza (G4940) reads *msw3:f n ht3:f sšm-nfr šri p3:hw-n-pt3: 3:b*, ‘his bodily children Seshemnefer the younger, Pehuentah, and Ab’ ([KANAWATI](#), 2001: pls. 22, 42, 47).<sup>3</sup>

The examples above demonstrate the most common and basic use of the expression, but occasionally it can be complemented with additional qualifiers. For instance, the Dynasty 6 mastaba of Mereruka at Saqqara features the following inscription in the false door on the west wall of room C3 (i.e. the tomb of his son Meryteti): *iri-pt mry z3:f n ht3:f smsw mry3:f im3:hw hr inpw tpi d3:w3:f mry-tti*, ‘the *iri-pt* Mery, his eldest bodily son whom he loves, revered one before Anubis who is upon his mountain Meryteti’ ([DUELL](#), 1938: pl. 62).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, in this inscription Meryteti is said to be a ‘bodily son’ of Mereruka, but in other instances in the tomb he claims to be a ‘bodily son’ of the king, an idea to which I return below. Both qualifiers, namely *smsw* and *mry3:f*, tend to appear together, although there are a number of instances where *smsw* is not followed by *mry3:f*.<sup>5</sup> so one should not assume that they always co-occur.

<sup>2</sup> A photograph of the relief seen in Figure 1 can be found in the online collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (KHM Vienna ÄS 8006), available here [↗](#) (accessed 28 March 2023).

<sup>3</sup> See also <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/ancientpeople/1870/full/> (accessed 29 March 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The title *iri-pt* is a high honorific title in Old Kingdom sources often translated as ‘count’ or ‘prince’. On this title, its connection with the vizirate, and changes in its use during Dynasty 5, see [STRUDWICK](#) (1985: 307–312, 338–340) and [BAUD](#) (1999: 257–259).

<sup>5</sup> For example, from the mastaba of Djaty in Giza (G 2337 X), door-jamb MFA 27.445 features a relief where a son is identified as an ‘eldest bodily son’, with no reference to him being a beloved one ([SIMPSON](#), 1980: pl. liv.c)

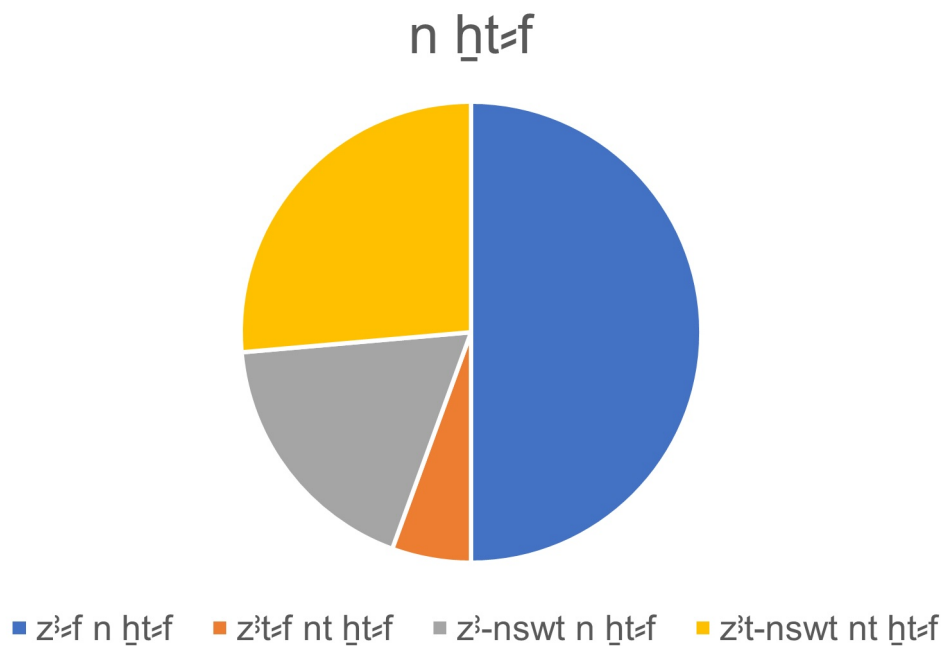


Fig. 2: Survey of attestations according to data from *TLA*.

Focusing on the genitival construction itself (i.e. expression of filiation followed by *n ḥt* and suffix pronoun), the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (*TLA*) lists 144 attestations of this phrase.<sup>6</sup> Although the scope of the *TLA* is naturally limited because the selection of textual sources included in this digital corpus cannot be comprehensive, it is very useful as a starting point for an approximate idea of the frequency and distribution of *zꜥf n ḥtꜥf* and its variants. As can be seen from Figure 2, the expression *zꜥf n ḥtꜥf* makes up half of the attestations, with 72 cases recorded. Its female counterpart *zꜥtꜥf nt ḥtꜥf* includes 8 attestations. The rest of the sample, namely 64 cases, include a reference to the king, comprising 26 cases for ‘son of the king’ and 38 cases for ‘daughter of the king’. The sample may be admittedly skewed, as the vast majority of examples referring to the daughter of the king come from the well-documented mastabas of Meresankh or Idut, while the attestations for ‘son of the king’ appear in a variety of different tombs. This overview, however, is useful in demonstrating that *n ḥtꜥf* is employed in relation to royals almost as often as in the classification of apparently non-royal kinship. In addition, the reference to daughters seems to be mainly restricted to the royal sphere.

In terms of provenance, most attestations of this expression date back to the Old Kingdom, specifically in elite contexts in the cemeteries of Giza and Saqqara, with a site distribution as shown in Figure 3. It is hardly surprising that these two sites accumulate the majority of examples from the Old Kingdom; what is interesting is that the number of attestations decreases dramatically during Dynasty 6 until disappearing almost completely after the reign of Pepi II. Post-Dynasty 6 examples are mainly related to the divine sphere; for instance, there are some New Kingdom references to the king being the ‘bodily son of Ra’,<sup>7</sup> and the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*, a New Kingdom source that I discuss in further detail below, features the expression in relation to deities.

Despite a few attestations, its frequency is almost negligible after the Old Kingdom. This could suggest either that after the Old Kingdom it was no longer considered important to display this sort of relationship,

<sup>6</sup>On the basis of searches of combined occurrences of lemma 122080 (*ḥt*) with the following lemmata: *zꜥ* (125510), *zꜥt* (125630), *zꜥ-nswt* (450223) and *zꜥt-nswt* (400447). Qualifiers that occur between *zꜥ* and *ḥt* have been disregarded for the purposes of this survey.

<sup>7</sup>For example, in the battle reliefs of Seti I at Karnak, where Amun-Ra refers to him as his bodily son and his beloved (**THE EPI-GRAPHIC SURVEY**, 1986: pl. 8).

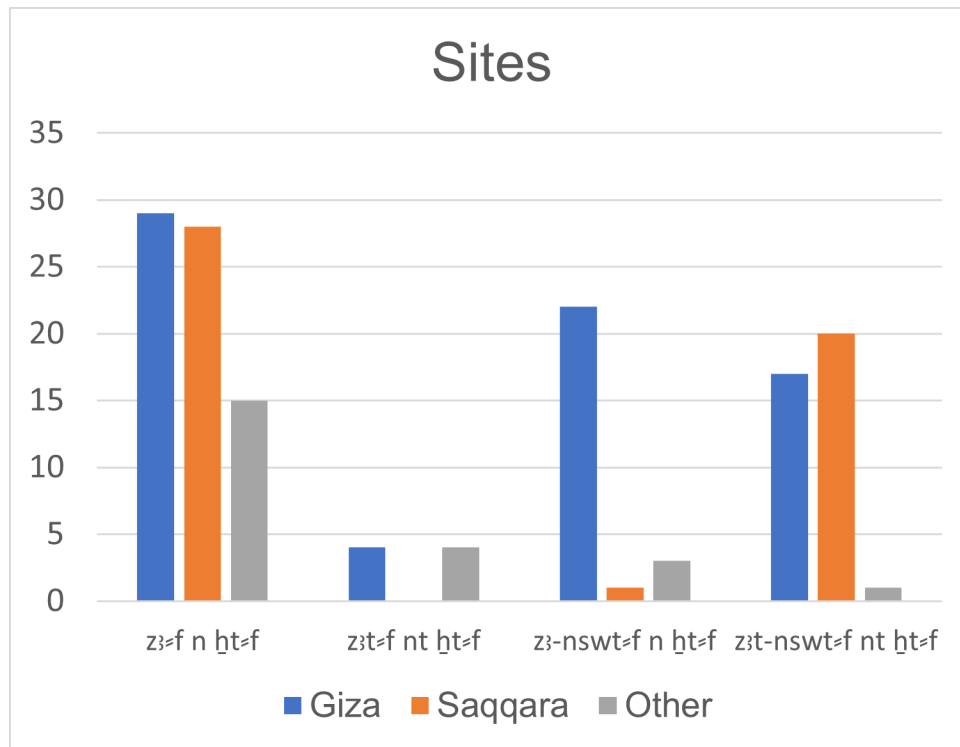


Fig. 3: Distribution of attestations according to data from TLA.

or that other terms were preferred to highlight an alleged ‘bodily’ connection. Expressions of relatedness and their range of meanings can change over time, and this may be indicative of new perceptions of contemporary body worlds and their connection to kinship. An examination of the specific usage of ‘bodily’ in connection with the king’s son illustrates some of the issues that we encounter when we use the body as a proxy for ‘biological’ relations.

### 3 Kingship or kinship? Body, biology, and inheritance

From the data above, it seems noteworthy that just under half of the known attestations do not refer simply to  $z_3/z_3t$ , but instead to  $z_3-nswt$  or its female counterpart  $z_3t-nswt$ , which are traditionally translated as ‘king’s son’ and ‘king’s daughter’ respectively. The mastaba of Meresankh III, for example, features several instances of both examples. In the main room of the chapel of mastaba G 7530 (room A, north wall of pillar leading to room C), there is a relief of Meresankh standing with a diminutive representation of a man by her side with the caption  $z_3-nswt$  n  $ht=f$   $dw_3-rw$ , ‘the bodily son of the king Duare’ (DUNHAM & SIMPSON, 1974: 13, pl. vi, fig. 6).<sup>8</sup> This man is probably the owner of mastaba G 5110, where he is identified by a number of high ranking titles (STRUDWICK, 1985: 162–163; BAUD, 1999: 606–607, dossier 248). Meresankh III was a granddaughter of Khufu, and wife of another king of the Dynasty 4 (unclear whether Khafra or Menkaura), and she herself was also captioned as a  $z_3t-nswt$  in her tomb (DUNHAM & SIMPSON, 1974: 13–15, pl. vii, fig. 7).

The use of the term in this and other tombs sparked a heated debate in scholarship regarding what it may tell us about royal lines. If  $n$   $ht=f$  is understood as an expression of a direct biological relationship, as proposed by Junker, then its usage may have implications in the construction and demarcation of royal genealogies of the Old Kingdom. However, prosopographic analysis of the elites of the time seems to indicate that a  $z_3-nswt$

<sup>8</sup> DUNHAM and SIMPSON (1974: 13) note that this figure and its caption are not carved in relief, so they may have been a later insertion. See also <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/ancientpeople/560/full/> (accessed 28 March 2023).

*n htꜣf* is not necessarily a biological son of the king.

The example of Meryteti, introduced above, is illustrative, as he is captioned as both son of Mereruka and king’s son in the chapel. On the south wall of room C3, an inscription reads *iri-pt mry zꜣf smsw n htꜣf mryꜣ imꜣhw hr ntr ꜣ shꜣ hmw-ntr mn-nfr-ppi zꜣ-nswt htꜣtiꜣ mry-tti*, ‘the *iri-pt* Mery, his eldest bodily son whom he loves, revered one before the great god, inspector of priests at ‘the perfection of Pepi endures’, king’s son, *htꜣtiꜣ* Meryteti’ (DUELL, 1938: 5, pl. 88)<sup>9</sup> where *n htꜣf* refers back to Mereruka, who was a non-royal married to a daughter of king Teti (BAUD, 1999: 467, dossier 83).

An even more eloquent case may be that of Seshathetep Heti, an official from early Dynasty 5 whose career progression can be traced along different monumental inscriptions during his life (KANAWATI, 2002: 11–30; GREEN, 2022). Even though there is no evidence that he or his wife were related to the king, he was first presented as a *rh-nswt*, then as a *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* and chief of royal works, and finally as a *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf smsw* and vizier (SCHMITZ, 1976: 73–75; BAUD, 1999: 576–577, dossier 219). This example seems to confirm that *n htꜣf* should not be taken as an expression of biological kinship, and that it should instead be interpreted as a title denoting rank and hierarchy.

In her aforementioned study of the role of ‘king’s sons’, Bettina SCHMITZ (1976: 65–79) remarks on the length to which other authors, such as Junker, need to go to make their understanding of ‘king’s son’ as a biological son of the king fit with the evidence. Instead, she argues that there is reason to believe that ‘king’s son’ did not denote a genealogical son at all. First, she points out that not all the children of the king receive the title, as shown by the example of Ankhnesmeryre and her sister, one of whom is designated as *zꜣt-nswt* while the other is not (SCHMITZ, 1976: 137–138; BAUD, 1999: 141–148, 426–429, dossiers 37 and 38). Second, there are cases in which non-biological children also receive this denomination. An example of this may be that of Meresankh III, who is the daughter of a woman who then married a king, yet Meresankh is said to be *zꜣt-nswt nt htꜣf* (BAUD, 1999: 461–463, dossier 76). In this case, what is essentially an adoptive relation is presented as a ‘bodily’ one. Third, a number of individuals referred to as *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* do not appear to have been members of the royal family, as shown by the case of Seshemnefer (III), owner of mastaba G 5170, who received the title *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* when he was promoted to vizier (STRUDWICK, 1985: 139–140; BAUD, 1999: 577–578, dossier 220). SCHMITZ (1976: 168) concludes, on the basis of evidence such as Seshathetep’s inscriptions mentioned above, that *zꜣ-nswt* is a title expressing hierarchy and, more specifically, that *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* should be understood in relation to expeditions and construction works, while *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf smsw* may be linked to tasks related to the vizier.<sup>10</sup> These individuals would not be ‘real’ princes, but ‘titular’ princes.

Detlef FRANKE (1983: 308) also provided a brief discussion on the title *zꜣ-nswt*, noting that its use for non-royal individuals is well-known since the Old Kingdom, although it became more evident from the Middle Kingdom onwards. In this context, Franke suggested that the title was originally reserved for biological children of the king (‘leiblichen Söhnen des Königs’), going on to denote a close relationship of dependency and subordination with the king through kinship terminology.

Michel BAUD (1999: 162–189) reassessed the titles *zꜣ-nswt* and *zꜣt-nswt* in his prosopographic approach to Old Kingdom royal families. He (1999: 182–185) admitted that there is evidence to support that a *zꜣ-nswt* was not simply a son of the king, but probably a title related to career advancement. In addition, BAUD (1999: 159–160) observed that *n htꜣf* is rarely featured in private statements of kinship, which could confirm that its main usage is related to administration. Along these lines, it would make sense to understand *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* as a title with no bearing on family connections. However, he also noted that Schmitz’s clear-cut rejection of a genealogical understanding of *zꜣ-nswt n htꜣf* needs to be nuanced, because it is impossible to separate office, hierarchy, and kinship in these sources. In a recent article, Gemma GREEN (2022: 105) argues that there is no

<sup>9</sup>As with *iri-pt* (see fn. 4 above), *htꜣtiꜣ* is a high-ranking title often translated as ‘prince’ in the Old Kingdom and connected with the royal entourage. On this title in the Old Kingdom, see STRUDWICK (1985: 307–312) and BAUD (1999: 257–259). See also WILLEMS (2013: 360–381) for a discussion on the interpretation of this title as ‘nomarch’, or ‘mayor’ in later sources.

<sup>10</sup>See also table summarising Schmitz’s ideas in BAUD (1999: 166, table 10).

compelling evidence that individuals unrelated to the royal family held these titles in the Old Kingdom, and that the expression  $z\text{:}nswt\ n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$  should be construed as ‘descendant of the king’. This is certainly a possibility in line with the more encompassing meaning of  $z\text{:}$  as ‘lineal descendant’ (see below). Be that as it may, the nature of the relationship here is less important than the way in which it is perceived. For example, **BAUD** (1999: 184) argues that the relationship, even if it is not that of a ‘real’ father-son, is modelled on father-son relations. This phrasing illustrates some of the problems that we often encounter in scholarship when analysing relatedness, namely the assumption that some relationships are more ‘real’ than others, which, in practical terms, translates into biological approaches to kinship.

Indeed, Schmitz, Franke, and Baud all used the body as a proxy for biology—and hence ‘real’ kinship—in the context of their work. For example, **SCHMITZ** (1976: 44) claimed that it is impossible to separate a ‘son’ from a ‘bodily son’ because they are the same thing, suggesting that only a biological son is a ‘real’ son. **FRANKE** (1983: 308) proposed that the title denoted a biological son of the king before its meaning was extended to non-royals. For his part, **BAUD** (1999: 188) stated that  $n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$  is simply a ‘lien du sang’, transposing to ancient Egypt a correlation between blood and kinship that is essentially Eurocentric (**OLABARRIA**, 2018). The implication here is that a biological relation, conveyed through bodily connections, is somehow more real than one that is not labelled as such.<sup>11</sup> It is a moot point, however, to try and determine whether someone was ‘really’ someone else’s child, especially if we favour a performative approach to kinship: the rights and duties ascribed to a given title, in this case  $z\text{:}nswt\ n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ , may have existed irrespective of any supposed biological relationship, and those duties may be as ‘real’ as supposed ‘blood links’. Rather than assuming that kinship was a pre-requisite to a function, it may be that performing that function contributed to constructions of relatedness.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the obsession with biology—and the interpretation of  $n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$  as marking a biological descendant—denotes more about our own biases and body worlds than about how the Egyptians perceived relatedness.

Arguably the main reason why this aspect is such a constant concern in modern scholarship is that we tend to interpret those ‘bodily’ connections as a means to determine legitimacy. Here we may recall one of the most salient examples of the use of  $n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$  post-Old Kingdom. In the literary text *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, a transmission of offices is being discussed and presented along the following lines:  $i\text{:}r\text{:}tw\ dt\ t\text{:}i\text{:}wt\ n\ sn\ n\ mwt\ iw\ z\text{:}n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ , ‘is it to the mother’s brother that the office should be given when a bodily son stands?’ (P. Chester Beatty I, 4,6–4,7, **GARDINER**, 1931: pls iv–iv.a). Although  $z\text{:}n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$  has been interpreted here as ‘legitimate heir’ (**BROZE**, 1996: 45–46), it is clear that it is being contrasted with the other possible successor to the throne of Osiris, hence recognising that other options apart from a  $z\text{:}n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$  were conceivable. This passage is foregrounding the positionality of Horus as a son in this game of succession; all things being equal, someone who occupies a position of son may be preferable, but the passage does not claim a bodily connection as the only possible means of legitimation (**PEHAL**, 2018: 152–157). Instead, there are other complementary ways in which (Osirian) succession can be actualised; for example, in terms of a violent competition for power that overrides any considerations of genealogical rights (**BAQUÉ-MANZANO**, 2017: 27–30). While it is true that an individual was a nominated heir and that this was often an eldest son (**ASSMANN**, 1976; **ALLAM**, 2010), there is no evidence to assume that a position in succession was conceptualised exclusively on the basis of a biological conception of the body.

Overall, through the example of  $z\text{:}nswt\ n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$ , I have argued that an understanding of  $z\text{:}f\ n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$  as a ‘biological son’ and hence a ‘legitimate heir’ illustrates some of the problems encountered when we study relatedness in ancient societies. First, it reproduces interpretations of kinship associated with modern notions

<sup>11</sup>Another example is provided in the work of Lisa **SABBAHY** (2021: 64–65), who claims that  $n\ h\text{t}\text{f}$  could be added in royal titles in Dynasty 4 to indicate belonging to ‘the royal bloodline’ and to stress ‘the actual son or daughter relationship’ (my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup>This performative approach to kinship can also be seen, for example, in relation to inheritance. Focusing on New Kingdom sources, Reinert **SKUMSNE** (2022: esp. 227–230) demonstrates that different people could act as the ‘eldest son’ and be made heir in place of the biological eldest son. Their right to inheritance was determined through their satisfactory fulfilment of duties, such as ensuring proper burial or supporting their relatives in old age.

of biological relations based on the notion of ‘blood’, which are transposed onto conceptualisations of the ‘body’. Second, it also assumes that legitimacy must be established on a biological basis. Such interpretations lead to a reductionistic reading of what it meant to be related and says more about our own practices of kinship than about those of the Egyptians.

#### 4 The term *z3* and the pitfalls of paterno-filial relations

The contexts of use of *z3fn ht3f* in the Old Kingdom and the case study in reference to king’s sons show that we should not take its meaning for granted: neither is it used exclusively for sons and daughters nor is it clear that it refers to a rightful heir. So if a ‘bodily son’ is not a ‘biological son’—and hence a legitimate heir—what is it? In her work, Marilyn STRATHERN (2020) highlights the history of construction of meaning of certain terms, arguing that an epistemic approach to social classifications can help elucidate the implications of their main uses. A similar perspective can be applied to this interpretation of ancient Egyptian expressions of relatedness: in this case, by inferring epistemic connections between terms, it may be possible to unpack the meaning of phrases such as *z3fn ht3f*. In the following sections I propose to examine its components in turn in order to attain a more nuanced understanding of the expression within its cultural setting. Following Bruno LATOUR (1987), we are looking into the ‘black box’ of *z3fn ht3f* to determine what it may have meant from an emic perspective.<sup>13</sup>

The first element to be analysed is the term *z3* and its female counterpart *z3t*, which are conventionally translated as ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ respectively. This rendering, however, is an oversimplification of a more complex concept: in anthropological terms, *z3* refers to lineal descendants, such as children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren (OLABARRIA, 2020: 63–67). Above I have alluded to GREEN’s (2022) discussion of how a *z3-nswt* could potentially be a grandchild of the king, hence providing a neat explanation for apparently anomalous examples such as that of Nefermaat, who received the title *z3-nswt n ht3f* even though he was the son of a daughter of king Snefru (STRUDWICK, 1985: 110) This reading, however, confirms an interest in framing this relationship in terms of ‘real’ versus ‘fictitious’ kinship, but I suggest there may be other ways of understanding the role of *z3* if we use a performative approach.

Kin terms in ancient Egyptian have been argued to display metaphorical extensions that stretch the role of kin types to other social relations outside the nuclear family (FRANKE, 1983: 302–311; WILLEMS, 1983). Within this interpretive framework, the term *z3* has been understood by some scholars to adopt the meaning ‘subordinate’ as a metaphorical extension of its basic meaning of ‘son’. For example, in a previous section I allude to BAUD’s (1999: 184) argument that a ‘father-son’ relationship should be regarded as the core of this bond, so non-biological instances of *z3-nswt* would be understood as ‘fictitious’ kinship.<sup>14</sup> While this approach recognises the pervasiveness of kin relations, it is problematic in that it assumes that ‘son’ (rather than ‘subordinate’) should be regarded as a primary meaning, arguably because being a son is mediated by biology, and hence ‘real’, while being a subordinate is artificially modelled on paterno-filial relations.

This privileging of father-son relations in the construction and interpretation of relatedness is not unique to Egyptology. STRATHERN (2020: 29) voices her concern that filiation too often becomes exemplary of other kinds of relations, which are weighted against it in an exercise of frontal comparison (CANDEA, 2018: 242–250). In this context, she discusses the incisive work of DE PINA-CABRAL (2017: 172–180), who criticises how Anglo-American philosophers treat all relations as akin to paternal filiation. Recognising the Eurocentric assumptions that this comparison implies, STRATHERN (2020: 28) refers to it as a ‘logical scandal’. Along the same lines, rather than modelling ancient Egyptian kinship on our own paradigm, it may be better to take Egyptian sources seriously and interpret relatedness within its own ancient context.

<sup>13</sup>On multi-scalar historical patterning and the use of black-boxing to assess the concept of body worlds, see HARRIS and ROBB (2013: 28–29 and 222–226).

<sup>14</sup>See also e.g. CANNUYER (1993) on fictitious and ‘spiritual’ kinship.

As seen with the example from *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* above, kinship in ancient Egypt is to some extent based on positional hierarchies, which are also reflected on the uses of the terminology. Thus, here the term *z* is not only expressing a paterno-filial relation, but it is also highlighting the hierarchical positioning of two individuals. Whether those individuals’ kinship is ‘real’—understood as biological—matters less than the performative relation of subordination that the term conveys.


## 5 The body and the torso

The second main element to note is of course the concept *ht*, which is used to qualify the relationship expressed by means of the term *z*. In this context, the hierarchical position of a person as a *z* is mediated by the way in which *ht* is understood. There are mainly two renderings that tend to be used for this term, and they are both slightly inaccurate.

First, the term *ht* is sometimes used in relation to the sky goddess Nut in religious and ritual texts, where the deceased is born from the *ht* of the goddess.<sup>15</sup> For example, the sarcophagus of Teti features the following recitation by the goddess Nut: ‘Teti is my son, whom I caused to be born and who parted my belly’ (Pyr. 1a; trans. ALLEN, 2015: 70). Here the journey of the deceased through the netherworld is likened to the cosmological daily journey of the sun across the sky, with the body (*ht*) of the sky goddess Nut becoming a safe and protective space for the deceased (ASSMANN, 2005: 164–176) These and similar usages of the term *ht* have led some authors to favour ‘womb’ as a possible translation, but this suggestion is highly problematic.

In his discussion on ideas of predestination and fate, Frank MIOSI (1982: 78–79) notes some of the problems associated with rendering *ht* as womb. He argues that the existence of the concept of fate—in the sense of a set of arbitrarily destined actions assigned by a god before birth—is dependent on the understanding of *ht* as womb, and this is often illustrated for the Old Kingdom in reference to some passages from *The Teaching of Ptahhotep*. He demonstrates that, when the term is translated as ‘belly’ instead, those passages no longer support the idea of predestination, hence showing the impact that an assumed translation may have on scholarly interpretations. Translating *ht* as womb also poses problems when it features a masculine possessive pronoun, as in the case of *z:ḥn ht:ḥ*. Arguably even more contentious are those passages in which there is no clear indication of gender, yet a reference to the mother is presumed due to the assumption that the term refers to the womb. For instance, a fragment from *The Teaching of Ptahhotep* (P. Prisse 19,3–19,5: ŽÁBA, 1956: 64) reads as follows:

Behave so that your master may say of you, ‘How well he was brought up by his father by whom he was begotten of his body (*ḥ:w:ḥ*). (Surely) he spoke to him while he was still completely within the womb (*ht*), for what he has accomplished is more than what he was told’ (trans. V. A. Tobin, in SIMPSON, 2003: 148).

In the original text, only the relation from father to son is being discussed,<sup>16</sup> yet the translation of *ht* as ‘womb’ alters the meaning of the section, shifting the focus to the role of the mother. In his translation for the TLA , Dils opts for the rendering of *ht* as ‘(Mutter)leib’, literally ‘(mother’s) body’, acknowledging that the reference to the mother is not present, but still assuming that it may be implied.

One could argue that the translation of womb would be contextually correct in some instances, so it should be kept when a text is clearly referring to a woman giving birth to provide a more idiomatic translation. However, this may potentially lead to mistaken assumptions because the rendering ‘womb’ could incorporate gendered differences into our translations that are not present in the original sources. For example, FRANKE (1983: 298) notes how an identification of *ht* and womb has led to a flawed interpretation of *ht* as a matrilineal

<sup>15</sup>The deceased may also be said to ‘come forth’ (*pri*) out of Nut’s *ht*; see BILLING (2002: 33–37; 2020).

<sup>16</sup>*pr.n:ḥ im:ḥ ht ḥ:w:ḥ dd.n:ḥ n:ḥ iw:ḥ m ht r:w*

kinship group in some publications (on *ht* as a group, see section 6 below). Further contexts of use of *ht*—discussed in the next paragraph—reveal a much wider range of meanings than what womb may manifest. In this sense, I agree with James WALKER (1996: 108), who, in his study of ancient Egyptian anatomical terminology, stated that translating *ht* as womb should be avoided because it is ‘erroneous, misleading, and totally superfluous’.

Another common translation that is often found for *ht* in Egyptological scholarship is ‘body’, which has certainly influenced the rendering of *z:f n ht:f* as ‘his bodily son’. At first sight, ‘body’ seems to be a relatively neutral term, and, unlike womb, it would work for all sexes. Despite the apparent convenience of this translation, it presents some ambiguities, as *ht* could strictly speaking mean ‘torso’, ‘abdomen’, or ‘belly’ rather than the whole body as we understand it (for a discussion of different schemata related to *ht*, see NYORD, 2009: 68–86).

The literary text known as the *Contendings between the Body and the Head* provides fascinating insights into this terminological issue. It is a humorous text preserved on a writing board (tTurin CGT 58004) that has been convincingly dated to late Dynasty 20 to early Dynasty 21 on linguistic and palaeographic grounds (DI BIASE-DYSON & STOCK, 2023; DI BIASE-DYSON, 2023). In it, the Body (identified as female) takes the (male) Head to court to determine who has supremacy over the other. The Body argues that she should prevail due to her command over the limbs, listing some body part functions as proof of her authority.<sup>17</sup> In this text, the term *ht* is used for Body, and the translators recognise the uncertainty around this rendering (DI BIASE-DYSON & STOCK, 2023: fn. 16; DI BIASE-DYSON, 2023: fn. 2) but they keep it because in the text the Body clearly presents herself as ruling over the limbs. However, the ‘limbs’ that are mentioned include the eye, mouth, nose, ear, arm, and forehead,<sup>18</sup> some of which we might assume should be part of the Head. It may be that in the bottom half of the text, which is now lost, the Head would argue that it was actually him who held supremacy over those parts, or perhaps the term *ht* was indeed ambiguous in scope, and Egyptians played with that vagueness in this comical account.

Terminological studies based on texts related to healing practices or anatomical lists show a preference for *ht* as referring more specifically to the torso rather than the whole body (WALKER, 1996: 105). Other literary texts also seem to favour the meaning of torso or belly. A common expression to indicate bowing refers to people placing themselves on their *ht*, such as in *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* (e.g. P. Hermitage 1115 67–68: BLACKMAN, 1932: 43, 10; PARKINSON, 1998: 93), which brings attention to the most salient characteristic of this posture (i.e. that the belly touches the ground when one is prostrated). There are also mentions of an empty *ht* to signify hunger or a full belly when one is sated (B1 325: PARKINSON, 2005: 41; PARKINSON, 1998: 72), as well as the need of a good man to ‘fill the belly’ of those he protects (P. Prisse 10,9: ŽÁBA, 1956: 42; PARKINSON, 1998: 257).

All of these examples show that *ht* refers to the middle section of the body, so a translation like ‘belly’ or ‘torso’ may be more anatomically correct. This would mean that a literal rendering of *z:f n ht:f* could be ‘his son of his torso’. This is certainly not an elegant translation, neither am I suggesting that we should take the expression at face value. Instead, it is important to further unpick what the term ‘torso’ meant for the Egyptians in order to determine what role it played in the qualification and characterisation of social relations.

## 6 A collective *ht*

In the previous section I have argued that, while *ht* is sometimes translated generically as ‘body’, it may refer more specifically to the torso. A magical spell from the New Kingdom gives us an interesting insight into this

<sup>17</sup>‘My eye sees into the distance (lit. sees in distancing itself), the nose can breathe and draws breath, the ear is receptive (lit. open) and hears, the mouth articulates (lit. shouts) and makes (lit. finds) its response, and the arms are controlled (lit. clever) and render service’ (trans. DI BIASE-DYSON & STOCK, 2023: 237).

<sup>18</sup>Interestingly, neither legs nor feet are mentioned in this context.



Fig. 4: Depiction of Nut at the Temple of Dendera. ©A. G. E. Hood.

term. This spell describes how the practitioner will transform into a fly and enter into a *ht*, from where they will have an advantageous view of the inside of the torso: *iwꜣi (r) ꜥꜥ htꜥk m ꜥꜥꜥ mtwꜣi mꜣꜣ htꜥk m-hnwꜥꜥ*, ‘I will enter your belly (*ht*) as a fly and then I will see your belly (*ht*) from its inside’ (oArmytage [= oUppsala, VM Inv. 2364], spell 2, lines 7–8; **BORGHOUTS** (1978: 1–2)). It is clear from this and other fragments that the *ht* is understood as a hollow receptacle.

On the basis of anatomical lists, **WALKER** (1996: 105–106) argues that the organs, including the heart, are meant to be contained inside the *ht*. Excrement is also said to originate from the *ht* (**LANDBORG**, 2021). In his work on conceptions of the body in the *Coffin Texts*, Rune **NYORD** (2009: 68–78) reprises this idea of the *ht* as a container, noting that it could also house more conceptual elements such as power, the *ka*, love, awe, fear, beauty, or even supernatural beings who may be responsible for causing an illness. Overall, there is evidence to confirm that the *ht* was conceptualised as a container.

As seen above, the *ht* can also contain babies—hence the inaccurate translation of ‘womb’—and, symbolically, the sun and the deceased as they traverse Nut on their daily journey, as shown in the depiction of Nut at the Temple of Dendera (Figure 4). In some of Nut’s representations on the ceilings of tombs or temples, as well as coffin lids, her torso is populated with stars, clearly indicative of the sky (**RUSCH**, 1922: 14–22; **BILLING**, 2002: 13–24).<sup>19</sup> Deriving from this context, the term *ht* can also be used metonymically as ‘constellation’. Already since the *Pyramid Texts*, there are examples of *ht* being used to refer to a group of stars that has at times been identified with the gods, particularly the Ennead. For instance, PT 528 includes a reference to how the *ht* of the Ennead is placed on the divine barque onto which the king will mount upon his death (**SETHE**, 1908: 205, 1250e; **ALLEN**, 2015: 169).

<sup>19</sup>See also **MORALES** (2016: 155–161) for a discussion of the important role of the decan stars and star-clocks within groups of texts, often inscribed on coffins lids, dealing with the protection of the deceased by the goddess Nut.

The translation of ‘constellation’ is not the only example of how the term *ht*, with its nuance of a receptacle containing an array of elements, can also acquire a collective meaning. The aforementioned literary composition of *The Contendings between the Body and the Head* refers to how the *ht* was seen as an entity that would rule over other limbs, hence implying a collective. In other examples, *ht* clearly assumes the meaning of a group of people.

Some instances of *ht* from the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom seem to designate a group of people living at the same time, possibly a generation.<sup>20</sup> For example, the stela of Hetepi from Elkab is a self-presentation text of the First Intermediate Period that relates the owner’s military prowess (GABRA, 1976). A few lines of the inscription are devoted to Hetepi’s kin, with mentions of a paternal grandmother and a maternal grandfather. Line 7 states that his wife gave birth to twelve members of a *ht*, without any further indication about how they related to Hetepi. This notion emphasises the generative aspect of *ht*, also providing a link between ideas of the body and temporality.

The *Teaching for Merikare* supports this rendering, since it states explicitly that one *ht* comes after another among people (P. Moskow 4658, 8.3: HELCK, 1977: 58, xxxv; PARKINSON, 1998: 225). Similar expressions, with almost identical wording, occur in so-called harpists’ songs of the New Kingdom as well. For example, the song on Papyrus Harris 500 emphasises the cyclical nature of the passing of generations (P. British Museum 10060, 6,3: SIMPSON, 2003: 332), something that is arguably also the focus of a passage in the Middle Kingdom literary text of *The Words of Khakheperreseneb* (P. Leiden 344 rto 6: GARDINER, 1909; PARKINSON, 1998: 146). In addition to *ht*, there are other terms that denote social groups with a temporal dimension. For example, *h:w* refers to a collection of elements around an individual, which can acquire temporal, spatial, animated, and materials meanings depending on the context, genre, and period of the source (CHANTRAIN & WINAND, 2018: 6–10). Overall, here we see a combination of two senses of temporality within the notion of *ht*: on the one hand, the idea of succession and generative reproduction; on the other, the focus on one specific moment when a group of people co-exist.

In his detailed study of kinship terminology, Detlef FRANKE (1983: 298) translated *ht* as ‘Körperschaft’ (‘corporation’), in a rendering that itself contains a reference to the body. The examples surveyed do not specify how all the members of a *ht* are related to each other and whether the body effectively plays any part in their relationship, but Franke takes that corporality as evidence of their connection. Perhaps time was as important as embodiment in the constitution of this social group, while the mention of the ‘torso’ was meant to give a material dimension to those relations. In different cultures, ‘blood’ has been used as a metaphor to indicate kinship (OLABARRIA, 2018: 92–93), and many languages contemplate the idea of ‘flesh’ in a similar sense.<sup>21</sup> STRATHERN (2020: 37–40) notes how these corporeal entities belonging to the physical world are meant to give a tangible aspect to kinship, which is essentially intangible. Perhaps the fact that the term *ht* merges perceptions of ‘body’ and ‘time’ might be a comparable effort that grants a material dimension to an immaterial characterisation of relatedness, but it is worth remembering that ideas of intangibility and materiality will be culturally specific. Be that as it may, this example is a good reminder of how there are different ways of understanding the articulation between embodiment and relatedness in modern and ancient cultures, namely within different body worlds.

In addition to this focus on time, the usage of *ht* in Middle Kingdom literary texts also exhibits a preoccupation for hierarchy. *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* reflects on the futility of a *ht* without a ‘great one’ (B1 220–221; PARKINSON, 2005: 31; PARKINSON, 1998: 67) while *The Loyalist Teaching* highlights how a worthy leader will be trusted by his *ht*, who will tell him all their concerns (CG 20538, l. 3: LICHTHEIM, 1973: 126; LEPROHON, 2009). These examples seem to rely on positional hierarchies, in a similar fashion to what I have argued for *z*: above.

<sup>20</sup> An earlier use of *ht* as a collective is known from the *Pyramid Texts*, where *ht tpt* refers to a ‘first generation’ of gods; see FRANKE (1983: 296), BAQUÉ-MANZANO (2017: 27–28, fn. 99).

<sup>21</sup> STRATHERN (2020: 37–40) describes how blood replaced the medieval concept of flesh as the main agent of a generation.

In summary, it seems that *ht* could refer to a contemporaneous group of people whose head was considered a figure of authority. Going back to *z:f n ht:f*, I would argue that temporality and subordination are essential traits that need to be considered in any analysis of its meaning.

## 7 Generic relations within *z:f n ht:f*

In the previous sections I have focused on *z:* and *ht*, which are arguably the most prominent elements of this expression. However, there are other components that I have not discussed yet, namely the genitival *n* and the suffix pronouns.

First, the genitival adjective *n* provides a nexus between the two terms explored so far. It can be translated as ‘belonging to’ or simply as ‘of’, and it implies a connection between two nouns, one of which acts as the head noun (*nomen regens*; usually the possessed) and one as the dependent noun (*nomen rectum*; usually the possessor). Through this syntactic construction, a narrow relationship between the two nouns is being conveyed, where the *z:* is qualified by the *ht*. Instead of referring to all their lineal descendants, attention is drawn to those who belong to a group that exists in a given moment in time.

Second, the *f* is a deictic that highlights a relationship: crucially, this suffix pronoun is relating both the *z:* and the *ht* to a third person, hence focusing our attention on him as a protagonist of this expression. In the example of the mastaba of Kaninisut shown above in Figure 1, those individuals captioned as *z:* or *z:t* are also represented in smaller scale to that of the mastaba owner, so that our attention—both linguistically and visually—is drawn to the man on the right, while those people represented around him could be regarded as a measure of his greatness. In this context, perhaps *n ht:f* could be interpreted as a reflexive linguistic device along the lines of *ds:f* (‘himself’). If this is true, *ht* would be qualifying a person’s individuality rather than the nature of the relationship. STRATHERN (2020: 70) identified relations as an ‘in-between’ space that connects persons, while also supporting their individuality. Interestingly, in the case of Egypt that individuality would also be reinforced through relations and expressed through a reference to one’s torso, which draws our attention to different body worlds.

In her analysis of the term ‘relations’, STRATHERN (2014: 13) acknowledges the difficulty inherent in imagining the worlds of the inhabitants of England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century through a ‘backwards glance’, and the consequences that this has when it comes to assessing terms nowadays regarded as ‘generic’. Strathern argues that some terms had different degrees of explicitness, and some of them could be regarded as generic ‘Goldilocks’ terms—neither too explicit nor too general. But those general terms in their ‘vagueness’ could potentially be more precise than others, because flexibility would convey the meaning of the concept much better. For example, STRATHERN (2014: 10) notes how the term ‘kinsman’ was often used without exact knowledge of how a connection was traced. It may be that the nature of the relationship expressed through *z:f n ht:f* was not immediately evident to Egyptians themselves either, or that it was so multifaceted that it was better rendered through a generic term or expression.

The problem remains how such a generic yet culturally specific, vague yet incredibly nuanced phrase can be translated. When we render *z:f n ht:f* as ‘his bodily son’, we run the risk of conveying ideas about biology and legitimacy because they happen to be relevant to our own body world. In this context, we need to recognise the distinct interpretational frameworks from which these relationships arise. VIVEIROS DE CASTRO (2004) addressed this puzzle through the notion of ‘controlled equivocation’, which is not only a methodological approach but essentially a political stance that requires researchers to take the other seriously by recognising their different ontological perspectives. HOLBRAAD and PEDERSEN (2017: 185) provide an insightful summary: ‘if the economy of anthropological inquiry is constituted by ontological divergences, it is also an economy of misunderstandings. Within the language game that is at issue here, then, “the anthropologist” and “the native” do not so much disagree with each other (...) as constitutively talk past each other’.

Hence, **VIVEIROS DE CASTRO** (2004: esp. 16–20 on the term ‘txai’) uses the idea of ‘controlled equivocation’ as a heuristic tool to understand concepts that are as culturally unique as kinship terms. No translation can ever provide an entirely satisfactory reflection of terms or concepts with all their nuances, which is why his method requires an exercise in comparison that should be ‘in the service of translation and not the opposite’ (**VIVEIROS DE CASTRO**, 2004: 5), which is what I have attempted to do in this article. It may not always be possible to provide extensive descriptions in Egyptological scholarship, but it is essential that we problematise translations like ‘his bodily son’ in order to raise awareness about the conflicting perspectives that we are facing in our academic work. As **CANDEA** (2018: 261–266) nicely articulates, the point is not to provide an adequate translation but ‘to keep the equivocation live by forcing the reader to confront the alterity of a conceptual world’ in which relatedness could be expressed through the body, time, hierarchy, individuality, and the in-between space of interpersonal relations.

## 8 Conclusion

In this article I have used the expression  $z_3:f n \underline{ht}f$  as a case study to explore ideas about kinship and bodily experience, both in ancient Egypt and in Egyptological scholarship. The phrase is used mainly during the Old Kingdom, becoming much rarer in later periods. This may be seen as a terminological fad, or perhaps it may point at a change in the perception of contemporary body worlds.

The kin term  $z_3$  refers to lineal descendants rather than simply to sons and daughters. It also encodes a relational hierarchy that clearly expresses a connection of subordination between two or more individuals. The term  $\underline{ht}$  is notably difficult to translate. Although usually rendered as ‘body’, it probably refers more specifically to the torso, conceptualised as a receptacle. By extension, it can acquire a collective meaning, including denoting a group of people, and it can also be used as a means to define one’s identity. Both together, they make up an expression that has been seen in scholarship as a representation of a biological—and hence legitimate—relationship, but that should probably be interpreted more accurately as an embodiment of hierarchy. The use of the suffix pronoun as a possessive indicates the leading role in this asymmetrical relationship, where the primacy of an individual is expressed by means of their positional relatedness.




To say that one was a  $z_3:f n \underline{ht}f$  does not imply a biologisation of kinship relations (that is only our bias when reading the text), but rather an identification of a relation between two individuals that encompasses a complex and nuanced understanding of ancient body worlds. Different conceptions, practices, and experiences of the body may coexist at any given time, but we should always avoid projecting our own body worlds inadvertently into the past. As shown, the expression  $z_3:f n \underline{ht}f$  goes beyond a reductionistic view of the physical body, and it can be used to highlight individuality through a focus on relatedness that is conveyed through the conceptual vehicles of time and hierarchy.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## ‘Who wears a kilt like men and a sash like women’

### Negotiating foreignness, gender, and the body in New Kingdom representations of ‘Near Eastern’ goddesses

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#### Abstract

Egypt’s imperial age saw the emergence of new deities within the country’s monumental and literary repertoires. Some were of Near Eastern origin, while others were Egyptian creations inspired by perceptions of Near Eastern cultures. Among these were the goddesses Qadesh, Astarte, and Anat, whose bodily characterisations in visual and textual media exhibit features that are unusual compared with Egyptian norms of gendered representation. We might hypothesise that such figures were uniquely placed to disrupt convention, being doubly peripheral as both ‘foreign’ and feminine within an androcentric representational system. This article evaluates the utility of Marie Louise Stig Sørensen’s model of gender negotiation for understanding the processes that produced these representations. The paper first outlines Sørensen’s argument that gender norms are produced by finding agreements between different understandings of roles and identities. It then discusses the origins of Qadesh, Astarte, and Anat, interrogating the nature of the ‘foreignness’ they might embody. Their characterisations are then examined within a select corpus of visual and textual sources: Qadesh’s triadic stelae, the literary text *Astarte and the Sea*, and a mythic precedent to a magic spell called *Anat, Seth, and the Seed of Pre*. While these representations are indeed unusual, traces of more standard dynamics are nonetheless discernible. Drawing on Sørensen, we might describe this process as a negotiation between message and medium, between the intent to create exceptional, exoticised personas and the culturally determined vocabulary available to do so.

**Keywords:** gender, goddesses, New Kingdom, Sørensen, negotiation

"من يرتدي النقبة مثل الرجال والوشاح مثل النساء": التفاوض حول الأجنبية والهوية الجنسية والجسد في تصورات الدولة الحديثة لمعبودات "الشرق الأدنى"

#### الملخص

شهدت الحقبة الإمبراطورية في مصر ظهور آلهة جديدة ضمن حصيلتها من النصوص الأدبية والمعالم المعمارية. بعض هذه الآلهة كان يرجع أصلها إلى الشرق الأدنى، بينما كان البعض الآخر من ابتكارات مصرية مستوحاة من تصورات التي يحملها المصريون عن ثقافات الشرق الأدنى. من بين هذه المعبودات كانت قادش، عشتروت، وعناة، حيث تظهر الصفات الجسدية لكل منهن في المصادر البصرية والنصية سمات غير مألوفة مقارنةً بالتصورات المصرية التقليدية للهوية الجنسية. لذا يمكننا من خلال هذا الاختلاف أن نفترض أن هذه الشخصيات المصورة وضعت بهذه الصورة الفريدة لإبراز خروجها عن القواعد المعتادة، وذلك لكونها تلعب دوراً ثانوياً مرتين: أولاً باعتبارها 'أجنبية'، وثانياً كونها أنثوية، كما هو واضح من نظام التمثيل الموقعي. تعمل هذه المقالة على تقديم تقييم لمدى فائدة أحد النماذج التي طرحها ماري لويز ستيج سورنسن، والتي تتناول الهوية الجنسية، في المساعدة على فهم العمليات التي أنتجت هذه

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التصويرات. تبدأ الورقة بتوضيح المحجة التي تتركز عليها سورنسن، والتي تفيد بأن المعايير المحددة للهوية الجنسية تتشكل من خلال إيجاد نقاط اتفاق بين المفاهيم المختلفة للأدوار والهويات. وعلى الرغم من أن هذه التصويرات غير مألوقة بالفعل، إلا أنه يمكن تمييز آثار لديناميكيات أكثر تقليدية بينها. من ثم تنتقل المقالة إلى مناقشة أصول المعبودات قادش، عشتروت، وعناة، حيث يستعرض البحث الطبيعة 'الأجنبية' التي قد تجسدها هذه الشخصيات. بينما بعد ذلك، يتم فحص الصفات المميزة الخاصة بمجموعة مختارة من المصادر البصرية والنصية: مثل اللوحات الثلاثية لقادش، والنص الأدبي "عشتروت والبحر"، نسخته أسطورية سابقه لأحادي التعويذات السحرية التي تُسمى "عناة، ست، وبذرة بري". وعلى الرغم من أن هذه التصويرات غير مألوقة بالفعل، إلا أنه يمكن تمييز آثار لديناميكيات أكثر تقليدية بينها. استناداً إلى سورنسن، يمكننا وصف هذه العملية بأنها مرحلة تفاوض بين الرسالة والوسيط، وبين الرغبة في إنشاء شخصيات استثنائية ذات طابع غريب والإمكانات المحددة ثقافياً التي تتيح تحقيق ذلك

الكلمات الدالة الهوية الجنسية، المعبودات، الدولة الحديثة، سورنسن، التفاوض

## 1 Introduction

The New Kingdom (c.1550–1069 BCE) witnessed one of the most extensive imperial enterprises in Egyptian history. Whether through direct rule, vassal states, or assertion of cultural prestige, Egyptian influence was felt (at various points) from Nubia to the borders of the Hittite Empire. This period is often called an international age, in which Egyptian elites showed interest in aspects of the cultures they encountered or dominated (e.g. [VAN DE MIEROOP](#), 2021: 175, 231–242). Cultural elements originating beyond the Nile valley, or interpretations of those elements, appeared in a range of contexts and media. Minoan motifs were incorporated into decorative arts, for instance in a ceiling painting from the palace of Amenhotep III at Malqata, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (accession number 11.215.451, [PORTER & MOSS](#), 1964: 781; [HAYES](#), 1959: fig. 148). Deities tracing their origin or inspiration to non-Egyptian cultures were absorbed into the pantheon. This included Near Eastern goddesses, who occupied an increasingly prominent role in visual and textual sources following the expansion of the empire into those regions during Dynasty 18. For example, a chariot found in the tomb of Thutmose IV is engraved with a scene in which the king is accompanied in his chariot by the god Montu and captioned as 'standing on a chariot like (the goddess) Astarte' ([CARTER & NEWBERRY](#), 1904: pl. 10). By Dynasty 19, these goddesses were part of royal naming practices, with Ramesses II naming his daughter Bintanat meaning 'Daughter of (the goddess) Anat' ([CORNELIUS](#), 2008: 85; [VAN DE MIEROOP](#), 2021: 241). The Egyptian state continued to represent those beyond its borders in its traditionally alienating fashion, yet this was also a time when elite culture flirted with the aesthetics of otherness, when 'out' was 'in'.

Goddesses might prove an especially powerful lens for observing the internalisation or re-imagining of exoticised cultural elements via imperial relationships, since those dynamics are often gendered. For instance, Edward Said famously delineated Orientalism as a Euro-American colonial discourse about 'the East' as opposed (and inferior) to 'the West'. He noted that 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist scholars characterised this imagined monolith by 'its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability (...) The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien' ([SAID](#), 2003: 206–207). While Said was describing a specific representational discourse, emerging from a particular socio-historical context, certain dynamics observed within that discourse could have wider applicability. The model demonstrates how the perceived 'Other' can be feminised in the rhetoric of an androcentric colonial power. Similar mechanisms appear to have been at work in the ancient Egyptian context, as shown by Uroš Matić in his discussion of the feminisation of foreign enemies in Egyptian texts ([MATIĆ](#), 2021: 114–119). In the status-driven, male-oriented media of imperial Egypt, in which the representational possibilities for gods and men were structured (and constrained) by concerns of prominence and prestige, we might hypothesise that tensions between the familiar and the exotic would be highly pronounced in representations of foreign goddesses.

Yet we should also note that goddesses are worthy subjects of analysis regardless of whether they embody

wider social phenomena or the concerns of those who represented them. One could argue that divinities were just as 'real' and active in the Egyptian social world as living humans. For example, anthropologist Alfred Gell recognised that artworks have agency of their own, generating effects through interactions with both makers and audiences (GELL, 1998: ix). Similarly, while deities are conceptual entities, their attributes and mythologies generate effects, informing people's worldviews and practices and thereby shaping the very culture that created them. As Bruno Latour wrote when critiquing prevalent models of culture within the social sciences, 'if religion, arts or styles are necessary to 'reflect', 'reify', 'materialize', 'embody' society ( ... ) then are objects not, in the end, its co-producers? Is not society built literally—not metaphorically—of gods, machines, sciences, arts and styles?' (LATOUR, 1993: 54). We should therefore take deities seriously as actants in the processes that created the monuments, media, and material culture that are the bedrock of Egyptological studies.

The internalisation of foreign cultural elements poses a raft of questions, of which this paper is largely concerned with the following: what does 'foreign' mean in this or any context? By what mechanisms were these elements assimilated, re-imagined, or fabricated? In the case of 'foreign goddesses', we might also ask whether their real or imagined exteriority placed them outside of the norms that shaped representations of other goddesses in the Egyptian pantheon. Or are the mechanisms that maintain gender constructs still observable? Perhaps such norms are in fact rendered *more* visible, discernible through choices made at the periphery where (one might argue) there is a greater range of possibilities.

The questions I have raised are, at their core, theoretical. Any response to them will inevitably draw upon conceptual frameworks, regardless of whether those frameworks are acknowledged or even recognised. In short: theoretical questions can only have theoretical answers. Yet Egyptology is notorious for its aversion to engaging with theoretical discourse. The foundational goal of amassing knowledge about ancient Egypt has largely retained primacy over more abstract discussions and methodological debate, to the extent that David Wengrow has remarked that 'there is no strictly Egyptological way of researching or explaining anything' (WENGROW, 2020: 51). Suspicions linger about anachronism, exteriority to the cultural context under study, and the danger of shaping data to fit our own preconceived narratives.

While there may be some merit in caution, these concerns are not sufficient to disqualify theory as an Egyptological tool. Inappropriate impositions should indeed be minimised, yet as external observers of a past cultural system, impositions are unavoidable. We make them whether we intend to or not. Far from being a trap that will ensnare analysts in unsubstantiated storytelling, theory invites us to carefully examine assumptions that might otherwise go unchecked. To be intentional and transparent in the narratives we use or create. Not only can Egyptologists benefit greatly from the richness and diversity of theoretical models and methodologies—these constitute a toolkit or toy chest rather than a set of competing ideologies that demand allegiance—but Egyptology itself has much to contribute to wider theoretical discussions, whether that be through its wealth of possible case studies or the potential to build models grounded in ancient Egyptian culture. This potential was inspiringly demonstrated at the *Egyptology in Dialogue* conference.

In the spirit of exploring these avenues, this paper will evaluate the utility of Marie Louise Stig Sørensen's model of gender negotiation for observing the processes underlying bodily characterisations of goddesses of Near Eastern origin. To do so, I will primarily use her 2007 paper 'On Gender Negotiation and its Materiality', as well as her 2000 monograph *Gender Archaeology*. The characterisations in question—visual and textual renderings of the goddesses Qadesh, Anat, and Astarte—exhibit unusual features in the context of Egyptian gendered representational norms. I will argue that while notions of foreignness may indeed facilitate these departures from more standard depictions, the inclusion of such exoticising features is a choice that ultimately reflects Egyptian preoccupations. These characterisations are shaped by negotiations between message, medium, and gendered representational vocabularies.

## 2 Aspects of Sørensen

Before examining these goddesses and their associated material in greater detail, I will first summarise the aspects of Sørensen's model with which I primarily engage in exploring its viability for observing the processes at work in these representations.

The crux of Sørensen's idea is that gender norms are produced when individuals and groups seek agreements between different understandings of the roles, rights, responsibilities, and identities held by themselves and others (SØRENSEN, 2007: 47–48). It is a compelling thesis. We might suppose that each of us moves through the world in conscious or unconscious reference to a set of beliefs or assumptions about ourselves and our place in society. These may have been taught to us explicitly or learned through experience. They may align with the values of our community or stand in opposition to them. Our actions and self-image are shaped by these beliefs in one way or another. However, we are not the only actors in the world, and ours is not the only set of beliefs in existence. It is only a matter of time before our ways of doing and being come into contact or conflict with those of others. Moreover, it is rare that one's conception of self is not also concerned with other people. Whether as individuals or in groups, people shape themselves in reference to those around or apart from them, whether that be through emulation or opposition. Therefore, not only do we seek to act as we feel we should, or yearn to be able to, but we project those expectations onto others, and are ourselves projected onto. Workable middle grounds must be found between these positions which, when occurring on a societal level, produces gender norms. This is an ongoing, dynamic, and at times multivocal or contentious process.

A key point for my analyses, and indeed for anyone who makes inferences from archaeological material—we should include texts in this seeing as they are carried and mediated by objects—is that material culture is pivotal in the process of negotiation. As Sørensen notes, 'it is within material culture that we find both the physical means, and the social expression, of gender agreements' (SØRENSEN, 2007: 42). Material culture can be used to express gender agreements and is also the arena in which they are forged. It is through material culture that these constructs are given a social reality, whether that be through the allocation and use of resources or the choices that shape iconography in a piece of art. Such a premise opens a world of possibilities. It is often said that the material record of ancient Egypt is fragmentary, and while this may be true, those fragments were themselves actors in ancient processes of gender negotiation to which they might bear witness.

Yet such a seemingly intuitive perspective is not without flaw or grounds for criticism. It could be argued that the suggested process of negotiation implies intentionality, that people are consciously calculating midpoints between their respective positions and conceive of the interaction in those terms. This seems implausible, not least because in any given situation we are unlikely to be aware of all the personal or cultural baggage that shapes our experience of the world. Furthermore, the idea of 'negotiation' between two or more parties might imply comparable agencies for the actors, that everyone involved is engaging from similarly strong positions. This notion ignores the realities of a world permeated by inequality and power imbalances. Surely any negotiations undertaken in such circumstances are conducted under duress; might they be better described as gender dictates or impositions? Sørensen herself addresses the issue, stating that 'agreements can be forced or voluntary' (SØRENSEN, 2007: 47), and elsewhere discusses, Archaeology's 'central dilemma' of agency and the relationship between the individual and wider social structures (SØRENSEN, 2007: 65–67).

While these critiques are valuable for nuancing our understanding of Sørensen's theory, they do not necessarily invalidate the model itself or preclude its use. I do not interpret gender negotiation as implying or requiring intentionality. Rather, I see this model as a means of describing how culture moves and evolves. The different conceptions of gender roles and identities held by respective individuals or groups are not positions in a debate, but nodes of tension attempting to act simultaneously on and despite one another. We might think of these tensions as cataracts in a river; a tangle of stones pressing on one another, whose interactions shape how the water (here representing cultural or social action) is able to flow through it. Conscious calculation

may indeed play a part in this process at certain junctures, especially in a setting like ancient Egypt where many forms of cultural media were structured by a complex algebra of hierarchy and prioritisation that John Baines terms ‘decorum’ (e.g. [BAINES](#), 2007: 14–29). Yet calculation is not the core of the phenomenon itself. Furthermore, recognising the potential effects of imbalances is an important qualifier of gender negotiation, nevertheless objects of different sizes will still act upon one another. We should be cautious of reducing our understanding of agency to a binary of the unfettered and the utterly subjugated. Since Sørensen’s model is ultimately about interaction, the existence of power imbalances does not invalidate it, but refines it.

The concept of negotiation reveals the analytic potential of the sources examined by this paper. We might suggest that the unusual representations of Qadesh, Anat, and Astarte, are all ultimately part of that same process of negotiation in which gender agreements are sought and solidified. This assertion presents a further set of questions: what forms do those agreements take? What ideas are they between? And what function do such agreements ultimately serve in a wider sociocultural sense? The last question will lead us to visit another of Sørensen’s points over the course of the following discussions, namely that material culture and negotiation can at times be used to challenge or subvert normative ideas of gender ([SØRENSEN](#), 2007: 48). In considering whether the characterisations of these goddesses are examples of such subversions, or whether they may in fact bear the marks of established structures, we must carefully examine the context of the sources as well as their content.

### 3 Exotic bodies: Goddesses of Near Eastern ‘origin’

As stated above, the material to which I will be applying Sørensen’s theory concerns three goddesses: Qadesh, Anat, and Astarte. Qadesh will be considered through visual sources, namely the so-called ‘triadic stelae’ that carry striking depictions of her (see §4 and Figure 1). She constitutes the primary focus of these discussions. The supporting analysis of Anat and Astarte is made in reference to textual sources, namely magical and literary texts dating to Dynasties 18 and 19 (see §5). Before examining these sources in greater depth, I will give some background to the goddesses they centre on, thereby returning to the issue of how ‘foreign’ these figures truly are.

The earliest attestation of Qadesh appears in the reign of Amenhotep III, in an inscription on a Memphite statue of a man called Ptahankh who was connected to the priesthood of Ptah ([ZIVIE-COCHE](#), 2011: 3). The text refers to the city’s port of Peru-Nefer, an area associated with other foreign and particularly Near Eastern deities ([HORN](#), 1969: 37; [COLLOMBERT & COULON](#), 2000: 217–219), presumably due to its real or symbolic connection with distant foreign locations. Izak Cornelius identifies Qadesh as having Levantine origins ([CORNELIUS](#), 2008: 86–87). Her frontally rendered nude form does indeed resemble iconography seen in the Levant. Cornelius suggests she was ‘brought back’ to Egypt by Egyptians who had served in the military or in imperial administration.

However, Christiane Zivie-Coche points out that Qadesh as a distinct deity does not appear in Near Eastern sources ([ZIVIE-COCHE](#), 2011: 6). Instead, it seems the Egyptians built an entirely new deity, drawing on the religious ideas and iconography of the communities they interacted with. According to Yuri Volokhine, Qadesh’s appearance utilises Hathoric iconography which had permeated into the Near East, namely her frontal depiction and hairstyle of two curled braids ([VOLOKHINE](#), 2000: 68). Frontality was a relatively limited mode of representation in Egyptian visual media, as was nakedness for most goddesses and high-status adults ([ROBINS](#), 1996: 33–39), though these features were not unknown. The goddesses Nut, for example, was frequently depicted as a naked woman from the New Kingdom onwards ([BILLING](#), 2002: 13). Furthermore, Nut was associated with coffins from at least the Middle Kingdom ([ASSMANN](#), 2001: 163–173), as a result of which her image appears on the inside of many coffins and sarcophagi. These images can be frontally rendered, sometimes showing her naked or partially clothed in a manner that, while not identical to Qadesh, is certainly reminiscent. Qadesh’s iconography might therefore have been designed to appear simultaneously familiar and alien. To round everything off, the Egyptians took the Semitic root *q-d-š*, meaning ‘sacred’ or

'holy', and used it to create a name for this new deity (CORNELIUS, 2008: 94; ZIVIE-COCHE, 2011: 5–6).

Already, Qadesh's origins call notions of 'foreignness' into question. In many ways she is just as Egyptian as long-attested goddesses like Isis or Hathor, since she appears to have been created by Egyptians, for Egyptians, and in an Egyptian context. Yet she has clearly been constructed with otherness or exoticism at her core, her name and iconography evoking non-Egyptian cultural settings. She is like the coronation chicken of goddesses; just as this curry-based dish is an imperial British reworking of South Asian flavours, Qadesh is the product of an imperial setting, produced in and for the imperial centre, using interpretations of foreign elements which the centre has metabolised. She is less a foreign artefact as she is a crystallisation of Egyptian imaginings of the foreign. She might therefore serve as a mirror we can hold up to Egyptian norms of gendered representation, her depictions being constructed as different yet understandable, a process which in turn casts light on the priorities and frameworks that underlie negotiations of gender norms.

I now turn to the goddesses Astarte and Anat. Like Qadesh, both were adopted into the Egyptian pantheon during the New Kingdom, the former in Dynasty 18 and the latter in Dynasty 19. Astarte was originally a fertility goddess known from Ugarit and Phoenicia, being the consort of Baal and the Levantine counterpart to the Mesopotamian Ishtar (HORN, 1969: 41). Her connection to Baal is echoed in Egyptian sources. Following her absorption into the pantheon, she became a consort of the god Seth, who could be identified with Baal (e.g. TE VELDE, 1984: 909). Their association is attested in the literary text *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, when the goddess Neith suggests Astarte be given to Seth as compensation for not being awarded the throne of Osiris (GARDINER, 1932b: 40.3–5). In Ugaritic texts, Astarte is the sister and consort of the chief god El (HOLLAND, 2010: 203) and was particularly associated with the horse. She sometimes appears on horseback in her Egyptian depictions (CORNELIUS, 2008: 42) and can also wield a bow and arrow, both communicating a link to warfare (SADEK, 1987: 156; HOFFMANN, 2008: 50). Like Qadesh, Astarte can be depicted naked (see §4). She had a cult centre at Memphis (SADEK, 1987: 157) and at Per-Ramesses, the latter indicated by the *Praise of the Delta Residence* in P. Anastasi II of the *Late Egyptian Miscellanies*, which states that 'Astarte is in its east' (GARDINER, 1937: 12.12). Anat holds a very similar set of associations, being the daughter of El and closely associated with Baal, though not his consort (see CORNELIUS, 2008: 92). Indeed, the two goddesses are often mentioned or depicted alongside one another, whether in Near Eastern sources (SMITH, 2014: 34) or Egyptian ones (she is offered to Seth alongside Astarte in *The Contendings*).

Perhaps Astarte and Anat might be termed 'foreign goddesses' with more certainty than is possible for Qadesh. While Qadesh's depictions draw upon iconographic traditions that were entangled with the places and peoples under Egypt's colonial influence, she is ultimately an Egyptian creation. Astarte and Anat have demonstrable lives outside of Egyptian religious and mythic traditions. Echoes of those contexts might be found in the goddesses' representations, such as Astarte's conveyance on horseback rather than in a chariot, as may be more usual for Egyptian iconography. Yet even here the question of foreignness is not straightforward. As will be discussed in the following sections, the inclusion of such features was not an inevitability of depicting these goddesses. It was a choice. I would therefore suggest that the true analytic value of observing the 'foreignness' of these goddesses is not in identifying some objective otherness. What I will interrogate here is a *perception* or *construction* of otherness. It is a belief held in the Egyptian cultural imagination. This paper examines how that belief might interact with, affect, and be affected by processes of gender negotiation.

#### 4 Qadesh's triadic stelae

We might observe some of these processes first hand in the so-called 'triadic stelae' in which Qadesh features prominently. Indeed, she dominates. Figure 1 shows a typical example of this object type in the Museo Egizio (Cat. 1601 = CGT 50066), commissioned by the scribe Ramose in Dynasty 19. The stela's lunette depicts three deities: Qadesh, and the gods Min and Reshep. The naked Qadesh stands front and centre, looking directly out to the viewer, flanked by Min to our left and Reshep to our right. Cornelius presents ten such stelae in his iconographic analysis of Qadesh and other Levantine goddesses (CORNELIUS, 2008: 123–126, cat. 5.1–10).



Fig. 1: The ‘triadic stela’ of the scribe Ramose. Museo Egizio CGT 50066/Cat. 1601. © Museo Egizio. Shared under a CC0 1.0 Universal license.

Most of these, including the Ramose stela, are attributable to Deir el-Medina, though one example in the Cairo Museum is provenanced to Memphis (JE 45535, [CORNELIUS](#), 2008: 126, cat. 5.10).

Some have assumed that the function of these objects related to fertility. This is largely due to Qadesh’s appearance, as well as the presence of the ithyphallic god Min. In the case of the Museo Egizio example this interpretation is also based on the presumption that Ramose’s apparent lack of biological children must have been a motivation in his votive practices (e.g. [DAVIES](#), 1999: 81–82; [VALBELLE & GOUT](#), 2002: 62). Yet there is little evidence to substantiate such claims. Nowhere in Ramose’s substantial body of votive material does he articulate a desire for offspring. Furthermore, examples of triadic stelae were dedicated by individuals known to have had children. The deities depicted on the stelae have associations that reach beyond matters of fertility; all three might be connected to the desert margins, with Qadesh and Reshep having influence over the dangerous animals that inhabit those areas as well as over disease ([VOLOKHINE](#), 2000: 67; [CORNELIUS](#), 2008: 97–98; [MÜNNICH](#), 2013: 119). It therefore seems probable that these objects served apotropaic functions.

As the central figure, with the two gods either side facing inwards towards her, Qadesh is very much the focal point of these stelae. A particularly large and finely carved example in the British Museum (EA 191) renders her figure significantly larger and more sculptural than those of the accompanying gods. Everything about these images of Qadesh commands our attention. While her frontal depiction is not unparalleled, we have already seen that frontality is relatively specialised in Egyptian art, suggesting Qadesh’s appearance may have been striking to an ancient viewer. Similarly, nudity is not unknown for goddesses (e.g. Nut), but neither is it very common, perhaps due to issues of status. According to Julia Asher-Greve and Deborah Sweeney, clothedness was normative for most elites in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian media, unclothedness being highly contextual ([ASHER-GREVE & SWEENEY](#), 2006: 151–153). It was more usual for Egyptian artists

to allude to the naked bodies of high-status women through translucent or tight-fitting clothing (ROBINS, 1996: 36–37). We might therefore propose that the treatment of Qadesh’s body is intended to mark her as unusual, an exoticised ‘Other’.

The remarkable rendering of Qadesh is accompanied by a seemingly exceptional position within group compositional dynamics, which in almost all other instances are structured according to mechanisms of androcentric gender hierarchy. As Gay Robins noted in her seminal explication of compositional dominance in Egyptian art, two-dimensional representations use various organisational and spatial techniques to communicate relative prestige or primacy among depicted individuals. This may be through the order in which figures appear in a group, whether they appear in the higher or lower areas of a composition or surface, and so on (ROBINS, 1994: 33–36). Broadly speaking, when deities of multiple genders are shown together as a collective unit, goddesses will occupy secondary positions, even if the arrangement might appear somewhat egalitarian at first sight. For example, in the tomb of Sennedjem at Deir el-Medina dating to Dynasty 19 (Theban Tomb 1, PORTER & MOSS, 1960: 1–5; BRUYÈRE, 1959; SHEDID, 1994), the tomb owner and his wife worship outside a shrine containing two registers of divine figures labelled as ‘all the gods of the *Duat*’ (see Figure 2). Both registers begin with two male deities (Ra-Horakhty on the upper register and Osiris on the lower) before beginning an alternating pattern with female ones. The genders of the generic divine figures that follow Ra-Horakhty and Osiris are discernible through the presence or absence of beards, in accordance with the patterns in the wider tomb programme. As a result, the five goddesses within the group are outnumbered by eight gods, and the goddesses’ presence in the composition appears weighted towards the back. As I shall discuss at greater length in a forthcoming volume, in most circumstances goddesses only assume primary positions in groups when: the members are entirely female; any male figures who appear rank lower in kinship hierarchies; the group itself occupies a less prestigious area of a larger composition or decorative programme.

It is not so with Qadesh. She is prominent to the extent so that the two accompanying gods appear almost as if they are her attendants. An unfinished example in Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum is dominated by a large and carefully worked figure of Qadesh upon a lion, while the adjacent figure of Min is smaller and rougher, there being only lightly scratched traces of Reshep (CORNELIUS, 2008: cat. 5.5). This suggests Qadesh was the most important element. In most other instances where goddesses appear alongside gods, their posture or depicted actions often communicate a supportive role or emphasise the primacy of their male companion. Qadesh seems to be the main event in a manner rarely if ever replicated in other contexts. Perhaps the caption accompanying her on the Museo Egizio example is right when it refers to her as one ‘of whom there is no equal’.

Depictions of Qadesh on her triadic stelae lend weight to the notion that goddesses of foreign origin, whether actual or imagined, can stand outside the usual parameters of gendered representation. Exactly how far outside, and what role gender negotiation might play in bringing this about, shall be discussed shortly (see §6). Before then we turn to bodily characterisations of foreign goddesses in textual sources, considering whether these support or disrupt what we have observed in visual material.

## 5 Textual otherness: Characterisations of Astarte and Anat

The first of these texts is the mythological tale known as *Astarte and the Sea*. The text is highly fragmentary, being mostly preserved in P. Amherst IX (GARDINER, 1932a: 74–75) with the introductory section of the manuscript identified in Paris’ Bibliothèque nationale by Philippe Collombert and Laurent Coulon (P. BN 202: COLLOMBERT & COULON, 2000). The dimensions of the complete manuscript would align with Ramessid standards, yet the introduction contains a dating formula referencing Amenhotep II (COLLOMBERT & COULON, 2000: 195–199). This lends weight to the current scholarly consensus that the composition itself (though not necessarily this manuscript) dates to Dynasty 18.



Fig. 2: West wall of the tomb of Sennedjem, © Archivio Museo Egizio C00135. *Image cropped.* Shared under a CC0 1.0 Universal licence.

Despite the state of the manuscript, we can glean the general shape of the narrative (an English translation is available from Edward F. WENTE, 2003). Following a cosmogonical opening, the text describes how a personified Sea grows tired of the tribute which the harvest goddess Renenutet has been bringing him on behalf of the Ennead. He threatens the destruction of the world, and so the Ennead send for Astarte to intercede. Upon seeing her, the Sea remarks at her appearance, asking ‘Where have you come from, you daughter of Ptah, you furious and tempestuous goddess? Did you wear through your sandals that are <on> your feet and did <you> tear your garments that are on you while you were transiting heaven and earth?’ (GARDINER, 1932b: pl. 9 ls. 18–19; WENTE, 2003: 110). Astarte is captured by the Sea, prompting the Ennead to task Seth with her rescue. The tale seems to draw upon the Ugaritic Baal cycle (e.g. OLDENBURG, 1966: 117–120, 134–137), though this is a case of adaptation, not simply of translation. There are clear efforts to Egyptianise the narrative; in place of the council of gods in the Ugaritic original, the text could have referenced the gods as a general designation, but instead names the Ennead specifically. The result is a text that references and incorporates foreign elements but is nonetheless an Egyptian product.

One of the tale’s striking details is its description of Astarte’s dishevelled, semi-naked appearance. This characterisation is echoed in visual sources, such as stelae that depict her naked on horseback (e.g. Museo Egizio suppl. 1308 CGT 50068, CORNELIUS, 2008: cat. 4.4) or one from Tell el-Borg in North Sinai which shows her seated and topless (HOFFMEIER & KITCHEN, 2007: 128–129, figs. 1a–b). While one might assume this iconography is merely an inheritance from her original Near Eastern context, Astarte’s nakedness is not an inevitability. She appears on a stela of Ramesses II in the Louvre (E 26017: CORNELIUS, 2008: cat. 3.6; MÁLEK, 2012: 7–8) wearing a standard sheath dress worn by many anthropomorphic Egyptian goddesses. We must therefore view occurrences of Astarte’s nakedness as representing conscious choices on the part of the artists, perhaps intended to emphasise the exoticised aspects of her persona. In the case of *Astarte and the Sea* the choice is a bold one; if nakedness is specialised for Egyptian goddesses, wearing torn clothes is practically unheard of.

Here, as with Qadesh, we see a goddess of foreign origin whose exoticisation goes hand in hand with exceptionalism. The Ennead clearly believes Astarte will be able to connect with the Sea where Renenutet cannot. Unfortunately for Astarte, they are only too right. Singling her out as an exceptional figure is fitting from a narrative standpoint, seeing as she is one of the main protagonists, and also when considering historical context. Astarte was becoming increasingly prominent during early Dynasty 18. She was a favourite of Egypt’s militaristic kings with Near Eastern geopolitical interests, whether that be Thutmose IV and his chariot inscription (see §1) or Amenhotep II himself. The Great Sphinx Stela recounts Amenhotep’s talent for horsemanship, stating that ‘Reshep and Astarte rejoiced over him doing all that his heart desired’ (HELCK, 1955: 1282, l. 23). Our text was produced at a time when Astarte was actively promoted in the spheres of state religion and monumentality; it may even have been intended to facilitate that process. Yet while centring Astarte in the text might be expected from both a storytelling and a historical perspective, what may not be anticipated is the manner in which it has been done. She stands out because the characterisation of her body emphasises her otherness and places her outside the usual realms of goddesses’ representation.

A similar singling out occurs with Anat in a text known as *Anat, Seth, and the Seed of Pre*. The text is a mythic precedent to a magic spell dating to the Ramessid period and is known from five fragmentary manuscripts, four of which are provenanced to Deir el-Medina (P. Chester Beatty VII, P. Turin, O. DM 1591, O. DM 1592; GARDINER, 1935: pl. 36; ROCCATI, 1972: 152–159; POSENER, 1977: pls 45–45A). The fifth manuscript was discovered among the mudbrick structures surrounding the Ramesseum (O. UC 31942: see SPIEGELBERG, 1898: pls. I–IA). The text describes Seth’s attempt to rape the Seed Goddess, who is interpreted by van Dijk as being the wife of the sun god Pre and a personification of his own regenerative power, through which he fathers himself every night for rebirth the morning (VAN DIJK, 1986: 40). After Seth attempts to mount the Seed Goddess, she flies up to his brow and causes him to become ill. Anat, who as we have seen can be a consort of Seth in Egyptian sources, asks her father Pre to release Seth from the affliction. An unsympathetic Pre remarks ‘what is the matter with you, Anat, victorious goddess, who acts as a warrior,

who wears a kilt like men and a sash like women?' (vs. 1.9–2.1, [GARDINER](#), 1935: pl. 36).

This description of Anat's clothing might perform a similar function to the characterisation of Astarte in the previous tale. It draws the audience's attention, thereby centring her in the action as a main protagonist. It also singles her out as exceptional, perhaps marking her as the most capable of intercession, as we saw with Astarte and her interaction with the Sea. It is intriguing that these tasks, which may require their agents to be less constrained by convention and the standard frameworks of divine society, are given over to foreign goddesses. In the case of Anat, the text explicitly connects this exceptionalism with gender presentation.

As with Qadesh, these characterisations of Anat and Astarte evoke unusual modes of bodily presentation which go hand in hand with their exoticisation. This observation aligns with the hypothesis at the beginning of this study: that the convergence of femininity and foreignness might provide a unique environment for Egyptian cultural frameworks to become malleable. It is a peripheral space where the right actors can perform functions unfeasible for those whose ways of being are more constrained by the structures of the centre. What insights might emerge when using Sørensen's theory of gender negotiation as a lens for observing this process?

## 6 Negotiating message and medium

The explanatory value of the model can be demonstrated by re-examining some of these bodily characterisations, specifically the triadic stelae of Qadesh. While the goddess' prominence on these objects may indeed be exceptional, even here traces of more usual gender dynamics might be discernible. As I shall argue, the mediation of these structures while attempting to create something outside of the norm is a process which the prism of gender negotiation helps us to observe and understand.

Returning to Ramose's triadic stela in the Museo Egizio (see Figure 1) we see that Qadesh does not exist in a vacuum. Our eye is led to her as an almost startling focal point, yet her figure is also entangled with the gods either side of her through a set of compositional relationships. She holds her lotus flowers to the nose of Min on the left side of the scene, whilst holding a snake towards the face of Reshep on the right. Cornelius argues that Qadesh's snakes and flowers are her own attributes and do not necessarily pertain to the gods who accompany her, as suggested by examples where Qadesh appears alone yet still holds these objects ([CORNELIUS](#), 2008: 127–129, cat. 5.14–5.16). Even if so, the placement of these attributes in relation to Min and Reshep appears purposeful. The lotus, held to Min's nose, signifies rejuvenation and sensuality ([HARTWIG](#), 2004: 64, 99), perhaps resonating with Min's well-noted associations with fertility and virility. Meanwhile, the snake which Qadesh presents to Reshep may recall his association with the desert margins and his role as a guardian against the venoms inflicted by the animals of those areas, as attested in contemporary magico-medical texts such as on P. Chester Beatty VII (BM EA 10687.3, [GARDINER](#), 1935: 64, pl. 36). Min and Reshep are therefore depicted as the recipients of iconographic paraphernalia whose associations interweave with their own, enhancing their presence within the scene. They do not act analogously toward Qadesh; they merely stand statically alongside her. Therefore, this enhancement of presence is not a reciprocal process within the group, it moves outwards from the central goddess to the gods on either side. It seems that, even here, the expectation that goddesses support or bolster gods in multi-gender groups cannot be fully escaped.

The details upon which these inferences are based may appear inconsequential to a modern observer, but to an ancient Egyptian audience they would likely have been dense with meaning. As John Robb and Oliver Harris discuss when introducing their concept of body worlds ([ROBB & HARRIS](#), 2013: 7; [HARRIS & ROBB](#), 2012), spatial and person-object relationships are key in negotiating the borders of one another's bodily realities. Where we stand in relation to others, how that space may be crossed, the objects we interact with; these dynamics can construct or obstruct social connections and help determine interpersonal status. According to Robb and Harris, this process occurs cross-culturally, albeit in varying permutations and according to culturally specific concepts and priorities. It stands to reason that it also occurred in ancient Egypt, where

figurative art was relationally structured according to underlying sociocultural models. Interactions between depicted figures may have materialised Egyptian understandings of body worlds and the gender norms communicated when they interact. Indeed, they would perpetuate and shape those understandings. Harris notes that monuments constitute bodies in themselves, exerting agency that draws humans to interact with them and embeds them as powerful actors in social relations (HARRIS, 2018: 186–189). In this way, triadic stelae and Qadesh herself were active participants in negotiation, the compositional relationships constituting the 'understandings' they contribute to the process of forming gender agreements.

This re-examination of the stelae's iconography calls into question the applicability of one of Sørensen's arguments, that gender negotiation can challenge or subvert dominant notions of gender. Perhaps we might previously have viewed Qadesh's depictions in this light, but the traces of normative relationships within them destabilise that conclusion. We must also remember that the records we have examined were created at the cultural centre. Qadesh's triadic stelae were mostly produced in the royally supported artisans' community at Deir el-Medina. *Astarte and the Sea* was very possibly a royal commission or produced in a courtly setting, seeing as it anchors itself to Amenhotep II. *Anat, Seth and the Seed of Pre* was an established aspect of magico-medical literature among the influential communities of the Theban west bank. These are not products of the periphery. Therefore, while Sørensen is probably right to argue that negotiation can be used to challenge gender norms in certain contexts, it seems unlikely that there is disruptive intent behind these sources.

If anything, the sense of otherness with which Qadesh was purposefully imbued may have tacitly emphasised and reinforced the norm. Knowledge, as discussed by Nathalia Junqueira in relation to Herodotus' reporting of Egyptian gender roles (JUNQUEIRA, 2018: 208, 212–214), is often expressed as a discourse about the thing it pertains to. The place of women in ancient Egyptian society was described by Herodotus as an inversion of what one might expect in Hellenic culture, thus was ultimately a comment on how Athenian women should behave. Similar processes may be at work in our sources. This need not be a conscious process; Rachel Crellin and Oliver Harris have discussed how human and non-human entities simultaneously affect one another, meaning that the objects and forms created by a culture are products of interaction within assemblages of diverse actants (CRELLIN & HARRIS, 2021: 472–473). Each element, including the norms of gendered representation, leaves its fingerprint. In this way, even when artists attempt to create the exceptional, something of the familiar might still be felt within it.

While the subversive aspect of Sørensen's model may not be fully applicable in this instance, gender negotiation can still help us to understand the process by which normative structures might become baked into representations that, to some degree, attempt to shirk them. Gender agreements, which are made and manifested in material culture, are temporary equilibria between different understandings of gender roles. We might theorise that, in the case of the triadic stelae, the different understandings in question are between the message and the medium, between what the artists are trying to communicate and the representational vocabulary available to do so. On the one hand, we have a goddess who is imagined as foreign, as coming from outside of Egypt and being outside of convention, one 'of whom there is no equal'. On the other is the representational system with which she is depicted, a system whose very frameworks are infused with androcentric hierarchies. Both sets of priorities are negotiated within the triadic stelae, rendering Qadesh's body and her interactions with the surrounding figures in a way that holds these understandings in balance. The extent to which this negotiation is a conscious effort of the artists or more of a cultural reflex response is a matter for debate. Perhaps the outcome is an inevitability of attempting to represent something outside of the norm; whatever we describe, we can only do so with the language available to us.


## 7 Conclusion


In the bodily characterisation of goddesses of actual or perceived Near Eastern origin, perceptions of foreignness could allow these figures to stand somewhat outside the norms of gendered representation. This was perhaps made possible by the double peripherality of being feminine and (conceptually) non-Egyptian in

an andro- and Egypto-centric representational system. These unusual depictions might emphasise a deity's exceptional or exotic nature, with the expression of 'foreign' elements being an active choice even for goddesses who had been assimilated into the pantheon from other cultures. However, the mechanisms at work in generating these representations could preserve traces of normative dynamics, since Egyptian representational vocabularies were permeated with androcentrism. Sørensen's model of gender negotiation has proved useful in observing and describing this process. As may be well-known to politicians and diplomats, it seems the outcome of negotiations will always be shaped by the terms available to the negotiators.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Semantic perspectives on the nude/naked body in ancient Egyptian texts

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## Abstract

Starting from the assumption that bodies are relational entities, this paper dedicates itself to conceptualisations of nudity/nakedness as they manifested themselves in ancient Egyptian texts (funerary, literary, documentary, monumental, medico-magical, 'private' texts) in diachrony (c.2300–350 BCE). The focus of this work lies on a lexicological and lexicographical study of lexemes—especially the verbs *hꜣi*, *shꜣi*, *szꜣi*, and *kfi/kfꜣ*—attested in the ancient Egyptian lexicon referring to the process of exposure/unveiling of the body or the state of nudity/nakedness. The goal of the study is to visualise culture-specific perspectives on ancient Egyptian bodies by means of a relational network (semantic conceptual field) transferred from ancient Egyptian to English as target language.

In order to introduce the resulting conceptual field and under consideration of one textual and one visual example from the Ramesside period, the semantic concept of [EXPOSURE] of the verb *kfi/kfꜣ* is discussed. The article closes with a presentation of the conceptual field, which is composed of four superordinate semantic domains [OPENING], [COGNITION], [SEPARATION] and [EXPOSURE]. The resulting visualisation shows the range of semantic meanings of the studied verbs in comparison to each other in providing information on their semantic overlaps (partial synonymy) and distinctions.

**Keywords:** lexicography and lexicology, body conceptualisations, nudity/nakedness in ancient Egypt and Egyptology, conceptual field

## تصورات دلالية للجسد العاري في النصوص المصرية القديمة

### الملخص

انطلاقاً من الفرضية التي ترى الأجساد ككيانات متصلة ومتراصة، يركز هذا البحث على استكشاف تصورات العري في النصوص المصرية القديمة، بما يشمل النصوص الجنائزية، الأدبية، الوثائقية، الأثرية، الطبية السحرية، والنصوص "الخاصة"، وذلك عبر سياق زمني يمتد من حوالي ٢٣٠٠ إلى ٣٥٠ ق.م. يتمحور هذا العمل حول دراسة معجمية وقاموسية لمجموعة من الأفعال الموثقة في المعجم المصري القديم، مثل: *hꜣi*, *shꜣi*, *szꜣi*, *kfi/kfꜣ* التي تشير إلى عمليات الكشف أو التعري عن الجسد أو حالة العري. تهدف الدراسة إلى تقديم رؤى ثقافية محددة حول مفهوم الجسد في مصر القديمة، وذلك من خلال بناء شبكة علائقية لمجال مفاهيمي دلالي يُترجم من اللغة المصرية القديمة إلى الإنجليزية. لإبراز هذا المجال المفاهيمي، وبالنظر إلى مثال نصي وآخر بصري من فترة الرعامسة، يناقش البحث المفهوم الدلالي لفعل *kfi/kfꜣ* فيما يتعلق بـ [الكشف]. يختتم المقال بعرض شامل للمجال المفاهيمي الناتج، الذي يتألف من أربعة مجالات دلالية عليا: [الفتح]، [الإدراك]، [الانفصال]، و[الكشف]. تُبرز التصورات الناتجة نطاق المعاني الدلالية للأفعال المدروسة، مما يتيح مقارنة دقيقة بين هذه الأفعال، مع تسليط الضوء على تداخلاتها الدلالية (الترادف الجزئي) والاختلافات بينها.

الكلمات الدالة: المعجم وعلم المفردات، تصورات الجسد، العري/التعري في مصر القديمة وعلم المصريات، المجال المفاهيمي

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Theoretical background: Relational bodies

As humans, we encounter bodies empirically in our daily experience: firstly, with respect to our own bodies, by experiencing physical needs such as hunger, thirst, pain, emotions, etc.; and secondly, when we interact with others, a phenomenon which is processed by our senses. This constitutes an intrinsic, dynamic, and reciprocal creation and negotiation of our ‘body world’ by communication (HARRIS & ROBB, 2013: 7–31). These processes take place as things, entities, and bodies are put in relation to each other.

Since the so-called relational turn in sciences and the establishment of relational anthropology (STRATHERN, 2020; STRATHERN, 2018; STRATHERN, 2014), thinking-in-relations became an important paradigm (SHULTS, 2003: 18; KÜNKLER, 2017: 67–68). Thinking-in-relations instead of thinking-in-entities presupposes that relations precede relata and are, thus, neither secondary nor subsequent connections between pre-existing instances or entities. Rather, entities in their specific instantiation are primarily formed and created by relations. In this sense, relations are granted an ontological primacy which enables the overcoming of structuralist dualisms such as subject vs object, body vs mind, etc.

As scholars, we encounter bodies in the archaeological field or at the desk, e.g. when we are dealing with pictorial and textual body representations or human remains in the archaeological record or in museum collections. From the perspective of a historian or archaeologist, this encounter—an unbridgeable(?) gulf between now and then (JOHNSON, 2010: 14, fig. 2.1)—often unintentionally leads to a ‘frontal comparison’ (CANDEA, 2019) between ‘us’ and ‘them’, generating a dichotomy and thus a certain tension between ‘our’ and ‘their’ body knowledge. Although it is understood that the relations between us and them are complex—there are inclusions, attributions, superimpositions, similarities, contrasts, differences—we are at risk of seeing relations when there are none or of misjudging their quality. This touches upon the very question of ‘historical’ vs ‘diachronic’ bodies. These two terms can be tentatively disentangled in the following way: whereas the first notion emphasises the difference or the alterity between modern and past body worlds, the second can imply a dynamic evolution, continuity and a certain transhistorical validity between these two relational networks.

As has been put forward, in its use in modern English, the notion ‘relation’ often carries positive connotations, inferring relatedness, attachment, mutuality, and reciprocity (STRATHERN, 2014: 5–6; STRATHERN, 2018: 8). However, relations can also designate disruptions, oppositions, or detachments, or they can function in a linear manner by inducing, structuring, or enhancing relata (KÜNKLER, 2017: 70). Within this framework, individual bodies as well as subjectivity and individuality are understood as strictly relational entities: that is, as intersubjectivity and sociality (KÜNKLER, 2017: 69–72). Thus, bodies are not singular or independent units but rather are embedded in a relational matrix, being intertwined in an interconnected but dynamic conceptual field (KÜNKLER, 2017: 73). Depending on the perspective from which one looks at this matrix (emic vs etic), the nature and functions of the relations can be different.

In this context, it is not trivial how modern scholars use terminologies derived from their respective languages and lexica in order to describe and refer to past bodies and body parts as well as associated processes, movements, and physical conditions (see Di Biase-Dyson, this volume). As has been long recognised by scholars of translation studies, it can be particularly problematic when trying to translate lexemes and expressions from temporally remote as well as linguistically, culturally, and spatially distinct societies (e.g. ancient Egypt) into a modern target language (e.g. English or German).<sup>1</sup> In general, languages differ with respect to the lexicalisation of body conceptualisations and physical processes. This can be observed in textual data on the semantic and pragmatic levels of language use. But how can the semantic scope of lexemes and the concepts behind them be adequately analysed and represented in Egyptological discourse?

<sup>1</sup>On the difficulty of representing semantic meaning in translation, see, e.g. MALMKJÆR, 2018.

## 1.2 Problematisation: Nudity/nakedness in ancient Egypt and Egyptology

These theoretical concerns are best illustrated by the example of the unclothed body and the underlying body conceptualisations in ancient Egypt. Originating from all regions of Egypt (and beyond), from c.4400 BCE to the end of the Pharaonic era, there is an overwhelming abundance of material culture representing the unclothed body in form of figurines, statues, graffiti and dipinti, paintings and reliefs, ‘paddle dolls’, handles of spoons or mirrors, and stamp seals, etc. Found in temples, houses, and tombs and showing all kinds of entities such as humans, kings, and deities, the representation of the unclothed human body is not only ubiquitous but also seems to have been multifunctional in Pharaonic Egypt (SEROVA, 2018).

However, especially in the English-speaking Egyptological discourse, scholars are confronted with a certain difficulty in describing these Egyptian objects by use of common terminology. This is due to a reformation of the English language in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which a conceptual distinction was made between the terms ‘nudity’ and ‘nakedness’ (CLARK, 1985: 1). While ‘nakedness’ was connoted with negative aspects such as shame, deprivation, defencelessness, primitivism, and sexual desire, ‘nudity’, borrowed from Latin, was charged with opposite associations, such as purity, aesthetics, beauty, eroticism, and sensuality (CLARK, 1985; BERGER, 1972; GERNIG, 2002: 10). In that sense, neither of these two terms is neutral, as they convey certain ideas and values. When attributed to ancient Egyptian material culture, certain modern conceptualisations, and associations—predominantly, a heteronormative, voyeuristic male gaze on the female body—are at risk of being applied in the description and interpretation (SEROVA, 2025). In this context, how can the etic vs emic split be overcome and culture-inherent body conceptualisations from ancient Egypt (such as nude vs naked) be studied and best described?

## 2 Data selection and methodology

One possible analytical approach to ancient Egyptian conceptions of nudity/nakedness—understood here as an emic perspective—consists of the lexicographical and lexicological analysis of textual data (HARM, 2015; SCHLAEFER, 2009; for Egyptology see, e.g. BLÖBAUM et al., 2011). Such an approach means the study of selected lexical units (lexemes) used in ancient Egyptian texts to refer to the unclothed body and associated processes. This requires a primary identification of relevant lexemes in the Egyptian lexicon as well as a systematic analysis of their occurrence in different text genres and usage contexts in a diachronic perspective.

In the ancient Egyptian lexicon, seven lexemes can be identified which are used to describe the process of exposure/unveiling of the body or the state of nudity/nakedness in various contexts. The lexemes of interest are *ḥꜣi* ‘to be naked; to be apparent; to be clear’ (*Wb.* III 13.13–16) and its nominalised derivatives *ḥꜣyt* ‘nakedness’ (*Wb.* III 14.6), *ḥꜣ.w/ḥꜣ.y* ‘the naked’ (*Wb.* III 14.1–3), *ḥꜣ.wtj* ‘the naked’ (*Wb.* III 14.4–5), as well as the verbs *šḥꜣi* ‘to unveil; to expose; to undress; to eliminate; to liberate’ (*Wb.* IV 209.10–14), *szꜣi* ‘to take off (clothes); to make disappear’ (*Wb.* IV 273.1–4) and *kfi/kf* ‘to unveil; to expose; to reveal; to open; to remove; to eliminate; to rob; to plunder’ (*Wb.* V 119.4–19; 120.2–3; 120.10–11; 121; 121.1).

These lexemes were selected according to the onomasiological principle, i.e. starting from the concept and inferring the terms used in the ancient Egyptian vocabulary. This was conducted on the basis of the publication *Großes Wörterbuch: Deutsch–Ägyptisch* by Rainer HANNIG (2000). In a second step, these terms were studied from a semasiological perspective with the aim to assess their ranges of semantic meaning (TRAUGOTT & DASHER, 2001: 25–26). This was undertaken by queries in the online database *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (corpus version from 31 October 2014; ↗, last access: 29 July 2025) and in the *Digitalisiertes Zettelarchiv* (DZA; ↗, last access: 29 July 2025) of the *Berliner Wörterbuch* project. The resulting catalogue of attestations was expanded as far as possible with the aid of the respective secondary literature and the information provided by other repositories.

The resulting catalogue consists of 906 ‘protocol sentences’ or attestations (tokens) which were attributed to 193 textemes (types) on the basis of formal and content criteria. The term ‘texteme’ is understood here as

	<b>OK</b>	<b>FIP</b>	<b>MK</b>	<b>SIP</b>	<b>NK</b>	<b>TIP</b>	<b>Late Period</b>	
	Dyn. 3–8	Dyn. 9–11	Dyn. 12–13	Dyn. 13–17	Dyn. 18–20	Dyn. 21–22	Dyn. 25	Dyn. 26–30
<i>kfi/kfʃ</i>								
<i>ḥʃ.w/ḥʃ.y</i>								
<i>ḥʃi</i>								
<i>ḥʃ.wtj</i>								
<i>szʃi</i>								
<i>ḥʃ.yt</i>								
<i>shʃi</i>								

Tab. 1: Diachronic distribution and attestation of the studied lexemes

<b>Lexemes</b>							
<b>Text genres</b>	<i>kfi/kfʃ</i>	<i>ḥʃi</i>	<i>shʃi</i>	<i>szʃi</i>	<i>ḥʃ.yt</i>	<i>ḥʃ.w/ḥʃ.y</i>	<i>ḥʃ.wtj</i>
(Auto-)biography	x	x	x			x	x
Funerary: PT	x	x		x	x		x
Funerary: CT	x	x	x				
Funerary: BD	x	x				x	x
<i>Amduat</i>	x	x	x				
<i>Book of Gates</i>	x	x	x				
<i>Litany of Re</i>	x	x				x	
Hymns and prayers	x	x		x			
Ritual	x	x			x	x	
Magico-medical	x		x	x	x		
Historical-rhetorical	x						
Educational	x						
Literary	x	x	x		x		
Administrative	x	x					
Letters (private)	x	x					
Other	x	x		x			

Tab. 2: Distribution of lexemes in text genres

a textual unit which has a semantic demarcation (TOPMANN, 2002: 43; BUCHBERGER, 1993: 13, 52). In this sense, textemes—i.e. phrases and sentences—consist of both single attestations as well as parallels (e.g. BD spells).

Diachronically in the time range from c. 2300–350 BCE, the selected lexemes show different attestation phases (see Table 1) which can partly be led back to their use within specific texts and corpora (Table 2): *kfi/kfʃ*, *ḥʃi* and the nouns *ḥʃ.w/ḥʃ.y* are not only the most frequently attested,<sup>2</sup> but also show the widest range of usage from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period. The remaining lexemes occur depending on the transmission situation of the respective text corpus (e.g. CT, BD) either with larger interruptions (*ḥʃ.wtj*; *szʃi*) or even only selectively (*ḥʃ.yt*; *shʃi*).

In order to analyse the selected lexemes with regard to their semantics (classification, readings, meanings), grammar (morphosyntax) and context-dependent usage, all textemes were annotated according to the *Leipzig Glossing Rules* (DI BIASE-DYSON et al., 2009). Such an annotation allows more flexibility and freedom in

<sup>2</sup>The distribution of attestations (absolute/relative number) on the individual lexemes is the following: *kfi/kfʃ* (638/69%), *ḥʃ.w/ḥʃ.y* (124/13%), *ḥʃi* (72/8%), *shʃi* (38/4%), *szʃi* (23/3%), *ḥʃ.wtj* (19/2%), *ḥʃ.yt* (10/1%).

translation while at the same time providing detailed insights into the grammar of every lexical element of the corresponding text. Of special interest here are the verbs from this group which were used to create a semantic conceptual field consisting of corresponding semantic domains (see Section 3).

The main goal of the conducted study was to elucidate which semantic meanings the selected ancient Egyptian lexemes had within their co(n)texts. Further research questions include the following: who or what is represented as being nude/naked in the texts? In what situational contexts is nudity/nakedness mentioned in the texts? How was the unclothed body evaluated in these contexts?

## 2.1 Examples

To illustrate the methodology, one textual and one visual example for the concept of *kfi/kf* [EXPOSURE] shall be given which are then put in relation to each other. The first example, a texteme from the corpus, comes from the so-called *Dream Book*—a compendium of over 200 dreams with their interpretation, which was possibly used for divination and prediction of the future (SZPAKOWSKA, 2011: 509–510, 514–515; SZPAKOWSKA, 2003: 66–76).

### Example 1: *Dream Book*, pLondon BM EA 10683 (pChester Beatty III), rto 9.10<sup>3</sup> (Dynasty 19).

<i>jr</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>-sw</i>	<i>zj</i>	<i>m-</i>	<i>rsw.t</i>
when	see:SBJV	-3SG.M	man(M)[SG]	in	dream-F

*When a man sees himself in a dream,*

<i>hr-</i>	<i>kf</i>	<i>ph.(w)i</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>ds</i>	<i>f</i>
on	denude:INF	bottom-M.SG	=3SG.M	self(M)[SG]	=3SG.M

*exposing his own rear-end:*

<i>dw</i>	<i>jw</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>r-</i>	<i>nmh</i>	<i>hr-</i>	<i>ph.wi</i>
bad(M)[SG]	SBRD	=3SG.M	to	be_poor:INF	on	end-M.SG

*Bad! He will end up poor.*

The layout of this text is organised like a table (Figure 1) with horizontal lines arranged in columns and a preceding vertically written heading *jr m sw zj m rsw.t* ‘When a man sees himself in a dream’ (cf. GARDINER, 1935: figs 7–7a; ISRAELIT-GROLL, 1985: 75). This is followed by individual dream descriptions, which have been interpreted as subordinate clauses (*hr* + infinitive) to the header, which is to be read before each individual line (cf. SZPAKOWSKA, 2011: 511; LEITZ, 2000: 224; ISRAELIT-GROLL, 1985: 113–114.) Each line contains one dream and can be subdivided into three parts: first, a *protasis*, i.e. the image seen, or an action performed in the dream; second, an evaluation of the dream as *nfr* ‘good’ or *dw* ‘bad’; and third, the *apodosis*, or the

<sup>3</sup>DZA 30.586.880; PUGLISI and DAKOTA (2023: 434–448, fig. 17.2); SZPAKOWSKA (2011: 511); NOEGEL and SZPAKOWSKA (2006: 196, 206, 207–208); SZPAKOWSKA (2003: 66–76, 108–109, rto 9.10); LEITZ (2000: 221–246, 243, IX, 10); GARDINER (1935: 7–23, figs 7–7a). See an image of this object in the online database of the British Museum Collection: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/31612001>, last access: July 29, 2025.

resulting consequence for the future of the person affected (SZPAKOWSKA, 2011: 511).

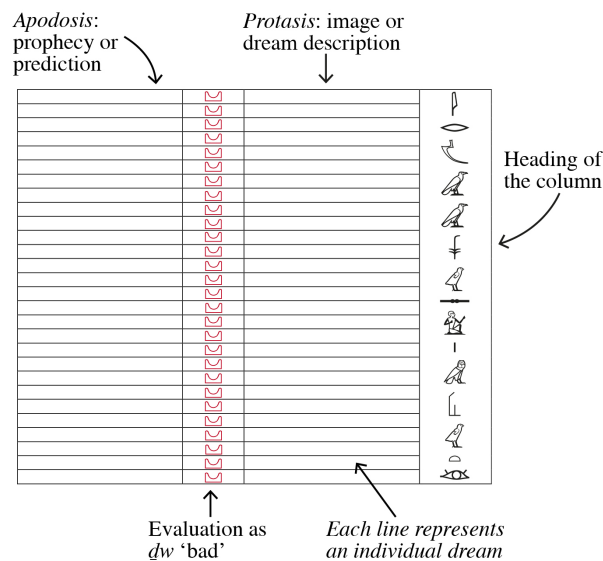


Fig. 1: Schematic illustration of the general layout of the *Dream Book* (pLondon BM EA 10683, rto col. 9).

All dream interpretations in this papyrus are decidedly aimed at a male reader (SZPAKOWSKA, 2011: 515) and situate the dreamer as the main agent or sufferer in the centre of the event. As has been already emphasised by several authors, wordplay, consonances, and visual puns play an overriding role within this text composition (NOEGEL & SZPAKOWSKA, 2006: 193–212). Stylistic devices like puns do not only serve as rhetorical or ‘literary’ tools but rather reinforce the ritual or ‘magical’ effect of the text (NOEGEL & SZPAKOWSKA, 2006: 196). Thus, most of the dreams in the *Dream Book* are allegorical; i.e. the interpretation of what is dreamed does not correspond directly to the content of the dream but is rather explained on the basis of the pun (LEITZ, 2000: 226–234).

In Example 1, a man exposes his own rear-end and sees himself unclothed in a dream. This incidence is understood as a negative omen and the person is prophesied a future of poverty. As for the question of who or what caused the nakedness of the man, which in many other texts plays a special role and can either be associated with positive or negative attributions (SEROVA, 2025), the *Dream Book* does not provide any contextual information on this point, as it is known from modern dream interpretations, for example.

Within this dream, the focus lies on the perception of one’s own body, in the sense of becoming aware of oneself and/or specific (bodily) properties of the self. The fact that the naked male body and explicitly the exposure of the buttocks is evaluated as ḏw ‘bad’, might indicate that showing and seeing this part of the body was perceived as unusual or inappropriate in specific situational contexts or even in everyday reality in general (SEROVA, 2025).<sup>4</sup> Although the dream sphere of the dreamer is to be considered a ‘private space’ (LAZARIDIS, 2018), it seems also to be subject to specific social norms and expectations.

In this passage, several levels of wordplay can be identified: e.g. the use of *antanaclasis*, that is, two homonymous lexemes with different semantic meanings that occur in the same co-text (NOEGEL & SZPAKOWSKA, 2006: 195; cf. other examples in PUGLISI & DAKOTA, 2023: 443–444.) These are *ph.wi* ‘buttocks’ in the *protasis* and *hr ph.wi* ‘in the end’ in the *apodosis*, where *ph.wi* is to be understood as an abstract noun (NOEGEL &

<sup>4</sup>However, it is interesting to note that in dream 4,12 on the recto of the same papyrus (GARDINER, 1935: 13 and fn. 16, pl. 6+6A), the mention of *ng:t ḥbs.w* ‘ripping/tearing the clothes’ is interpreted as *nfr* ‘good’ since the man can thereby free himself from all evil (*wh:f m ḏw.t nb.t*) (SZPAKOWSKA, 2003: 88; LEITZ, 2000: 229–230). This demonstrates all the more the importance of the situational context for evaluating the meaning of the unclothed body.

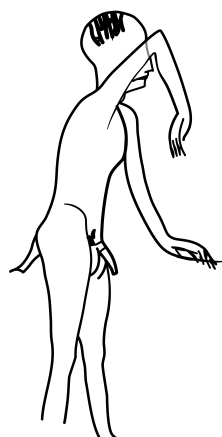


Fig. 2: Representation of Sehaqeq on oLeipzig ÄMUL 5251 (author's own image, cf. ČERNÝ & GARDINER, 1957: pl. 3).

SZPAKOWSKA, 2006: 207–208). The special feature here is that seen from the perception centre—that is, the eyes of the dreamer—there is a spatial distance to his rear end/buttocks. This spatial distance (head $\leftrightarrow$ bottom) is conceptually transferred to the temporal distance (present $\leftrightarrow$ future): at the end of a certain period of time, which is not further specified, the dreamer will be *nmh* 'impoverished; miserable; orphaned' (*Wb.* II 268.11–16) and literally sees 'his own end'. Although not explicitly mentioned, the clothing of the lower part of the body stands as a symbol for material provision and prosperity which is, e.g. very well-known from (auto-)biographical inscriptions from the Old Kingdom onwards (SEROVA, 2025). Its absence indicates impoverishment and material misery for the dreamer (SZPAKOWSKA, 2003: 108–109).

The second example, oLeipzig ÄMUL 5251, also dated to the Ramesside period (Dynasty 19), consists of a limestone ostrakon containing 11 lines of hieratic text written with ink as well as a depiction of a standing male individual (FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 230–248; ČERNÝ & GARDINER, 1957: pl. 3). From the context and juxtaposition of image and text, it can be deduced that the represented individual—identified as Sehaqeq, a potentially malevolent entity (LUCARELLI, 2010)—is the addressee of the text against whom the spell is to be uttered. As is known from other texts, Sehaqeq represents a night demon or a deceased revenant ('Wiedergänger') who can disturb the sleeper and cause him suffering, e.g. by invading his head through the headrest and by bringing nightmares (FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 240–243; FISCHER-ELFERT, 2016: 30; LUCARELLI, 2010; AZZAM, 2009). Sehaqeq is also known as a cause of different kinds of head ailments (FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 233).

The representation (Figure 2) shows an unclothed male figure in profile which presumably is a boy. The recipient can see the genitals of the individual and that the penis is uncircumcised. Also, on his head there are only a few loose strands of hair which is reminiscent of a sidelock of youth (cf. however FISCHER-ELFERT & HOFFMANN, 2020: 152, fn. 641, who interpret this as a sign of 'baldness'; cf. FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 227–228). While his left arm is stretched forward, his right arm is contorted upward so his elbow covers his eyes, and the face of the individual is not visible. This gesture has been interpreted as not wanting to be seen or not having to look at anything himself (FISCHER-ELFERT, 2016: 28; AZZAM, 2009: 107; cf. BORGHOUTS, 1971: 176). It is also reminiscent of representations of captives of the Sea Peoples and Asians in the Medinet Habu reliefs from the reign of Ramses III (THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY, 1930: pl. 43–44; REDFORD, 2018: 29–31): here, on the right part of the scene, groups of bound prisoners are depicted with their elbows pointing upwards, their arms tied up with ropes and protruding unnaturally above their faces so that they partially cover their eyes. In the case of Sehaqeq however, the most peculiar element—a strange extension—can be found at the rear-end of the individual. It is the text of the spell (Example 2, see also Appendix) which adds to the understanding of this image in stating the name and affiliation of the individual as well as providing a

full description of his body and posture.

**Example 2: Protection spell, oLeipzig ÄMUL 5251<sup>5</sup> (Dynasty 19) (see Appendix)**

- (1<sup>rt0</sup>) *j:nd hr=k Sh:qq pri m- [p.t jr.tj=f]*  
Hail to you, Saturated-Devourer<sup>6</sup> (Sehaqeq), who came from [the sky], [whose eyes]
- (2<sup>rt0</sup>) *m-db.t' f [ns] f m- r.t f wnm f m-t' hr.i [jm f hpš f]*  
are in his head, whose [tongue] is in his arse so that he can only eat bread [with it] from below.
- (3<sup>rt0</sup>) *jmn.i m- d:i hr- jr.t f wp.t(j) n: sb:w (hr-) dg; nh f m- d[bn.w]*  
[His] right [forearm] crosses over his field of vision, which is (thus) divided. The stars (deities) see that he lives on d[roppings].
- (4<sup>rt0</sup>) *[nb]-št:w m- p.t rs.i(t) snd n f*  
[Oh, Lord] of Secrets in the Southern Sky, whom
- (5<sup>rt0</sup>) *[jm.i-hr.t-ntr] Ndr-sh-mj-mm<sup>8</sup>*  
[the inhabitant of the necropolis] fears! The-one-who-picks-excrements-like-grains (Nedjersek-mimem)
- (6<sup>rt0</sup>) *[rn n- mw.t=k] [Dw]-bš.t<sup>9</sup> rn n-*  
[is the name of your mother], [Mount]-vomit (Djubesht) is the name of
- (7<sup>rt0</sup>) *[jt=k] [jr jy=k r- mn] ms n- mn*  
[your father]!<sup>10</sup> [If you should come after NN] born by NN,
- (8<sup>rt0</sup>) *[jw:j r-pri k:-h:t=k 'wj] k w:i.w*  
[then I will go (against)]<sup>11</sup> your 'corpse-k'?' so that] your [arms are] far away


<sup>5</sup>oLeipzig ÄMUL 5251, DZA 29.408.650; (FISCHER-ELFERT, 2016: 27–30, fig. 16–17; FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 230–248; ČERNÝ & GARDINER, 1957: pl. 3) is one of at least six parallel attestations of this protective spell: the other sources are pLondon BM 10731 (EDWARDS, 1968), oGardiner 300 (ČERNÝ & GARDINER, 1957: 24, pl. 91.1), pHeidelberg Hier. 3a+b (FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 220–252), pLondon UC 31969 and pAthens 1826 (x+7,11–x+8,4) (FISCHER-ELFERT & HOFFMANN, 2020: 150–155). In the presented (glossed) translation of the spell, textual reconstructions were made by use of the synoptic text version published in KITCHEN (1982: 181–184); cf. also the translation of pLondon BM 10731 in KITCHEN (2003: 133).

<sup>6</sup>On the basis of oLeipzig ÄMUL 5251, the name of the demon is tentatively interpreted as a combination of the following Egyptian lexemes: 1) *sh*: 'to confound; to defraud' (*Wb.* IV 207.2–5), which is attested once in the sense of 'saturation' (*Wb.* IV 206.9), and 2) *qq* 'eat' (*Wb.* V 71.10) as a participle. This would suggest an Egyptian origin of the name which has however been strongly debated in Egyptological discourse: see the detailed etymological discussion in FISCHER-ELFERT and HOFFMANN (2020: 153–154) and FISCHER-ELFERT (2015: 227, 243–246) with references to HOCH (1994: 266–267, fn. 377) and EDWARDS (1968: 158); cf. also QUACK (1996: 511, n° 377) who relates the name of the demon to the Egyptian verb *hk* 'to break open(?)' with reference to VON DEINES and WESTENDORF, 1962: 573–574

<sup>7</sup>*db.t* 'box' (*Wb.* V 434.10) or *tb.t* 'box' (*Wb.* V 261.6) can be understood as a pejorative expression for the 'head' of the protagonist.

<sup>8</sup>The personal name in this text version seems to be composed of the elements *ndri* 'to hold fast; to seize' (*Wb.* II 382.21) as participle without gender congruency (*.t*), *shw* 'filth' (*Wb.* IV 211.12) as the object of the verb followed by *mj* 'like' and the noun *mmj* 'grains' (*Wb.* II 58.7).

<sup>9</sup>This personal name might be a construction by use of two lexemes: 1) *dw* as 'bad, evil' (*Wb.* V 545.9–546.20) or 'mountain' (*Wb.* V 541.7–545.1 in the sense of a 'rock; pile' and 2) *bši* 'to spit out; to spew' (*Wb.* I 477.14–478.4) to be understood either as a resultative form with the ending *.tw/tj* or as the noun *bš.t* (based on the infinitive form) to be translated as 'vomit' or 'puke'. Since pLondon BM EA 10731, vso 3 shows the sign O39 as classifier after *dw*, a reading as 'pile of barf' or 'mount-vomit' seems possible. As has been kindly pointed out by Christian Casey and Andreas Winkler in a private discussion, the group writing of the name and the addition

of the classifier group T14-A1  in the version oLeipzig ÄMUL 5251 are noteworthy as indicators of a foreign origin of the name-holder. In that sense, it might be an intentional 'foreignization' of an Egyptian noun compound in the sense of a dysphemism; (cf. comment by FISCHER-ELFERT & HOFFMANN, 2020: 152, fn. 636).

<sup>10</sup>Such an interpretation of the personal names of the parents of Sehaqeq rules out the option of a foreign etymology and would strongly contradict the prevailing opinion that these designations have a Nubian or Meroitic origin: see FISCHER-ELFERT (2015: 248) and ZIBELIUS-CHEN (2011: 207–208); cf. also EDWARDS (1968: 159–160), in favour of a Syrian or Anatolian origin of the names. The readings proposed here are only possible on the basis of the text version in oLeipzig ÄMUL 5251, since the other parallels provide different variants of these names (cf. FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 248).

<sup>11</sup>As in *pri-* 'to be brave; to be violent' *Wb.* I 527.6; the version pLondon BM 10731 is used here, but the visible signs do not provide any attestation of the sign D36 for *⋈*: for a zoomable image of the object see <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/ob->

- (1<sup>vs0</sup>) *[rꜥk nn hꜣ]yꜣsn hrꜣj jnk ꜣ.wjꜣsn hꜣ-kꜣr dd-mdw*  
 from you. They [cannot affect] me, not me after all! Their hands are placed around the ‘shrine’!  
 Recitation
- (2<sup>vs0</sup>) *hr- mhꜣ.w n- wd.w jr.w m- ꜣhꜣ [...]*  
 over flax fibers of raffia shaped into an arrow [...],
- (3<sup>vs0</sup>) *[...] r-pꜣ rmtꜣ jrꜣ nꜣfꜣ tꜣ hrꜣi [...]*  
 [...] against someone to whom bread is given from below [...].

What can be learned from this object is that Sehaqeq is an anthropomorphic being who has all kinds of functional body parts (with associated abilities), but because of his posture—effectively captured both in the image and the spell (Figure 2, cf. line 3, rto)—he is limited in his visual perception and, thus, his actions.<sup>12</sup> Sehaqeq is able to see neither himself nor his rear-end, but the viewer of the ostrakon can(!). Also, the extension at his rear-end, which has occasionally been interpreted as a tail (BRUNNER-TRAUT, 1956: 57), is referred to in the text as a *ns* ‘tongue’: this corporeal feature inflicts the reversal of the direction of food intake as part of the banishment or punishment of this potentially malevolent being. Thus, the spatial displacement of the tongue out of his field of vision reinforces a functional restriction and inversion of his eating behaviour (for further discussion of the ‘reversed corporeality’ of this demon, see CONTE, 2025; see also FISCHER-ELFERT & HOFFMANN, 2020: 151, fn. 633 and 154). This reversal is expressed by the motif of living on faeces, which is already known from other spells dedicated to the execration of and defence against hostile entities (CT 698: see FRANDSEN, 2000: 18; FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 231, fn. 101).

As is known from numerous magico-medical texts (e.g. pTurin CGT 54050, vso 6,8–9; ROCCATI, 2011: 34, 172), the unmasking or exposure (*kfi/kfi*) of pathogens which are often personified as *hfꜣt* ‘enemy’, *mwꜣt* ‘dead’, *ꜣꜣy* ‘adversary’ or as specific disease demons, as is the case in Example 2, is one of the measures taken by the healer or priest in order to fight against the disease. By identifying and revealing the name of hostile entities in the patient’s body, the healer is able to destroy or render them harmless. In the case of pTurin CGT 54050, these entities are commanded to come out (*pri*) of the body or to reveal themselves through typical symptoms, e.g. in the form of bodily fluids, so that the healer can see (*mꜣꜣ*) the cause and take more targeted action against the illness of the person affected.

In the case of oLeipzig ÄMUL 5251, the above-described depiction and description of the body of Sehaqeq has the effect that the demon is subject to the will of the recipient or user of the ostrakon (cf. THEIS, 2014: 398). This is also strengthened by reference to the names of the parents and thus the genealogical origin of this demon (see lines 5–7, rto), which—if read as Egyptian expressions—can be interpreted as the dysphemetic designations *Nꜣr-shꜣ-mjꜣ-mm* ‘The-one-who-picks-excrements-like-grains’ (Nedjersekhmimem) and *Dw-bšꜣt* ‘Mount-vomit’ (Djubesht), taking up the motif of ‘reversed corporeality’ by including negatively connotated bodily excretions. The unclothed body in combination with the passive, defensive and contorted posture, as well as the inability to see contributes to the innocuousness of this demon (cf. RITNER, 1990: 30). In this sense, both the image and the text of the ostrakon guarantee that Sehaqeq not only loses his powers and thus cannot affect the body of the patient or the user of the spell but is also subject to the perception of the viewer.

When putting both examples (Examples 1 and 2) in relation to each other, the role of *mꜣꜣ* ‘to see’ in the context of nudity/nakedness becomes evident. However, far from Eurocentric ideas of voyeurism, in this case *mꜣꜣ* describes the processes of cognitive apprehension (understanding), visualisation, and perception of hidden contents that are otherwise not visible or perceptible (see also below, Section 3). In Examples 1 and 2, bodies

ject/Y\_EA10731 (last access: 29 July 2025).

<sup>12</sup>However, cf. the parallel text oGardiner 300, rto 3–4 (KITCHEN, 1982: 182; FISCHER-ELFERT, 2015: 233) where the body of Sehaqeq is described as mutilated and constrained in several ways, being incapable to move or speak; see also FISCHER-ELFERT (2015: 241–242) comparing the information on the arm postures in the parallel documents.

are understood as objects with inherent qualities on their inside and outside. In this sense, the verb *kfi/kfi* in association with nudity/nakedness semantically refers to processes that take place either from the inside to the outside of an entity or on the surface of a carrier. In the first case, the underlying principle is that of the body as a [CONTAINER], while in the second, the body functions as a [SURFACE] (cf. NYORD, 2009: esp. 10–14 on image schemata). In Example 1, the focus is on the experience and perception of one's own body—the dreamer is seeing his nakedness and is becoming aware of his corporeality, whereas in Example 2, the pictorial and textual representation of the naked body eternally captures specific characteristics of the protagonist (Sehaqeq), shown semi-bald, contorted, and limited in his physical abilities,<sup>13</sup> who is thus made subject to the will of the recipient. According to the principle of [CONTAINMENT], *kfi/kfi* can express the activation of qualities and potential powers inherent within individual body parts that have positive or negative effects on the whole body of the individual. However, both examples rather seem to highlight a negative and vulnerable view on the unclothed body, i.e. the naked rear-end or abdomen (cf. NYORD, 2009: 300–302). At least based on these contexts, the exposure of this body part seemed to have been perceived as something potentially unnatural, unusual, or inappropriate.

These two examples were used to demonstrate some aspects of the semantic domain [EXPOSURE] of the verb *kfi/kfi*. To elucidate the semantic range of the context-dependant meanings and usage of this and other verbs associated with nudity/nakedness, the studied lexemes (see Section 2) shall be modelled within a conceptual field, a relational network visualising semantic interrelations between these lexical units (see Section 3).

### 3 Results: Nudity/nakedness and the modelling of semantic relations

Lexemes can be assigned to certain classes ('lexical' or 'conceptual fields') on the basis of their semantic relationship (synonymy, antonymy, hyper- and hyponymy, etc.), which not only structure the individual and collective understanding of a language on a psychological-cognitive level but are also reproduced in active and passive acts of communication. Such a conceptual field, as represented here, is inspired by semantic map research (GEORGAKOPOULOS & POLIS, 2022) and consists of a set of meaning-related or partially synonymous lexemes that stand in certain paradigmatic, lexical relations to each other. The sum and variety of the semantic meanings of the lexemes as well as their overlaps can be represented schematically. In this sense, a conceptual field, as an abstracting way of representing information and knowledge, can be used to describe and analyse linguistic complexity by establishing a network of entities and relations.

In relational thinking (STRATHERN, 2020; STRATHERN, 2018; STRATHERN, 2014; KÜNKLER, 2017), a differentiation between relations-between and relations-within entities can be drawn. In the first case, already-identifiable phenomena are brought into (external) relations with one another, while in the second, phenomena are understood as internally constituted by relations (STRATHERN, 2018: 4; STRATHERN, 2020: 7–8)—although these are seemingly two irreconcilable perspectives, both types of relations are at play when language in general and especially semantics and lexis are concerned. As has been argued by several scholars (e.g. STRATHERN, 2018: 4; KÜNKLER, 2017: 67–68), the establishment of a specific relation between entities by thinking of one entity 'with respect to' another can change their 'conception' or 'identity' (cf. 'merographic connections' in STRATHERN, 1992). This assigns an ontological quality to relations that have an effect on the terms or entities they are referring to or are associated with. On the other side, as for the relations-within, any change within one entity (e.g. semantic change in meaning of one word) can affect the meaning of other entities to which it is related.

Against this theoretical backdrop, when applied to research questions in linguistics and lexicography, a conscious engagement with models of thinking-in-relations becomes inevitable, as relations are relevant on at least two different levels (see Figure 3). First, it concerns the relation between the sign (lexeme) and the

<sup>13</sup>e.g. the reversal of food intake constitutes an internal process which normally cannot be perceived from the outside.

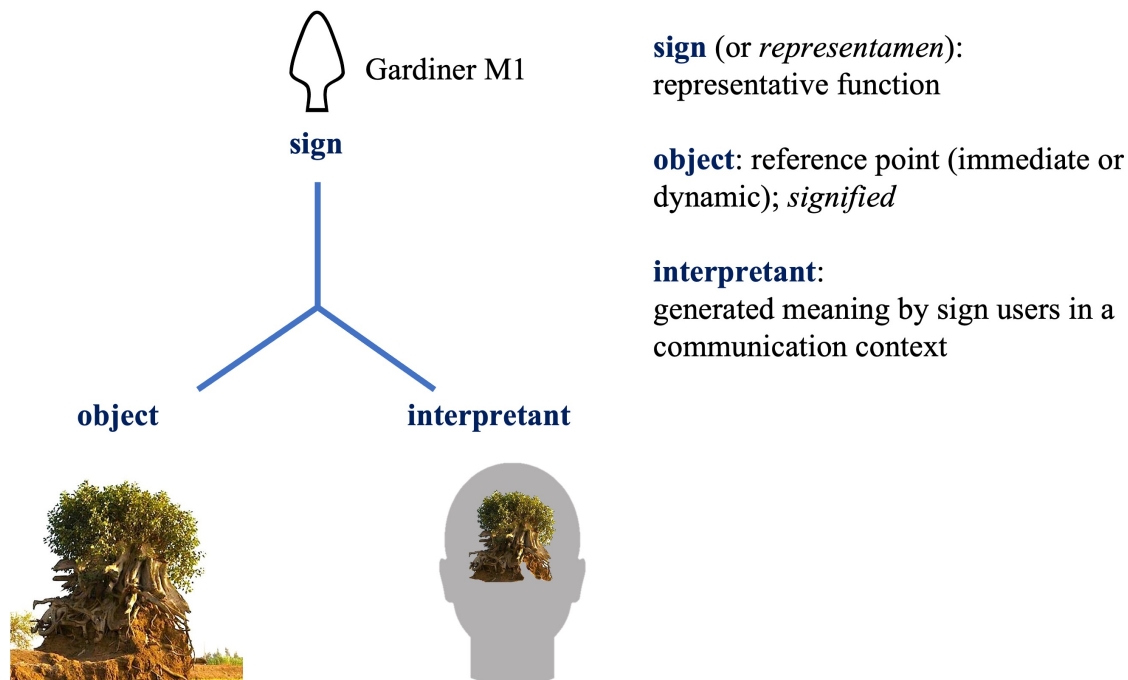


Fig. 3: Triadic model of a semiotic sign according to C.S. Peirce (Nöth 2000: 136–141).

interpretant (attributed meaning): the differentiation between relations-between and relations-within implies that not only the semantic scope of a lexeme as an entity is dynamic and organised by specific internal relations (e.g. rules of inflection), but also that its relations to other homonymous or synonymous lexemes within the conceptual field are subject to change according to their use context (i.e. chronolect, regiolect, sociolect, idiolect, register). Second, when going beyond the interrelation between the sign and its meaning (semantics), the semiotic relation between the sign (lexeme) and the object to which the sign refers to in reality comes into the foreground (see Figure 3).<sup>14</sup> In this sense, all three semiotic components and their respective relations are subject to change and have the potential to affect each other, forming a complex network of interrelatedness (cf. KÜNKLER, 2017: 69–76). Although the conceptual field presented here especially concerns the first complex of relations, it is not untouched or unaffected by the second one.

In the present study and conceptual field (Figure 4), the semantic meanings of the verbs *kfi/kfī*, *ḥꜣi*, *shꜣi* and *szꜣi* (on the methodology see Section 2) were identified by analysis of their usage co(n)texts and then transferred into the English target language. The resulting visualisation shows the range of semantic meanings of the verbs in comparison to each other by providing information on their overlaps or points of contact but also their distinctions (see Figure 4). Basically, three different entities are interrelated here: semantic domains, attested translations of the investigated lexemes and the lexemes themselves, building a complex semantic network and thus representing a selected section of the Egyptian lexicon.

In the case of this study, the ‘common lexical field value’—a prerequisite of any lexical or conceptual field (COSERIU, 1973: 49)—is the body-related area (‘body field’), i.e. physical nudity/nakedness as a state (passive, intransitive) and exposure or unveiling as a process (active, transitive). However, not all four verbs have this core meaning (or body relatedness) since some of them have their foci in other semantic areas (see Figure 4). The ‘nodes’ in the scheme are the readings of the lexemes inferred on the basis of glossing and analysis of the co-texts. In Figure 4, the topological distance or proximity between the nodes does not result from a

<sup>14</sup>While semantics focusses on the study of meanings of words and the connections/relations between these meanings, semiotics takes all kinds of signs into account and looks at all three components sign, object, and interpretant (for further reading see NÖTH, 2000: 158ff. and ECO, 2002).

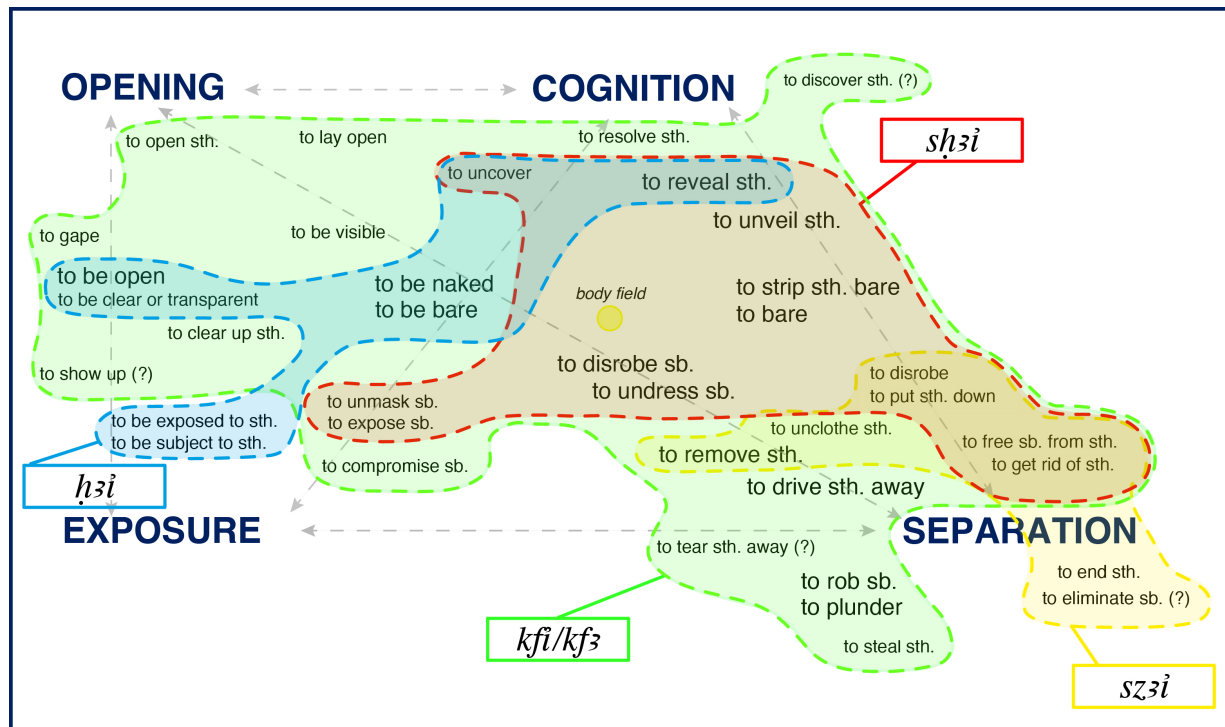


Fig. 4: Conceptual field associated with nudity/nakedness structured by the four semantic domains [OPENING], [COGNITION], [SEPARATION] and [EXPOSURE]; indication of semantic areas of the verbs *kfi/kfz*, *hzi*, *shzi* and *szzi* within this space.

quantitative computational approach but from a qualitative analysis. Thus, the visualisation of this part of the ancient Egyptian lexicon, as well as the position of the single nodes, represent tentative approximations. Coloured lines indicate the boundaries of the respective lexemes in the semantic space.

As the analysis has shown, the examined lexemes and their English equivalents move on specific axes, whose poles are composed of the superordinate semantic domains [OPENING], [COGNITION], [SEPARATION] and [EXPOSURE]. A semantic domain is an abstract unit in which readings/meanings of the lexemes are clustered, thus sharing commonalities in their semantic use.

The ‘body field’ is dominated by the verbs *kfi/kfz*, *shzi* and *hzi*. These lexemes are used both to describe the state of being nude/naked and to express the action of undressing or unveiling. In the studied texts, not only human or human-like beings and their body parts were addressed but references to animals were also made. Here, the body parts which are often described as being undressed or nude/naked include the head (*dp*) and the face (*hr*), but also, for example, the teeth (*jbh.w*), the extremities (ϵ, *qh*, *rmn*; *ms.t*, *mn.tj*) and parts of the abdomen (*ph.tj*, *kz.t*), as well as internal body parts, such as the heart (*jb*). The evaluation and contextual meaning of nudity/nakedness can have positive or negative connotations depending on the body part and the conceptualisations associated with it. The spectrum of meanings ranges from activity, dynamism, vitality, power, revelation, and initiation to poverty, helplessness, deprivation, liminality, and weakness (see in more detail [SEROVA, 2025](#)).

In the semantic domain [OPENING], the lexemes *kfi/kfz* and *hzi* are predominant. *hzi* as a stative verb often stands for the result of the described action, which consists of ‘standing/lying open’ or ‘being clear/transparent’. Such a use of *hzi* was attested marginally with abstract nouns such as *hrw* ‘day’ (e.g. pLondon BM EA 10477, 9–10) or *mw* ‘water’ (e.g. S1C, Cairo CG 28118 with CT VI, 207e–g [586]). In both cases, *hzi* ‘to be naked’ in its use as ‘to be clear’ refers to the revelation, perception and thus cognitive understanding of

inherent and normally not visible elements. For example, in the context of *Coffin Texts*, ‘naked water’ as an expression means transparency and thereby the visibility or perceptibility of the beings (such as potentially dangerous animals) located in the water. In this sense, *kfi/kfj* and *h3i* can be used to create references to the perceptibility and visibility of things (see [COGNITION]). This means that the opening, i.e. disclosure and revelation of things and objects, can be linked to their visibility and cognitive perception. *kfi/kfj* in the domain [OPENING] is mainly used actively with readings such as ‘to make sth. clear’, ‘to open sth.’ or simply ‘to gape’. The reading ‘to clear sth. up’ (cf. [SEPARATION]), especially in relation to *p.t* ‘sky’ is already attested in the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom<sup>15</sup> and expands later to *šn.(yt)* ‘storm clouds’,<sup>16</sup> attested from the New Kingdom onwards. The reading of *kfi/kfj* ‘to open sth.’ was first observed in the Second Intermediate Period within the medical manuscript pEdwin Smith (pNew York AoM 217), especially in the sense of ‘to gape’ in relation to wounds and injuries. In the meaning of ‘to open’, *kfi/kfj* was later used twice within one and the same text document in Dynasty 19, namely the *Calendar of Lucky and Unlucky Days*.<sup>17</sup>

The area [COGNITION] is covered by the verbs *kfi/kfj*, *sh3i* and *h3i*. The main matter in this semantic domain is the ‘revealing’ of secrets or other things not otherwise externally perceptible, which are brought outside and thus made visible or accessible (e.g. internal processes, qualities, or characteristics). The term [COGNITION] describes the concept of learning, cognitive understanding and recognition which is evoked by the process of unveiling or uncovering. For example, in some texts, the physical exposure of certain body parts (e.g. the head or face) relates to the ability to see and be seen, thus perception and information processing. Such a usage context is attested with the verb *kfi/kfj*, which, in addition to the reading ‘to clarify (a matter)’, holds the meanings ‘to find out sth. unknown/hidden’, ‘to discover’ or ‘to suddenly notice sth./sb.’.

In the semantic domain [SEPARATION], the verbs *kfi/kfj*, *sz3i*, and marginally *sh3i* are attested. These lexemes overlap, especially in their readings such as ‘to free sb. from sth.’, ‘to discard sth.’, and ‘to remove sth.’. The verb *sz3i* additionally shows a use as ‘to settle (a dispute); to end’ with respect to objects like *jzft* ‘falsehood’ and *hmn.w* ‘turmoil’ (e.g. PT 229, §229a–c, Wenig). In turn, *kfi/kfj* can also be used to express actions like ‘to plunder; to rob; to steal sth.’ (e.g. *Sinuhe*, pBerlin ÄM 3022 + pAmherst, fragm. M–Q, 145–146) and ‘to rob sb.’ in the sense of violent appropriation of the property of others. Also, in numerous documents, *kfi/kfj* shows the reading ‘to remove; to drive away sth.’, which the verb partly shares with *sz3i*.

The last semantic domain is [EXPOSURE] where the lexemes *kfi/kfj*, *h3i* and *sh3i* are situated. While in *h3i* the physical aspect still plays a role, in the sense of a body ‘being exposed to a natural element’ (e.g. *Opening of the Mouth Ritual*, scene 1, KV 17), the other two verbs focus on psychological exposure, i.e. ‘losing face’ or compromising and unmasking individuals or evil beings. As ‘to unmask; to expose sb.’, *sh3i* is clearly attested with this reading in the New Kingdom, especially in Dynasty 20 (tTurin CGT 58004, 1–2). This also holds true for *kfi/kfj* with the reading ‘to expose; to compromise sb.’.

#### 4 Discussion

The above-presented conceptual field of nudity/nakedness based on four verbs (Section 3, Figure 4) brings detailed insights into the organisation of a small part of the ancient Egyptian lexicon by showing semantic overlaps between the lexemes and associated areas (‘semantic domains’) where these lexemes are partially synonymous. Although the number of studied lexemes (four in total) is low and their attestations (906 in total) are statistically irrelevant as they represent only a marginal and limited part of the lexicon, the insights gained can be considered as epistemologically exemplary and methodologically innovative for lexicographic

<sup>15</sup>For one of the earliest attestations of the expression *kfi/kfj p.t*, see, e.g. the (auto-)biographical inscription by *Htj* II. (*Siut* IV, l. 10–11; FIP): DZA 30.587.030; EDEL (1984: 67–187, esp. 185).

<sup>16</sup>See e.g. the so-called *Israel-Stela* (Cairo CG 34025, l. 2–3; Dynasty 19): DZA 30.587.210; KITCHEN (1982: 12–19, l. 10).

<sup>17</sup>See pCairo JE 86637, *rto* 20, 3–4 and 26, 10–11; LEITZ (1994: 285–286, esp. 285 with fn. a, 104 with fn. e); LEITZ (1994: pl. 26, l. 10–11 and pl. 74, l. 3–4).

and lexicological research within Egyptology.<sup>18</sup>

The potential of the modelling of the lexicon as a multidimensional or multifactorial network highlights the role and complexity of relations between the studied entities (lexemes) and thus shifts the focus from meticulous and evitable lexicographical or lexical examinations of single terms to a more holistic understanding of lexis and language use in context. Furthermore, this network is expandable by the inclusion and addition of other neighbouring semantic domains which are associated with other linguistic concepts and areas of the lexicon; therefore, it can provide an alternative perspective on the organisation of related lexemes. The resulting network can also be used for mapping antonymous relations between lexemes, as the semantic domains allow both the attribution of antonyms and synonyms (cf. [SEROVA](#), 2025).

However, some limiting aspects of this approach should also be noted. First, the conceptual field presented here (Figure 4) was not created by means of a quantitative approach as it is often done in modern linguistics (e.g. multi-dimensional approaches, [BIBER](#), 1992: 331; concerning semantic maps see e.g. [GEORGAKOPOULOS](#) and [POLIS](#), 2022 and [CROFT](#), 2022). Such approaches in Egyptology would not only require a specific expertise in statistics and Digital Humanities, but also full access to digital corpora with deeply annotated texts from different genres and time periods. However, these are still in the process of development and growth for Egyptological research.<sup>19</sup> Also, as a dead language, ancient Egyptian cannot be accessed and analysed in the same way as modern languages since the historical linguistic reality is almost completely lost ([JENSET & MCGILLIVRAY](#), 2017: 37–38). Whether and to what extent such methodologies can be applied to ancient Egyptian texts still awaits a critical evaluation.

As a second limitation, the visualisation (Figure 4) does not illustrate diachronic change of the lexemes, as it shows all attested meanings and readings of the verbs simultaneously. This is not unproblematic because the continuity vs alterity of semantic meanings and related body conceptualisations cannot be represented by means of this model (cf. Section 1.1).<sup>20</sup> The strength of the conceptual field, which is expandable by inclusion of further semantic domains, lies in showing the possible context-dependent semantic uses of the studied lexemes in their full range.

The third aspect relates to the general translation issue: there is an inherent bias within the methodological approach of semantic mapping when used in an interlingual context (e.g. [HASPELMATH](#), 2003: 217), that is the translation of lexemes and associated sememes from one language to another—the core task of interlingual lexicography ([HARTMANN](#), 2007; [MALMKJÆR](#), 2018). The issue of translation equivalence is even more problematic when dealing with a dead language such as ancient Egyptian (for further reading see [IMHAUSEN](#) and [POMMERENING](#), 2016: 1–5; [POMMERENING](#), 2016: 176–177, 184–187, esp. 187; [HOFFMANN](#), 2016: 337–339, 341–342).

Nevertheless, the conceptual field presented here provides valuable insights into an area of the ancient Egyptian lexicon, as the visualised relations between lexemes and their meanings are not detached from

<sup>18</sup>In current Egyptological research, there are several comparable studies on lexical and conceptual fields, in the form of ongoing or completed doctoral theses (e.g. [JENKINS](#), 2022 on ‘sadness’; [KÖHLER](#), 2016 on ‘rage’; [EICKE](#), 2015 on ‘fear’; [STEINBACH](#), 2015 on verbs of perception; B. Böhm on verbs of stealing and appropriation). These works indicate a stronger interest in the modelling of ancient Egyptian vocabulary and its cognitive-semantic comprehension by means of theories and modern methodologies from linguistics, philology, and lexical studies; for an evaluation and theoretical discussion of the possibilities of lexical field research in Egyptology, see, e.g. [BUTT](#) (2011: 49–59); [HAFEMANN](#) (2011: 103); [KÖHLER](#) (2011: esp. 128).

<sup>19</sup>The updated and revised version of the database *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* ([TLA](#), corpus version 19, web-app-version 2.2.1.1, 6 March 2023, last access: 29 July 2025) was first launched in autumn 2022. It offers all texts from the old *TLA* ([TLA](#), corpus version 16, 31 October 2014, last access: 29 July 2025)—with the exception of the Edfu texts—plus all texts that were edited and finished between 2015 and 2022. However, not all query functions are implemented yet in the web app versions 2.0.x. More functionalities will be implemented and added during the next years. In addition, there are plans to publish the raw corpus data in format. As for the database *Ramses Online* for Late Egyptian texts, currently accessible in its beta version ([RO](#), last access: 29 July 2025), it continues to grow, as existent texts are currently revised in terms of quality and more textual material and attestations are about to be included into the corpus. I would like to express my gratitude to Daniel A. Werning for providing this information.

<sup>20</sup>For a detailed description of the diachronic change of the semantic meanings of the studied lexemes, see [SEROVA](#) (2025).

the objects they refer to in the lived reality and the empirical experiences with bodies and corporealities (cf. Figure 3, see Section 3). As for ancient Egyptian body conceptualisations, the semantic domains of the lexemes identified by a close reading of the texts provide a deeper understanding of the emic conceptualisation of (un)dressing events and of the body itself—whether royal, divine, human, animal, abstract or precise, animate or inanimate. Furthermore, such an approach to texts referring to the unclothed body and beyond opens new perspectives to the interpretation of the manifold pictorial representations of the body and its material culture surviving from ancient Egypt (cf. Examples 1 and 2 in Section 2.3).

## 5 Conclusion

This contribution has dealt with conceptualisations of ancient Egyptian bodies as relational entities in a dynamic conceptual field. Exemplified on the basis of nudity/nakedness, bodies as a research subject were approached by means of an examination of ancient Egyptian written texts with a focus on semantics and meaning making. The use of language—that is, naming and designating entities (e.g. people, things, places) and putting them in relation to each other as subjects or objects in specific settings—is understood here as a means of referring and expressing inter- and intra-subjective body conditions and activities or processes. Such an instantiation of a relation between relata by language use, e.g. by applying specific terminologies, contributes to the social negotiation and construction of bodies. Thus, when dealing with an extinct culture as an archaeologist or a scholar of ancient studies, there is a natural tension when describing the other body by means of vocabulary derived from modern languages such as English or German. This is because these come with their own cultural and zeitgeist connotations that run the risk of being transferred onto the ancient material.

In this paper, these issues concerning concepts of nudity/nakedness in ancient Egypt have been discussed by means of two case studies. By studying selected lexemes (*ḥꜣ*, *šꜣ*, *szꜣ*, and *kfi/kfꜣ*) which are diachronically attested in a wide range of ancient Egyptian texts (Table 2), linguistic references to the unclothed body and related processes were collected and contextualised within a lexical conceptual field (Figure 4). The resulting conceptual field is a relational visualisation of a marginal part of ancient Egyptian vocabulary, represented by translation of linguistic expressions into a modern target language.

For illustrative purposes, one textual (Example 1) and one visual example (Example 2, Figure 2) from the Ramesside period were presented in order to evaluate possible perspectives on the nude/naked body and the concept of [EXPOSURE].

The result of this study was an innovative mapping of semantic values of four selected ancient Egyptian verbs moving within a large lexical relational network, structured by four semantic domains, namely [OPENING], [COGNITION], [SEPARATION], and [EXPOSURE]. The semantic analysis has shown that the studied verbs used to express the state of nudity/nakedness or undressing/unveiling events move on specific axes between these domains and occupy their distinct semantic space (Figure 4). Also, it became evident that the contextual use and meaning of the four verbs is highly dependent on the text type, the co-text, the situational context of the action, and the body part involved.



In this sense, a relational network (bodies in their specific socio-cultural, temporal, spatial, contextual settings) associated with emic attributions and expressed by specific linguistic means (vocabulary) was described by means of a semantic conceptual field using etic terminologies. The approach proposed here allows cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons to deepen the understanding of ancient Egyptian bodies as historical and diachronic entities.

## 6 Acknowledgments

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
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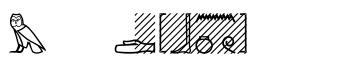
A Appendix


1rto   
**j:nd** **hr:k** **Sh:qq** **pri** **m-** **[p.t]** **[jr.tj]** **[ʃf]**  
 hail:IMP face(M)[SG] PN come:RES[-3SG.M] from= sky-F eye-DU.F =3SG.M  
*Hail to you, Saturated-Devourer (Sehaqeq), who came from [the sky], [whose eyes]*


2rto   
**m-** **db.t** **ʃf** **[ns]** **ʃf** **m-** **ʀ.t** **ʃf**  
 in= head-F =3SG.M tongue(M)[SG] =3SG.M in= arse-F =3SG.M  
*are in his head, whose [tongue] is in his arse,*

  
**wnm** **ʃf** **m-** **tʰ.w** **hr.i** **[jm]** **[ʃf]**  
 eat:PFV =3SG.M from= bread-COLL under:ADVZ with =3SG.M  
*so that he can only eat bread [with it] from below.*

  
**[hpš]** **ʃf** **jmn.i** **m-** **d:i** **hr-** **jr.t** **ʃf** **wp.t(j)**  
 forearm(M)[SG] =3SG.M right:M.SG in= cross:INF over= eye-F =3SG.M divide:RES  
*[His] right [forearm] crosses over his field of vision, which is (thus) divided.*

  
**n:** **sb:ʷ** **(hr-)** **dg:** **ʀh** **ʃf** **m-** **d[bn.w]**  
 ART:PL star-M.PL on= see:INF live:INF =3SG.M from= round\_excrement-M.PL  
*The stars (deities) see that he lives on d[roppings].*

4rto   
**[nb]-št:ʷ** **m-** **p.t** **rs.ı(t)** **snd** **nʃf** **[jm.i-hr.t-ntr]**  
 lord=of=secrets-COLL in= sky-F south(F) fear:REL(M) of=3SG.M in:ADJ.M.SG=necropolis-F  
*[Oh, Lord] of Secrets in the Southern Sky, whom [the inhabitant of the necropolis] fears!*

  
**Ndr-sh-mj-mm** **[rn]** **[n-]** **[mw.t]** **[ʃk]**  
 PN name(M)[SG] of= mother-F =2SG.M  
*The-one-who-picks-excrements-like-grains (Nedjersekmmimem) [is the name of your mother],*

  
**[Dw]-bš.t** **rn** **n-** **[jt]** **[ʃk]**  
 PN name(M)[SG] of= father-(M)[SG] =2SG.M  
*Mount-barf (Djubesht) is the name of [your father]!*





## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## *Chaîne opératoire* in a relational consideration of epistemology, body knowledge, and embodied cognition

WILLEKE WENDRICH<sup>1,\*</sup><sup>1</sup>Politecnico di TorinoPublished: 19<sup>th</sup> December 2025**Abstract**

Understanding historical bodies in ancient Egypt requires us to be aware of how we might misinterpret our sources based on how we, embedded in our present-day society, think about the body. By considering the relations between epistemology, body knowledge, and embodied cognition we can trace our own preconceptions when we seek to understand the ancient understanding of the body. Epistemology, the way we gain knowledge about the world and consider some types of knowledge valid, while others are classified as beliefs or opinions, influences how we assess knowing. Body knowledge is the capability of making complicated and deeply rooted movements, as mastered by, among others, makers, dancers, musicians, caretakers, cooks, and athletes. In present day society, body knowledge is often undervalued, or not even considered 'knowledge'. The root of valuing the mind over the body may be the split between body and mind (generally known as 'Cartesian dualism'). The third element in this relationship, embodied cognition, foregrounds the interaction with the environment and the importance of the senses in how we know and understand the world. The full-body sensation of touch, knowing which movements to make, how much strength to use, how to shift weight and point of gravity, is essential to all our movements and learning to be in the world. Studying the ancient body from archaeological remains requires an approach that allows us to reconstruct the interactions of material, environment and bodies. In the discussion, I explore the value and limitations of a *chaîne opératoire* approach to consider the ancient body from an embodied epistemology by emphasizing the person who did, rather than the process or the result of doing.

**Keywords:** ontology, epistemology, tactile, body knowledge, *chaîne opératoire*

منهجية السلسلة التشغيلية في سياق نظرية المعرفة، معرفة الجسد، والإدراك المتجسد

**المخلص**

لفهم الأجساد التاريخية في مصر القديمة، من الضروري إدراك كيفية تأثير تصوراتنا المعاصرة للجسد على تفسيرنا للمصادر القديمة. نظرنا المتأثرة بجمع اليوم قد تؤدي إلى إساءة تفسير الفهم القديم للجسد. من خلال دراسة العلاقة بين علم المعرفة، معرفة الجسد، والإدراك المتجسد، يمكننا تتبع تصوراتنا المسبقة والكشف عنها أثناء محاولتنا لفهم منظور المصريين القدماء. تشير نظرية المعرفة إلى الطريقة التي نكتسب بها فهماً للعالم، وكيفية تصنيف بعض أنواع المعرفة على أنها موثوقة، بينما تُعتبر أخرى مجرد آراء أو معتقدات. هذه العملية تؤثر بشكل كبير على كيفية تقييمنا لما يُعد معرفة حقيقية. أما معرفة الجسد، فهي القدرة على أداء حركات معقدة ومتأصلة بعمق، كما هو الحال لدى الحرفيين، والراقصين، والموسيقيين، ومقدمي الرعاية، والطهاة، والرياضيين. ورغم أهميتها، إلا أن هذه المعرفة غالباً ما تُهمل في المجتمع الحديث، أو لا تُعتبر "معرفة" في الأساس. ربما يرتبط هذا التهميش بالجذور الفكرية لتفضيل العقل على الجسد، كما يتجلى في الثنائية الديكارتية بين الجسد والعقل. الإدراك المتجسد، وهو العنصر الثالث في هذه العلاقة، يبرز أهمية التفاعل مع البيئة ودور الحواس في اكتسابنا للمعرفة وفهمنا للعالم. الإحساس الجسدي الكامل—بما في ذلك الإحساس باللمس، ومعرفة الحركات اللازمة، وتحديد مقدار القوة المطلوبة، وكيفية تعديل الوزن ونقاط التوازن—هو أساس كل حركاتنا وتعلمنا كيفية التفاعل مع العالم المحيط. دراسة الأجساد القديمة من خلال البقايا الأثرية تتطلب منهجية تعيد

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بناء التفاعلات بين المواد، والبيئة، والأجساد. لذلك، يناقش هذا البحث أهمية استخدام منهجية "السلسلة التشغيلية" في دراسة الأجساد من منظور معرفي مجسد، مع التأكيد على دور الشخص الفاعل بدلاً من التركيز فقط على العملية أو النتيجة النهائية. الكلمات الدالة علم الوجود، نظرية المعرفة، ملهوس، معرفة الجسم، منهجية "السلسلة التشغيلية"

## 1 Introduction to the problem: what the body knows

The purpose of the 2022 workshop *Egyptology in dialogue: Historical bodies in relations of comparisons and negotiations* in Atlanta was to investigate the perception and conceptualization of the body and bodily difference in ancient Egypt and how, mostly anthropological, theories of relations, comparisons, and negotiations could be useful in the Egyptological understanding of the body. Theory has not been a mainstay of Egyptological interpretation, which traditionally heavily depends on texts and imagery (HOWLEY & NYORD, 2018). The wealth of information provided by well-preserved material remains, including texts ranging from formal inscriptions to daily notes, have long been considered to 'speak for themselves'. Speaking, language, the meaning of words is fundamental to our understanding of the world and how we are part of it, but always requires translation. Language is central to ontology as well as to epistemology: how we define and can know the relations between environment, materiality, human and other animal bodies. Letting the ancient texts 'speak for themselves' means understanding them from a very specific way of thinking about the world, either today's or that of the many pasts that we study. There are clear examples on how unrecognized preconceptions in scholarship are the basis of tacit theories that have far reaching influence on the Egyptological interpretation of its subject (NYORD, 2018). Sometimes these are not all that silent, as in the explicit naming of domestic spaces in Amarna as 'master's bedroom', 'servants' quarters', and 'porter's lodge' (FRANKFORT & PENDLEBURY, 1933). Not acknowledging or explicating one's preconceptions is in fact a theoretical approach: 'our' reality is 'the' reality. Such an approach uses theory, albeit tacitly, unrecognised and therefore difficult to account for and to critique.

Understanding ancient Egyptian culture requires, then, researching our own ontology and epistemology: how does our worldview influence what we consider ways of knowing and valid knowledge? Studying the body in ancient Egypt compels us to consider our own attitudes towards the body, and to trace how the body was deemed to be in different regions and social contexts over time. In Christian and Islamic thought it was clear that both humans and animals have bodies, but humans were considered distinct from and superior to other animals, based on the difference between creatures with and without a soul (BUSHNELL, 2021; HARRISON, 1992; TLILI, 2014). It allows human superiority over the natural world, which is understood to be created for human use. This is just one of the consequences of what is usually called the Cartesian split, although the distinction between a metaphysical and a physical realm predates Descartes. In his vision it is the mind, sentience, spirit or soul that separates humans from animals. The mind, despite its different nature, is intimately connected to all of the human body, rather than any particular part of it. Descartes' interest in anatomy led him to consider the function of various body parts, including the brain, and he tentatively suggested that the pineal gland, a small organ of unclear function, might be the point of connection between body and soul (LOKHORST, 2021).

The notion of a body and soul as separate entities obviously predates Descartes, and was put forward by, among others, early Christian authors, as can be seen in the writings of Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, and the later work of Thomas Aquinas, based on his knowledge of Aristotelian texts (TKACZ, 2012). Their understanding of the relationship of body and soul during life as well as after death resulted in disdain for the body, evident in the Christian emphasis on ascetism and martyrdom. The bodily suffering of martyrs as imitation of the suffering of Christ glorified the immaterial soul as merely contained in a physical body (TILLEY, 1991). With the establishment of Christianity as an official religion, other aspects of bodily weakness, such as the physical decay of the body in old age, let alone after death, created theological conundrums

to ensure the community of an—often believed to be imminent—healthy and youthful bodily resurrection. The body-soul or body-mind split remains deeply engrained in Western society, even if increasingly philosophers, anthropologists, ecologists and psychologists have pointed out the problematic consequences of this dualism, and emphasize the importance of understanding the human experience as embodied (RYLE, 1949; BATESON, 1979; INGOLD, 1988; INGOLD, 2000; LAKOFF & JOHNSON, 1999; GIBBS JR., 2005; GALLAGHER, 2006; PFEIFER & BONGARD, 2007; VARELA et al., 2017).

The philosophy of mind has effectively criticized Cartesian dualism (RYLE, 1949; BATESON, 1979; INGOLD, 1988) but the understanding of mind and body as separate entities has persisted, for instance in cognitive science. Computational cognitive science considers external stimuli as input that is being processed and results in an output. Embodied cognition on the other hand ‘variously rejects or reformulates the computational commitments of cognitive science, emphasizing the significance of an agent’s physical body in cognitive abilities’ (SHAPIRO & SPAULDING, 2021: 1).

Embodied cognition maintains that we humans are in constant interaction with our environment, even when at times we are day-dreaming, thinking, or analyzing situations or memories. Memory, as argued by GLENBERG (1997: 1) is not for memorizing, but for ‘the encoding of patterns of possible physical interaction with a three-dimensional world’. Interacting in that world is done through speech and gestures, but embodied cognition proponents state that gestures are not just meant for communication, but are an aid in recalling memories or helping the thought process (M. WILSON, 2002: 629). Bodily perception constitutes a relation to the world around us and a seamless combination of the visual, aural, spatial, tactile, olfactory, and gustative, as well as the emotive elements related to these. Examples of the latter are memories of well-being, fear, or unrest. Movement is a foundation of human cognition and arguably its only ‘output’ (BARNARD, 2022: 321–325; GALLAGHER, 2006: 9; PFEIFER & BONGARD, 2007: 25; SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, 2011: 117–118; F. R. WILSON, 1999: 10; WOLPERT et al., 2001). Margaret Wilson argues that even mental concepts that are highly abstract can be considered to stem from sensory and motoric knowledge (M. WILSON, 2002: 634). Her emphasis on the origin of mental properties leads her to suppositions about the development of human kind and is focused on how human intelligence arrived where it is. For our purpose, this is not the most important contribution of embodied cognition, but rather its consequences for epistemology is.

Embodied cognition maintains that knowing and learning is only possible through integrated bodily, sensorial experience. There are, however, many definitions and variations in understanding what this entails and what the consequences are of embodiment (MALAFOURIS, 2016). My work on learning and maintaining knowledge of and through bodily activity in the past and the present has led me to consider how epistemology suffused in our Western academic approach is biased, especially towards what I have called elsewhere *body knowledge* (WENDRICH, 2012). What the Western world considers acceptable ways of knowing is shaped by a very specific value proposition, a tacit ranking of different kinds of knowledge. Western epistemology considers ‘theoretical knowledge’ as intrinsically of higher value than ‘practical knowledge’, an attitude that has led to an emphasis on thinking at the expense of doing. This also underlies current societal problems, such as economic, social, and racial inequality in which manual skills are rated low and blue-collar workers are paid a fraction of the income of CEOs in the same industry (BIVENS & KANDRA, 2022). The classification of some types of work as ‘mindless’ seemingly considers the body as a separate entity, a machine or automaton. Expressions such as ‘working like a dog, pig, or donkey’ likens manual labour to the efforts of similarly ‘mindless’ animals.

It is from this epistemology that we tend to evaluate ancient cultures as well. The result of such a hierarchy of knowledge is that Egyptology makes distinctions that do not exist in the ancient sources. For instance, in the Egyptological interpretation of ancient Egyptian texts that deal with sickness and health, some ancient approaches are considered science, or medicine, while others are classified as ‘magic’ (ERMAN, 1901). Similarly, ‘religious texts’ are divided into ‘theology’, ‘ritual’, and ‘magic’ (BAUMANN & KOCKELMANN, 2017). The papyri describe, however, integrated body techniques, which combine speaking (‘reciting a spell’) with other actions (e.g. tying a knot). This choice of translation renders bodily activities related to making, worshipping

and healing as unsophisticated or ‘primitive’, i.e. not (yet) reaching our standards. The distinction between ancient Egyptian medicine, magic and religion are, perhaps subconsciously, the result of our assessment of what is a rational approach, an effort of the mind, rather than the body.

In the anthropological literature the terms epistemology and ontology are not always sharply distinguished and sometimes used almost interchangeably. In this chapter I use ontology as defined by **HARRIS** and **ROBB** (2012: 668), as a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is. Epistemology is the way in which we gain knowledge about the world, and defines what is considered valid knowledge, in contrast to what is, for instance, a belief, an opinion, or superstition. Epistemology and ontology are closely linked, especially when discussing different worldviews, something that is the bailiwick of anthropologists and should be that of archaeologists as well (**CARRITHERS** et al., 2010; **CRELLIN** et al., 2021). Especially if we try to interpret ontologies that differ from our own, we might be severely hampered in understanding these because we classify spiritual knowledge as ‘merely beliefs’ or ‘superstitions’. Such disconnects in fundamental understanding not only are at play across centuries, countries or continents, but also between groups within the same geographical region, as illustrated by the sharply increased polarisation in the United States, and elsewhere, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The problematic shorthand for ontological and epistemological differences is ‘culture’, or ‘sub-culture’, and the degree of variation, as well as the interpretation of the underlying reasons for its occurrence is a matter of scale (**STRATHERN**, 2004: xvii). In the Western epistemological tradition, variation is subsequently interpreted as branches of culture, based for instance on geographical distance or genetic bifurcations, that are understood as developments similar to the evolutionary explanatory system. The self-reflexive approach of Marilyn Strathern, which at times reads as a *monologue intérieur*, is a wonderful example of constantly second-guessing ones own preconceptions, analyzing ones own biases, and bringing up alternative interpretations, while she states that ‘interpretation must be a matter of refusing many meanings in order to focus on any’ (**STRATHERN**, 2004: xxi).

Strathern thus complicates comparison, by stressing the seemingly endless variation in both the phenomena we might choose to study, as well as our way of thinking and understanding these. ‘Cultures’, a term she critiques as a particular way of objectifying the world, where ‘we’ are the norm and alterity is defined by ‘our’ relation to ‘them’ (see also **FRIEDMAN**, 1989) exist by our definition. A better approach might be to consider varying worldviews not as more or less fixed entities, but focus instead on relations. Comparisons require a definition of the entities that are to be compared. Relationships similarly need to be characterised, and in the process invite a self-reflexive approach. The two- or multi-way traffic of relationships includes an identification of the entities that are related, but also the analysis of the relationship itself. In contrast, comparisons might evoke the use of an authoritative voice: one entity is held up and compared to a standard or better known example, that then functions as benchmark (**CANDEA**, 2018; **CANDEA**, 2019).

## 2 Discussion

### 2.1 Relationships

What happens if we define the ancient body within a set of relationships? Even though archaeology does not have the living body to relate to, it has the certainty that human bodies existed and that these had relationships with the things that we find today: landscapes, sites, objects, residues. Archaeological interpretation is built on relationships, often literally as in the description of stratigraphy through the relations of walls, deposits, and things found within these. Defining relationships brings into focus that, throughout the history of archaeology, research interests determined which relations were considered valid, interesting, or relevant. We can actually sketch out the history of the study of archaeology as sets of relationships between objects and scholars: emotional, objectifying, symbolic, positivist, or subjective.

In what perhaps can be considered very early forms of archaeology object relations were mostly based on

the senses, emotions, and wonder. Stones that were unusually smooth or shaped with curious angles urged people to pick them up from the ground and keep them. The relation of the antiquarian to objects from the past was one of intrigue and wonder, of admiration of beauty, with the emotional involvement of the collector at its center (ANDERSON, 2012; BARNARD, 2023a; CARBONELL, 2012; GENOWAYS & ANDREI, 2016; HODDER, 2012; IMPEY & MACGREGOR, 2018; MACGREGOR, 2008; SCHNAPP, 1996). The *Wunderkammer* contained objects of which it was often unclear whether they were ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’. Axe and arrowhead shaped stones were thought to have been shaped by thunder, because they were often found where lightning had struck. This most likely was due to search bias, because curiosity to see the results of the immense power of lightning meant that these areas were checked carefully and possibly dug over. The rational explanation that these were not faerie stones or created by thunder was mostly based on comparison with native American artifacts, as well as biblical references to stone knives. The suggestion that these objects were made by humans was given by several different antiquarians and gradually accepted (GOODRUM, 2008).

Objectifying relations are the basis for early ‘scientific’ archaeology with its penchant for classifying, organising, and maintaining an objective stance towards the material world. Relationships between objects were created based on similarities of place, material and appearance in order to form ‘archaeological cultures’ connected to distinct periods in the past. Rarely recognized, however, is the fact that early Egyptologists were also seeking a relation between archaeological material and ‘cultures’ of the present, with good intentions, but for all the wrong reasons: a fascination of comparing Nilotic ‘primitive’ cultures with the ‘primitive’ phases of Egyptian Neolithic and Predynastic periods (SELIGMAN & MURRAY, 1911; SELIGMAN, 1913; MURRAY, 1956). The relations with anthropological sub-Saharan Africa that Murray and Seligmann emphasized were subsequently explained away as foundations of Egyptian culture and overshadowed by theories of a ‘dynastic race’ that had the higher mental capacity to build pyramids (DERRY, 1956; EMERY, 1961; PETRIE, 1920).

Considerations of object symbolism, and analyses of functional and isochrestic styles mostly in the 1970s were similarly object focused (SACKETT, 1990; WIESSNER, 1985). The positivist effort to define archaeology as a science, using measurable, verifiable and reproduceable information looked at how one (set of) objects could be related to another, through precise measurements and statistical analyses. The objective was to consider the intentionality of persons, either those producing, obtaining, displaying or using objects. In terms of relationships, ethno-archaeology played an important role, but was limited to object-object relations, in which human behaviour was inferred based on analogical reasoning. Most attempts to involve the body in these relationships are linked to ethnoarchaeology or other forms of anthropology, usually based on comparisons, analogies, correspondences or discrepancies broadly discussed in the literature (BINFORD, 1979; BINFORD, 1980; WYLIE, 1985; DAVID & KRAMER, 2001; GOSSELAIN, 2016).

In the last decades, attention in archaeology has shifted from the products and mode of production to the two-way relationship of object agency and the human factor in the form of the producer and user of objects (WENDRICH, 1999; BARNARD, 2023b). In this context Marcia Dobres refers to two types of ontology, firstly ‘practical reason epistemology’ that highlights approaches that are often positivist efforts to study tangible remains, as well as testable claims and, secondly, ‘cultural reason epistemology’ that is interested in finding indications of, for instance, gender, between the lines of the obvious (DOBRES, 2010: 105–107). In this context she brings up the concept of *tekhne* in its original Greek meaning, a term that has its own history of thought in the philosophical traditions of phenomenology into postmodernism in Germany and France (e.g. DERRIDA, 1976; FOUCAULT, 2005; HEIDEGGER, 1993; HUSSERL, 1970; LYOTARD, 1984). In several of his books, Tim Ingold highlights *tekhne* as the term that encompasses art, skill, craft, methods, knowledge, understanding, and awareness (INGOLD, 1988; INGOLD, 1990; INGOLD, 2000). These are among the many aspects of body knowledge (WENDRICH, 2012) and can be rephrased as relationships between object and maker, user, buyer, consumer, receiver, researcher, or reader. The understanding of what something should look or feel like is only partly inherent in the object, its material, or its maker, but also in others (objects and people) who interact with the thing. This complicates the concept of agency as being neither of the ‘thing’, nor of its maker. Agency thus defined is relational, situated somewhere in between, as belonging to the many different relationships

that can be explored with the object as its starting point.

The study of agency is particularly interesting when focusing on standardized objects, such as a water jar that is quite famous in present day Egypt. The Ballas jar is made of marl clay in one area of Middle Egypt. Depending on the placement in the kiln and the firing temperature these jars can have a beige, pinkish or greenish tint. The Ballas producers have no direct influence on the color, but they market clusters of similarly-tinged pots to particular regional communities. Each of these has a strong preference for jars with one of these three colors, which is somehow considered to be of higher quality than the others, while they are for all practical purposes all the same (NICHOLSON & PATTERSON, 1985).

## 2.2 Relationships of the body

Early in the development of archaeological reasoning the consideration of the relationship between human bodies and matter existed, but was seen in the light of human evolution, where the use of tools and the complexity of manipulating matter was part of the definition of the progress of humanity (THOMSEN, 1836; HEIZER, 1962). Ancient technology was closely related to progress of human capability that developed from tool use to science, and was part of humanity's influence on and mastery over nature. These studies often focused on the mechanisms of materiality, the properties that dictate technological solutions and the inventiveness of humanity through time (SINGER et al., 1954; FORBES, 1955). The emphasis on making, rather than the experience of owning or using is partly explained by a western focus on productivity and industry and the fact that making objects can be studied either from the product itself, or from production localities and debris (COSTIN, 1991). The ontology of the Western world determined much of the interest in and conclusions about ancient technology. For instance, linking ancient technology to social organization by marking craft specialization as an important indicator of social complexity was based on tacit considerations born from a capitalist understanding of economic systems, in which economic systems, moreover, were considered the determining factor in social organization (WEBER, 1958).

Bodily interaction as well as emotional reactions are relationships that are felt corporeally. It is in this realm that a life history of a group of objects, or a biography of one particular object, provides a series of relationships that go beyond the physical and beyond the instrumentalization of the concept of use-wear. It includes ownership, inheritance, value, meaning, discard and destruction (GOSDEN & MARSHALL, 1999). Beyond the visual relation of seeing an object, touching, smelling or tasting something that is part of another realm, whether determined by distance in history, social stratification or space, can provide an experience that transcends the mere sensory encounter. Whenever people ask me what my most special archaeological find was I often tell them about a palm leaf brush that was excavated in Amarna, dating to approximately 1350 BCE. The brush is made of long grass and heavily worn down, originally it would have been over a meter in length, but now only 35 cm is left of it. This consists of a stump of the brush part, but is mostly formed by the handle, which is a folded bundle of the grass sturdily wound with string. Holding the handle and putting my fingers in the position where the brush was held over 3350 years ago is like touching the past: archaeological cooties. The relationship of a touch through time is a very special, powerful and in this case positive thing. The bodily experience of the past, which seems utterly out of reach and impossible, was present in this case, and in many others, as long as you allow yourself to look for them.

Our study material, archaeological remains, is surrounded by potential relationships, which form an in-between-space. Depending on our interest, we focus on specific relations and the possibilities and limitations of grasping them. Here Strathern's work provides a vital contribution, when she discusses the end of the all-encompassing ethnographer and the consumption of experience (STRATHERN, 2004). Rather than academia claiming sole authority, indigenous archaeology provides subaltern voices and different ways of being and knowing. These contributions are slowly being accepted as providing valid information. Yet this does not mean that present day indigenous epistemology and ontology are in any way identical to the ancient ones, nor can we state that in a 'society' there was only one way of being or knowing. Nevertheless, with the

emphasis on indigenous and community archaeology the leading voice should not be that of the Western researcher and the leading paradigm cannot only be based on a Western ontology and epistemology. The fundamental problem is that this paradigm has for centuries been so overwhelmingly expanding that the work from colleagues from the southern or eastern hemisphere is only accepted if they fully subscribe to and have internalized Western epistemology. Moreover, they are frowned upon when they are considered to not keep up with the latest disciplinary developments and might subscribe to 20<sup>th</sup> century Western methods and theories.

As we saw, the traditional Western ontology is biased against the body and even the term ‘embodiment’ reflects this split, as if something exists outside the body that needs to be brought within, or sustained by feeding the body as its carrier. Yet during intense physical activity, such as complicated physical or emotional tasks, the entirety of us is involved. The unity of body and mind, action and thought, are most readily experienced during, for instance, focused work, dance, trance, or sex. The Western ontology, with its Cartesian split of body-mind, tends to distinguish a person from a body, while the body is the most intimate part of a person. This is evidenced by the social limitations to touching, the familiarity needed to allow skin to skin contact, let alone sharing bodily fluids. STRATHERN (2020: 137) describes the relations of persons that are unknown to each other until the moment that part of one body is implanted in another. She narrates that this creates a strong sense of kinship between families of the deceased donor and the recipient living with the bestowed body part. The physical—and literal—incorporation of part of a living or deceased person in another is perceived as ‘living on’ in the body of another. Perhaps the strongest argument in opposition to the Cartesian split would be that there is no such thing as a mind that exists independent of the body, but anyone who has lost a loved one might have experienced that the deceased is no longer the beloved person. The Western ontology can pull apart body and personhood, at death and in exceptional cases during life when regular relations are upended. The expression that someone ‘is not themselves’, or ‘is not the same person’ is used for living people, who are still the same body, but have shown a profound change of character, for instance due to illness or traumatic events. In spite of being the same body, they are no longer recognized, as if a change in personality means they left the body. The ‘inner person’ is reflected in the body, which thus is essential and at the same time suspect. What is perceived by society as attractive needs to be young, strong, healthy, beautified, and enhanced. What is considered unattractive has been attested to work against the old, the disabled, or the ugly and is increasingly called out as ageism, ablism, and lookism (MINERAVA, 2017). This conflict and ambiguity in what we tend to consider a rational well-ordered epistemology comes to the fore most clearly if we focus on subalterity.

### 2.3 Relationships of matter and the *chaîne opératoire*

As archaeologists we deal with material and we can express object agency as relationships of matter, by considering the influence of objects in the tension field of human-object relations (GELL, 1998; JONES & BOIVIN, 2010; STRATHERN, 1988). Analysing these relationships requires a methodological approach that allows us to take the object as starting point. DOBRES (2010) proposes an agnostic use of the *chaîne opératoire* independent of whether the objective or focus of research is the material or the person. Her interest in the study of agency or intentionality in object creation takes as its point of departure the ideas of the maker or producer. She considers this explicit or implicit design as a mental image, as something separate from their bodies. *Chaîne opératoire*, developed by LEROI-GOURHAN (1965) to consider objects as the result of a process, rather than an *objet d’art*, is most often used to understand the agency of a maker in a production process. It is a method that orders and simplifies imagined production processes and the unintended effect is that it disembodies the process, as if things happen without the physical involvement of the maker. This certainly was not the purpose of Leroi-Gourhan, who emphasized gestures and movement, including the body position of the maker during the process. The concept of body knowledge, in contrast, integrates the physical-mental continuum and relates actions to the body in time and space: movements, strength, subtlety, power, design, and moments of contemplation in which the entire mindbody is involved.

Using a *chaîne opératoire* approach we can reconstruct relations of the body with matter based on the different production sequences and specifically how materials are grasped by the producer. The grasp is reaching out both by hand and thought, linking the material remains to physical, bodily actions of the producer. A fine-grained description of the production sequence allows us to understand the positions, attitudes, affordances, and limitations of the body and the materials within the process of making. Grass simply is. It only becomes a 'material' in relation to the hands of a farmer who cuts it for his wife. It becomes a 'raw material' in her hands when she uses it in the production of a basket. Standardised objects from a workshop have the same *chaîne opératoire*, but display slight differences, that are engrained in the body knowledge of the potters, akin to trademarks or finger prints. Potters can readily recognize the work of others, usually by microvariations in rims or handles (GUPTA-AGARWAL, 2015). In the words of the potters: 'Pots are like people, each alike yet different from others' (NICHOLSON & PATTERSON, 1985: 234). The *chaîne opératoire* of Egyptian sewn plait baskets, shows that standardized sizes are based on the span of two outstretched arms, the *ba'a*, the exact size of which depends on how large the basket maker is. A small basket, the *gauta*, is sewn from a plait that is three arm-spans long (approximately 4.50 m), a medium sized basket, the *alaga* is 7 arm-spans and the large *maqtaf* is sized as 10 *ba'at* (150 m). The size is, therefore, not determined by a particular diameter, height or content of the end product, but is embodied by the basket maker (WENDRICH, 1999: 397).

In an archaeological object such elements of production are perhaps more readily discernable, than the relation between a thing and its user. This in spite of the fact that the relationships between us and objects is one of intense connection, repeated use and multiple senses. We see, hear, smell, taste, and most of all touch objects. Use wear, especially on clothing, blankets, furniture, tools etc, is the rubbing of the body and the material world. It is touch embedded in material and gives the clearest indication of repeated movements, habits and habitus. In how far this can be observed depends on the type of object and the intensity, length and intimacy of use.

As archaeologists, we consider objects because that is what we have to work with. We know, but do not truly account for the fact that we are left with only a fraction of what once existed, and it is not the subtle part, but the hard, sturdy stuff such as flint and potsherds, to a lesser extent bones, hardly ever flesh. But bones and even flesh are still not bodies. If we construct a *chaîne opératoire* to understand only the process, rather than the many relations of the archaeological object, then it does not get us to the quintessence of experience.

## 2.4 Body knowledge

A relational approach provides a means to map out experience, and the transfer of experience as knowledge. Body knowledge is a way to express the experience of movement, the doing, making and ingrained 'knowing how' that often is only gained by years of practice and gradual improvement, building skill, dexterity, and endurance. Elsewhere, I have defined dexterity as the physical ability to perform an action, while skill involves the right conduct of movement, timing, and organization. Endurance is the stamina built to continue a process for the required length of time (WENDRICH, 2012: 3). Ingold emphasizes that skill is not a property of the human body but of the total field of relations 'constituted by the presence of the organism-person, indissolubly body and mind, in a richly structured environment' (INGOLD, 2000: 353). That *cultural/natural* environment is the determinant in informal learning as well as formal apprenticeship. Training to do complicated tasks involves a long continuous process of observing, listening, but most of all feeling through repetition that lies at the basis of apprenticeship. The *chaîne opératoire* helps us to organize the different activities and relations with teachers, co-workers, materials, and the environment, but it is a stylized and polished rendering of a process that is in fact unorganized and messy. Actions are not done in a certain order and are constantly interrupted by other, more urgent tasks that may have nothing to do with the production or procurement or whatever undertaking is supposed to be the 'main' pursuit. The traditional way of using a *chaîne opératoire* approach not only simplifies, but also creates a linear representation of processes that are only linear in hindsight. Constructing what actions are needed to create the end-result, the only aspect that an archaeologist has in

hand, is artificial, and does not consider agency of the participants and the many relationships represented by the object. First of all, there are the relations with people, foremost children, who in many societies are present in the place of work and participate, interfere, or need to be taken care of. Then there are the relations to the materials, architecture, community and the environment. Moreover, apprenticeship is not just about learning to do something, but perhaps most importantly to be or become someone, to grow into a member of a community of practice. Instilled in the body are not just the movements, but also the values and ethics.

In the last few decades critique of traditional Western epistemology as the standard way of accepted knowing has opened the way for the recognition of other types of knowledge. A re-evaluation of body knowledge is one of these developments (BENDER JØRGENSEN, 2003). This is not about melancholic longing for the high-quality craftsmanship of the past, when people still had time on their hands to create beautiful things, but about the fundamental reconsideration of what comprises intelligence, knowledge, and expertise. It enables a re-evaluation of indigenous knowledge, which similarly does not fit the Western epistemic model. Ingold's example of the reindeer or caribou who offers their life to the hunter is a case in point (INGOLD, 2000: 13). During the hunt, when a reindeer becomes aware of the hunter, they stop and look the hunter in the face. The 'rational' explanation by biologists is that this is an apt reaction when reindeer are pursued by wolves: it allows both prey and predator to catch their breath for a final dash. This behaviour makes the animal easy to kill by humans with weapons, but rather than thinking the animal heedless, the Cree consider it a voluntary gesture towards the hunter, who receives the substance of the caribou in gratitude. This is an example of how indigenous ontologies can provide explanations that are based on a deeply felt relationship. Gratitude for a gift of life is a very different proposition than extractive behaviour, based on maximising yield.

The authoritative foregrounding of traditional Western epistemology and ontology has come under critique, not just because of ingrained and easy to defend social and racial inequality, but because of the disastrous ecological effects and the instrumentalisation and commodification of earth resources. The politicisation of ontology is used as a weapon in an effort to counter the effects of the Anthropocene (TOLA, 2018; LATOUR, 2017; POHL, 2020). Considering not just the human body as important, but embodying the world, makes the understanding of damage done visceral and immediate.

## 2.5 Body relations in ancient Egypt

Visceral reactions are immediate, gut-felt, and stand in contrast to reasoned, mind-based reactions. This is just one example of how English idiom tacitly includes the body-mind divide. In *Breathing Flesh*, Rune Nyord considers the ancient Egyptian terminology for body parts and the relations between them in the theoretical frame of metaphor (NYORD, 2009; see also NYORD, 2017). Perhaps from the standpoint of embodied cognition, we can go further and state that these metaphors reflect a deep felt ontological 'truth', which may not need to be taken literal in order yet to be 'true'. Nyord hints at this when he discusses the literature on the two terms that are used in ancient Egypt for the heart: *ib* and *hꜥty*. They seem to refer to the same anatomical entity, are sometimes used interchangeably, but have a clear semantic difference. The translation *hꜥty* as heart and *ib* as mind, seems to make perfect sense:

(Eb. 855 k) 'As to the mind [*ib*] kneeling (breaking down): this means that the mind [*ib*] is constricted and the heart [*hꜥty*] becomes small. It is that the heart [*hꜥty*] is hot and weary and eats little.

This is explained in a rubric (an explanatory line, in red ink):

(Eb. 855 l) 'As to drying up of the mind [*ib*], it is that probably the blood coagulates in the heart [*hꜥty*].'

Another example is Papyrus Ebers 277, where a medicinal intervention is said:

(Eb. 277) 'To expel a poison from the heart [*hꜥty*], expel fleeting forgetfulness and injury of the mind [*ib*]' (Translations: BRYAN & SMITH, 1930).

In his comment Nyord states that it is clear ‘why this description seems so initially appealing: it corresponds exactly to a modern dualistic folk model of the relationship between brain and mind’ (NYORD, 2009: 65). Egyptian personhood appears to be split into many aspects, of which some are referred to during life, most are important around and after death: the ba, ka, shadow, name, body, image, heart etc. Nyord’s careful analysis shows that there is no consistency, even in the same period and genre of texts.

If we subscribe to the notion that body and mind are one, are we not making the same mistake by now forcing another Western ontology onto ancient societies? Lakoff and Johnson ask themselves what difference it makes if we accept that there is no disembodied mind, no split between body and a free-moving soul and that the division in subject and self is metaphorical. For anthropologists this is a real conundrum:

Requiring the mind and Soul to be embodied is no small matter. It contradicts those parts of religious traditions around the world based on reincarnation and the transmigration of souls, as well as those in which it is believed that the Soul can leave the body in sleep or in trance. It is not consistent with those traditions that teach that one can achieve, and should aspire to achieve, a state of pure consciousness separate from the body (LAKOFF & JOHNSON, 1999).

The problem mostly arises due to the epistemological conviction that truth exists, is unique and absolute. The inconsistent references to all aspects of ancient Egyptian personhood are not subject to ancient ‘theological’ treatises, but mostly problematized by Egyptologists, based partly on Hellenistic philosophical traditions and early Christian theologians who tried to precisely define how the two elements of a person, body and soul, and their relationship, should be thought of.

Archaeology allows us to foreground the body as a complete entity that is in the world. Through archaeology we can approach ancient ontology in a theoretically and methodologically consistent way, without superimposing our own worldview. Considering material culture, art, architecture, writing, landscape modification, etc. as the result of actions, interactions and relationships we can employ a *chaîne opératoire* to understand material remains as the result of what mindbodies do. It is a suitable method that allows breaking down actions into movements in which all senses are involved, resulting in a fuller understanding of what being-in-the-world in ancient Egypt might have entailed. The main vector of body knowledge is sensory. We cannot easily verbally explain, read or write touch, nor can we readily record touch, smell or taste. An essential aspect of conveying knowledge is to pass on what something should feel like. The experienced farmer, maker, dancer, cook, scribe, might say ‘here, let me show you’, while what (s)he really means is: ‘Let me make you feel’, or: ‘Let me try to make you experience what it should feel/smell/taste like’.

### 3 Conclusion

Body knowledge is an aspect of embodied cognition, focused not just on how we learn, but also how we maintain knowledge through ingrained movement memory. In Western society, bodily achievements are generally considered less important than those of the mind, with some striking exceptions, such as the accomplishments of famous concert pianists, dancers or artists. Their ‘art’ is, however, not considered in the first place a physical achievement, but a soulful or spiritual one. A pianist who plays all the notes speedily, but without feeling, is compared to an automaton, or a robot. Yet expressing feeling can only be done by the body, so playing mechanically, or playing soulfully does not represent a contrast of mind and body, but a differentiation of skill.










Considerations of the body as the lesser part of the self has led to inequalities on many levels, social, economical, ecological. The inequality in social standing and payment of blue versus white collar workers, or the underpayment of those who provide care, mostly women, are examples of this. Perhaps even more fundamental is the different value that is given to animals, as soulless bodies, and nature, as in the service of humankind. My emphasis on the value of body knowledge is in a way a reaction to an epistemology that

is based on a dualism of mind and body and in particular the difference in appreciation for the body as the unique source of our intelligence in the broadest sense of the word, including ideas, social and emotional intelligence, and the capability to move and be moved.

Epistemology allows us to be explicit about what we consider valid ways of knowing and the acceptable expressions of this knowledge. In our world, speaking, writing, and reading are the aural and visual exponents of knowledge transfer. Audio and video are the electronic equivalents that enable hearing and seeing across distance in space and time. They are replacing oral traditions and are grudgingly allowed entry as a way to convey knowledge, rather than mere amusement. Although we claim that a picture says more than a thousand words, images are usually considered more suitable for children, who cannot yet read, or for analphabetic populations. Similarly, virtual reality, which involves completely merging the visual and the aural, is considered amusement, or at best a great way to illustrate things, such as reconstructions of the past, to children or the general audience. Theories of embodied cognition should help us to understand that, on the contrary, virtual reality is a tool to enable an embodied representation that evokes new questions and has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of the world, an understanding that texts will never be able to achieve. Yet even these representations, that are considered ‘experiential’ are still lacking smell, taste and touch. To represent the cloud of relations of objects that have come to us from the past, requires analysis, but also imagination and a theoretically founded understanding that the mindbody is a sensory creature. A *chaîne opératoire* approach focused on movement and interaction, rather than production sequences, is a suitable method to define smaller analytical units that include relationships and a broad range of sensory experiences.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**(Re)assembling a boat****Exploring different body worlds of funerary models**EMILY WHITEHEAD<sup>1,\*</sup><sup>1</sup>Emory UniversityPublished: 19<sup>th</sup> December 2025**Abstract**

'Yet in that dry, still, dark little chamber those boats and statues had stood indifferent to all that went on in the outer world' (WINLOCK, 1955: 7–8). This quote is part of an introductory narrative capturing the 1920 find of the chief royal steward Meketre's tomb models, where Winlock describes the 'spirits of these little servants' working 'eternally' for Meketre, demonstrating an interpretation of these models as being enlivened to serve their deceased owner, and these models having a lack of relations with the outside world (WINLOCK, 1955: 5–6). Both aspects—being enlivened to serve their owner and a lack of relations to the outside world—remain common to Egyptological thought. By tracking the changes of relations with and within a single object of a similar type and date to Meketre's models, *Model Solar Boat* (Michael C. Carlos Museum 2018.010.415), the potential of relational approaches to tomb models, in particular, body worlds (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013) and assemblage theory (HARRIS, 2021) to generate new questions and a more nuanced understanding of an object with a complex biography is exemplified. *Model Solar Boat* is made from at least three ancient tomb models, held together with modern pins and plaster. This case study focuses on two snapshots of time: the Middle Kingdom, when the ancient models were placed in burials, and the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> when those models were modified into the object before us today. The different aims of the model are viewed in relation to the deceased's body, the ancient living community, and the encounters with 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century bodies of knowledge.

**Keywords:** tomb models, solar boat model, body worlds, assemblage theory

إعادة تجميع مركب: استكشاف عوالم الجسد المختلفة في النماذج الجنائزية

الملخص

ومع ذلك، في تلك الغرفة الجافة والمظلمة إلى حد ما، ظلت تلك القوارب والتماثيل واقفة غير مبالية بكل ما يحدث في العالم الخارجي (WINLOCK, 1955: 7–8). هذا الاقتباس هو جزء من وصف تمهيدي يعرض اكتشاف مجموعة من النماذج الجنائزية في مقبرة كبير الخدم الملكي مكت-رع في عام 1920، حيث يصف وينلوك هذه النماذج ويُفسّر "أرواح هؤلاء الخدم الصغار" بأنها وجدت لتعمل "بشكل أبدي" من أجل مكت-رع، إذ يساهم هذا الوصف في تقديم تفسير لدور هذه النماذج الجنائزية باعتبارها نابضة بالحياة لخدمة صاحبها المتوفى، مع توضيح افتقارها لأي روابط تربطها بالعالم الخارجي (WINLOCK, 1955: 5–6). نجد أن كلا الوصفين، سواء أن هذه النماذج نابضة بالحياة لخدمة صاحبها أو أنها تفتقر لأي صلوات بالعالم الخارجي، لا يزالان سمتين شائعتين لهذه النماذج في دراسات علم المصريات. يتبع هذا البحث التغيرات التي طرأت على الصلوات المرتبطة بقطعة واحدة من نوع وتاريخ مشابه لنماذج مكت-رع، وهي نموذج المركب الشمسي (متحف مايكل سي. كارلوس 2018.010.415). حيث يتيح هذا التتبع إمكانية دراسة النماذج الجنائزية من خلال نهج ترايطي، مع التركيز على عوالم الجسد (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013) ونظرية التجميع الفلسفية (HARRIS, 2021). يفتح هذا النهج آفاقاً جديدة لطرح أسئلة مبتكرة ويساهم في فهم القطع ذات التاريخ المعقد بدقة أكبر. تم صنع نموذج المركب الشمسي من ثلاث نماذج مقابر قديمة

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على الأقل، جُمعت معاً باستخدام دبابيس وجص حديث. تركّز هذه الدراسة على لحظتين محددتين من التاريخ: الأولى تعود إلى عصر الدولة الوسطى، عندما وُضعت هذه النماذج القديمة في الدفنات، والثانية إلى أواخر القرن التاسع عشر وأوائل القرن العشرين، حين أُجريت تعديلات على تلك النماذج لتصبح بالشكل الذي نراه اليوم. تستعرض هذه الورقة البحثية الأهداف المختلفة لصناعة هذا النموذج، وتبحث في الصلات التي قد تربطه بجسد المتوفى، والمجتمع الحي في العصور القديمة، إلى جانب علاقته بمنظومات المعرفة التي تطورت في القرنين التاسع عشر والعشرين.

الكلمات الدالة: النماذج الجنائزية، نموذج المركب الشمسي، عوالم الجسد، نظرية التجمي

## 1 Introduction

*Model Solar Boat* (Figure 1) arrived in the Michael C. Carlos Museum in 2018 as a gift of the George Ricard Foundation, among over 1,500 objects of predominantly Egyptian origin. As an ancient object, *Model Solar Boat* falls into the category of grave goods known as tomb models. Tomb models, as a term, is generally used in Egyptology for three-dimensional painted scenes of agriculture, food and craft production, transport, and the bearing of offerings, but can also refer to miniature tools, weapons, food, and vessels that were placed in tombs and burial shafts across Egypt from the late Old Kingdom to the late Middle Kingdom (TOOLEY, 1989).<sup>1</sup> During the reign of Pepi II (c. 2246–2152 BCE), limestone statues of figures undertaking solo activities such as grain milling and attending a bread oven were superseded by predominantly wooden images of groups of figures undertaking similar activities (TOOLEY, 2001). These figured scenes continued to be deposited in burials and tomb shafts until the end of the reign of King Senwosret III (c.1840 BCE) (BOURRIAU, 1991: 11; TOOLEY, 1989: 63–68). The traditional interpretation of these tomb models was that they were enlivened in the afterlife to work on behalf of the deceased with whom they were entombed (eg. TOOLEY, 2001; FREED & DOXEY, 2009: 151).



Fig. 1: *Model Solar Boat*. Gift of the Georges Ricard Foundation. Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta, GA, 2018.010.415 © Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University.

<sup>1</sup>For recent discussions of the definition of tomb models and the distinction between miniatures and models, see DI BIASE-DYSON (2023), ESCHENBRENNER-DIEMER (2021), and NYORD (forthcoming-b).

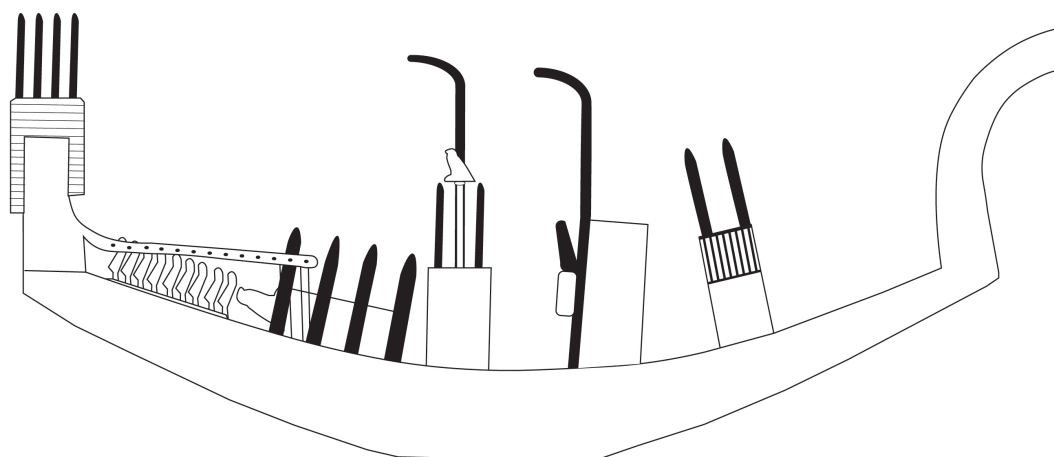


Fig. 2: A model solar boat, based on Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 4949. Line drawing by author.

Perhaps the most numerous of these models, and certainly the most studied, were boats, including sailing and rowing boats, funerary boats carrying a coffin or the mummiform deceased, kitchen, and fishing and fowling boats, among others (FREED & DOXEY, 2009: 166; MERRIMAN, 2011; REISNER, 1913; TOOLEY, 2001). On close inspection, *Model Solar Boat* is not identifiable with any single subcategory of ancient Egyptian tomb models. Through its title at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, *Model Solar Boat*,<sup>2</sup> it has been identified as a solar boat model. Solar boat models are identified by their unique furniture and bow and stern finials (Figure 2). Some of this unique furniture is found on *Model Solar Boat*, namely the striped bow finial, the falcon, and the box with four posts, which identify it, at least in part, as a solar boat model. However, solar boat models lack a crew, unlike the deck crowded with human figures that we see on *Model Solar Boat* (REISNER, 1913: 101–103). Thus, the figures and the furniture did not belong on the same ancient hull.

A series of technical examinations in 2020 and 2021 confirmed that the human figures and mast had been added using modern construction techniques to an ancient solar boat hull and that the striped rectangular box on the stern had been moved from its original position towards the centre of the deck (for further discussion, see WHITEHEAD, 2023b; WHITEHEAD, 2023a; WRIGHT & WHITEHEAD, forthcoming). A Computer Tomography (CT) scan showed dowel holes in the hull that had been filled with plaster and square profile drill holes for the mast and figures' legs (Figure 3). The latter is not in keeping with what we consider to be ancient Egyptian construction techniques. The dowel holes matched the expected locations of solar boat furniture (Figure 4). Therefore, *Model Solar Boat* was a solar boat model hull with some of the expected furniture, twelve figures and a mast attached in more modern times. The twelve human figures—ten standing and two crouching—and a mast were identifiable as having a place on a sailing model or funerary barque, based on comparisons to contemporaneous models from recorded archaeological contexts.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

Despite its strong connections to anthropology, Egyptological discourse is noted for privileging cultural historical approaches rather than engaging in broader theoretical discussions in anthropology and archaeology (HOWLEY & NYORD, 2018: vi). While there has been a recent trend to engage with frameworks from other

<sup>2</sup>It was known as 'Funeral Boat' and 'Model of a Funeral Boat' prior to its arrival in the Michael C. Carlos Museum's collection in 2018.

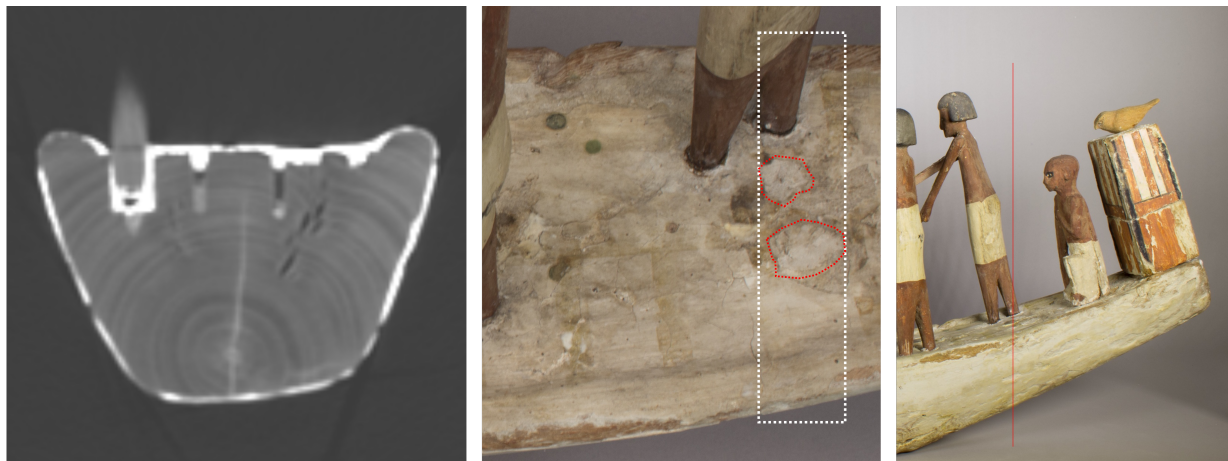


Fig. 3: Computer Tomography (CT) scan slice of *Model Solar Boat* (left) showing the thin covered-over dowel holes where the rectangular striped box was previously placed, the fill material on the deck covering the two holes (centre) and the location of the scan slice (right) © Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University.

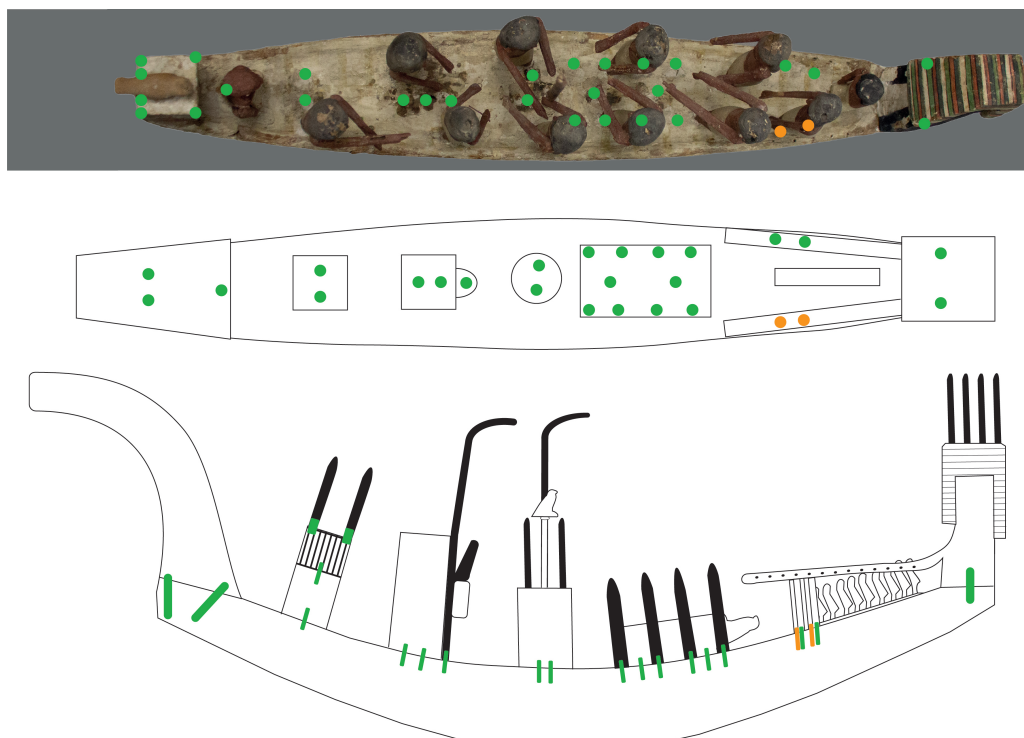


Fig. 4: Annotated birds eye view of *Model Solar Boat* with a map of the covered-over dowel holes (green) and two holes made for legs over where ancient dowel holes would have been (orange) identified from the CT scan. Line drawings by author; Photograph: © Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University.

disciplines and to take interdisciplinary approaches to answer Egyptological questions, this has often been a one-way street rather than an interdisciplinary dialogue. *Model Solar Boat* provides a case study to exemplify the usefulness of relational thinking, particularly the concept of body worlds, when examining an ancient Egyptian funerary object with a varied and extensive biography.

Body worlds, as defined by Robb and Harris, encompass ‘the totality of bodily experiences, practices and representations in a specific place and time’ and are ‘at the heart of how we understand the world’ (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 3). They argue that the body ‘is not a universally shared physical object whose historical continuity comes from its unchanging biological structure, but rather something emergent through history’ (ROBB & HARRIS, 2013: 4). This framework allows for an exploration of the complexity of the multiple ways of being human. It also allows for analysing ‘contact between different groups and change through time in new ways’ by avoiding presenting ontologies as singular and bounded (HARRIS & ROBB, 2012: 669). ROBB and HARRIS (2013: 26ff) show that body worlds allow for analysis at multiple scales and not just as a description but also by providing a framework to address time and causation. However, this framework is fundamentally anthropocentric, centring human bodies within its analysis, with non-human objects as part of these body worlds. In this case study, which centres on an object, *Model Solar Boat*, there is a need for the concept of a body world to expand to consider non-human bodies as being at the centre of an analysis. In doing so, this paper expands on the framework of body worlds using the terminology presented in the more recent discussion of Deleuzian assemblage theory by HARRIS (2018) and HARRIS (2021) and considers the interrelatedness of the terms of assemblage and body. Like a body within a body world, an assemblage turns our attention away from the final product—the body or assemblage as a final, unchanging product—to the process of becoming (HARRIS, 2018: 89). An assemblage ‘can be as simple as a molecule of water, composed of oxygen and hydrogen atoms, or as complex as a whole planet with the teeming forms of life that make it up’ (HARRIS, 2018: 89). They have two axes—machinic/enunciative and territorialisation/deterritorialisation—and assemblages are always both machinic, made of material elements, enunciative, made of immaterial elements, and constantly in the process of coming together and breaking apart (HARRIS, 2021: 62). Alongside the process of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, assemblages are also coded and decoded—as HARRIS (2021: 63) defines it, ‘if territorialisation refers to the gathering of different things together...then coding is their organisation,’ the order in which the elements are brought together. Deleuzian assemblage theory goes further than body worlds, as it no longer assumes that humans are the only or central players in the past HARRIS (2018) and HARRIS (2021). Both frameworks are fundamentally relational, and the latter recognises the agency of non-human beings, materials, and matter in these relationships, providing an effective post-anthropocentric vocabulary.

A relational, more-than-representational approach has only recently been suggested for tomb models (see NYORD, forthcoming-b), with tomb models as non-relational entities being central to the traditional interpretation of these objects for the last century. Therefore, taking this approach allows for different questions to be asked of *Model Solar Boat* and tomb models more widely. Pastiche tomb models, that is tomb models that have had elements added, taken away, or modified, after their disinterment, while common to museum and private collections alike, are often ignored or excluded from Egyptological scholarship or focused on solely for what they might be able to tell us about the ‘original’ ancient model. Taking *Model Solar Boat* as a case study to exemplify the usefulness of these frameworks and ways of thinking through this object allows for the examination of *Model Solar Boat* at several scales and at two snapshots in time in its process of becoming through time. This provides an opportunity to take seriously the understanding, function, and purpose of *Model Solar Boat* in its ancient context—at the time of its creation and deposition—and when it was (re)assembled into *Model Solar Boat*, which likely took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than focusing on it as a static final product (HARRIS, 2018: 89; HARRIS, 2021: 65).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>While the (re)assembly of *Model Solar Boat* may have been a process itself, the findings from the technical studies of *Model Solar Boat*, particularly the CT scan showing near identical drill holes for each of the figures legs and the same fill material being used to cover over the ancient dowel holes and to secure the legs into these new drill holes, suggest the (re)assembly of *Model Solar Boat*

### 3 Discussion

#### 3.1 *Model Solar Boat* in the ancient context

The present-day *Model Solar Boat* consists of elements of what was in the ancient context at least three distinct objects, which were, most likely, a solar boat model and two or more sailing or funerary boat models. Each will be examined as assemblages within body worlds at different scales. Multiscalarity, afforded by viewing *Model Solar Boat* as an assemblage, ‘allows us to consider how different assemblages relate to one another, becoming part of larger assemblages, or breaking down into separate elements’ (HARRIS, 2021: 63). By seeing the ancient boats that now make the *Model Solar Boat* as assemblages at these various scales, we can explore the relationships that they have, are building, or maintaining within the tomb or burial chamber immediately following their deposition. Through this exploration, we can also posit alternative interpretations and shed light on the construction of the traditional Egyptological discourses for their purpose and function.

##### 3.1.1 The ancient solar boat model

In the lead-up to the end of the reign of King Senwosret III, there were several changes in funerary practice, including a cessation of the production of wooden tomb models (BOURRIAU, 1991: 11). In this process, there was a move to burials with either a highly variable selection of objects, most of which were used in life, or the so-called court type burials (MINIACI & QUIRKE, 2009: 358). Court type burials typically consisted of anthropoid coffins encased in two rectangular coffins, one gilded, alongside burial goods, including royal insignia (GRAJETZKI, 2003: 54). The royal insignia, including staffs and weapons, are frequently referred to as Osirification regalia as they are found in later depictions of the hourly vigil (*Stundenwachen*) for Osiris (e.g. King Sheshonq III as Osiris on a funerary bed; GRAJETZKI, 2003: 51). Several staffs were broken at the time of deposition, so it has been concluded that they were likely used as part of the rituals before burial (GRAJETZKI, 2014: 10). Together, these objects transformed the burial into a funerary ritual chamber in a state of the perpetual hourly ritual that was performed using them during the funeral. Surrounding the deceased with these objects endowed them with an Osirian aspect (NYORD, 2014: 41; SMITH, 2017; SMITH, 2008). Right at the point of transition in burial goods, during the reigns of Kings Senwosret II and III, several objects, later found in the court type burials, were first found with burials containing earlier Middle Kingdom-style rectangular coffins and tomb models. Solar boat models appeared at the same time. However, unlike the Osirification regalia first appearing at this time, solar boat models, as three-dimensional objects, did not continue into the court type burials. They also did not appear in depictions of the ritual implements for the hourly vigil on the night before the burial nor in earlier Middle Kingdom coffin object friezes of this regalia.

A solar boat model was a rare form of tomb model, with four solar boat models with archaeological records. Two solar boat models from Dayr al-Barshā, that are now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, were found during Georges Daressy’s excavations in 1897 of burial shafts of Sepi II (CG 4953) and Sepi III (CG 4949) (DARESSY, 1900: 31–38; DE MEYER, 2016: 92–94).<sup>4</sup> These two vessels have been dated to the reigns of Senwosret II–III (DE MEYER, 2016: 92–94). The other two were excavated from the area of the tomb of Imhotep at Lisht and are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (14.3.21 and 14.3.22) (DE MEYER, 2016: 92–94; HAYES, 1953: 272; LYTHGOE, 1915: 147–148). Solar boat models (Reisner’s Type VI) share a particular set of boat furniture, as can be seen in the exemplar from the burial of Sepi III at Dayr al-Barshā (Figure 2; REISNER, 1913: xxv–xxvii). Based on the solar boats found at Dayr al-Barshā, along with

took place at one time (see WRIGHT and WHITEHEAD, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup>There was a third boat described by DARESSY (1900: 26–28) as like a solar boat in the chamber of Sepi I and its current location is unknown: ‘une troisième barque ressemblant à celle du soleil été brisée lorsque le puits ayant été comblé après son ouverture par les voleurs’.

disassociated furniture found in the surrounding burials,<sup>5</sup> Reisner described solar boat models as having ‘two distinct forms,—one with recurved uprising ends, and one with curtained bow,’ and the hull largely resembles that of ‘the funeral bark except in the form of the bow and stern-pieces’ (REISNER, 1913: xxv). A bow finial has either a striped top or has a striped cover and two chair armrest-like railings extending out. The bow occasionally has a beaded patterned wood panel or holes in the railings that may indicate such an object’s presence. The boat furniture from the bow to stern includes a board with several *ma’at*-feathers, which is found between the bow railings, a cuboid ‘object lying on the side with four finger-like black posts on each side’ with two falcons on the end facing upward, a cylindrical object with several black sticks, including one that is longer and curved like a *šms*-sign and a falcon or several falcons on top of a stick, a rectangular block with a *šms*-sign on the front facing towards to the bow, a cuboid object with four black posts on each corner, and, lastly, the stern is upturned and painted white and black (BARKER, 2022: 90; REISNER, 1913: xxv–xxvii; MERRIMAN, 2011: 102–103). In addition to the four solar boats with archaeological records, there has been some furniture found including two rectangular boxes found in recent excavations at Dayr al-Barshā (DE MEYER, 2016: 92–93), and two small falcons were found at Naga ed-Deir and Tebtunis (Hearst Museum PAHMA 6-20848) (KROENKE, 2010: 152). The falcons may have come from a vessel like Louvre Museum, Paris, E 17111, where two kites sit atop a canopy, albeit on a pastiche funerary boat—rather than a solar boat model (ESCHENBRENNER-DIEMER, 2014: 217). Like *Model Solar Boat*, there are several parts of solar boats that are now found on Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, San José, RC 485, and Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 4860. There are also several vessels that have been erroneously identified as having solar boat model hulls. For example, Towneley Hall Art Gallery and Museum, Burnley, Eg 5, has been suggested to be a pastiche solar boat model (MERRIMAN, 2011: 196). However, it does not have the corresponding holes in the exposed wood of the deck for solar boat furniture. Similarly, Manchester Museum, MM 5883, was suggested by both ENGELBACH et al. (1915: 8) and MERRIMAN (2011: 102–103) to be a solar boat. The el-Riqqa excavation report detailed that the boat appeared ‘to have had a crew of hawk- and animal-headed gods’ (ENGELBACH et al., 1915: 8). It is clear from viewing the extant hull that it was probably a funerary boat as the holes for furniture are in keeping with a canopy and steering oar posts. The latter likely had falcon-headed terminals that were mistaken for hawk-headed gods and solar boat falcons.

Given the rarity of solar boat models, turning to other mediums with the same image is essential for further contextualisation of solar boat models. The closest contemporary two-dimensional depiction of solar boats is that of the Pyramidion of the Dynasty 13 king, Khendjer (Figure 5). The Pyramidion was found during the 1929–1931 excavations led by Gustave Jéquier of the small north chapel of the Pyramid complex of Khendjer at Saqqara (JÉQUIER, 1933: 19). As a royal funerary object, the Pyramidion provides a strong indicator of a royal context for the solar boat models. This connection to royal images and, therefore, the later royal insignia, Osirification regalia, might suggest that solar boat models had a function in developing and maintaining similar relationships to the Osirification regalia. However, the royal insignia did not just create a relationship with Osiris and his transformation. They also established relationships with other deities that wear or are associated with royal insignia, such as Re. Relationships with deities other than Osiris through royal regalia has similarly been argued for the beaded apron found in court-type burials, such as the burial of Senebtisi (Figure 6). This beaded apron, part of the Lower Egyptian costume of the king, was found depicted in the relief of King Senwosret I from his barque shrine at Karnak and was, by definition, royal regalia (PATCH, 1995: 95). Patch notes that the same beaded pattern was depicted draped over the railings of the solar boat. As shown in the Pyramidion of Khendjer, there was also a tendency of one of the two solar boats having a swallow depicted on the top of the bow (PATCH, 1995: 114). Within the solar boat model as an assemblage, the beading and the swallow are both machinic, in their media, and enunciative, with their meanings and associations. The machinic and enunciative elements of the beading and the swallow ‘work through both

<sup>5</sup>This furniture includes Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 4954 and CG 4957 (bow covers), CG 4958 (rectangular striped box), CG 4959 (*šms*-sign), CG 4961 (cylindrical object), CG 4962 (rectangular box with two falcons), CG 4963 (falcon), CG 4964 (squatting child figure), CG 4965 (board with *ma’at* feathers), CG 4966 (railings).



Fig. 5: Reconstruction of the Pyramidion of King Khendjer. Line drawing by author, after **JÉQUIER**, 1933: 21.

territorialisation and coding’ (**HARRIS**, 2021: 62). In the territorialisation of the swallow and the beading in close proximity, they were coded to have an association with the Lower Egyptian costume. The Lower Egyptian costume, as Patch argues, symbolises Re’s daily rebirth. Therefore, through this association, the solar boat models likewise created relationships between the deceased and Re and the solar cycle, in a similar way to the other royal regalia situating the deceased in the place of Osiris.

The Pyramidion of King Khendjer shows two solar boats—the day and the night barque—bow to bow. Through this image, the two boats in this position are representing and maintaining relationships with the solar cycle in its entirety (**THOMAS**, 1956: 79). The image is further reinforced by the depiction of two forms of the sun god, Re-Harakhty and Atum, standing above the solar boats facing each other. While there is limited archaeological evidence to conclude that solar boat models were deposited in pairs, the two solar boat models found together at Lisht (**HAYES**, 1953: 271–272; **LYTHGOE**, 1915: 147–148) the frequent occurrence in texts of the day and night barques together (e.g. CT I 184g [CT 44], CT III 75h [CT 181]), and their presence bow to bow in images such as the Pyramidion of King Khendjer (**THOMAS**, 1956) make a foundation for a strong argument that they were intended as paired objects. The concept of ancient solar boat models occurring in pairs suggests that they had the potential to encapsulate the perpetual cyclical relationship with the sun in its entirety. They, therefore, had the capacity to establish and maintain the relationships with all aspects of the sun god, the cycle of solar rebirth, and the king’s role in this journey.

In locating the deceased’s body as part of an assemblage with a solar boat model, or a pair of solar boat models, the deceased is placed in the position of the king as he is depicted in the Pyramidion of King Khendjer. With the strong royal connections both through the connection to the Lower Egyptian costume, and their



Fig. 6: Beadwork apron of Senebtisi. Tomb of Senwosret (758), Pit 763, burial of Senebtisi, MMA excavations, 1906–07. Rogers Fund, 1908. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 08.200.29a.

presence on the Pyramidion of King Khendjer, solar boat models in the context of that larger burial assemblage create a situation, a body world, where the deceased is in the place of the king, specifically in his role as solar priest. The king, who is made present on the Pyramidion of King Khendjer as a *serekh* crowned with a Horus falcon passed between Re-Harakhty and Atum, is allowed to, as the accompanying text (CT 788) reads, ‘see the Lord of the Horizon as he crosses the sky’, which implies observing the sun from a more subordinate position. This imagery essentially places the king in the position of the sun being transferred between two solar boats—the day and the night barque. Through this image and CT 788, therefore, we have the king represented not only as the sun crossing the sky, but also observing it, ensuring its ongoing cycle. Drawing from Assmann’s concept of *unio liturgica*, with the language, knowledge, action, and ritual performance of the solar cult, the deceased was able to enter and join the liturgy and draw from the transformative power from the cult of the sun god (ASSMANN, 2005: 396–402). The deceased King Khendjer in the Pyramidion text and images is acting in the role of priest of the solar cult, ensuring the ongoing worship and maintenance of the solar cycle, and effectively merges with the sun god through his worship and cultic role. BORGHOUTS (1984), in discussing the Pyramidion of King Khendjer together with a Middle Kingdom text found on a stone box (Louvre Museum, Paris, E 25485), further demonstrated the ambiguity between worshipping and being the sun, and the roles that the deceased king is acting in. The end of the text on the stone box has several lines presumed to be spoken by Isis, in which she says that she has transferred the eyes from the morning barque to the night barque (BORGHOUTS, 1984: 714). BORGHOUTS (1984) pointed to the two *wedjat* eyes sitting in line with the two bows of the solar boats and below the *serekh* depicted on the Pyramidion of Khendjer as indicating this transfer. In this one image, we have the transfer of the king represented in the form of the *serekh*, the transfer of the eyes and the observation of the solar cycle at once. By conceptualising the solar boat as part of an assemblage with the deceased, the solar boat models in non-royal burials cast the deceased in the role of king in these ambiguous roles discussed by BORGHOUTS (1984), which include that of the king as a solar priest. Within this assemblage with a solar boat model, the deceased was placed at the centre of a body world which includes the network of relationships with the adorants speaking and enacting the solar

cult in the land of the living, and the ‘netherworldly congregations of adorants’ (ASSMANN, 2005: 395).

Using the framework offered by HARRIS (2021) that characterises assemblages as multiscalar and stepping back to see a pair of solar boat models as small assemblages within a burial assemblage and then zooming out further to see these burial assemblages within a series of contemporaneous ones across the country, the relationship to the king can be seen in a different light to that found in the existing Egyptological discourse. We can observe model solar boats as an innovation in grave goods, only appearing briefly from the reigns of King Senwosret II to King Senwosret III. Drawing on the limited archaeological evidence of solar boat models, in the first instance, they look to have been adopted at the royal necropolis, where non-royals used royal insignia, including the solar boat, to establish a relationship in which the deceased took the ritual roles of the king, as evidenced by two vessels found at the necropolis at Lisht (HAYES, 1953: 271–272; LYTHGOE, 1915: 147–148). This practice was adopted in the provinces, and the deceased individuals outside the royal necropolis take on these relationships with the king, as has been discussed in relation to the adoption of other royal roles and iconography, for example, in the adoption of the royal object ritual (WILLEMS, 2014: 138–140). By exploring the ancient solar boat model through these lenses, we move away from the previous representational interpretations of them as ritual objects that simply symbolised the deceased’s wish to join with the sun god, Re, on his celestial journey and instead see the range of relationships that are made manifest with the solar boat in this specific spatial and temporal context.

### 3.1.2 The ancient figured boats

The ten standing, two crouching human figures, and mast that are now a part of *Model Solar Boat* came from at least two other tomb models. Through comparison to a range of tomb models, they were identified as most likely coming from, in the case of the standing figures and mast, a sailing vessel, and the crouching figures, a sailing or funerary boat of some kind with an image of the deceased. There are too many figures to be from one boat alone. While there are vessels with a great number of figures (e.g. Figure 8 and Figure 9), figures of the size and style on *Model Solar Boat*, are generally only found on vessels with 3–6 standing figures. For example, the sailing vessel from the burial of Khety, Beni Hassan, that has figures of a similar size and craftsmanship to *Model Solar Boat* has only four standing figures—three working the rigging and one standing at the bow as look out (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, E.71a.1903). Therefore, the figures likely came from at least two vessels, which are assumed for this discussion to be one sailing boat and one funerary boat with propulsion in the form of a sail (e.g. Figure 7).

There is an extensive tradition of turning to contemporaneous tomb wall scenes to contextualise the purpose of Middle Kingdom tomb models with human figures. In the case of boats, tomb wall scenes generally depict sailing or rowing vessels on a journey to an important cult site, usually Abydos or Busiris. Sailing boat models, such as those that the standing figures were from, were found in pairs with rowing vessels, indicating a return journey on the Nile, which is most easily traversed under sail southwards and by rowing northwards (e.g. Figure 8 and Figure 9) (FREED & DOXEY, 2009: 173; TOOLEY, 2001) The boat models, therefore, have been interpreted to be three-dimensional representations of the same scenes of pilgrimage. Funerary boats are rarely depicted during the Middle Kingdom in two-dimensional wall scenes. When they occur in wall scenes or tomb models, they can include both male and female mourners, priests, and female mourners in the position of Isis and Nephthys, on a vessel transporting the deceased in their coffin on the day of burial (e.g. Figure 7) (BARKER, 2022: 85).

By viewing the sailing and funerary boat as multiscalar assemblages within body worlds, the range of relationships and connections it builds can be explored in depth. In starting within the figured models as assemblages, one can explore the relationships that the figures build within the burial assemblage and the body worlds of the living community. The predominant notion of these figured models is that the ‘anthropomorphic figures do not represent individual personalities, but depict prototypical human beings performing selected activities’ (ZÖLLER-ENGELHARDT, 2023: 622). ZÖLLER-ENGELHARDT (2023) contrasted the largely



Fig. 7: *Model Sailing Boat Transporting a Mummy*. Tomb B (Djehuty), Lisht South, MMA excavations, 1930–31. Rogers Fund, 1932. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 32.1.124a.



Fig. 8: *Model Paddling Boat*. Tomb of Meketre (TT 280, MMA 1101), Southern Asasif, Thebes MMA excavations, 1920. Rogers Fund and Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1920. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 20.3.5.



Fig. 9: *Model Sailboat*. Tomb of Meketre (TT 280, MMA 1101), Southern Asasif, Thebes MMA excavations, 1920. Rogers Fund and Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1920. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 20.3.4.

uninscribed human figures on figured tomb models to Roth's discussion of the limestone 'serving statues' that frequently bore names of members of the deceased's household, as evidence for these figures not representing individual personalities (ROTH, 2002). However, NYORD (forthcoming-b) demonstrated that figured models have the capacity to represent specific duties in the deceased's funeral, and later mortuary cult, and can materially anchor relationships with individuals undertaking these activities occurring in the mortuary domain on behalf of the deceased. In the case of the sailing boat, the figures in their roles on the boat models had the potential to form relationships with living individuals that took part in the pilgrimage to Abydos or Busiris on behalf of the deceased in their mortuary cult. This, in turn, created a relationship between the deceased, his living descendants, and the god Osiris. By providing the connection between the activity in the world outside of the burial assemblage, going to and from the cult place of Osiris, the sailing vessel through its proximity to the deceased provided that connection to the deceased's body, to ongoing cultic activity on their behalf. This connection further aids in the deceased's transformation into an Osiris-like divine ancestor. In the wider burial assemblage, the sailing vessel's relationship to another rowing vessel within the burial chamber allows for the encapsulation of the whole journey, its cyclical repetition, and the connection to the experience of the living.

When viewing the figured sailing vessel and figured funerary vessel as assemblages at the time of their creation and deposition in a tomb, several relationships between the anthropoid figures within the models can be identified and explored. BARKER (2022), in her comparison of the tomb models and contemporaneous two-dimensional scenes, noted that the tomb owner rarely appears depicted in tomb models, with sailing and rowing vessels being the only theme where the deceased appears in the corpus from Meir, Dayr al-Barshā, and Beni Hassan (BARKER, 2022: 84). She commented that 'the physical presence of [the tomb owner's] body in the burial chamber presumably did not necessitate the representation of his figure in models. Rather, the repertoire concentrated on the activities of servants who would provision him in the afterlife. It is therefore quite surprising to find him at all represented on model boats' (BARKER, 2022: 84). In the case of the figures from *Model Solar Boat*, the two crouching figures, with one arm across their bodies, indicate that at least one of the two vessels had an image of the deceased on board (Figure 10). This gesture has been interpreted as a gesture of adoration in two-dimensional representations (DOMINICUS, 1994: 5–6). The gesture, the way that their bodies are put together, is enunciative, an immaterial element of the assemblage, as it is associated with



Fig. 10: Details of two crouching figures at the stern (left) and bow (right) of *Model Solar Boat* © Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University.

adoration and respect. At the same time, the gesture codes, organises, the assemblage. Like Harris' example of making a cup of tea as an assemblage, where the ordering of the milk, water and tea bag is coded with strong social links (HARRIS, 2021: 61), the gesture indicates that these figures being placed near the image of the deceased or facing the deceased. The gesture codes their placement in association with other images and beings on the boat, or their placement in association with other images and beings codes the organisation of the figure's body into this gesture. These two figures are significant to aid in reconstructing the elements of the ancient, figured models, as well as demonstrating the relationships within the human figures on the figured boats.

By approaching the vessels as assemblages, we do not have to assume that the deceased's image's inclusion was 'a subsidiary measure to ensure that the boat successfully served [the tomb owner] for eternity' (BARKER, 2022: 85). When comparing two-dimensional scenes of pilgrimage by boat, to those depicting agriculture, for example, the deceased's involvement is markedly different. In scenes of agriculture, the deceased is generally standing or seated, overlooking the activities, not taking an active role. In the case of boats on pilgrimages, such as the journey to Abydos depicted in TT60, the two decedents, Senet and Intefiqer, are shown onboard a ship that is being towed to Abydos—seemingly taking an active part in the journey (Figure 11). Looking closely at this scene from an iconographic perspective, the presence of the block beneath their feet and their bodies being entirely in profile suggests that the decedents are depicted here as statues, not living human bodies (EATON-KRAUSS, 1984: 13–20). This is similarly reflected in the figure of Meketre on the model sailboat (Figure 12), where he is shown as lifeless, static, and blocklike in comparison to those figures around him (YAMAMOTO, 2015: 255). Therefore, these models and scenes are not to be interpreted as a scene from Meketre's nor Senet and Intefiqer's lives but rather an activity that is taking place on their behalf in the mortuary cult where an image of them is being transported to the cult place of Osiris at Abydos or Busiris, either in actuality or symbolically. In the tomb of Neferhotep (TT50), descriptions of boat processions as part of the Wag Festival are understood to be 'a ritual enactment involving model boats' (NYORD, forthcoming-b: 15). While this is a source from the New Kingdom, NYORD (forthcoming-b: 15) argues that this evidence is suggestive of the 'possibility that models had a role to play in ritual prior to deposition.' In both cases, the actual or the symbolic pilgrimage, within this boat, we can see the relationship between an-

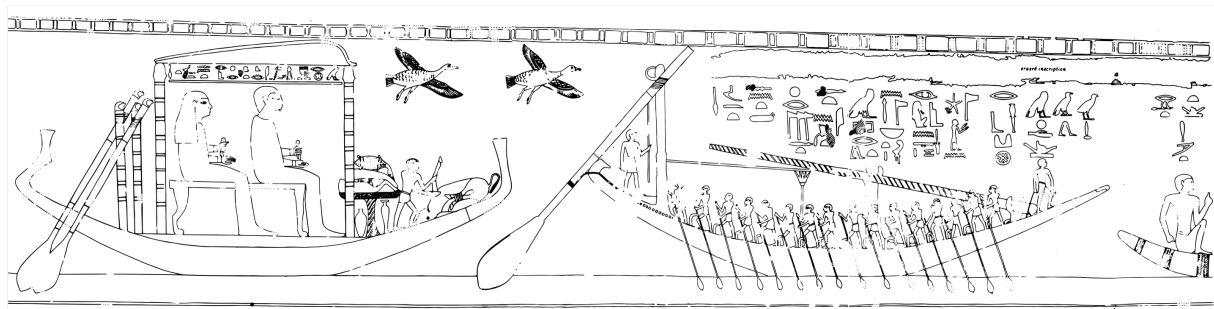


Fig. 11: Journey to Abydos (TT60) line drawing from [DAVIES](#) et al., 1920: pls XVII–XVIII. Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

other object—a statue of the deceased—and the figures taking it to Abydos or Busiris and comment on the roles and responsibilities of the different figures in this activity. In the case of the standing figures, they have a role in adjusting rigging and acting as lookouts, whereas the crouching figures are likely closer to the image of the deceased and are either acting in a ritual role, steering, or acting as lookouts. When viewing all the figures in relation to the body world outside of the boat, both the image of the statue and the human figures are referential to the roles and activities taking place in the land of the living. This is in opposition to the previously largely representationalist analyses of tomb models, that consider the image of the deceased as insurance and do not consider the figures as having a relationship to the activities in the world of the living. By focusing closely on the individual figures within the boat, the presence of such an image of the deceased on the sailing or funerary vessel can be identified, and, in turn, focusing on the type of body that is being used to represent the deceased allows for the questioning of the established interpretations of these images.

A similar set of relationships can be observed within funerary vessels. The crouching figures may suggest that an image of the deceased was present on a funerary bier rather than seated as a statue, like the cloaked figures with one arm free on a model sailing funerary boat from the tomb of Djehuty at Lisht (Figure 7). Within the boat, the relationship between the figures and the deceased being transported for burial can be seen. The figures are enacting rituals and, in the case of Djehuty's funerary boat, standing in place of Isis and Nephthys, placing the deceased in the position of Osiris at the time of his own burial. As a whole, the boat is a material replication of part of the rituals undertaken on the day of burial. In its relationships with other objects within the burial chamber, for example, the coffin which surrounds the deceased as Osiris was surrounded during the hourly vigil on the night of burial ([NYORD](#), 2014). The funerary boat as a part of the burial assemblage transforms the burial chamber into a perpetual ritual cycle performed in the funeral, to transform the deceased's body, at the centre of this body world, into a divine ancestor. By viewing the funerary boat through the more-than-representational lenses of body worlds and assemblage theory, the view of the boat as ritually efficacious is highlighted in comparison to the symbolic meaning that is stressed in the representational view.

### 3.2 Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century body worlds of *Model Solar Boat*

*Model Solar Boat*, when it encountered the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century body world in the form of three or more ancient boats, ancient assemblages, they were (re)assembled into the assemblage that is *Model Solar Boat*. Through the terminology of assemblage theory, the ancient assemblages were deterritorialised, whether through deterioration of the wood, insect activity, human intervention, or other means, or most likely a combination of all. Some of the elements were then (re)territorialised into a single assemblage. Assemblages were always engaged in these two competing flows of territorialisation, the process of an assemblage coming together, and deterritorialisation, the process of the assemblage breaking apart ([HARRIS](#), 2021: 61). Deterritorialisation is not secondary to territorialisation; rather, they occur simultaneously as a process, and



Fig. 12: Detail of *Model Sailboat*. Tomb of Meketre (TT 280, MMA 1101), Southern Asasif, Thebes MMA excavations, 1920. Rogers Fund and Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1920. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 20.3.4.

‘deterritorialisation almost always leads to reterritorialisation’ (HARRIS, 2021: 98). While there is a constant process of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, there are moments of ‘radical deterritorialisation’ such as this point in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century for the three ancient boats as assemblages, which as moments ‘mark phase transitions’ (HARRIS, 2021: 98). Alongside this process is the process of coding and decoding. With the passage of time, the components of the ancient assemblages were going through a process of decoding and (re)coding in the new body worlds that they were experiencing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (HARRIS, 2021: 61–62). Like the Western body HARRIS and ROBB (2012) explored, there was more than one body world—ontological vision—that a tomb model was experiencing within this new spatial and temporal context.

There is no known written material about *Model Solar Boat* from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus, turning to a contemporaneous find of the models of Meketre, a royal chief steward, whose tomb in Thebes was excavated by a team from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, alongside letters between the Director of the Ipswich Museum, Guy Maynard, and William Flinders Petrie regarding the museum’s subscription to excavations at Sedment, serve to demonstrate elements of possible body worlds, that the three ancient boats encountered in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. These two texts will act as a point of departure to explore several possible body worlds of *Model Solar Boat*. In the introduction of Herbert Winlock’s posthumously published volume on the Meketre models, Ambrose Lansing, curator of Egyptian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, relayed Winlock’s story of the finding of these models. Lansing’s introduction captured several ideas that were part of the context that the three or more boat models that contributed to the *Model Solar Boat* encountered, and also continue to be pervasive in Egyptological scholarship. Lansing and Winlock stated clearly that the figures within the models are without reference or relationship to the world outside the chamber after deposition, declaring: ‘Yet in that dry, still, dark little chamber those boats and statues had stood indifferent to all that went on in the outer world, as ancient in the days of Caesar as Caesar is to us, but so little changed that even the finger-prints of the men who put them there were still fresh upon them’ (WINLOCK, 1955: 7–8). Lansing and Winlock went on to suggest that these fingerprints of masons closing this chamber were evidence of the final time, until the excavation team in 1920 opened the doorway, that these objects had any relationship with the outside world. Their relationship in the intervening epochs was only with the statues and images of Meketre that could be inhabited by him, which acted as an extension of his body. This contrasts with the relational approach suggested for the ancient body worlds of the boat models.

A series of letters between the Director of the Ipswich Museum, Guy Maynard, and William Flinders Petrie, with regards to the museum’s subscription to excavations at Sedment, demonstrates the value placed on models for museum collections and also the treatment of those models from archaeological excavations at this time (SERPICO, 2008: 110). Maynard communicates to Petrie that not receiving models may lead to the withdrawal of the museum’s subscription (SERPICO, 2008: 110). Petrie, in his response to Maynard, states: ‘I am happy to say that I find we have been able to repair a boat, granary and group so that they are better than many that we have distributed...I may say that all the boats and groups had to be packed in separate pieces and built up again in London, except those which were dispatched as they arrived packed from Egypt’ (SERPICO, 2008: 110). The disbursement and repairs discussed in this letter have been shown to lead to models with figures in different positions to those they were found in, and elements added to other models and models split across multiple collections (SERPICO, 2008: 109–112). In addition to models from excavations like Petrie’s, there was also a substantial number without a recorded archaeological context sold into private and museum collections (e.g. Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London, UC75621, UC75868; Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, San José, RC 480; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, 82.12; see MERRIMAN, 2011 for further examples). *Model Solar Boat* likely came via the latter method, where there was a further separation from its find condition and context. The ancient solar boat and two figured boat models were deterritorialised from within the ancient burial assemblages they were a part of. Components of each of the boats as smaller assemblages were also deterritorialised and (re)territorialised together as the assemblage of *Model Solar Boat*. Each of these components is also decoded and (re)coded. For example, the striped rectangular box with the

falcon on top was decoded from being a piece of furniture, likely a shrine, on a solar boat when it was moved and (re)coded to be a finial on the stern of *Model Solar Boat*. It became an extension of the hull. The box and falcon were decoded from its association with the nearby solar boat furniture. This decoding included the loss of the association between the *šms*-sign and the falcon, which has been discussed to represent the followers of Horus (see [BOREUX](#), 1925: 86ff). The rectangular box and the falcon were then (re)coded in its new position as decorative, adding symmetry and balance to the bow finial.

The human figures are likewise deterritorialised and decoded from their figured model assemblages and (re)territorialised and (re)coded within *Model Solar Boat*. A central element to the interpretations that the models encountered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and one that is continued into Egyptological scholarship today, was the importance of human figures in the models. In the letters between Maynard and Flinders Petrie, there was also an emphasis on the models having human figures with them referred to as ‘figure-groups’ by Maynard ([SERPICO](#), 2008: 110). Lansing and Winlock described Meketre as unable to ‘conceive of an existence in which he would not require food and drink, clothing and housing, such as he was used to in this life, and being a rich man, naturally he wanted an estate in eternity like that which he had owned on earth’ ([WINLOCK](#), 1955: 5–6). Thus, instead of human beings being killed to serve him as they did in life, they stated that Meketre ‘attained the same end by putting in his tomb a host of little wooden servants, carved and painted, at their daily tasks, working before little portraits of himself’ ([WINLOCK](#), 1955: 5–6). Winlock then described the ‘spirits of these little servants’ working ‘eternally’ with Meketre’s ‘soul’ entering his images to ‘reap the harvest of their labors’. Thus, the associations with human beings enacting the deceased’s ancestor cult in the world of the living were decoded from the human figures. They were (re)coded, even in models where elements are not removed or modified, to be images enlivened in an afterlife to provide for the deceased’s needs. Particularly in the case of boats, they encountered a worldview where their ancient purpose was to provide the deceased with transport in an afterlife context or to ensure the ongoing provision of food. Thus, at a minimum, some means of propulsion in the form of a mast and rigging or oars, along with those anonymous figures to sail or row the vessels, were required for them to function and to be in agreement with the context in which the boats now found themselves. The ancient solar boat would not have fitted with the new context; it would have been incomplete.

We can see *Model Solar Boat* as the material result of these new body worlds and ontological visions it found itself within ([HARRIS & ROBB](#), 2012: 676). It is specifically boat models from an ancient Egyptian context that required figures for them to function and to be complete in the body world that the crewless solar boat model was entering. As demonstrated by an early 20<sup>th</sup> century display of water transportation from the Americas and Europe at the United States National Museum (Figure 13 and Figure 14), figures were not required of the boat models as a category cross-culturally. There are no figures visible on any of the model vessels (Figure 14), and ship models generally were not made with figures on board. They, instead, were made to accurately render the construction of the vessel to scale. Therefore, it was a specific requirement of an ancient Egyptian boat model in this context, where figures were required to be enlivened to perform duties for the deceased. We owe the idea of images being able to come to life to the work of Gaston Maspero in the 1870s through to the 1890s, where Maspero argued that all things and beings possessed an immaterial *ka* and, by virtue of this immaterial entity, images, could come to life ([NYORD](#), forthcoming-a: 3–7). This idea has continued into current scholarship of ancient Egyptian images including tomb models. It was a predominant view of models in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that it was by virtue of spirits that these figured tomb models could be enlivened to work in the afterlife. The Carlos Museum’s *Model Solar Boat* and other similar models sold during this time, did not closely mimic ancient boats nor the typical activities taking place on board. Rather, it seems for this context, these body worlds in which the boats were now in, the mere presence of the figures was key to fitting this context and being complete, functioning objects. This finding pulls in the same direction with the interpretation of these figures as servants for the deceased and the purpose of these models being to ensure the existence of the deceased with the appropriate food, drink, clothing, and housing. The ancient solar boat without a crew somewhat contradicted this interpretation and, coming into body worlds where this understanding was central, would have seemed incomplete. As discussed by [BARKER](#)



Fig. 13: Water transportation exhibits, North East Range, United States National Museum, c. 1900s, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 95, Box 43, Folder 10, Image No. SIA\_000095\_B43\_F10\_002.

(2022: 8) and evidence in the interchange between Petrie and Maynard, there was immense value placed on complete models, figure-groups, for both museum and presumably private collections.

At a similar time to the Carlos Museum *Model Solar Boat*, *Boat Model*, now in the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum (Figure 15), was (re)territorialised from an ancient solar boat, a funerary boat, and a granary. A comparison of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum *Boat Model* and the Carlos Museum *Model Solar Boat* highlights the symmetry and balance of each composition. The box-shrine in both cases was moved to the stern and there are two figures at each end of the vessel, looking inward. The mast is central on the Carlos Museum *Model Solar Boat*, with equal numbers of figures on each side engaging with the non-existent rigging. Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum *Boat Model* has the mast off-centre, central to the composition is the canopy and box beneath with four figures surrounding it. On the bow-ward side of the mast, gesturing towards it, are two standing figures. The activity around the mast is balanced by five figures, two of which are hauling grain on the stern side of the canopy. The hauling of grain is an image that is specific to granary models and to contemporaneous tomb wall scenes (BARKER, 2022: 21–30). As with the number of figures found working the rigging of Carlos Museum *Model Solar Boat*, Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum *Boat Model* is not mimicking known types of model boats in its composition. The number of human figures and activities taking place emulating those expected and known from ancient boat models was clearly not essential to its function in these late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century body worlds. Instead, it was the symmetry common to ancient Egyptian compositions and the presence of human figures to be enlivened to serve the deceased that were valued. Together, the symmetry and human figures completed these compositions.

#### 4 Implications of this case study

By thinking of *Model Solar Boat* as an assemblage, elements of which have played different roles in several body worlds, new lines of enquiry are opened not just for *Model Solar Boat*, but objects with extensive modifications and complex biographies more generally. The viewing of the boats as assemblages allows for a more nuanced view of the various boat models in their ancient deposition—both at different scales and in relation



Fig. 14: Water transportation exhibits, North East Range, United States National Museum, c. 1900s, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 95, Box 43, Folder 10, Image No. SIA\_000095\_B43\_F10\_007.



Fig. 15: *Boat Model*, Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, Object Number RC-485, © Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, San José, California.

to other objects, humans, and supernatural beings. Assemblage theory highlights assumptions made of the objects, particularly the interpretation of them as objects that enliven to provide for the deceased in the afterlife or as symbolic of Re's journey across the sky. It instead offers a broad array of relationships the boats were establishing and maintaining at different scales, including relationships with the gods, roles of the king taken on by non-royals, ongoing activities in the ancestor cult, and roles that the deceased took on in association with the models. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century context, combining assemblage theory with the concept of body worlds allows for the (re)assemblage of *Model Solar Boat* to be taken seriously as an act with intention, within new body worlds and ontological visions. Assemblage theory provides the vocabulary and sheds light on the decoding and (re)coding of the rectangular box and falcon from furniture in association with the other furniture on the vessel to a stern finial, an extension of the boat's hull, with a decorative and symmetrical function. Likewise, the human figures' roles are decoded, losing their association with actions within the ancestor cult, and are (re)coded with their place in working as enlivened images in the afterlife, also providing symmetry and balance to the composition.

This case study provides a point of departure for examining the frequently ignored pastiche models that are prevalent across museum and private collections globally, emphasising what these models can tell us about both their ancient construction and purpose, and their more modern (re)construction. It emphasises the non-relational interpretation that was central to the understanding and reception of the vessels at the time of *Model Solar Boat*'s recrafting into what it stands as today and the continuation of that interpretation into current scholarship on tomb models. By identifying these interpretations and their impact, the concepts of body worlds and assemblage theory provide a framework and vocabulary to examine their material and immaterial impact and offer alternatives

There does remain a question as to what the concept of body worlds and assemblage each bring to this case study. Assemblage theory as a post-anthropocentric, relational framework allows for the encapsulation of both the material and immaterial and recognises the agency of non-human beings, materials, and matter in these relationships, whereas body worlds are fundamentally anthropocentric. They both offer multiscale and the ability to explore historical change and continuity. In this case study, body worlds particularly served to analyse the relationship between the ancient assemblages and the lived experience—body worlds of the living community—and the contact between the ancient models and the new context in which they were (re)territorialised and (re)coded. In the latter case, body worlds provide a useful lens that avoids posing ontologies as singular and bounded, but rather looks at the multiple ways of interacting with and experiencing the (re)assemblage of *Model Solar Boat*. Assemblage theory as a post-anthropocentric framework allows for non-human entities to be the centre, the focus of analysis. Therefore, the two frameworks together provide a toolkit to centralise *Model Solar Boat* and seriously analyse its function, purpose, and relationships through its complex and varied past.

## 5 Conclusion

By looking at *Model Solar Boat* as an assemblage within several body worlds, we can place emphasis on the ongoing process of becoming, rather than some static form. In the snapshot of the multiscale assemblages of three or more vessels when they were deposited in tombs in the Middle Kingdom, the relationships with and within these boats clearly embedded the deceased in rituals connecting them to the cosmos, kingship, and not least to their living descendants, those enacting their funeral and mortuary cult. When viewing *Model Solar Boat* again when it entered a late nineteenth or early twentieth century body worlds, we can see that, in this context, the deceased needed to be sustained in his tomb chamber for eternity through models with human figures possessed by spirits, fundamentally contrasting with the relational function in the ancient context. The use of both assemblage theory and the concept of body worlds allows for *Model Solar Boat* not to be seen as a static, final product but for the examination of *Model Solar Boat*'s ongoing process of becoming. As a case study, *Model Solar Boat* and this paper call for the serious consideration of tomb models and similar objects

with complex biographies for not only their ancient and recent pasts but their present and future engagements and interpretations.

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INVITED COMMENTARY

## Afterword: Egyptological anthropology

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### Abstract

Building on the articles in this special issue, this afterword examines the place of comparison and defamiliarisation in the distinctive approach to Egyptology which is outlined in these pages. Noting that the articles make creative use of a number of theoretical devices from other disciplines, including social anthropology, the piece asks what social anthropology in turn might borrow back from this Egyptological conceptual moment. Rather than follow a traditional import-export model, trading ready-made theories between disciplines, this afterword argues for a different vision of interdisciplinarity, in which the disruptive potential of ancient Egyptian epistemologies plays a leading role.

**Keywords:** comparison, theory, anthropology

### لكلمة الختامية: الأنثروبولوجيا المصرية

#### الملخص

استناداً إلى المقالات الواردة في هذا الإصدار الخاص، تسلط الخاتمة الضوء على أوجه المقارنة في المنهج الفريد لعلم المصريين الذي تم استعراضه في هذه الصفحات. تُظهر المقالات استخداماً مبتكراً لعدد من الأطر النظرية المستمدة من تخصصات أخرى، بما في ذلك الأنثروبولوجيا الاجتماعية. وتتساءل الخاتمة عن الكيفية التي يمكن من خلالها للأنثروبولوجيا الاجتماعية أن تستفيد من هذه اللحظة المفاهيمية المميزة في علم المصريين. بدلاً من تبني النموذج التقليدي القائم على الاستيراد والتصدير النظري بين التخصصات، تدعو الخاتمة إلى تصور مختلف للتعددية التخصصية. في هذا التصور، يُمنح التراث المعرفي لمصر القديمة دوراً محورياً في إحداث تحولات فكرية وتقديم رؤى جديدة عبر التخصصات المختلفة.

الكلمات الدالة: مقارنة، نظرية، علم الأنثروبولوجيا

## 1 Introduction

When I told friends and colleagues that I had been invited to give a keynote at an Egyptological conference on bodies, I got a few puzzled looks. One friend even asked whether perhaps they had got the wrong Matei Candea? For I am not an expert on bodies, and more to the point, I know near to nothing about ancient Egypt (beyond the memories of my slightly obsessive nine-year-old self). My presence at that event and in these pages is therefore a testament to the intellectual curiosity and generosity of the organisers. At the root of the present volume and the encounter from which it emerges, was a thoughtful and sustained programme of speaking across intellectual borders and reaching out to other disciplinary fields. In this afterword I will endeavour to speak to this programme from the perspective of one of the disciplines being reached out to—social

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anthropology. In my contribution to the conference, I sought to offer some glimpses from social anthropologists' varied and conflicted history of thinking about, practicing and failing at comparison (CANDEA, 2018). Rather than reprise this work in this afterword, I hope I can in some measure repay the intellectual generosity of the organisers by asking a different question, one which emerges directly from this collection.

Each and every one of these articles is concerned in one way or another with the delights and pitfalls of comparison across cultural, historical, or ontological settings. In the pursuit of these comparative endeavours, contributors to this volume demonstrate with brio how discussions in neighbouring fields can enrich Egyptological scholarship and help see anew ancient Egyptian concepts and practices. And so, the question of comparison is doubled up: it emerges not just across cultures, but also across disciplines. As an anthropologist reading these articles, I was fascinated to see the productive and sometimes unexpected use to which some concepts and analytical practices with which I am familiar have been put. At the same time, I was struck by the calls in some of these articles to introduce more of a theoretical two-way street between Egyptology and other disciplines.

The way the problem was put echoed an earlier discussion in a different setting. In an introduction entitled 'Archaeological anthropology' (GARROW & YARROW, 2010), archaeologist Duncan Garrow and anthropologist Tom Yarrow observed that archaeologists often imagine themselves as rich in material but poor in theory. For some this is a source of empiricist pride, for others, a reason to seek theoretical input from elsewhere, notably from anthropology. Hence the value of a more 'anthropological archaeology' has become fairly banal. In the volume and the conference which preceded it, Garrow and Yarrow sought to turn this assumption inside out, by asking what anthropology would look like if it imported conceptual moves from archaeology.<sup>1</sup> In this afterword, I would like to ask a similar question: what can a consideration of Egyptological—and ancient Egyptian—concepts and practices, in turn, bring to anthropology? What, in other words, would a more Egyptological anthropology look like?

## 2 On cultural and disciplinary equivocation

While the comparative axes and approaches across these articles are extremely varied, one dynamic emerges centrally throughout these pages. This is the reflexive reconsideration of Euroamerican assumptions—particularly those baked into Egyptology itself. Thus Leire Olabarria deftly unpicks the contrast between 'real' and 'fictive' kinship in her re-examination of the notion of a 'bodily son'; Reinert Skumsnes dissolves the assumption of a distinction between 'empirico-rational medicine on the one hand and magico-religious texts on the other' (this volume, p. 41); in order to excavate the ancient Egyptian meanings of nakedness, Dina Serova finds she has to clear away a host of engrained meanings of the couple nudity/nakedness in post 18<sup>th</sup> century English. Camilla Di Biase-Dyson, in her discussion of the notion of 'aspective', points to the classic pitfall of defining others' cultural forms through what they seem to lack. Just as anthropologists once took the state for granted when they wrote of 'stateless' societies (FORTES & EVANS-PRITCHARD, 1940), the characterisation of ancient Egyptian art as lacking in perspective (a-spective) forgets that 'contrary to perspective being the default category of representation, perspective is rather the outlier in representational style in pan-cultural and pan-historical perspective.' (this volume, p. 77). Note the double use of the term perspective in this sentence—I will return to it below.

Even more searchingly, Di Biase-Dyson suggests that characterisations of 'aspective' bodily representations as fragmented or disarticulated misses the point that Egyptian notions of bodily wholeness and fragmentation may not stand in the same relation to each other as they do in the Euroamerican case. Willeke Wendrich, in a move familiar to anthropologists, attacks Cartesian body-mind dualism. Yet Wendrich adds a refreshing and unexpected twist when she asks 'If we subscribe to the notion that body and mind are one,

<sup>1</sup>For instance, in my own paper for the conference, I had asked what anthropological fieldwork might look like if we imagined it through the lens of archaeological fieldwork (CANDEA, 2007).

are we not making the same mistake by now forcing another Western ontology onto ancient societies?’ (this volume, p. 174). The call to suspend both of these assumptions is enticingly reminiscent of zen master Shunryu Suzuki’s observation that ‘Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think they are one, that is also wrong’ (SUZUKI, 2020: 7).

All of the moves above draw on the aesthetic of ‘frontal comparison’ (CANDEA, 2018). Some seek to clear the ground of our assumptions—zen-like—in order to see ancient Egyptian realities more clearly. Others foreground alternative ancient Egyptian realities as a destabilising device to challenge our assumptions about kinship or the body. These are the same move, inside out, as neatly illustrated in Rune Nyord’s book *Seeing Perfection* (NYORD, 2020). There, Nyord draws on anthropology’s ontological turn, whose core device is to allow indigenous concepts to transform the anthropologist’s own analytical framework (HENARE et al., 2007). Rather than try to explain why Egyptian images don’t conform to our own familiar representational norms, Nyord starts from Egyptian concepts such as *twt* (‘resemblance’) which might help us challenge our own representationalist assumptions and learn to start from elsewhere. The aim, Nyord writes

is to show that, far from being an exceptional area of archaeology or art history, Egyptian images are amenable to similar perspectives to those under development in other parts of those fields, and with a mostly unexplored capacity for bringing new concepts and materials to such theoretical discussions (NYORD, 2020: 8).

Now, as a long-time fellow-traveller of the ontological turn (henceforth OT), I find these points very convincing. There is however the seed of a paradox in the ontological turn, which a number of critics have noted and which is neatly illustrated, or even amplified in this context. On the one hand, the OT seeks to ground theoretical models in indigenous concepts by suspending our own ontological assumptions—this is why its proponents have often resisted the idea that the OT is itself a stable theory. On the other hand, the OT carries with it certain basic assumptions. Assumptions about how knowledge works—grounded in part in a distinctly anthropological vision of fieldwork-based disorientation and encounter. Assumptions also about what difference is (HEYWOOD, 2020)—including a characterisation of Cartesian dualism as the core of western thinking (this is where Wendrich’s reminder is particularly timely).

These assumptions function, whatever its proponents say, as a basic framework within which the ontological turn’s moves can be made, and this fact stands out most clearly when the ontological turn is drawn, as in this case, into a neighbouring discipline. So Nyord’s move is in a sense double. On the one hand, he suspends certain Euroamerican theoretical assumptions in order to make Egyptian concepts such as *twt* take centre stage. On the other hand, in order to do so he draws into Egyptological discussions a concept of ontology from anthropology. The anthropological concept of ontology enables the ancient Egyptian concept of *twt* to be heard.

I raise this point not as a critique of the OT or of Nyord’s deployment of it, but in order to focus our attention on the diverse layers of conceptual transfer at work in these pages, as in Nyord’s case. These borrowings work across ontological difference, perhaps, across disciplinary difference, also. On the one hand, frontal comparisons in this collection function as a kind of epistemological ground-clearing. On the other hand, they are accompanied and buttressed by an increase in theoretical frames, drawn from archaeology, anthropology, and philosophy. The articles collected here self-consciously set out to upend an older characterisation of Egyptology as anti-theoretical. Scrivens outlines in stark terms the *status quo* which this collection aims to challenge:

Egyptology is notorious for its aversion to engaging with theoretical discourse. The foundational goal of amassing knowledge about ancient Egypt has largely retained primacy over more abstract discussions and methodological debate, to the extent that David Wengrow has remarked that “there is no strictly Egyptological way of researching or explaining anything” (WENGROW,

2020: 51)' (Scrivens, this volume, p. 129; see also Whitehead this volume, p. 182–184; **HOWLEY** & **NYORD**, 2018: vi).

The articles above forcefully contradict the first sentence in this quote. Archaeological concepts of body worlds (**ROBB & HARRIS**, 2013) and negotiation or chaîne opératoire (**LEROI-GOURHAN**, 1965), anthropological discussions of relational thinking (**STRATHERN**, 2020), equivocation (**VIVEIROS DE CASTRO**, 2004), ontology (**DESCOLA**, 2005), philosophical discussions of assemblage theory (**DELANDA**, 2006; cf. Whitehead this volume) are all put to great use here.

Of course this importing of theoretical frames brings its own challenge when it comes to marking the distinctiveness (contra **WENGROW**, 2020) of Egyptological perspectives. Whitehead notes that Egyptological engagements with frameworks from other disciplines has too often been a 'one-way street' (Whitehead this volume, p. 184). From this perspective it might seem ironic that the one article here which deals with a concept forged within Egyptology itself—Di Biase-Dyson's discussion of 'aspective'—argues rather conclusively that the concept, at least in its original form, ought to be abandoned. As an outsider encountering Egyptology for the first time, the notion of aspective (as rendered in **BRÉMONT**, 2016; **NYORD**, 2013) had captured my imagination. The thought of an ancient Egyptian alternative to 'perspective' opened up a range of musings, echoes and parallels—some of which I return to below. I had thus come to the conference prepared to suggest some of the ways in which this Egyptological concept might in turn enrich anthropological theorising—my sense of what a 'two-way street' might look like. Di Biase-Dyson's chilling excavation of the racist and evolutionist character of early invocations of aspective certainly gave me pause.<sup>2</sup>

But perhaps this false start can prompt us to imagine an alternative kind of two-way traffic between Egyptology and other disciplines. Maybe an anthropologist seeking to be transformed by Egyptology should look beyond the conventional vision of disciplinary theory that can be 'imported'. Perhaps, following Nyord's lead, Egyptology's structure as a discipline enables and requires a different form of theoretical production: 'the potential to build models grounded in ancient Egyptian culture.' (Scrivens this volume, p. 130). This after all has always been key to the way anthropology itself has operated: wherever anthropology has produced its own theory (rather than importing it from philosophy, for instance), this has always been as an effect of allowing the conceptual worlds it studied to distort and reshape its own.

### 3 Ancient Egyptian epistemics

For me as an anthropologist, some of the most fascinating moments in this collection are those in which the reader glimpses something like the echoes of ancient Egyptian epistemologies. Those are the moments when we see an encounter not between material and analysis, but rather between two expert cultures, two 'originating institutions, that is the modern academy and ancient groups of religious initiates' (Miller, this volume, p. 103).

Di Biase-Dyson's evocation of ancient Egyptian meta-categories ('none of which have been adequately translated by terms like "(hieroglyphic) script", "teaching", "secret" or "wisdom"', this volume, p. 71) is one example. Richard Bussmann's work back and forth across the category of the 'non-elite' is another. At the outset, the non-elite might seem to be a projection of contemporary analytical concerns, since in ancient Egyptian representations 'the "non-elite" were not lumped together as one group but were distinguished according to performed activities and bodily characteristics' (Bussmann this volume, p. 31). And yet Bussmann

<sup>2</sup>Those who would retain the term aspective to point to an 'analytical talent' or 'regulative idea' (Di Biase Dyson this volume, p. 72, citing **JANOWSKI**, 2012), rather than an essential characteristic of the ancient Egyptian mind, might counter that concepts are not bound to their origins. The anthropological concept of 'animism' for instance has been put to productive use, despite having a similarly disturbing essentialist and evolutionary origin (**BIRD-DAVID**, 1999). However, the fact that aspective's origins are so recent does make this a particularly 'hard case'.

shows the progressive constitution of a typological visual language for characterising non-elite bodies, in ‘an attempt to classify, codify, and interpret society for the benefit of high-ranking officials’ (this volume, p. 33). Similarly, in Serova’s article the relational nature of semiotics and the relational characterisation of bodies in ancient Egyptian deployments of nakedness echo back and forth until the analysis and the material seem on the verge of collapsing into each other. This epistemological encounter is drawn out most explicitly however in Jordan Miller’s comparison of Egyptological and ancient Egyptian comparisons. Whether ancient Egyptian experience would have been better characterised as animism, perspectivism or analogism is a question which may feed productively into the comparative practices of Egyptologists. But ‘syncretic’ god-forms and their fused names provide, to the anthropologist, a more direct provocation as they map a distinctive ancient Egyptian form of comparatism:

Fused names identify metapersons through comparison with others. Each deity possesses a set of qualities or relations. Since the same divine force could be encountered through many, often recurrent, forms, fused names represent not the merger of entities but the linking of associations, even though the resulting bundle is conceived as a discrete subject (Miller this volume, p. 95).

What would Egyptological (or anthropological) comparison look like if it tried to emulate or learn from this type of syncretistic comparatism? Imagine ‘cultures’ or ‘institutions’ treated in this way, as collective subjects and simultaneously accretions, or as forms which replicate inside and through each other. Or what if, returning to Nyord’s discussion of ancient Egyptian visual concepts, we took *twt* as a device for rethinking anthropological comparison?

For Nyord, thinking ancient Egyptian images through terms like *twt* forces us to let go of what we thought we knew:

Against this background, the apparent paradox between images as ‘something which resembles’, on the one hand, and the various Egyptian image practices that go strongly against a mimetic ideal, on the other, begins to dissolve, as it turns out to be heavily dependent on our representationalist intuitions about what ‘resembling’ entails. [...] the Egyptian notion of *twt* does not refer to a mimetic copying of a visual impression. Rather, the idea of ‘resemblance’ refers to a correspondence with a deeper nature (such as Hatshepsut’s divine origin) or the defining features that make one a member of a particular category (NYORD, 2020: 12).

But what would happen if we added *twt* to the panoply of analytical terms such as resemblance and relation? What if we asked, in our comparisons, not just whether two things resemble one another, or whether they are related, but whether one somehow corresponds to the deeper nature of another? I suspect a rather different range of ways of envisioning comparison would begin to emerge.

Perhaps in the end, this is also where something like ‘aspective’ might fit in, not as an Egyptological concept, but as the echo of an ancient Egyptian epistemological device. As noted by Di Biase-Dyson, it is difficult to disentangle the term ‘aspective’ from Brunner-Traut’s initial account of Egyptian images as lacking in perspective and totality. The notion of a lack is built into the term (a-spective)—even if we were to reject the more obviously problematic implication that such a ‘lack’ relates to an earlier evolutionary stage of development. Yet the observation that ancient Egyptian art challenges contemporary expectations of ‘perspective’ remains undeniably productive. I would like to pick up on Di Biase-Dyson’s suggestion that we attend to more radical reworkings of aspective, such as Axelle Brémont’s notion of ‘multi-spective’ (BRÉMONT, 2016). Brémont rejects the earlier thought that so-called aspective art is uninterested in the perspective of the viewer. Rather, she argues that one can detect at the heart of the Egyptian visual forms characterised as aspective (which she renames ‘multi-spective’ or ‘bi-spective’) a tension between two perspectives, which the artist is seeking to simultaneously attend to and satisfy. On the one hand, the perspective of the viewer, seeing objects and persons from the front, and on the other hand, the perspective of the patron, who is depicted within the

picture, and therefore watching it from the side. Brémont argues that both the standard features of Egyptian depictions, and the occasional exceptions, speak of a productive tension in the heart of each image, between this view from the front and this view from the (in)side of the picture.

I am of course not in a position to assess the validity of Brémont's analysis from an Egyptological standpoint. But it proposes a suggestive analogue for thinking about anthropological comparison. Perhaps one might find here a clarifying restatement of the sorts of tensions I have tried to characterise elsewhere between frontal and lateral comparison (see also Miller, this volume). Bi-spective might speak to the way in which anthropological texts seek to provide both an illumination for their reader and a faithful reorientation of the description in light of the perspective of people studied—'the people in the book', as it were. As in ancient Egyptian art in Brémont's characterisation, anthropological attempts at 'bi-spective' denote not a settled ontology but a struggle, an attempt to hold diverse principles and aesthetics in tension—in pursuit of particular ends.

One might go further and query the widespread tendency to reach for 'perspective' as a characterisation of a broad comparative view. Consider again the final use of 'perspective' in the quote above: 'contrary to perspective being the default category of representation, perspective is rather the outlier in representational style in pan-cultural and pan-historical perspective' (Di Biase-Dyson this volume, p. 77).

The thought of 'a pan-cultural and pan-historical multi-spective' provides a bracingly suggestive vision for anthropology.

#### 4 Distortion and incorporation

In his account of depictions of the 'foreign' goddess Qadesh in Egypt's imperial age, Edward Scrivens writes:

On the one hand, we have a goddess who is imagined as foreign, as coming from outside of Egypt and being outside of convention, one 'of whom there is no equal'. On the other is the representational system with which she is depicted, a system whose very frameworks are infused with androcentric hierarchies. These understandings or priorities are negotiated within the triadic stela, rendering Qadesh's body and her interactions with the surrounding figures in a way that holds them in balance. The extent to which this negotiation is a conscious effort of the artists or more of a cultural reflex response is a matter for debate. Perhaps such an outcome is an inevitability of attempting to represent something outside of the norm; whatever we describe, we can only do so with the language available to us (Scrivens this volume, p. 139).

I would like to place this vision of incorporation and tension alongside a classic account of tension and incorporation in anthropology. This comes from Marilyn Strathern's book *The Gender of the Gift*—perhaps the Ur-text of relational anthropology:





In comparing 'our' categories to 'their' categories, one is, of course comparing two versions of our categories, the latter being derived from what we take to be salient or relevant to them, even as the ideas gained from what we take to be their categories come from 'our' encounters. To extract certain distinct ideas out of the encounter is not to judge the people as distinct, nor necessarily entail a comparison of whole societies (STRATHERN, 1988: 349 n. 10).



Drawing ancient Egyptian concepts and epistemic devices into Egyptology is less a matter of conceptual borrowing and more a matter of attempting to negotiate distortions of the discipline's conceptual norms. The same is true, on a smaller scale, when these devices in turn are drawn into the conversations of another discipline. We may never know to what extent these incorporations are faithful to the original. But the distortions of our frameworks are productive nevertheless.

## 5 Acknowledgements

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## **Egyptology in dialogue:**

### **Historical bodies in relations, comparisons, and negotiations.**

What insights can ancient Egyptian sources lend to our understanding of the human body? And what multidisciplinary perspectives can Egyptologists draw on to bring ancient sources around the body into dialogue with current phenomena and priorities?

Through engagement with recent anthropological and archaeological theory, the contributions to this volume recognise that every society understands the human body in its own way and thus that the body has a history and a culture-specific logic that warrants exploration. The volume moreover explores how bodies are relationally contingent, existing in both explicit relations with each other and their surroundings and in implicit relations across time and space. These relational encounters can be studied on their own or in comparisons between and negotiations with other entities, perspectives, time periods, and spaces.

By exploring these concepts with case studies from across the archaeological, visual, and textual record, this special issue includes conversations that extend well beyond the discipline, enabling us to engage with Egypt's rich archaeological record with new theoretical and methodological awareness.

