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Death and Eternal Life in Ancient Egypt: Ethical Reflections on Museum Treatment of
Human Remains

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD.....	3
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	3
1.1 PURPOSE AND ETHICS.....	3
1.2 MUMMYMANIA AND WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF ANCIENT EGYPT	7
CHAPTER 2: SELF AND THE AFTERLIFE.....	13
2.1 OSIRIAN AND AFTERLIFE MYTHOLOGY	13
OSIRIS AND SETH, ISIS AND REBIRTH.....	15
GETTING TO THE AFTERLIFE.....	17
“LIVING” IN THE AFTERLIFE	20
2.2 IDENTITY AND THE “SOUL”	23
CHAPTER 3: AFTERLIFE RITES AND RITUALS	28
3.1. MUMMIFICATION PROCESS	28
3.2. OPENING OF THE MOUTH RITUAL	31
CHAPTER 4 CASE STUDY: THE CHAU CHAK WING MUSEUM.....	35
4.1 ACQUISITION OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN HUMAN REMAINS	35
4.2 WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN THE CHAU CHAK WING MUSEUM?.....	36
MERUAH.....	37
HORUS	38
MER-NEITH-IT-ES	40
4.3 ETHICS, CURATION, AND RECENT CHANGES.....	42
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY	49

FOREWORD

My passion for the ethics of displaying human remains was sparked while volunteering at the Chau Chak Wing Museum when it opened in 2020; specifically by an unwrapped, disarticulated mummified ancient Egyptian head in The Mummy Room. I wondered about the identity of this person, and realised that, due to the history of my discipline and the methods in which the remains were acquired, the ability to know who this person was or the life they lived had been lost. I then began to think more broadly about the display of ancient Egyptian remains, whether it is possible to display them ethically, and what my interpretation of ‘ethical’ was. To me, people’s wishes surrounding the treatment of their remains are still relevant after their death, regardless of how long ago it was that they lived.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE AND ETHICS

The question of whether it is appropriate to display ancient Egyptian human remains in museum is a contentious one¹, as people’s opinions are affected by a number of factors. This thesis is a broad examination of ancient Egyptian mortuary ideology and practices from the Predynastic period up until approximately the end of the New Kingdom, and an examination of the curation of and recent changes of human remains displayed in the Chau Chak Wing Museum as a case study. The intended purpose is not to provide a framework of ethical display, as I am neither an Egyptologist nor an ethicist, but to provide people with specific aspects they can consider when viewing ancient Egyptian human remains – namely, is the identity of the person known, and how is their identity or lack of identity conveyed to the viewer? What is the intended purpose of the exhibit by the curator, and what is actually understood and felt by the viewer? How are the human remains portrayed and displayed, and what emotions are felt by people looking at them? Does the exhibit convey the mortuary beliefs that the deceased may have followed due to their context, and how much would those beliefs align with the manner of display?

¹ Swain 2016, 169.

I recognise that my drive for this topic is heavily influenced by my own morals, and that my morals are informed by my context; that of a white archaeologist growing up in a settler country with a history of genocide, exploitation, and ongoing institutionalised racism. Morality influences ethics², and while it is impossible to separate the two, ethical judgements would consider all perspectives, experiences, and logistics, in a scientific manner. As Gill-Frerking states, “most museum attendees are unlikely to need to make ethical judgements or decisions related to the mummies [...] museum curators, and exhibition designers and developers [...] should be prepared to delve into the ethics associated with the display of mummies at every stage [...] and beyond”³. My assessment of the Chau Chak Wing and other museums’ displays of ancient Egyptian human remains is based on my understanding and interpretation of the prominent aspects of ancient Egyptian mortuary ideologies, based on literary and archaeological evidence.

Museums have the ability and facilities to influence public perception surrounding the cultures and histories they exhibit human remains and artefacts from⁴, and thus they arguably have a moral responsibility to accurately and humanely portray ancient lives and cultures. The format and content of exhibitions, whether they are actually a reflection of the curator’s opinions and feelings, will be interpreted by the viewers of that exhibit as something the museum has approved, and thus, supports⁵. But, as Hein posits, “the agency attributed to the institution is a sort of fiction [...] it is not identifiable as collective behaviour, for it is singular – the performance of the museum”⁶. Institutions do not make decisions – the people who own, manage, and are stakeholders in them do, and excepting some smaller museums, the decisions of the museum are both the result of multiple people and may not reflect the opinions of the potentially hundreds of people working within it⁷. The question then becomes: what is social and/or ethical responsibility of the museum? Hein puts forth that museums must at least be accountable for “ [...] (1) their choices of what to represent, including the means by which they

² Gill-Frerking 2021, 61.

³ Gill-Frerking 2021, 62.

⁴ Gazi 2014, 2.

⁵ Marstine 2011, 5.

⁶ Hein 2011, 117.

⁷ Hein 2011, 117.

do so; (2) their non-representations that add up to exclusions, whether or not intentional, and, most problematically, (3) what they do not choose to – but nevertheless do – represent, by indirect means”⁸. One of the most fundamental tools a museum can implement in terms of accountability is transparency⁹. By making their motivations and decision-making process transparent it allows for greater community input into whether the actions of the institution are ethical, as they define it, and leaves less possibility for misconstruction by the public or other stakeholders.

What is defined as ‘ethical’ often depends on the law, such as the Declaration of Human Rights asserting that people have certain inalienable rights, and that to deprive people of these rights is an unethical act¹⁰. These rights only apply to the living, however¹¹, as the ethical treatment of recently (as in, excluding ancient peoples) dead differs by country, religion, and personal opinion¹². The legal rights of a dead person, including modern people, vary by country or state legislation, and more often legal cases concerning human remains concern ownership of those remains¹³. Museum ethics are not easily defined, and aside from when museums are part of ICOM, for example, the parameters of what constitutes ethical action and treatment in museums is often left up to the individual institution¹⁴. Creating and following a code of ethics is one way to achieve this. The development of codes of ethics is hugely influenced but also informed by the context it is developed in¹⁵, and as such different codes may apply in particular situations and clash with one another in their values.

There are some international institutions that provide a code of ethics, however membership is often non-compulsory. Museums that opt into joining the International Council of Museums (ICOM) will need to abide by their code. The relevant points of the ICOM code of ethics are

⁸ Hein 2011, 118.

⁹ Marstine 2011, 14.

¹⁰ de Tienda Palop & Currás 2019, 21.

¹¹ de Tienda Palop & Currás 2019, 20.

¹² de Tienda Palop & Currás 2019, 26.

¹³ Shevelev & Shevelev 2023, 1383.

¹⁴ Marstine 2011, 7.

¹⁵ Pickering 2011, 257.

as follows: “2.5 Collections of human remains and material of sacred significance should be acquired only if they can be housed securely and cared for respectfully. This must be accomplished in a manner consistent with professional standards and the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from which the objects originated, where these are known [...] 3.7 Research on human remains and materials of sacred significance must be accomplished in a manner consistent with professional standards and take into account the interests and beliefs of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated, where these are known [...] 4.2 Museums should ensure that the information they present in displays and exhibitions is well-founded, accurate and gives appropriate consideration to represented groups or beliefs [...] 4.3 Human remains and materials of sacred significance must be displayed in a manner consistent with professional standards and, where known, taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated. They must be presented with great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all peoples.”¹⁶.

I personally believe that viewing the remains of ancient people – in an ethical and appropriate context - and calling to attention their individuality and the lives they lived can humanise the past. However, as discussed extensively by Day, with ancient Egyptian mummified human remains this has predominantly not been the case, owing to the centuries long fetishisation of both past and present Egyptians and having been hugely influenced by the urban legend surrounding Tutankhamun’s ‘curse’¹⁷. My examination of ancient Egyptian mortuary ideologies is what has shaped my interpretation of ‘ethical’ and ‘appropriate’, and it is that remains that are unwrapped, disarticulated, or both, should not be displayed. However, as one ruling or code is difficult to apply to all instances, each set of human remains should be examined and discussed whether it is appropriate, and even logistically possible, to display. If the ethical code of the museum, or the morals of the curator, involve taking into account the beliefs of the cultural group being displayed, then the display should (as much as is logistically possible) both convey those beliefs and display the human remains within a similar environment and in a way that aligns with the beliefs they may have held.

¹⁶ ICOM 2017.

¹⁷ Day 2005, 296.

Modern museums, the Chau Chak Wing included, seem to be refocusing emphasis onto the lives of the people whose remains they display (or ostensibly display, where the remains are not definitively linked to an identity). This increase in scholarly debate surrounding ethical considerations in displaying human remains was arguably influenced by global attention to calls for repatriation by Indigenous communities in Oceania to institutions like the British Museum¹⁸.

Even with ethical codes, the interpretation of their content can differ widely by institutions, staff, and the public. Generally, it seems that while the institution may have rules that dictate whether ancient human remains can be displayed, it is most useful to examine and consider what is appropriate on a case-by-case basis. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches and collaboration is crucial, as well as encouraging public discourse and response through transparent curatorial practices.

Some museums have opted to display only scientific and medical images of mummified remains and/or reconstructions of them¹⁹, but some scholars have questioned whether the act of investigating these remains is in itself invasive²⁰, but this quandary is beyond the scope of this essay. Whether or not it is deemed by some to be morally questionable, investigating the remains in this manner is both less invasive and destructive than previous methods, and in the case of human remains with no associated identity it is the only way to learn about their life and death. In order to make assessments about ancient Egyptian mummified human remains that are on display, it is necessary to understand the historical context as well as the archaeological.

1.2 MUMMYMANIA AND WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

The word ‘mummy’ comes from the word *mumia*, a tar-like substance that was initially and incorrectly conflated with the resins used in the mummification process²¹. It was used as early

¹⁸ Swain 2016, 172.

¹⁹ Swain 2016, 175.

²⁰ Licata et. al. 2020, 2.

²¹ Meskell 1998, 64.

as the 12th century CE, and later used to refer to the substance created when the mummified remains were pulverised²². It is unknown when the term ‘mummymania’ was first coined, but the first recorded use of its predecessor, (in English) ‘Egyptomania’ was in 1810, used to describe a tourist who had been overcome with the desire to visit Egypt²³. ‘Mummymania’ refers to a more specific obsession with Egyptian mummified human remains.

Egyptian mummies have been objectified by the Western world since the medieval period²⁴, and the exploitation and trade of these human remains became increasingly globalised during the 19th century²⁵. Rather than being considered prestige items, like the material culture that was also taken, initially the primary use of the mummified human remains was medicinal²⁶. From as early as the 12th century CE the ground remains of mummies, or substances scraped off the bandages of unwrapped mummies²⁷, were also used as pigment²⁸. A compositional analysis of some mummy pigments suggested that the main substances were asphalt, bitumen, and sometimes beeswax, but that the remnants of human remains are currently difficult to detect and a non-confirmation does not mean that they weren’t used²⁹.

The lack of documentation and care for the individuals being removed from their tombs created problems and set a precedent that modern museums and archaeologists are still addressing today. While the trade in mummies continued into the 19th century, by that point they had become objects of curiosity, particularly for wealthy European travellers³⁰. Rogers argues that the ‘catalyst’ for widespread mummymania was Napoleon and the publishing of his expedition’s writings on Egypt³¹, assisted by the decipherment of hieroglyphic text within

²² Meskell 1998, 64.

²³ Doyle 2016, 122.

²⁴ Clinker 2024, 108.

²⁵ Clinker 2024, 107.

²⁶ Clinker 2024, 108.

²⁷ Languri & Boon 2005, 162.

²⁸ Rogers 2012, 202.

²⁹ Languri & Boon 2005, 174.

³⁰ Clinker 2024, 110.

³¹ Rogers 2012, 201.

the same twenty years³². Western tourism evolved in the same era as a more accessible form of the Grand Tour³³, more people becoming entranced by the idea of visiting an exciting, exotic new land, which in turn exposed more people to the concept of mummified human remains. ‘Mummy unwrapping parties’ became increasingly popular during the Victorian era, where mummies would be unwrapped layer by layer, audiences delighted by the treasures discovered and intrigued by the dissection of the human remains³⁴. These parties were incredibly voyeuristic, but the way in which they were done – layer by layer, tantalising the viewer – framed these remains as objects of mystery, and effectively ‘othered’ them. Due to the age and fragility of the remains, mummy unwrapping parties contributed to their destruction, in part leading to the creation of disarticulated, unwrapped remains. The early ‘othering’ of the mummies is important, as it allowed for the disconnect between seeing mummified remains as objects rather than dead human beings to grow³⁵.

This view was not widely challenged because it benefited and was benefited by the highly imperialist mindset of the British empire – the exploitation of these ‘others’ and the reduction of human remains to objects was an extension of the control exerted over a subjugated people by a colonising force³⁶. Britain gained control of Egypt in 1882, not only through military incursion³⁷ but also by lending money to the local government and driving the country into bankruptcy and a financial dependence on the British Empire³⁸. This parasitic relationship contributed to the British Empire’s advances in the fields of history, archaeology, and science, but also allowed for social advancement through the English tourists catered to at the expense of human remains and the local population. This created a cycle where the resulting advances in scientific research and social status promoted the continuation of these dehumanising practices and reinforced the British Empire’s global influence. As Corriou describes it:

³² Rogers 2012, 201.

³³ Hunter 2004, 29.

³⁴ Clinker 2024, 110.

³⁵ Rogers 2012, 199.

³⁶ Rogers 2012, 203.

³⁷ Hunter 2004, 33.

³⁸ Hunter 2004, 28.

“Showcasing the Empire in one’s private space was a way to acquire social prestige while asserting imperial domination through the commodification of colonised cultures”³⁹.

It is important to discuss the Victorian and Edwardian depictions of ancient Egypt, and ancient Egyptians specifically, as they heavily influenced both public attitudes towards and the display of mummies. “Mummy fiction” was a popular genre that emerged in the mid 19th century⁴⁰. Contrary to most modern depictions, the mummified human remains in early mummy fiction almost always belonged to beautiful women, who would often divest themselves of their wrappings but remain veiled in a titillating contrast between modesty and scandalous (for the time) nudity⁴¹. In Rider Haggard’s 1913 short story “Smith and the Pharaohs”, the protagonist falls in love with the mummy mask of a queen, searches for her tomb and discovers nothing but her disarticulated hand, which he kisses reverently⁴². At one point in the story he speaks to a vision of the mummy, named Ma-mee, who absolves him of all guilt for the invasion of her tomb and theft of antiquities, entrusting them into his care⁴³. Arguably a metaphor for the wider British invasion of Egypt (intentional or not), the story imbues British people with moral superiority and presents them as suitable custodians for Egypt’s historical and cultural legacy. Marriage between a British man and an ancient Egyptian mummified woman was a very common plot device⁴⁴ and the women in these stories were undeniably fetishised. Meskell⁴⁵ argues that this fetishisation extended into the mummy unwrapping parties; literally ‘stripped’ by someone in the name of entertainment, the mummy’s naked flesh was exposed to an audience who would study them to satisfy morbid curiosity⁴⁶. At the same time as they were stripped of their wrappings, they were also stripped of the provisions that they had believed to be necessary to achieve a fulfilling afterlife.

³⁹ Corriou 2021, 1.

⁴⁰ Corriou 2021, 6.

⁴¹ Deane 2008, 384.

⁴² Deane 2008, 386.

⁴³ Deane 2008, 388.

⁴⁴ Deane 2008, 389.

⁴⁵ Meskell 1998, 64.

⁴⁶ Meskell 1998, 65.

The popularity and global advertisement of these unwrapping parties led to the remains themselves becoming prestige items, and during this period many mummies were taken from less-travelled parts of Egypt and transported for sale in tourist hotspots in order to satisfy them⁴⁷. A trend of defacing monuments and tombs by British tourists allowed Britain, through its people, to forcefully entrench itself within the culture and history of Egypt⁴⁸. Hunter states that “tourism was inseparable from the West’s conquest of the Middle East”⁴⁹. Despite being in a foreign country, wealthy tourists enjoyed *more* privileges and deferential treatment than they would at home – British tourists were exempt from most local laws and were almost always supported in any judicial matter against the local population⁵⁰. British businesses also received preferential treatment by the government and authorities, benefiting the fledgling tourism agencies which further enabled mass tourism⁵¹. As the demand and exploitation grew, the Egyptian Antiquities Law of 1835 was introduced in order to hopefully curb the mass exodus of human remains and material culture, but the sanctions unfortunately had the opposite effect, making the remains more desirable out of perceived scarcity⁵². This act also contributed to the sale of disarticulated remains as appendages are more easily concealed and transported⁵³. Hands and feet in particular were popular souvenirs, with the Chau Chak Wing museum previously displaying a mummified foot that had been donated in an Arnott’s brand biscuit tin⁵⁴ – a popular item to bring, as the biscuits could be eaten on the journey to Egypt and then provided an airtight storage container for mummified remains. So many tourists desired to ‘discover’ mummies themselves that the person facilitating their visit would sometimes plant mummies for clients to discover and unwrap⁵⁵. Mummies were not often kept in their original coffin in order to upsell to a potential customer, and because of the logistics of transporting

⁴⁷ Clinker 2024, 111.

⁴⁸ Baber 2016, 61.

⁴⁹ Hunter 2004, 28.

⁵⁰ Hunter 2004, 28.

⁵¹ Hunter 2004, 34.

⁵² Clinker 2024, 112.

⁵³ Clinker 2024, 112.

⁵⁴ Richards 2021, 38.

⁵⁵ Rogers 2012, 202.

them⁵⁶ which has also contributed to the current difficulties in identifying the mummified remains.

Tourism declined during both of the World Wars but the trade of antiquities continued as soldiers occupying or supporting various places would return home with souvenirs. This coincided with public museums becoming more widespread and accessible to the public at the beginning of the 20th century⁵⁷, once again satisfying people's morbid curiosity at something they had never seen before, but also saw an increase in the desire to utilise the remains for academic study rather than public enjoyment. Museums, as institutions, allowed for both, which meant that mummy unwrapping parties – and by extension, private collections – fell out of practice as people donated remains for study and display. Despite the less “emotional” and more “scientific” reasons for acquiring, examining, and displaying mummified human remains, their objectification continued, particularly as media surrounding them became disseminated more widely through cinema, and through the language used by the museum itself to describe them⁵⁸. The very publicised discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb also catapulted mummies into mainstream interest – by way of the “mummy's curse” legend that assigned the deaths to those involved on the vengeful spirit of Tutankhamun⁵⁹. This event heavily influenced the depiction and reception of Egyptian mummies in film and television, turning them into a staple of the horror genre for much of the 20th century to the present day⁶⁰. Day divides the depictions of mummies in media into three periods: “the Preclassic Period (Victorian mummy romance literature), the Classic Period (mid-twentieth century horror films) and the Postclassic Period [...]”⁶¹. The ‘Postclassic Period’ refers to the author's experiences with how non-academics discussed mummies in the mid 2000s – disparagingly, “refer[ing] to curses and living mummies only in jest or credulous fear.”⁶². Mummies are seen as dirty, decaying, half-unwrapped corpses, with no consideration to the fact that preventing decay was arguably the

⁵⁶ Rogers 2012, 202.

⁵⁷ Clinker 2024, 112.

⁵⁸ Clinker 2024, 114.

⁵⁹ Day 2005, 296.

⁶⁰ Day 2005, 296.

⁶¹ Day 2005, 297.

⁶² Day 2005, 297.

main purpose behind mummification⁶³. Academics, unfortunately, are not born and raised in a vacuum, so it is credible to think that Egyptology as a discipline has also felt the effects of mummymania, which also must be taken into account when writing about perceptions and displays of mummies. The early methods of study also contribute to this. Day also found that most laymen tend to conflate the sarcophagus or mummy board with the mummy itself, raising the question of whether the human remains are necessary to display at all in the current day⁶⁴.

Certainly it is no longer necessary to unwrap the mummies in order to study them, and the practice is considered disrespectful and destructive⁶⁵. Investigation into mummies necessitated their unwrapping to expose the actual remains until the creation of scientific imaging technologies in the late 20th century, namely CT scanning⁶⁶. With this began a broader change in how mummies are viewed, and the resulting scholarship about human remains and ethical display, - and whether they need to be displayed at all - will be discussed in a later chapter.

While there is no current consensus across all museums and communities as what constitutes ethical display of these remains - and whether ‘ethical display’ of human remains is in fact an oxymoron – this thesis takes the view that an important aspect of ethical display is to take into account the religious and cultural beliefs of the ancient community being displayed, as much as is logistically possible, and that the personhood and individuality of the remains should be emphasised. The following two chapters will analyse some aspects of ancient Egyptian mortuary belief, drawing out some of the salient themes, and then chapter 4 will discuss a case study of a museum that is reassessing their approach towards ethical display.

CHAPTER 2: SELF AND THE AFTERLIFE

2.1 OSIRIAN AND AFTERLIFE MYTHOLOGY

Egyptian mythological beliefs and legends are not monolithic, but there are aspects of it that undeniably impacted mortuary beliefs and rituals. I do not believe that I have excluded any

⁶³ Day 2005, 299.

⁶⁴ Day 2005, 300.

⁶⁵ Licata et al. 2020, 2.

⁶⁶ Antoine & Vandenbeusch 2021, 566.

information that would negate the main goal behind my thesis, but there are many things I am not able to detail due to the sheer size and scope of Egyptian mythology and ideology. I acknowledge that the specifics of myths changed over time, however I believe that the core messages, as I have interpreted them, is consistent.

This chapter will also use the word ‘soul’ several times. There is no equivalent translation for the soul in ancient Egypt as the concept is viewed in modern, Western societies, heavily influenced by the Christian concept of the soul. I use ‘soul’ here to describe the metaphysical entity that existed after death in ancient Egyptian mortuary belief, and both its composite parts and a more detailed analysis of the concept will be discussed in chapter 2.2.

My interpretation of Egyptian mortuary ideology is not infallible, but the core themes that are present to me are that of identity and agency. Osirian mythology is necessary for context to the broader mortuary beliefs and rituals, but I believe that both identity and agency are seen in the descriptions of what the afterlife was like, and what limitations and abilities of the successfully transformed deceased were. The prominent aspect is that their sense of self was retained in the afterlife, and if provisioned correctly their existence in death would be very similar to their experience in life, albeit in the world of the dead.

The primary sources for mortuary ideology range from the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom, and are now referred to as the Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead. The Pyramid Texts are so named because they were found carved on the walls of various monumental pyramids, the earliest being that of King Unas from the latter half of the 5th Dynasty⁶⁷. They were intended to assist the royal occupant of the tomb in their rebirth and ascension to the afterlife after death⁶⁸. The Coffin Texts are literary and pictorial evidence from decorations of coffins in wealthy Middle Kingdom burials. Tools and instruments used in the mummification process and rituals are sometimes depicted, and the tools themselves (or imitations of them) have been documented as burial goods⁶⁹. The Book of The Dead refers to

⁶⁷ Mieroop 2021, 149.

⁶⁸ Mieroop 2021, 166.

⁶⁹ Grajetski 2021, 13.

a collection of texts, mostly papyri, found in New Kingdom burials that, collated, provide a somewhat comprehensive source of the mortuary and religious beliefs of that time⁷⁰.

The physical process of mummification and their intended purpose will be discussed in detail in chapter 3, but the ideological beliefs behind the process arose out of the creation and afterlife myths of the Egyptians. The mythical context behind these beliefs and practices is necessary to understand their reasoning. The relevant myths, as well as the metaphysical journey the deceased undertook and the state of their existence in the afterlife will be discussed in this chapter. The prepared deceased body, after all relevant rituals and rites had been completed, was paramount⁷¹, as it was both the vehicle that allowed the “spirit” or “soul” of the person to journey and stay in the afterlife, and what allowed them to occupy space in the living world as they wished⁷². This will be discussed in more detail in the sections on rites and rituals relating to the afterlife, and this section will give an overview of the Osirian myths that motivated the physical rituals, as well as the metaphysical process of journeying to the afterlife. Many aspects of the religious beliefs of the time were cyclical; life, death, and the intended subsequent rebirth were included in this⁷³.

OSIRIS AND SETH, ISIS AND REBIRTH

The Osiris myth has never been discovered as a complete continuous text; rather it has been reassembled from multiple sources, many of which differ slightly – however, the core ideologies remain largely the same⁷⁴. The key agents in the myth are Osiris, Isis, Nephtys, and an opposing force who orchestrates the death of Osiris⁷⁵. Across Egyptian history the villain of the story was varied but by the New Kingdom it seems that Seth was the most common actor⁷⁶. The basis of the Osirian myth of death and rebirth was that Osiris, who ruled over the

⁷⁰ Grajetski 2021, 6.

⁷¹ Quirke 2015, 201.

⁷² Quirke 2015, 201.

⁷³ Meskell 1998, 28.

⁷⁴ Assmann 2005, 23.

⁷⁵ Assmann 2005, 23.

⁷⁶ Roth 2000, 197.

land of the living, was murdered, dismembered, and his disparate parts were scattered him over land and water. His sister-wife Isis collects the pieces of his remains, and mummified him, among other things, to revive him⁷⁷. It was not a revival to his original state of existence – through his reanimation he became immortal, and began to rule the netherworld. Where Seth is present, he represents death – true death, where one did not or could not complete the journey to the afterlife. When listed, the actions of Isis – which included mourning, re-uniting the parts of his corpse, placing his heart back in his chest, providing him with breath – mirror the rituals performed on a dead human being⁷⁸. Assmann describes mummification of the human body as “the counterimage of redemption from death through collecting, joining uniting, and knotting together”⁷⁹. Funerary rituals did not involve the literal dismemberment of the deceased, but mirrored the state Osiris was in as he was becoming immortal. The gathering and reuniting of disparate parts by Isis was crucial, demonstrating that the wholeness and connection of a mummified corpse was a necessary part of mortuary belief.

Stela 286 contains a Hymn to Osiris, which narrates the myth from when Isis and Nephthys locate the pieces of Osiris’ dismembered corpse. They restore Osiris’ physical body (through which Horus is conceived) and make it ready for immortality. Then, Horus attends to his father’s social condition by avenging his honour and judging the actions of Seth. The judgement is a legal procedure⁸⁰, and is likely the foundation for the later evidence of mortal souls being judged before entering the afterlife. After Seth is condemned, Osiris is able to fully realise his immortal, undead self⁸¹. Osiris’ triumph over Seth and his own murder mirrors (or is mirrored by) mortals’ triumph over death through the rituals and spells associated with mummification, as well as the process itself⁸². Assmann states that “in mythic thought, there was no such thing as a natural death.”⁸³ Death went against the natural state of being a living,

⁷⁷ Roth 2000, 196.

⁷⁸ Assmann 2005, 25.

⁷⁹ Assmann 2005, 26.

⁸⁰ Assmann 2005, 64.

⁸¹ Assmann 2005, 66.

⁸² Assmann 2005, 74.

⁸³ Assmann 2005, 31.

whole person, and the act of dying was seen as inherently violent⁸⁴. Death was also an affront to the concept of *maat*, translated by Assmann as “truth/justice/order”⁸⁵, which was something Egyptians strived to keep salient. Seth (or another evil actor) was the aggressor, and by the time the myth was codified in the New Kingdom, a successful journey to the afterlife was seen as victory over Seth, and by extension, death itself. Death was something undesirable and unjust that could be fought against and conquered⁸⁶ – but not permanently, as it was a necessary opposition for life⁸⁷.

The sexual union of Osiris and Isis was one of the necessary steps to fully revive and immortalise Osiris also created the god Horus, a very prominent figure in funerary rituals and beliefs⁸⁸. In some versions of the myth, Horus avenges his father by judging and then condemning his murderer⁸⁹. He is the one who restores Osiris’ honour through the humiliation of his adversary, and facilitates Osiris’ return to rulership by asking Geb (the god of the earth, the one with the most authority) to acknowledge Osiris as king of the netherworld⁹⁰. Filial piety, ancestor worship, and religious festivals were important aspects of both communicating with the dead and ensuring their satiated existence in the afterlife.

GETTING TO THE AFTERLIFE

This section will explain what happened to a person, in the beliefs of the Egyptians, as they navigated the stage between dying and entering the desired afterlife⁹¹. Dying was not seen as the precursor of death, and if the person’s physical body was transformed metaphysically through the successful process of mortuary rituals and spells, then they would be able to

⁸⁴ Assmann 2005, 31.

⁸⁵ Assmann 2005, 67.

⁸⁶ Assmann 2005, 67.

⁸⁷ Assmann 2005, 70.

⁸⁸ Roth 2000, 197.

⁸⁹ Assmann 2005, 38.

⁹⁰ Assmann 2005, 42.

⁹¹ While in some contexts ‘netherworld’ and ‘afterlife’ may be used interchangeably, in this thesis ‘netherworld’ comprises the entire Amduat (world of the dead and the gods who rule there) while ‘afterlife’ refers to the end goal, where the metaphysical self will exist primarily once the deceased has successfully completed their journey.

navigate their way through the netherworld and, hopefully, reach the afterlife. This process would have been narrated by a priest during the physical process, as the evidence primarily comes from spells, laments, and recitations intended to be performed along with physical rituals and processes. They are performed *on* or done to the corpse of the deceased. This section will outline the actions of the ‘soul’ of the deceased, assuming that all outside rituals, rites, and processes were performed correctly and the deceased was interred in their tomb with the appropriate accoutrement. The end state of this process for the deceased was physical immortality, through mummification, and metaphysical immortality, through, among other things, becoming synchronised with Osiris⁹². It was necessary for the deceased to emulate Osiris so that they could surmount death in the same way. Isis was a common image on tomb walls, as the very depiction of her (and by extension, the spells she would recite) had the ability to transform the coffin into a live-giving, womb-like vessel that would help facilitate the deceased’s rebirth⁹³.

A prominent aspect of the deceased’s journey underwent changes across the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, labelled as the Judgement of the Dead. While the actors and roles changed, the obstacle – judging the deceased’s moral character according to the standards at the time – is fairly static. It also arguably mirrors or is heavily influenced by the judgement of Seth by Horus. The difference between the Judgement of the Dead as codified during the New Kingdom and as it was in the myth of Osiris is that the dishonour that prevents reanimation now lay with the deceased, not in the act of their death⁹⁴. The heart of the deceased, believed to be the source of emotion and thought, where the ‘self’ was located, in essence, was weighed against a feather that represented the force of *maat*⁹⁵. The beating of the heart was equated to speech, and thought to be the uniting force behind a functioning, live human body⁹⁶. Within the judgement, the life of the deceased was analysed for wrongdoings, and one who was found wanting against *maat* would have their hearts eaten by the monster Ammit⁹⁷, also called the

⁹² Assmann 2005, 70.

⁹³ Assmann 2005, 35.

⁹⁴ Assman 2005, 73.

⁹⁵ Assmann 2005, 75.

⁹⁶ Assmann 2005, 28.

⁹⁷ Grajetski 2021, 6.

“Devourer”⁹⁸. The language describing the “activation” of the heart of the dead person during the mummification process is often translated as “awoken”, before which it is “weary”⁹⁹. The heart must be mummified, awoken, and placed in the correct position before the deceased can journey to the afterlife¹⁰⁰. Evidence from the Coffin Texts suggests that the Judgement took place in the physical world at the end of the embalming process where it would be acted out by the presiding priests¹⁰¹. It was the complement to the prevention of physical decay – exonerating the deceased of their wrongdoings in life allowed for the continuation and preservation of the ‘soul’ or ‘selfhood’ of the deceased. If the deceased was condemned they were thought to be a follower of Seth, and Ammit subjected them to a permanent death with no hope of salvation¹⁰².

Later in the New Kingdom, evidence suggests that the deceased was instead judged by Osiris along with forty two others, but the only action necessary for the deceased was to declare their innocence of each specific wrongdoing in their life, which would be presented as a list¹⁰³. By denying each crime, chapter 125 of the Book of the dead states that the deceased was “[...] purified from all the evils he committed (things such as murder, lying, religious taboos, professional conduct¹⁰⁴ [...] Gazing upon the face of the gods.”¹⁰⁵. This allowed the dead person to continue their journey and successfully enter the afterlife¹⁰⁶.

In the Coffin Texts spell 839 the journey was presented as fraught with dangers and potential saboteurs – obstacles that the deceased must avoid or overcome on their way, separate from the judgement of their character¹⁰⁷. If they were not victorious against these forces, they would

⁹⁸ Assmann 2005, 73.

⁹⁹ Assmann 2005, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Assmann 2005, 29.

¹⁰¹ Assmann 2005, 74.

¹⁰² Assmann 2005, 76.

¹⁰³ Assmann 2005, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Assmann 2005, 79.

¹⁰⁵ Assmann 2005, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Assmann 2005, 78.

¹⁰⁷ Assmann 2005, 143.

be condemned to a state of true death, a place separated entirely from both the earthly world and the divine – a fate which they were warned to avoid at all costs¹⁰⁸. Both this state and the outcome for those eaten by Amit have been described as a “true death”, in opposition to the death enjoyed by those who passed judgement successfully. A “true death” involved the complete erasure of the deceased’s identity, their ability to communicate with anyone, dead or alive, and robbed them of the agency enjoyed by those who completed the journey to the afterlife, discussed in the following section.

“LIVING” IN THE AFTERLIFE

The final resting place of successfully transformed dead was only one part of the netherworld – the entire realm was called the Amduat¹⁰⁹. It encompassed places including where the journey of the deceased would take place, the kingdom and court of Osiris, and perhaps, the space where unsuccessful souls were destroyed. The presence of Re during the night is consistent, although his level of involvement and salience within the netherworld differs across the span of ancient Egypt. The process of resurrection, if the initial mummification and various rituals was done correctly, took place repeatedly each night¹¹⁰. Nighttime, when the sun was seemingly absent from the world above, was when Re illuminated the netherworld, sometimes noted as being the one to ‘wake’ the dead¹¹¹. Some of the dead would then accompany Re in their metaphysical form as he returned to illuminate the world of the living¹¹².

The afterlife was seen as a place where one was outside of the reach of death, able to live functionally as they had in life but gaining access to the benefits of liminality¹¹³. The world of the fully-realised dead mirrored the world of the living, but the dead could not self-sustain – they relied on the living for any comforts they might enjoy, although the goddesses Nut and

¹⁰⁸ Assmann 2005, 144.

¹⁰⁹ Assmann 2005, 401.

¹¹⁰ Meskell 2002, 184.

¹¹¹ Assmann 2005, 69.

¹¹² Roth 2000, 198.

¹¹³ Assmann 2005, 143.

Hathor (often referenced as one Goddess of the West¹¹⁴, which can also be used as a title for Isis¹¹⁵ would both provide food and drink¹¹⁶. There was a social ladder available to climb, with Osiris at the head of the court and closeness to him was the goal¹¹⁷.

They could be affected after they completed the full transformation and achieved immortality, such as if they were no longer receiving offerings or if their tomb had been disturbed or damaged¹¹⁸, as was the case of someone named Nebusmekh. Whether or not he actually existed, the story – in which he is disturbed and agitated because the ritual tools in his tomb as well as his coffin were damaged, and he was only able to rest when they were replaced – demonstrates that the longevity and state of the tomb was important for the deceased after they were interred¹¹⁹.

In the New Kingdom, one of the places where successfully transported souls dwelled was named as the “Field of Reeds”, a liminal space where Re would illuminate for one hour each day during the progress of the sun¹²⁰. The salience of Re within the mortuary beliefs and practices increased during the Amarna Period¹²¹, with the realm of the dead thought to be at Amarna, travelling with the Aten to be provided for at the Great Temple¹²². After Akhenaten’s death the status quo of the netherworld being subterranean was reestablished, but the idea of some or all of the dead accompanying Re each day remained a fairly consistent theme¹²³.

¹¹⁴ Assmann 2005, 153.

¹¹⁵ Assmann 2005, 155.

¹¹⁶ Assmann 2005, 153.

¹¹⁷ Assmann 2005, 161.

¹¹⁸ Assmann 2005, 181.

¹¹⁹ Meskell 2002, 187.

¹²⁰ Assmann 2005, 233.

¹²¹ Assmann 2005, 217.

¹²² Assmann 2005, 217.

¹²³ Assmann 2005, 217.

After the sun set, Re resided in the netherworld with the dead, and some of them would accompany him in his journey across the sky as the sun rose¹²⁴. Book of the Dead chapter 68 (reflected in Coffin Texts 225) describes a place where dead people were made to walk upside down in filth and excrement, but this is in a drastic comparison to where the fully-realised, fully-transformed, successfully immortalised dead went – a place of paradise¹²⁵. While the world of the dead was separate from the world of the living, the liminality of the dead (outlined in detail in the next section) allowed them to both pass between that space and be contacted by the living. A letter from an Old Kingdom tomb from the son of the deceased implores the dead man to protect him from harm¹²⁶. In another tomb from the same period a dead man's widow and son implore him to enact justice on those who have robbed them of their rightful inheritance¹²⁷. These letters indicate that the dead could still act as agents in the living world, and could be communicated with in the netherworld. They could also travel to the world of the living during the day in one of their metaphysical forms.

Direct references to the concept of “going forth by day” appear during the Middle Kingdom and are common by the New Kingdom¹²⁸. It described the soul of the deceased acting on a desire to behold the light of day and enter the world of the living¹²⁹. The Book of the Dead contains a section titled “The Spells of Going Forth by Day” and presents one of the primary symbols for this concept at the time: a false door through which the deceased could both receive offerings and exit the netherworld through their tomb into the daylight¹³⁰. The door was decorated with inscriptions, formulaic, narrative, and in the form of prayers, and images of Osiris, Anubis, Sokar, and Re¹³¹. After the Amarna period the fully realised false door was replaced with an imitation stela¹³² but functioned in the same way. The form that it was

¹²⁴ Assmann 2005, 401.

¹²⁵ Assmann 2005, 130.

¹²⁶ Assmann 2005, 159.

¹²⁷ Assmann 2005, 160.

¹²⁸ Assmann 2005, 202.

¹²⁹ Assmann 2005, 209.

¹³⁰ Assmann 2005, 210.

¹³¹ Assmann 2005, 211.

¹³² Assmann 2005, 211.

necessary for the deceased to take in order to travel will be discussed in the chapter on the nature of the soul in ancient Egypt, however it is important to know that the deceased did not interact with the world in the form of a reborn body or in the form of their mummified remains¹³³, but as a metaphysical concept. While the physical rituals that will be discussed in chapter 3 did not give the deceased literal, physical agency, they, along with the performed spells, gave their metaphysical form agency. Once successfully transformed, they were able to live much as they had in their life – if properly provided for. Regardless of their provisions in the way of household items such as furniture, their metaphysical self was able to move between the boundaries of the netherworld and the living world and interact with the population of each, as well as deities like Osiris and Hathor. Assmann identifies four primary loci that the deceased would visit: their tomb, their home, their garden, and the location of festivals at the time that they occurred in order to partake in worship and celebration alongside the living¹³⁴. Festivals were opportunities to communicate and give offerings to the dead during the liminal space created by cultic religious activity or particular days as identified by religious authorities, or passed down through cultural tradition¹³⁵. Some occasions listed in requests from the 13th and 14th dynasties all the way to the New Kingdom were the Festival of Osiris, the Great Festival of Vindication at Abydos, the Beautiful Festival of the Valley, and the Festival of Sokar¹³⁶. The actions they were able to undertake in the living world – facilitated by the agency given to them through mortuary rituals - reaffirmed their cultural, religious, and personal identity.

2.2 IDENTITY AND THE “SOUL”

During the mortuary rituals which enabled a person’s metaphysical self to journey to the afterlife, a process occurred which Assmann has described as ‘dissociation’¹³⁷. In order to travel through the liminal space of the netherworld through to their final destination, the metaphysical self needed to be broken up into its disparate parts.

¹³³ Assmann 2005, 215.

¹³⁴ Assmann 2005, 219.

¹³⁵ Assmann 2005, 212.

¹³⁶ Assmann 2005, 212.

¹³⁷ Assmann 2005, 87.

The translation of these disparate parts is controversial – as mentioned in chapter 2.1, the word ‘soul’ is sometimes used to describe these aspects in order to relate it to a modern, Western audience. In this thesis I have used the words ‘soul’ and ‘metaphysical self’ interchangeably to describe these concepts, of which there are three; *ba*, *ka*, and *akh*¹³⁸. The *akh* is characteristic only to a fully transformed deceased person, whereas the *ba* and *ka* are inherent to living people but only accessible and active once the metaphysical transformation has occurred¹³⁹. They can be further related to different aspects of being: the *ba* belonged to the “physical sphere” that a person existed in, is sometimes translated as “shadow”, and related to the person’s physical body before and after death, and the *ka* belonged to the “social sphere”¹⁴⁰. The heart of the person connected these two spheres and allowed movement through both¹⁴¹. The *ka* was also related to the name of the person, and offerings are usually addressed to the deceased’s *ka*¹⁴². The *akh* is difficult to translate but it is sometimes understood as a “transfigured ancestral spirit”¹⁴³. A being more powerful than the ordinary deceased as they were not tethered to their corpse¹⁴⁴, the *akh* was able to protect the tomb where their body was located by some degree of physical or metaphysical effect on potential looters¹⁴⁵. Names are important as an identifier of a person’s composite parts, and more simply personal names signify that someone exists¹⁴⁶. The heart and the corpse also formed part of a person’s identity and were crucial to preserving it and facilitating their metaphysical transformation, but they will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

¹³⁸ Assmann 2005, 87.

¹³⁹ Assmann 2005, 89.

¹⁴⁰ Assmann 2005, 89.

¹⁴¹ Assmann 2005, 89.

¹⁴² Grajetski 2021, 7.

¹⁴³ Assmann 2005, 52.

¹⁴⁴ Wendrich 2010, 209.

¹⁴⁵ Grajetski 2021, 7.

¹⁴⁶ Wendrich 2010, 205.

The form of the *ba*, pictorially, is a bird, often with the head of the person it is referring to¹⁴⁷. It was in this form that the person made the journey through the netherworld to the afterlife, and the form that they utilised to travel to and from their tomb. It was the aspect with the most agency as it was not tethered to the physical location of the body – the tomb – and could move freely through the worlds of the living and the dead, and accompanied Re across the sky¹⁴⁸.

Just as depictions of gods were believed to *be* those gods (if the appropriate rituals and spells were carried out) representations of the deceased – specifically, the corpse and the mummy mask, and later anthropoid coffins – were also viewed in this way¹⁴⁹. The “accuracy” of these depictions is both impossible to ascertain and irrelevant, and would have depended on the ideal characteristics at the time, as laid out by the elite class¹⁵⁰.

Names were a prominent part of funerary ritual and of great importance even after they had been performed, as an identifier of the deceased and a mechanism to keep them alive metaphysically. Names, and more widely, speech (discussed in chapter 3) were paramount as all of the transformative and protective spells would have been uttered aloud, and it was this utterance and proclamation by priests and other religious officials that gave them power¹⁵¹. The importance of names as the preserver of identity and ‘social memory’ is attested from the Early Dynastic Period through the recording of deceased’s names on their funerary stelae¹⁵². Names, in addition to personal identity, also preserve cultural, religious, and familial identity, as often one or more components of a person’s name (depending on the time period) would indicate or relate to these, and both a person’s immediate family and ancestors are at some points recorded in their tomb¹⁵³. Specific names were often re-used by families, with second names used to differentiate them¹⁵⁴. Spells in both the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead are protective

¹⁴⁷ Assmann 2005, 90.

¹⁴⁸ Assmann 2005, 80.

¹⁴⁹ Assmann 2005, 105.

¹⁵⁰ Bassir 2021, 2.

¹⁵¹ Vittmann 2013, 1.

¹⁵² Vittmann 2013, 1.

¹⁵³ Vittmann 2013, 2.

¹⁵⁴ Wendrich 2010, 106.

measures to prevent the deceased from forgetting their own name, and in wealthy tombs with areas open to the public (for the purposes of offerings, also discussed in chapter 3) statues of the deceased would encourage visitors to say the name aloud¹⁵⁵. At the tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel several inscriptions are instructive, including the following:

“O every prophet, every wab-priest, every scribe, every

scholar who will enter this necropolis and see this

tomb, may you mention my good name [...]”¹⁵⁶

Judicial texts also relate the importance of names as signifiers of identity and preservation of social memory; a punishment meted out in the Ramesside era was for the names of the wrongdoers to be replaced with ones with evil connotations, such as ones that evoked or linked to the name of Seth¹⁵⁷. Punishment could also involve the complete erasure of a person’s name with no replacement¹⁵⁸, thus destroying their identity and presumably, their ability to transform into their metaphysical self and journey to the afterlife, as the Judgement of the Dead required the deceased to reflect on their actions in life, which they could not do with no ‘social self’. *Damnatio memoriae* had the dual functions of removing the historical record of an individual and preventing their existence in the afterlife¹⁵⁹. Being a person, whether alive or ‘dead’, as in existing in the afterlife, required the recognition of the identity of that person by others¹⁶⁰. True death, whether by being found wanting during the Judgement or by the name of the person being forgotten or destroyed, was the complete erasure of the metaphysical self. Simply put by

¹⁵⁵ Vittmann 2013, 6.

¹⁵⁶ Vittmann 2013, 6.

¹⁵⁷ Vittmann 2013, 6.

¹⁵⁸ Vittmann 2013, 7.

¹⁵⁹ Wendrich 2010, 206.

¹⁶⁰ Harrington 2012, 130.

Wendrich: “a body without a name is [...] not identifiable as a person”¹⁶¹, and Meskell: “to destroy the name meant the total destruction of the individual”¹⁶².

The *ka*, belonging to the “social sphere” as laid out by Assmann¹⁶³ is closely linked with the deceased’s sense of self, including their accomplishments and moral character during their life¹⁶⁴. It had no physical mobility, unlike the *ba*, but the language surrounding the *ka* is associated with reunion, not only of the deceased’s physical and metaphysical forms, but also the idea of reuniting with deceased relatives¹⁶⁵. In Old Kingdom inscriptions the phrase “going to the *ka*” was synonymous (and dependent on) being buried in a sufficiently provisioned and prepared tomb, with all the necessary rites and rituals having been performed¹⁶⁶. As mentioned previously, the *ka* was what enabled the deceased to receive offerings after their successful transition to the afterlife. Texts from the 18th Dynasty Tomb 57 in Thebes references both the owner’s *ba* and *ka*:

“[...] may you die as one who goes to his ka [...] may your ba rest in the House of the Phoenix [...]

These concepts are crucial to understand when analysing and discussing the display of ancient Egyptian human remains in museums. While it is impossible within the scope of this thesis to include and explain every aspect of their mortuary ideologies, especially as they differed within each era, the concepts that have emerged from this particular analysis as salient are identity and agency (which will be discussed more in chapter 3). After death, the preservation of the whole, unified mummified corpse was paramount, along with the preservation and perpetual recognition of the identity of the deceased by others, facilitated (when present) by their coffin,

¹⁶¹ Wendrich 2010, 210.

¹⁶² Meskell 2002, 30.

¹⁶³ Assmann 2005, 89.

¹⁶⁴ Mieroop 2021, 365.

¹⁶⁵ Assmann 2005, 99.

¹⁶⁶ Assmann 2005, 99.

tomb decorations, burial goods, and the speaking aloud of their name along with offerings to sustain them.

CHAPTER 3: AFTERLIFE RITES AND RITUALS

This is not an extensive explanation of ancient Egyptian mortuary processes; many aspects have been omitted, such as the importance of the heart and its treatment during the mortuary rituals and processes. While fundamental to Egyptian ideology, hearts are not often visibly displayed in museums and the focus of this thesis is about human remains more broadly, particularly disarticulated appendages. This section is intended to serve as a brief overview of the relevant aspects of mortuary ritual that demonstrate the salient themes of identity and especially agency through the Opening of the Mouth ritual. The mummification process and the speculated reasoning behind it, coupled with the Osirian and afterlife myths discussed in Chapter 2, arguably indicate the necessity of the corpse remaining whole. This is an important justification for the exclusion of unwrapped, disarticulated remains from museum display. Papyrus 12.14d, from the burial of Horus at the Chau Chak Wing summarises the intended physical effects of the mortuary rituals and provisions for the dead: “*A perfect burial, may it endure upon your bones and remain upon your flesh/without destruction and without decay eternally*”¹⁶⁷.

3.1. MUMMIFICATION PROCESS

The myth of Osiris and mummification are linked, and regardless of which was created first the myth of Osiris serves as either a blueprint or a justification for the process of mummification. Regardless of the manner of death, the deceased was treated as though they had been dismembered and strewn about as Osiris had¹⁶⁸. The larger, functional purpose of mummification was the preservation of the corpse, but the binding also served as a representation of re-uniting parts of the body so that the person might become whole¹⁶⁹. The

¹⁶⁷ McClymont 2022, 165.

¹⁶⁸ Assmann 2005, 31.

¹⁶⁹ Assmann 2005, 31

importance of wholeness and emphasis on unity arguably proves that ancient Egyptians might object to the disarticulation of their mummified remains.

The process of mummification and the rites and rituals involved would take place at the Necropolis. From physical evidence of extant mummies, records and depictions of mummification, and a later account by Herodotus the basic process is understood to have occurred in this way, over approximately seventy days¹⁷⁰: all of the organs were removed, the brain through the nose and the others through an incision in the abdomen; most organs were discarded except for the ones they believed necessary to function in the afterlife (heart, lungs, liver, stomach, intestine), which were placed in canopic jars for preservation. The heart was, by the New Kingdom, returned to its original position in the body cavity after preservation but this placement was not consistent throughout history¹⁷¹. The body and all retained organs were dried with a mixture of natron and resin and removed, after which began the forty-day process of desiccating the corpse and organs so that it was dried entirely (and thus unable to rot)¹⁷². The final stage to prepare the body was to oil it with more resin and, depending on the period, stuff it with various substances including mud or chaff in order to make the wrapped figure appear more lifelike¹⁷³. The corpse would be wrapped in many layers of linen with protective amulets in between, and the face of the mummy would often be decorated (or given a mask) with a simulacrum of their appearance in life, such as wearing earrings or given artificial eyes adorned with makeup¹⁷⁴. The quality, ornamentation, and extravagance of the resulting mummy depended on the financial situation of the deceased's family – the process itself was quite expensive due to the sheer amount of time and skill it necessitated. Imported material also contributed to the expense. Cedar was one of the most popular choices for coffins, but needed to be traded from Lebanon¹⁷⁵, and other common choices were fig and acacia wood from local trees¹⁷⁶. Along with the embalmers, the process was overseen by multiple priests

¹⁷⁰ Assmann 2005, 31.

¹⁷¹ Assmann 2005, 32.

¹⁷² Assmann 2005, 33.

¹⁷³ Assmann 2005, 33.

¹⁷⁴ Assmann 2005, 33.

¹⁷⁵ Cartwright 2022, 115.

¹⁷⁶ Cartwright 2022, 115.

who would perform the metaphysical preservation and transformation required in order for the deceased to successfully journey to the netherworld¹⁷⁷. The utterances of the priests also contributed to the metaphorical re-unification of the corpse's disparate parts, with spells and prayers proclaiming the restoration of the deceased's body¹⁷⁸. Events such as the Judgement of the Dead were reenacted (with the deceased prevailing) during or after the embalming process, dependent on the specific ritual being enacted¹⁷⁹. After the mummification process was completed, one of the final stages was the procession to the tomb, comprised of the deceased in their coffin, and many other actors including priests and mourners¹⁸⁰. Water was a prominent element during many stages of the entire mortuary process, as early as the immediate transport of the recently deceased to the Necropolis which necessitated crossing the Nile river¹⁸¹. Inscriptions from as early as the Old Kingdom indicate that there was also a symbolic 'crossing of the lake' where the corpse was washed¹⁸². Prior to internment in the tomb, the Opening of the Mouth ritual was performed, discussed extensively in the following section.

In addition to facilitating the transformation into the afterlife, the coffin functioned as another marker of the identity of the deceased¹⁸³. While trends in coffin decoration varied over time, such as the salience of gendered elements or the particular shape of the coffin¹⁸⁴, they consistently represented the person who had been interred, through both depiction of their features and the writing of their name¹⁸⁵. In popular culture - potentially because of the discrepancy between the visibility of the deceased's face on the coffin, and the horror trope of the mummy whose face is swathed in bandages and thus invisible – coffins have become emblematic of ancient Egypt and the mummified human remains themselves, particularly the

¹⁷⁷ Assmann 2005, 33.

¹⁷⁸ Assmann 2005, 34.

¹⁷⁹ Hays 2010, 6.

¹⁸⁰ Hays 2010, 6.

¹⁸¹ Hays 2010, 3.

¹⁸² Assmann 2005, 32.

¹⁸³ Sousa 2019, 172.

¹⁸⁴ Fuller 2021, 57

¹⁸⁵ Fuller 2021, 58.

image of Tutankhamun's coffin and mummy mask¹⁸⁶. This raises the question of whether it is necessary to display or depict ancient Egyptian human remains if the coffins could potentially have the same impact and convey the same information, whether or not the remains themselves are inside the coffin. This will be discussed in more detail within the conclusion.

3.2. OPENING OF THE MOUTH RITUAL

The Opening of the Mouth ritual (hereby referred to as the OMR) was a mortuary ritual that was both closely connected to the physical mummification process and the metaphysical transformation that was believed to take place as a result¹⁸⁷. From pictorial, archaeological, and later literary evidence it seems to have taken place just before the deceased's permanent interring but the object of the ritual was somewhat flexible: it could be performed either on the physical corpse of the deceased or on a representation of it (which, through ritual action *became* the deceased rather than a facsimile of them)¹⁸⁸. This section will aim to show that, as well as the mortuary functions it provided, the ritual was intended to imbue the deceased with agency and preserve their identity in the afterlife. It must be noted that the OMR evolved over time, and some speculate that it had different purposes and implications in different circumstances¹⁸⁹, however this section will focus solely on the OMR as it was performed on the corpse as part of the mortuary rituals.

A potential depiction of the OMR is seen on one of the coffins discussed in the section on the human remains in the Chau Chak Wing museum (see Chapter 4). The mummiform deceased stands upright opposite Anubis who is holding a tool in his left hand (potentially identified as a *peseshkef*) while his right hand is raised to the deceased's mouth¹⁹⁰. It was referenced as early as the 4th Dynasty but definite representations of it did not appear until the 18th Dynasty¹⁹¹. The

¹⁸⁶ Day 2005, 29.

¹⁸⁷ Seiler & Reühli 2015, 1208.

¹⁸⁸ Mendoza 2017, 225.

¹⁸⁹ Finnestead 1978, 120.

¹⁹⁰ Lord & Gosford 2022, 107.

¹⁹¹ Hays 2010, 7.

ritual would allow the deceased to speak in the afterlife¹⁹² but the secondary functions of it are slightly contentious. Roth argues that the OMR represented birth for the purposes of facilitating rebirth, and that it would enable the deceased to consume their funerary meal¹⁹³.

Evidence for this ritual includes tools as well as pictorial and literary examples. One prominent piece of literary evidence is the Papyrus of Ani, who was buried at Thebes during the 19th Dynasty¹⁹⁴. Six spells (or recitations) “ensure that the mummy is animated so that it may receive offerings and be able to see and breathe”¹⁹⁵. Scenes show members of his family acting as priests and two mourners acting as Nephthys and Isis. The priests hold vessels, and one holds three tools associated with the OMR¹⁹⁶. These tools have been identified as the *peseshkef*, the *ur hekau*, and the *seb ur*. The *ur hekau* is the most relevant here; associated with Isis – a powerful and salient figure within mortuary beliefs and ritual, particularly with magic speech - , it was “a master of powerful speech [...] [that] uttered the names of deities and the words needed to invoke them”¹⁹⁷.

Scholars have tried to determine whether the mouth needed to be physically opened as part of the process, but the fact that it primarily took place *after* the extensive and expensive process of mummification makes this unlikely¹⁹⁸, although there has been some suggestion that it could also or would instead take place directly after the mummification process, before transport¹⁹⁹.

Versions of spells and rituals documented in the Book of the Dead as well as the Pyramid Texts are inscribed on a coffin currently displayed in the Chau Chak Wing. The following excerpts are direct to the transformed dead or the netherworld gods from the owner of the coffin:

¹⁹² Hays 2010, 8.

¹⁹³ Roth 1992, 198.

¹⁹⁴ Mendoza 2017, 253.

¹⁹⁵ Mendoza 2017, 254.

¹⁹⁶ Mendoza 2017, 254.

¹⁹⁷ Mendoza 2017, 256.

¹⁹⁸ Seiler & Reühli 2015, 1208.

¹⁹⁹ Finnestead 1978, 130.

“Speech by the Osiris Mer-Neith-i<t>²⁰⁰es justified²⁰¹,

[...]

“Greetings to you, lords of truth,

Who are free of sin and who live for ever and ever.

[...]

May you give me my mouth so that I may speak therewith,

[...]”²⁰²

“*May you give me my mouth so that I may speak [...]*” is relevant here. It demonstrates that speaking was not an inherent ability of the dead, it needed to be given to them and it was imperative that it be done. As is characteristic of most mortuary rituals, the recited spells were essential to the entire process, including mummification, transformation, and the OMR. In several scenes, one of the priests (acting as Horus, as the deceased is Osiris) touches the deceased’s mouth, and in the tomb of Rekhmire from the New Kingdom at another point he proclaims:

“I have come to seek/embrace you, I am Horus.

I have added your mouth.

I am your son, who loves you!”²⁰³

²⁰⁰ < > indicates disrupted, indecipherable, omitted symbols or symbols with multiple possible meanings

²⁰¹ ‘Justified’ indicates that she has become Osiris, she is a fully transformed immortal being.

²⁰² Ockinga 2022, 110-11.

²⁰³ Assmann 2005, 314.

Paternal piety and the responsibilities of children to their parents are extremely prevalent within the mortuary ideologies and rituals but will not be discussed here. The family was, however, heavily involved in the entire burial process, particularly the deceased's spouse and their children, who represented the continuation of the deceased's family line, and by extension, their name²⁰⁴ - but they also signified that the deceased's memory would be preserved, and that they would be continually provided for with offerings by their descendants²⁰⁵. As part of some cult activities an individual would list the names of their ancestors, following their family line, and they are found inscribed on stelae or in temples²⁰⁶. The deceased's family is often represented alongside them in depictions of the OMR²⁰⁷, demonstrating that familial involvement was high at many stages of the burial process, including the OMR.

Assmann lists out, compiled from various sources, a series of ritual offerings and actions that would be performed as part of the OMR. The deceased is offered a number of things, with the head priest reciting a specific line each time, the second here after the *peseshkef*:

"I clean out your mouth, I open your eyes for you,"

[...]

*I have opened your mouth for you with the [peseshkef] with which the mouth of every god and every goddess is opened"*²⁰⁸.

What can be gleaned from the evidence of the OMR and other mortuary rituals is that not only was the metaphysical transformation facilitated by rites and rituals in the physical world, but actions from the living were required to give the deceased agency over their bodily actions in the afterlife. The mouth is the vehicle for speech, linked to identity, as the fastest way to make others aware of your identity is to introduce yourself, but it was also linked to food and sustenance. The unity of the disparate parts of the deceased, both physically and metaphysically, was necessary and ensured through the enacting of these rites and rituals, as

²⁰⁴ Harrington 2012, 108.

²⁰⁵ Harrington 2012, 109.

²⁰⁶ Harrington 2012, 125-6.

²⁰⁷ Schulman 1984, 169.

²⁰⁸ Assmann 2005, 215.

well as their ability to transform and thus enter the afterlife, and live a life of comfort within the afterlife. Their desire was for this to be facilitated continuously through their uninterrupted internment within their coffin and tomb.

CHAPTER 4 CASE STUDY: THE CHAU CHAK WING MUSEUM

4.1 ACQUISITION OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN HUMAN REMAINS

The Nicholson Museum opened in 1860, ten years after the University of Sydney,²⁰⁹ from the collection of Sir Charles Nicholson, who had endeavoured to bring back antiquities and human remains for students at the University of Sydney to study²¹⁰. Born in Edinburgh, he moved to Australia in 1830 and inherited wealth which would fund his later expeditions and travels²¹¹. Nicholson “believed that cultural and educative institutions could help civilise a robust Australian society”, and desired to emulate universities like Oxford and Cambridge that had collections of antiquities for students of many disciplines to aid in their education²¹². In the mid to late 1850s he travelled to Egypt and Italy, collecting (through purchase as well as likely his own excavations) over 400 antiquities (and human remains), but documentation of where exactly he went and what he purchased are sparse²¹³. A subsequent visit to Egypt in 1862 resulted in several hundred more antiquities being added to the collection²¹⁴.

The coffin of Mer-Neith-it-es and the remains inside were bought by Nicholson in 1856-1857²¹⁵ and accessioned by the University of Sydney in 1859²¹⁶, the same year that the coffin of Meruah and associated remains were accessioned²¹⁷. One year later the museum acquired

²⁰⁹ Fraser 2022, 26.

²¹⁰ Fraser 2022, 25.

²¹¹ Chau Chak Wing Museum. *Nicholson Collection*.

²¹² Fraser 2022, 26.

²¹³ Fraser 2022, 26.

²¹⁴ Fraser 2022, 32.

²¹⁵ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 61.

²¹⁶ Lord 2022, 127.

²¹⁷ Vu et. al. 2022, 75.

the mummified body of a boy from Roman Egypt²¹⁸. Other acquisitions were obtained from private donors, many who had acquired them while being stationed in Egypt during the first and second World wars²¹⁹.

The context in which Nicholson lived and worked – colonial Australia – is important, as museums in Australia are arguably inherently institutions that benefited from and perpetuated colonialism through venerating European archaeology and history. This is still highly relevant because the creation of a new museum does not erase the circumstances under which they were accessioned, and also because the Chau Chak Wing Museum, and the university itself, are on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation²²⁰, and the museum (and the university) was founded and developed at the expense of the traditional owners of the land. This adds an extra layer of complexity to the discussion surrounding the display of human remains, as they are being displayed on Indigenous land. While the interaction between museums as an institution and Indigenous peoples, and the way they affect each other, is out of the scope of this thesis, it is still crucial to mention as it is a salient part of broader museum ethics.

The Egyptian antiquities and human remains in the Chau Chak Wing are part of the Nicholson Collection, formerly located in the Nicholson Museum before it was amalgamated, along with the university's other museums, into the Chau Chak Wing (CCWM) in 2020²²¹.

4.2 WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN THE CHAU CHAK WING MUSEUM?

Currently The Mummy Room in the Chau Chak Wing displays the human remains of two individuals and digital representations of another, and three coffins are displayed in total. The coffins displayed belong to people named Padiashaiket, Meruah, and Mer-Neith-it-es, with only the wrapped bodies of Meruah and a Roman-era child mummy who was buried without a coffin being visible. Recent dating of the mummified human remains in Padiashaiket's coffin were determined to be an unrelated woman from the Roman period, 800 years later than the

²¹⁸ Chau Chak Wing Museum Collections Search. *Mummy of a boy*.

²¹⁹ CCWM 2024, 2.

²²⁰ The University of Sydney. *The Chau Chak Wing Museum*.

²²¹ Fraser 2022, 32.

date determined for the coffin²²². The coffin of Padiashaiket is prominently displayed and is the first thing visitors see when they enter the exhibit²²³, but as there are no associated human remains with his coffin that could be potentially belong to him, it will not be discussed here. The most recent dating attempts utilised both stylistic and radiocarbon dating of two the coffins and their inhabitants, with CT imaging, photogrammetry, and laser-light scanning²²⁴ revealing further insights²²⁵. Two samples from each, one of human remains and one of the linen wrappings, were studied – discrepancies between them may indicate the re-use or handing down of linen wrappings²²⁶. For the coffin of Mer-Neith-it-es two samples of wood were dated²²⁷. None of the dates put forward by research are absolute in the sense that there is always room for contention, making it impossible in most cases to definitively match the identity of the human remains to the coffin they are in. Meruah is the most contentious, the identity of the remains in Mer-Neith-it-es currently require more analysis to determine the date. Horus has been positively identified with the individual wrapped in linen bearing that name due to analysis of sex characteristics.

MERUAH

Stylistically, Meruah's coffin dates to the mid-late 21st Dynasty, but CT imaging of the human remains inside revealed that the mummification process was more indicative of Third Intermediate Period techniques from the 19th-20th Dynasty²²⁸. This could either indicate “that the mummy was placed into a different coffin for sale [to Nicholson]”, or that the techniques used on the coffin were introduced earlier than previously thought²²⁹. The identity of the owner of the coffin will be discussed separately from what was gleaned about the human remains

²²² Vu et. al. 2022, 99.

²²³ The coffin of Padiashaiket is quite striking and very salient in the exhibit – it raises the question of whether actual human remains are necessary to display in order to evoke familiarity and understanding of the past.

²²⁴ Lord 2022, 129.

²²⁵ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 57.

²²⁶ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 57.

²²⁷ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 58.

²²⁸ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 57.

²²⁹ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 57.

from examination, as there is contention over whether they are associated with each other. Displayed in the exhibit are the case and lid of an anthropoid, likely inner coffin and an associated mummy board²³⁰. At the time Meruah died, mortuary customs tended towards group burials, which meant less space for individualised decoration and burial goods, meaning that their transformative powers needed to be exercised solely through the coffin instead²³¹. Her sex is depicted on her coffin in the styles of the 21st Dynasty; visible earrings, hidden ears, depiction of breasts, nail polish, and a feminine collar²³². Her coffin titles her ‘Chantress of Amun’, a role entailing temple and religious festival work for Amun-Re, involving singing and dancing and perhaps performances at funerals, but also potentially administrative duties. Another title, ‘Adorant of Mut in Isheru’ indicating that she also performed religious duties for the goddess Mut at the Temple of Karnak²³³. These are the prominent identifying roles presented on her coffin, perhaps chosen by her or by a close relative, meaning that they were likely closely tied to her personal identity. Her social status is difficult to determine from the evidence but she was likely a member of the lower elite class in Thebes²³⁴. Skeletal analysis of the associated human remains indicate that they were an adult female who had mild scoliosis²³⁵. The mummification techniques used do not rule out that these remains are Meruah, but they do not confirm it either, as the techniques were implemented over a broad range of time: from the 19th to the 21st Dynasty²³⁶. On the wall above and behind the display case containing the open coffin with the completely wrapped (in original, and then sheer archival material) body visible is a screen with a looping video. It contains both the CT scans of the human remains and a 3D reproduction, explaining some of the techniques used including the mud carapace and the filling of the bodily cavity with mud.

HORUS

²³⁰ Lord 2022, 65.

²³¹ Lord 2022, 63.

²³² Lord 2022, 66.

²³³ Lord 2022, 68.

²³⁴ Lord 2022, 68.

²³⁵ Vu et. al. 2022, 80.

²³⁶ Vu et. al. 2022, 80.

The human remains identified as Horus are both the least relevant temporally – the context of Roman Egypt is different to that of previous periods – and the most relevant ethically, as he is the youngest mummified human remains in the collection and therefore attracts the most attention and controversy. Characteristic of the time in which he died, he was buried without a coffin and with a shroud and an elaborate gilded cartonnage mask²³⁷. Under the top layer of wrappings were two papyri detailing his name²³⁸ and what seems to have served as a replacement for the texts previously inscribed on coffins and tomb walls – descriptions of his safe passage, successful transformation to the afterlife, and the survival of his memory through eternity²³⁹. 19th century translations determined the name of the child as Haranth, but later reassessments including imaging which allowed the sex to be determined supported the translation of the name as Horus²⁴⁰. The preservation of his body indicates that the embalmer who mummified his remains was quite skilled, and it probably that his family were wealthy although there are no amulets or jewels in between the layers of bandages²⁴¹. Skeletal analysis indicates he was between seven and eight years of age when he died, and his cause of death is not evident, although he possibly suffered from iron deficiency or general malnutrition²⁴². In front of and slightly below the glass display case containing Horus is a horizontal display with touchscreen capabilities. The data from CT and photogrammetry scans of his remains was turned into a 3D model, with each distinct layer – from his shroud through to his bones and internal organs – rendered separately. There are two slider bars that gradually reveal vertical and horizontal cross sections of either the selected layer or the entire model. Each layer as well as the whole is annotated, with touch-activated toggles that give relevant information about Horus and the mummification process his remains underwent, as well as brief explanations of some of the ideological beliefs behind them²⁴³. This was intended to facilitate a visitor-led

²³⁷ Vu et. al. 2022, 153.

²³⁸ Vu et. al. 2022, 154.

²³⁹ McClymont 2022, 163.

²⁴⁰ McClymont 2022, 163.

²⁴¹ Vu et. al. 2022, 158.

²⁴² McClymont 2022, 162.

²⁴³ Jansson et. al. 2022, 172.

investigation of Horus and his remains²⁴⁴, and demonstrates how new technology makes destructive approaches to examining mummified human remains redundant and unnecessary.

MER-NEITH-IT-ES

The coffin belonging to Mer-Neith-it-es was dated to the 26th Dynasty using stylistic and palaeographical analysis²⁴⁵. The remains inside, as evidenced by CT scans, were heavily damaged and disarticulated as a consequence of looting²⁴⁶, and thus after the decision was made to examine the remains they needed to be carefully excavated²⁴⁷. The wood samples taken, as well as samples from the wrapping, dated to approximately the 23rd Dynasty²⁴⁸. The discrepancy between the relative dating and chemical analysis necessitated examination of human tissue: keratin from the exposed fingernails of a partially unwrapped hand, with researchers minimising the amount of tissue taken as much as possible²⁴⁹. The keratin samples aligned with the dating of the linen, again placing the remains approximately the 23rd Dynasty²⁵⁰. This, however, does not explain the discrepancy between the relative and absolute dating. It is possible that both the coffin and the linen bandages were reused from an older burial, but what is more likely, but still unconfirmed, is that the style of this coffin appeared earlier in Egyptian history than previous scholarship has suggested²⁵¹. During the examination of this coffin and the human remains, wheat grain was found that definitively is not of ancient origin; currently the date cannot be determined further than between the mid 16th century CE – late 18th century CE, meaning that after the coffin was looted it was opened at least once more before Nicholson acquired it²⁵². The way that resin was used in the mummification process – poured into bodily cavities including the skull and torso – supports a Late Period

²⁴⁴ Jansson et. al. 2022, 173.

²⁴⁵ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 59.

²⁴⁶ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 58.

²⁴⁷ Lord 2022, 131.

²⁴⁸ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 59.

²⁴⁹ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 61.

²⁵⁰ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 61.

²⁵¹ Levchenko et. al. 2022, 61.

²⁵² Levchenko et. al. 2022, 61.

date²⁵³. The identity of Mer-Neith-it-es is salient on her coffin. It is anthropoid in style²⁵⁴, likely but not certain to be the inner coffin of a larger set²⁵⁵ and depicts her with masculine features possibly to synchronise her with Osiris to facilitate her metaphysical transformation and journey to the afterlife. On the back of the wig at the base of the coffin there is what appears to be a depiction of Anubis performing the OMR on the occupant of the coffin²⁵⁶. Despite the salience of identity, there is controversy surrounding the gender of the occupant – they are described as being the son of their father, but also referred to with a female determinative as well as with feminine gendered suffixes²⁵⁷. The general consensus is that the owner of the coffin was female and the references to her being a son are either a scribal error or masculinisation to become like Horus. Skeletal analysis of the remains suggested that they belonged to an adult woman²⁵⁸, who was potentially malnourished or suffered from a period of illness that she had been recovering from when she died²⁵⁹. The coffin is closed, and on the wall above a screen loops a video showing a 3D reconstruction of the coffin as well as a digital reproduction of what it may have looked like when originally painted, facilitated by pigment analysis done during examination²⁶⁰. A second, small screen on the display stand at the foot of the glass case containing the coffin is a continuous cross section CT scan of the remains inside, showing their damaged state prior to excavation. While the human remains associated with this coffin are not visible nor even stored in the coffin, they are still prominently depicted to viewers of the exhibit.

Prior to the most recent changes to the exhibition objects discovered in the coffin were displayed in a neighbouring display case: a small portion of the more than 7000 beads found with the remains, posited to have been a woven net covering the corpse, and an anatomically correct beeswax ear. The ear may have several explanations and none of them are more or less

²⁵³ Lazer et. al. 2022, 133.

²⁵⁴ Lord & Gosford 2022, 101.

²⁵⁵ Lord & Gosford 2022, 104.

²⁵⁶ Lord & Gosford 2022, 107.

²⁵⁷ Ockinga 2022, 108.

²⁵⁸ Lord 2022, 132.

²⁵⁹ Lazer et. al. 2022, 138.

²⁶⁰ Drabsch et. al. 2022, 120.

plausible than the others; it could be a protective amulet, the deceased could have suffered from a deficit in hearing and was provided an imitation so as to have complete hearing in the afterlife, or it could be imitating faience ears found elsewhere that are thought to have assisted the pleas of the deceased to reach the gods, or for the requests of the living to reach the dead²⁶¹.

4.3 ETHICS, CURATION, AND RECENT CHANGES

Ethical display was highly salient during the planning and curation stages of the Egyptian galleries. All of the human remains of the people discussed above had been visibly on display in the Nicholson Museum at various points²⁶², and rather than making an all-encompassing decision, the remains were considered on a case-by-case basis. The remains of Mer-Neith-it-es were considered inappropriate to physically display, owing to their initial mistreatment by tomb robbers, but some of her burial goods along with digital images of the remains were deemed important to display²⁶³. Another ethical aspect to consider was consent on the part of the viewer, so that people who have no desire to (or cannot due to cultural or religious reasons) view human remains are unlikely to see them accidentally²⁶⁴. The design of the exhibit is reminiscent of a tomb entrance, and looking in from the entrance, only the empty coffin of Padiashaiket is visible, there is a notice advising visitors that there are human remains in this room to the left of the entrance, and educators are advised to make sure students and members of tour groups can opt out of viewing these displays.

Prior to the most recent changes at the time of writing, the neighbouring case to Mer-Neith-it-es displayed some unwrapped, disarticulated body parts (as well as some burial goods from Mer-Neith-it-es' coffin): a head, a foot, two hands, and legs belonging to an infant or small toddler²⁶⁵. The other room in the Egyptian collection, Pharaonic Obsessions, displayed two hands and a foot, also disarticulated²⁶⁶. The justification for this was that their display would

²⁶¹ Lord 2022, 131.

²⁶² Donnelly & Fraser 2022, 187.

²⁶³ Donnelly & Fraser 2022, 187.

²⁶⁴ Donnelly & Fraser 2022, 188.

²⁶⁵ Donnelly & Fraser 2022, 188.

²⁶⁶ CCWM 2024, 2.

not ignore or shy away from the practices and context of the Nicholson collection when it began, and would educate viewers on the mistreatment of these and similar remains throughout archaeology's history²⁶⁷.

On April 5th 2024, 9News published an article with the headline “Sydney museum removes ancient Egyptian human remains from public display”²⁶⁸. This headline was misleading, as the decision to remove ancient Egyptian mummified human remains was only applied to the unwrapped disarticulated body parts, both within Pharaonic Obsessions and The Mummy Room. The display in The Mummy Room that previously contained them along with goods from Mer-Neith-it-es' coffin were replaced with a display of funerary masks, and a display of a Roman-era Egyptian funerary portrait was also added within the exhibit²⁶⁹. Along with the announcement of this change was the news that the museum is analysing the language within the Egyptian Galleries, and is considering more identity focused names to replace ‘The Mummy Room’²⁷⁰, which arguably contributes to the alienation and dehumanisation of these remains by putting emphasis on the ‘mummified’ aspect of ‘mummified human remains’.

These changes are part of larger reassessments of the museum's policies regarding the display, curation, and treatment of and surrounding all human remains within their collections. The Human Remains Research Project is an ongoing research project at the CCWM which pertains to the treatment, display, and response to human remains in the museum. Part of the research involves surveys of museum visitors as well as the Egyptian-Australian diaspora community and their reactions and opinions of the display of ancient Egyptian human remains within the CCWM. The museum has facilitated ongoing feedback by placing QR codes that link to a survey where visitors can input their thoughts about the displays, and has also held focus groups related to this topic. After the reassessment of the human remains and the language surrounding them in the Egyptian galleries, the next stages of the project will involve larger reassessments

²⁶⁷ Donnelly & Fraser 2022, 188.

²⁶⁸ Jeffrey, D. 2024. *Sydney museum removes ancient Egyptian human remains from public display*.

²⁶⁹ The University of Sydney. April 2024. *Museum removes Egyptian body parts from display*.

²⁷⁰ The University of Sydney. April 2024. *Museum removes Egyptian body parts from display*.

of the treatment, display, and language surrounding all human remains within the museum, including those from the Near East and Europe²⁷¹.

The guidelines for the CCWM surrounding the care and display of these remains is extensive, publicly available, and gives insight into the museum's approach and response to the display of human remains. A survey was conducted by the Human Remains Research project in 2022 of 200 visitors, with 79% indicating that they "agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'museums should be allowed to display human remains'"²⁷². A QR code is currently installed in The Mummy Room and any other rooms with human remains displayed, asking visitors how they feel about the display. While the results from the surveys will be used, the guidelines stress that malleability is vital, with decisions on human remains made on a case-by-case basis and regular reviews of the displays by the Director. Some of the CCWM's current strategies and approach are as follows: preparing visitors to see human remains and what that entails, as best as is possible; not displaying exposed, or disarticulated human remains; ensuring the language around the exhibits and display convey to an appropriate degree that these human remains belonged to living people (including using their names, where known); and conveying, as much as possible, the layers of decision making and aspects that must be considered by museums when approaching and discussing this topic²⁷³ (guid4-5).

Point 6.3 of the guidelines pertains to education and the training of education officers and other guides in specific approaches to the mummified human remains. This includes using the phrase 'mummified human remains' instead of 'mummy' and making sure this is explained to visitors and students; for student groups, having them sit (where feasible) around a particular display; encouraging the use of lowered voices, and conveying the reasoning behind the current displays, the ongoing scholarship surrounding this issue and issues specific to the museum, such as the mummified human remains being displayed on Gadigal land²⁷⁴ (guid7).

²⁷¹ The University of Sydney. "Human Remains Research Project". *The Chau Chak Wing Museum*.

²⁷² CCWM 2024, 4.

²⁷³ CCWM 2024, 4-5.

²⁷⁴ CCWM 2024, 7.

Given that, as established in the introduction, ethics can be somewhat subjective (and morality certainly is), it would be almost impossible to display ancient Egyptian human remains in a way that everyone who views it would agree is ethical and appropriate. However, gaining insight into the public's response, and the thoughts of communities that have a larger stake in this issue – i.e., Egyptian citizens, diaspora communities, and in some cases, Indigenous Australians, is vital to include in discourse as well as the opinions of Egyptologists, curators, and archaeologists. Malleability is also important, as while displays should be thoroughly researched, vetted, and discussed before they are created, museums must be open to change based on the changing discourse within the field as well as the reactions of those who view the human remains on display. The CCWM is also moving towards a more identity-focused approach to displaying these remains, attempting to de-objectify them and represent their individuality, rather than an 'artefact' from Ancient Egypt.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Marstine writes that “a substantive policy and practice of change depend upon a museum ethics of change [...] and [is] invigorated by deep engagement with the key ethical issues of the day”²⁷⁵. A museum is judged on whether it is ‘ethical’ by what discourse within the subject is present at the time of judgement. Ethical change does not mean making instant decisions so as to respond as quickly as possible – it arguably should involve involved, multidisciplinary and international research and discussion, considering all aspects involved with displaying ancient Egyptian human remains, not just curation. Marstine asserts that museums have “moral agency”²⁷⁶, where the actions and morals of both the museum as an institution and the people who staff it drive the ethics of the museum. Museums alone do not determine what is ethical display; the way that visitors and stakeholders react, interpret, and respond to it are highly influential as well. Transparency is a tool that museums and curators can use in order to facilitate dialogue with the public, accountability is another²⁷⁷. Taking accountability for past and present mistakes or injustices does not mean ignoring them after the mistakes or injustices

²⁷⁵ Marstine 2011, 5.

²⁷⁶ Marstine 2011, 5.

²⁷⁷ Besterman 2011, 240.

have been corrected (if at all possible), but allowing and facilitating discussion around the topic and the steps taken to amend them.

Within the context of this thesis, the mistakes or injustices refer to the historical treatment of ancient Egyptian mummified human remains. This is also an example of how morality drives ethics: ‘mummy unwrapping parties’ are no longer considered moral or ethical, but the issue at hand is that the way that the remains are displayed currently (or up until recently) are being examined to determine whether these practices are immoral and unethical. Thus, one of the most useful qualities of an ethical museum is malleability – the ability to examine and re-examine practices of display, and respond not only to current scholarship but feedback from the public. The Chau Chak Wing has facilitated this by providing visitors access to a survey in order to respond to their display of these remains, but have also added signage to make visitors aware of the recent changes (i.e, the removal of disarticulated unwrapped remains and their replacement with funerary masks).

The Chau Chak Wing is not the only museum making reassessments of their displays of human remains and moving towards identity-centred design. The British Museum’s 2014 exhibition ‘Ancient Lives, New Discoveries’ included a section where funerary masks were displayed at approximately the average height of a person’s face with their name listed, and visitors were encouraged to say the name of the deceased aloud²⁷⁸.

An argument can be made that the way to display these remains ethically is to treat them, as closely as possible, according to the religious and mortuary beliefs of their temporal and geographical context. One way this has been attempted is designing the space around the exhibit, such as the entrance of the Chau Chak Wing’s Mummy Room resembling the entrance to an ancient Egyptian tomb²⁷⁹. Another way to do this, according to the themes I have interpreted as salient in the mortuary beliefs, is to only display unified, wrapped remains. However, the way to abide by the beliefs the closest would be to leave these remains interred within their tomb, which, due to past tomb robbers and environmental changes damaging the architecture of the tombs, is unfeasible. This does not also solve the issue of mummified human remains that are already in the museum’s collection.

²⁷⁸ Taylor & Antoine 2014, 11.

²⁷⁹ Donnelly & Fraser 2022, 184.

The questions that then arise are, are these remains able to be displayed ethically and appropriately, according to the museum's code and the attitude and morals of the museum's context? What should be done with remains that are deemed unsuitable for display – is it more unethical to leave them in museum storage indefinitely? What are the logistics of curating displays ethically? Most of these questions are outside the scope of this thesis, although all are important and are salient in current and emerging scholarship – particularly the question of what should be done with remains that are unsuitable or inappropriate for display and can provide no scientific value through investigation.

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this thesis is not to provide a framework for ethical display, but rather to encourage people to come to their own understanding of ancient Egyptian mortuary beliefs and evaluate the ethics of a display based on their interpretation, just as this thesis is based on mine – but even those who do not have the knowledge could still evaluate a display based on their personal morals. I believe that there *is* a way to ethically display ancient Egyptian human remains, and that they are important for evoking empathy from visitors, and allowing them to engage with the past in a human-focused way, rather than learning only from artefacts. This belief only applies to ancient Egyptian human remains, as this is what I have been studying, and does not apply to Indigenous remains at all, for example. The Egyptian people of today arguably can be said to not represent cultural continuity from the ancient Egyptians, as they do not follow the same religious or cultural beliefs and their contexts are wildly different; but it is still their archaeological history, and one that they historically have been exploited over and had no control over. This is why intercultural collaboration, as well as interdisciplinary, is crucial to gain access to many relevant but differing perspectives on this topic.

Just as one perspective is limiting when considering ethics, one rule or generalisation should not be applied to all ancient Egyptian human remains. It seems more ethical and practical to consider each set of remains individually, and as much as is known, their individual context – including both the context of the identity of the remains and their time, and the context of how the remains were acquired and treated in the museum's history. The decisions should also not be set in stone; museums should be flexible with their exhibits as much as is feasible, including the way the remains are displayed and the way the information is conveyed. The language around display is also a point to consider in terms of ethics, particularly in the humanisation or de-humanisation of these remains. The Chau Chak Wing Museum in particular has evaluated the language around The Mummy Room, and has determined that the use of the word 'mummy'

to encapsulate and describe the human remains in that exhibit can contribute to their objectification. References to ‘mummy/mummies’ will be replaced with language such as ‘mummified human remains’, and the name of the room will also be changed, and while alternatives have been suggested (such as ‘The Eternity Room’), no consensus has yet been reached²⁸⁰.

This topic is incredibly complicated and contentious, and this thesis demonstrates that there are many different aspects to consider, which themselves may be debatable. Through a broad examination of ancient Egyptian mortuary beliefs from approximately pre-Dynastic times until the Third Intermediate Period, this thesis has determined that the salient aspects of the ideology were unity (of the corpse, and with the tomb), identity, and agency. Some of these, such as agency and unity with the tomb, may be infeasible to implement within a museum exhibition setting, although design decisions such as architecture can mimic the atmosphere of a tomb. Identity can be implemented as a design feature, if the name and some details about the life of the deceased are known, but even without this knowledge identity can still be salient by asking visitors to ponder the deceased’s identity and personhood. Encouraging visitors to view the deceased as a person rather than an object in an assemblage can evoke empathy and provide more specific information, putting ancient Egypt in context in terms of the people who lived in it.

While the scope of this thesis is somewhat limited to mortuary ideology and one particular museum, many questions arose during its creation that would be useful to investigate in the future; including (1) what should be done with human remains that cannot be displayed or research, and what are the ethical and logistical implications of the potential solutions? (2) is there a way to display ancient Egyptian remains while following the beliefs of their context as much as feasibly possible, barring the fact that they are now stored in a museum? (3) would displaying coffins and funerary masks evoke the same effect and humanise the past as much as displaying ancient Egyptian human remains?

Ultimately, these questions and an answer to the question ‘what would an ethical display of ancient Egyptian human remains look like?’ can only be answered by intensive research including surveys across communities, particularly Egyptian and Indigenous voices (where the

²⁸⁰ The University of Sydney. “Human Remains Research Project”. *The Chau Chak Wing Museum*.

remains are on Indigenous land) with interdisciplinary collaboration, and museums that are responsive to change and facilitate discourse from their visitors and staff.

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