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Only the dead can tell us: on ancestor worship, law, social status, and gender norms in ancient Egypt

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4. On the actual juridical function of some Letters to the Dead²⁸⁵

4.1 The so-called Letters to the Dead and their ritual background

The so-called Letters to the Dead²⁸⁶ are an invaluable tool for investigating ancient Egyptian religion. Indeed, within these textual sources lies a core of beliefs centered on the interplay between the living and the dead, which provides important insights into the complexity of the ancient Egyptian ancestor worship.²⁸⁷

Before delving into the issues related to these documents, it is important to stress that the label “Letters to the Dead” is a conventional name, a modern category used by Egyptologists to indicate a corpus of documents which is rather inhomogeneous. The only feature that unites all these written sources is that of being requests addressed to a recently deceased in order to solve a problem. Currently, there is no consensus on what can be considered a “Letter to the Dead” and what not and, despite the use of the term “letters”, many of these documents do not show the typical traits of the epistolary genre.²⁸⁸

These texts were written on a wide variety of media: above all bowls and papyri, but also statues; moreover, one letter is written on a stela, one on an ostrakon, and another one on a piece of linen. Another document which somewhat linked to the same religious milieu, the Oracular decree for Neskhons – CG 58032 and CG 46891, was written both on a wooden tablet and a papyrus sheet.²⁸⁹ Also, at first sight, the so-called Letters to the Dead would seem to be attested from the 6th dynasty until the Late Period. However, a more accurate analysis shows how most of the documents belong to a limited time span between the end of the Old Kingdom and the first half of the Middle Kingdom (end of the 3rd millennium BCE), and only few sources date to the subsequent historical phases.²⁹⁰

As for the type of aid the dead were asked for, one has to consider that a restricted number of documents can be understood as “reminder letters” referring to previous requests, and, as a consequence, their content is often obscure to modern readers because they allude to the problem rather than describe it; in a few cases, the documents are too damaged to understand the nature of the issue.²⁹¹ Nevertheless, if one analyses the texts in which the request is clearly described or where

²⁸⁵ This chapter is an extended version of two different papers of mine: R. Schiavo 2013 A, and R. Schiavo 2023.

²⁸⁶ For the bibliographic references concerning the Letters to the Dead, see the special section of the bibliography.

²⁸⁷ N. Harrington 2013, 34-37.

²⁸⁸ S. Donnat Beauquier 2019, 52-56.

²⁸⁹ See Tables 6, 7 and 8.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ See Tables 6, 7 and 8 docs: 3, 8, 14, 21, 22.

there are enough hints to understand its nature, despite the great heterogeneity characterising the so-called “Letters to the Dead”, the range of problems the ancestors were called on to solve is surprisingly narrow. Indeed, it always concerns an existential crisis related to a moment of passage: a living person who has to replace another deceased individual, by assuming the social role of the latter. Specifically, it is possible to distinguish three main themes:

1. Letters to appease an angry spirit who died a premature death. Remarkably, most of these documents were addressed to deceased women, angry with their living relatives because they died during childbirth, or because another woman was about to take over their social role within the family.²⁹²
2. Requests concerning the birth of an heir. Indeed, one has to keep in mind that in a society strongly based on the institution of the extended family,²⁹³ the lack of offspring, especially of a male son, meant the lack of a successor who could take over from the head of the family, once the latter died;
3. Letters concerning disputes over inheritance issues. This type of problem is to be understood within a broader context, which also entails the choice of the heir who should have succeeded the deceased in his social role of family chief.

In the present chapter we will primarily deal with this latter group.

²⁹² R. Schiavo 2020, 201-212. See also chapter 5. Yet not all the documents written to appease an angry spirit were addressed to deceased women. See, for example the so-called Louvre bowl, Louvre E61634 (see doc. 12); or the statue of Ahmose Sapair, Louvre E 15682 (doc. 23).

²⁹³ J. C. Moreno García 2012.

Table 6 - Letters to the Dead: end of the 3rd millennium BCE ²⁹⁴

	Document	Medium	Date	Provenance	Topic
1	Cairo Linen JdE 25975	Linen	End 6 th dynasty	Saqqara	Inheritance
2	Qaw Bowl -UC1663	Bowl	End 6 th dynasty	Naga ed-Deir	Inheritance
3	P. Naga ed-Deir 3500	Papyrus	End 6 th dynasty	Naga ed-Deir	General aid or protection – Reminder letter?
4	Chicago Vessel - Chicago Oriental Institute Museum E 13945	Jar stand	6 th / 11 th dynasty	Girga (?)	Fertility
5	Bowl associated to the Chicago Vessel	Bowl (?)	6/11 th dynasty (?)	Girga (?)	Appease an angry spirit (?)
6	P. Naga ed-Deir 3737 - MFA 38.2121	Papyrus	6th /11th dynasty	Naga ed-Deir	Aid protection – issues concerning real estate?
7	Stele of Nebetitef - Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2014.033.001	Stele	11 th dynasty	Naga ed-Deir	Appease an angry spirit
8	British Museum (EA10901)	Papyrus	FIP	Unknown	Not clear due to lacunae; general aid or protection (?)
9	Hu Bowl - UC 16244	Bowl	End FIP	Hu	Reminder letter – Inheritance?
10	Berlin Bowl -Berlin 22573	Bowl	12 th dynasty	Naga ed-Deir	Appease an angry spirit
11	Berlin Jar Stand – Berlin22574	Jar stand	12 th dynasty	Naga ed-Deir (?)	Fertility
12	Louvre Bowl - Louvre E61634	Bowl	11th /12 th dynasty	Abydos? – Middle Egyptian area	Appease an angry spirit
13	P. Berlin 10482 + P. Berlin 10481 a-b	Papyrus	12th dynasty, first half.	Asyut	Fertility
14	Cairo Bowl - CG 25375	Bowl	12th dynasty	Saqqara	Aid/protection - letter of reminder?
15	Louvre Figurine - Louvre E 8000	Statuette	13 th dynasty	-	Fertility
16	Berlin Figurine – 14517	Statuette	MK, second half	-	Fertility

Table 7 - Letters to the Dead: 2nd/1st millennium BCE ²⁹⁵

	Document	Medium	Date	Provenance	Topic
17	P. Leiden AMS 64/ I 371	Papyrus	19 th dynasty	Memphite area	Appease an angry spirit
18	O. Louvre 698	Ostrakon	20 th dynasty	Deir el-Medina	Appease an angry spirit
19	P. Brooklyn 37.1799 E	Papyrus	7 th century BCE	Theban area	Inheritance

²⁹⁴ For the bibliographic references concerning the documents collected in this table, see the special section of the bibliography.

²⁹⁵ For the bibliographic references concerning the documents collected in this table, see the special section of the bibliography.

Table 8 -Documents showing affinities with the so-called Letters to the Dead²⁹⁶

	Document	Medium	Date	Provenance	Topic
20	MFA 13.3791	Jar stand	6th-10 th dynasty	Naga ed-Deir	Not clear due to lacunae
21	Qubbet el Hawa bowl - JdE 91740	Bowl	Middle Kingdom	Qubbet el-Hawa	Issues concerning real estate
22	Horhotep Ostrakon – JdE 49911	Ostrakon	12 th dynasty	Theban area	Not clear
23	Ahmoose Sapair sculpture -E 15682	Statue	17 th dynasty	Abydos or Theban area	To appease an angry spirit
24	Oxford Bowl - 1887.27.1	Bowl	17th/ 18th dynasty	-	Inheritance
25	Moscow Bowl -3917b	Bowl	18 th dynasty/19 th dynasty	-	Inheritance
26	Munich Cosmetic Vase ÄS 4313	Cosmetic Vase	18 th dynasty	-	To appease an angry spirit
27	Oracular decree for Neskhnos – CG 58032 and CG 46891	Papyrus sheet (CG 58032); wooden tablet (CG 46891)	21 st dynasty (995 BCE)	Theban area	To appease an angry spirit

Archaeological evidence indicates that the letters were placed inside tombs, or in their vicinity.²⁹⁷ Moreover, some references in the texts suggest that their ritual deposition should happen during a ceremony performed in the necropolis.²⁹⁸

Funerals were likely one of the main occasions during which the ritual deposition could take place. Yet, even in the few cases in which the find-spot of the documents is known, it is not clear whether the deposition occurred in connection with the funerary rituals or at a later stage.²⁹⁹ According to S. Donnat Beauquier, since the letters often deal with very contingent problems, it cannot be excluded that the ritual deposition could also have been organised upon request.³⁰⁰ H. Willems, instead, stated that the ceremony was performed in connection with specific festivals linked to the cult of the dead, such as the Wag-feast, or the Mysteries of Osiris;³⁰¹ also, given the strong affinity between the letter

²⁹⁶ For the bibliographic references concerning the documents collected in this table, see the special section of the bibliography.

²⁹⁷ J. Troche 2018, 6-7.

²⁹⁸ In the Cairo Linen it is clearly stated (columns 8-9) that the sender is in the same place as the deceased, (Cf. S. Donnat Beauquier, *op. cit.* 2014, pp. 29-31); in the Qaw bowl, there is a reference (inside, columns 9-10) to some scribes who are in the same city (the necropolis?) as the deceased (S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 35-37); in P. Brooklyn 37.1799 E, it is stated (Verso, line 1) that the letter has to be recited in front of the tomb of the deceased (R. Jasnow and G. Vittmann 1992-1993, 27).

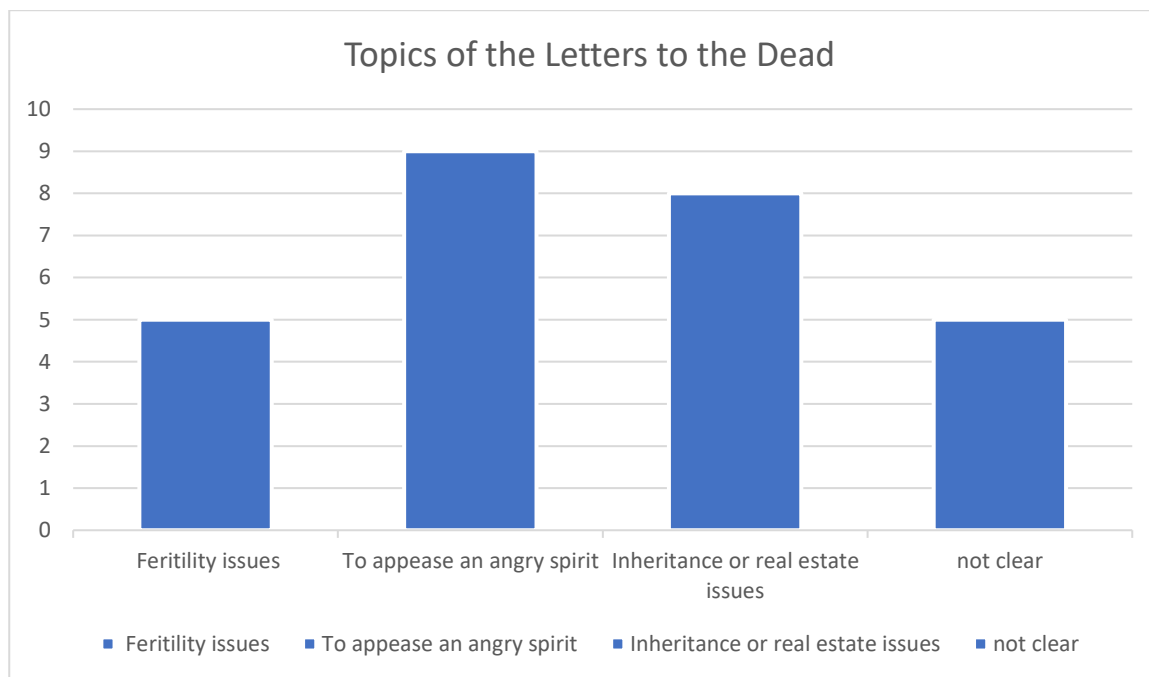
²⁹⁹ J. Troche 2018, 6-7.

³⁰⁰ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 138-142.

³⁰¹ H. Willems 2001, 354-358.

to the dead and Coffin Texts spells – 30-41, 149 and 312 – he hypothesised that the latter group of spells could have been the liturgy used during the ritualised deposition of the documents.³⁰²

The three thematic groups previously identified may provide interesting hints in this regard. As mentioned above, the “Letters to the Dead” do not constitute a literary genre invented and recognised by the ancient Egyptians themselves. Rather, these documents are to be interpreted as material evidence of diverse ritual practices focusing on the interactions between the living and the dead, which reasonably took place on diverse occasions.



The letters written to appease an angry spirit, for example, show a strong affinity with the mythical theme concerning the wrath of the Solar Eye, and her pacification through inebriation, music and dance.³⁰³

On the other hand, both the requests concerning inheritance and fertility issues (especially the request for a healthy offspring in doc. 13) can be understood in the light of a wider theme concerning legitimation and succession, which was strictly linked to the Osiris myth. As suggested by both S. Donnat Beauquier and U. Verhoeven, the mythical paradigm of these documents can be identified in an episode narrated in Chester Beatty I, recto, 14,6-15,8, where it is said that the dispute between Horus and Seth for the throne of Egypt was solved thanks to a letter addressed to Osiris, a deceased god dwelling in the netherworld.³⁰⁴

³⁰² H. Willems 2001, 345 and ff.

³⁰³ See chapter 5, section 5.3.

³⁰⁴ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 218-219; U. Verhoeven 2003, 38.

P. Chester Beatty I is datable to the 20th dynasty, but, as shown in the previous chapter, the mythical theme of a message addressed to Osiris and sent to the netherworld can be already identified in Middle Kingdom sources, Coffin Text spell 312, which tells how Horus sent a messenger (*Irw-Hr*), able to reach the realm of the dead and convey a message to Osiris.³⁰⁵ It can thus be said that for the specific cases of the letters concerning inheritance and (in part) fertility issues the hypothesis proposed by H. Willems, who identified the ritual context of these documents within the several festivals linked to the Osirian Myth (or other similar deities, such as Sokar), is quite reasonable. Moreover, these festivals were also connected with the cyclical renewal of nature and, therefore, with the theme of fertility in its broader meaning, including not only the productivity of the earth, but also human reproduction.³⁰⁶

In this regard further considerations are necessary. The rise of the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos coincided with the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. However, as mentioned above, the spread of the so-called Letters to the Dead through Egyptian history is not homogeneous. Most of the letters belong to a restricted window of time between the late Old Kingdom and the early Middle Kingdom; this means that most of these documents can be considered as an expression of the patronage network linked to the nomarchal families, which held the actual power during the First Intermediate Period and, in some cases, continue to have political impact also during the Middle Kingdom.³⁰⁷ Ancestor worship certainly played a foremost role in the self-presentation of these powerful families, the most significant evidence, being the posthumous cults devoted to certain local governors who lived during the end of the 6th dynasty, such as Izi at Edfu³⁰⁸ or Heqaib at Elephantine/Qubbet el-Hawa.³⁰⁹ This religious phenomenon should be understood as an evolution of the pre-existent mortuary cults celebrated for the elites and focused on their mortuary temples, called *ḥw.t-kꜣ*, “temple of the *Ka*”.³¹⁰ Indeed, during the historical period examined here, these mortuary cults were reshaped as public events, probably in imitation of the celebration performed within royal mortuary complexes during the Old Kingdom. It means that the participation was not restricted to just the extended family of the deceased, rather it involved large sections of the population on a regional scale. As for the case of Heqaib, it has been pointed out that his shrine was certainly restored during the First Intermediate Period in order to host a larger number of participants,³¹¹ and that his mortuary cult was structured in the form of a periodical celebration during which public processions starting from his shrine were

³⁰⁵ See chapter 3, section 3.2.1.c.

³⁰⁶ M. Smith 2017, 127 and 368.

³⁰⁷ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 174-179.

³⁰⁸ D. Farout 2009), 3-10.

³⁰⁹ D. Raue 2014.

³¹⁰ H. Willems 2014, 207-208; D. Raue 2014; A. Dorn 2015, 121.

³¹¹ A. Dorn 2015, 121-122.

performed.³¹² Also, a recent publication by Iлона Regulski has highlighted how the deceased invoked in both P. Berlin 10482 and P. 10481 a-b might have been a local ruler of Asyut.³¹³ According to her palaeographic analysis, the group of Coffin Text spells copied on the recto of P. 10482 seems to have been used more than once: as a liturgy for the funerary rituals of the deceased invoked in the letter, but also during subsequent celebrations in his honour– the mortuary cult, according to the terminology used here– during which the ritual deposition of the Letters to the Dead was performed.³¹⁴ A similar interpretative scheme could also be applied to the aforementioned Chicago Vessel from Dendera. The text of this letter begins with a quotation from a certain Idu,³¹⁵ whose post-mortem bond with his son was considered as inspirational for the senders of the missive:

*Tw=k rh.ti nt.t dd-n Idw r s3=f ir wnn.t wn.t im nn di<=i> nkm=f nkm.t nb.t
ir mi n mit.t iry.t*

You know that Idu said in reference to his son: “Whatever exists or has existed there, I will not allow him to suffer any suffering. So, do the same for me!

Indeed, it would be plausible to identify this Idu, with an influential ancestor perceived as an authoritative voice.³¹⁶ It would be even possible to identify him with one of the governors of Dendera, Idu I, who was probably the object of a local posthumous cult.³¹⁷

In the light of what has been said so far, the exact occasion during which the ritual deposition of the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issue occurred could be identified with a certain accuracy. The existence of a number of ceremonies enacted during the funerals and specifically focused on the interactions between the living and the dead have been identified in the previous chapter.³¹⁸ Above all, the rituals performed at the embalming place the night preceding the inhumation, and the subsequent funerary procession which led the mummified body from the embalming place to the tomb have proven to be particularly relevant.³¹⁹ These ceremonies did not characterise only the funerals, but they were also re-enacted during the mortuary rituals. The best documented example is

³¹² D. Raue 2014.

³¹³ I. Regulski 2020, 330-331.

³¹⁴ I. Regulski 2020, 364-367.

³¹⁵ H.G. Fischer 1900, 4-12.

³¹⁶ See J. Hsieh 2022, 163: “This Letter is informative for Egyptian beliefs about the realm of the dead. The beginning shows that the sender believes that the recipient has knowledge of what Idu said to his son. As it is not stated who Idu is, one may presume that Idu is known to all parties involved; perhaps he is a deceased senior member of the family and the sender is utilising the collective power of their ancestors”.

³¹⁷ H. G. Fischer 1968, 93-100; F. W. M. Petrie 1900, 4-12.

³¹⁸ See chapter 3, section 3.4.

³¹⁹ See chapter 3, section 3.4.

provided by the Middle Kingdom Mysteries of Osiris celebrated at Abydos,³²⁰ but similar festivals are attested from the Old Kingdom onwards, such as the Wag feast.³²¹ These celebrations played a foremost role for the self-presentation of the local governors – such as the festivals for Heqaib at Qubbet el-Hawa, which celebrated the latter as a manifestation of the god to Sokar³²² – and given that the most ancient group of the Letters to the Dead appears to be strictly connected with the patronage networks of the nomarchal families, it is reasonable to posit that their deposition might have occurred in concomitance with this kind of celebrations.

We can go into even more detail. Among these pre-burial rituals there was also a ceremony denominated the “counting of the dead” or the “counting of the surplus”,³²³ a ritualised judgment involving both the living and the dead, which shows a number of analogies with the judgment described in some Appeals to the Living,³²⁴ in CT spell 149,³²⁵ and that probably also characterised some phases of the Haker feast which occurred during the Mysteries celebrated at Abydos, as well as other similar festivals.³²⁶

Several elements seem to suggest that the ritualised deposition of the some of the documents we use to call Letters to the Dead could have occurred during this ceremony. First of all, within some “letters”, the senders often invoke the deceased recipient so that the latter could set up a judgment against their enemies.³²⁷ It can therefore be reasonable to state that this supernatural judgment pertaining to the relationship between the living and the dead could coincide with the ritualised judgment that occurred during the funerals (and was re-enacted during the mortuary rituals). This hypothesis can be further supported by the fact that Coffin Text spell 149, which clearly describes the kind of judgment of the dead, and was certainly used as a liturgy for the ritualised deposition of P. 10482+10481a-b, as clearly shown by the recent study by I. Regulski.³²⁸

4.2 Research questions and methodological issues

The fact that some of the so-called Letters to the Dead were written to solve inheritance issues is certainly significant. Indeed, a rich body of scientific literature has highlighted a certain connection between ancestor worship and the rules regulating the passage of privileges and possessions through

³²⁰ See chapter 3, section 3.3.

³²¹ H. Goedicke 1986 B, 1135-1140.

³²² H. Willems 2014, 207-208; A. Dorn 2015, 121.

³²³ H. Willems 1988, 148; J. Assmann 2005, 282-283.

³²⁴ S. B. Shubert 2007, documents: OK 2; OK 5a; OK 9; OK 18; OK 19; OK 31; MK 12.

³²⁵ H. Willems 2014, 186-187.

³²⁶ See chapter 3, section 3.3.3.

³²⁷ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 108-113.

³²⁸ The reuse of P. 10482 highlighted by I. Regulski on the basis of palaeographic evidence could be interpreted in this sense. I. Regulski 2020, 330-331.

generations, especially within societies strictly based on the institution of the extended family and in which the patronage network plays a foremost role.³²⁹ In addition, the involvement of supernatural entities in settling juridical cases is not alien to Egyptian traditions. The most striking cases are certainly the oracular consultations of certain deceased kings aimed at settling legal disputes,³³⁰ a practice documented with certainty from the New Kingdom onwards.³³¹ Moreover, from the Late Period onwards, another category of documents, rather similar to the Letters to the Dead, is attested, the so-called “Letters to the Gods”, which often deal with legal issues too – especially theft or embezzlement³³² – and for which an actual legal function has been suggested by some scholars.³³³

Given these premises, the main aim of the present chapter is to investigate whether the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance problems could have had an actual juridical function comparable to those of these later practices, above all the oracular consultations.

A possible connection between the Letters to the Dead and the oracular practices is not totally new.³³⁴ Yet, the actual legal function of the Letters to the Dead concerning legal issues has not been adequately taken seriously.³³⁵ In the present research, therefore, the aim is to focus on social history, embracing a wider general vision in which religious phenomena are analysed as significant data to investigate specific aspects of ancient Egyptian society, above all the role played by both mortuary and funerary cults within the juridical system.

In order to pursue this objective, an analysis of the relevant documents will be conducted in order to answer the following questions:

³²⁹ The list of works dedicated to the topic is quite extensive and I will cite here just some of the main titles. Earlier works date back to the first half of the twentieth century. Cf. for example: N. Hozumi 1912; K Yang 1934. One has to take into consideration, that the influence of cultural evolutionism was, during this period, certainly strong and, thus, also the axiom according to which ancestor worship was not only the “primitive form of religion”, but also the driving force behind the rise of the foremost social institutions. Cf. E.B. Tylor 1871, 21; H. Spencer 1876, 411. On the other hand, the connection between ancestor worship and rules regulating inheritance is undeniably attested within several cultures and, clearly, it cannot be considered as a mere abstract assumption biased by earlier anthropological thoughts. This theme has been indeed the object of several studies over times and, in this regard the work by the social anthropologist and Africanist J. Goody 1962 – certainly constitutes a point of reference. As regards Egyptology, the connection between funerary rituals and inheritance has been widely treated by Pestman – See: J.J. Janssen and P.W. Pestman 1968, 137-170; P. W. Pestman 1969, 58-77. See also, H. Willems 2001, 369.

³³⁰ A.G. MacDowell 1990, 114 – 118.

³³¹ According to Baines and Parkinson, it would be possible to identify the evidence for an oracular consultation occurred during the 5th dynasty, but their hypothesis has not been unanimously accepted. Moreover, it is not a legal consultation. Cf. J. Baines and R. B. Parkinson 1997, 9-27.

³³² K. Endreffy 2019, 249 and note 8.

³³³ E. Seidl 1966.

³³⁴ J.D. Ray 1981; J. Baines 1987; J. Baines and R. B. Parkinson 1997; R.K. Ritner 2002 A; R.K. Ritner 2002 B; J. C. Moreno García 2010.

³³⁵ For example, in his analysis of this documents, G. Miniaci denominates them as “legal fiction”. G. Miniaci 2014.

1. Is the formal textual structure of the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues comparable with that typical of an ancient Egyptian legal text?
2. Did the action of depositing a written plea inside a tomb or in its vicinity have an officially recognised legal value?
3. Do the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance problems and the oracular practices show significant common traits, such as the kinds of supernatural entities involved, or the kinds of legal problems called upon to solve?

In order to find answers to these questions, the present chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of all the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues. However, some methodological issues need to be addressed. At first sight, the criteria to select the relevant documents should be rather self-evident: to choose all the letters in which a deceased is asked to settle an inheritance dispute. On the other hand, a wider issue must be taken into consideration. As mentioned above, the category “Letters to the Dead” is not a literary genre recognised by the ancient Egyptians themselves, but a label codified by modern scholars³³⁶ and, actually, there is no unanimous definition of “Letter to the Dead”. Rather, as recently stated by S. Donnat Beauquier,³³⁷ it is possible to recognise “two main existing approaches”:

1. to consider the Letters to the Dead as a subcategory of the “letter” textual genre;
2. to consider the Letters to the Dead as a non-formalised genre, including, thus, also more generic pleas addressed to the deceased.

As a consequence, even the number of documents to be included in the corpus is quite variable.³³⁸ Given this premise, the present chapter will be first focused on documents which show the following characteristics: typical traits of the epistolary genre; the recipients are undeniably deceased; the main problem to solve is an inheritance litigation. Thus:

- The Cairo Linen (JdE 25975)
- The Qaw Bowl (UC 1616)
- Papyrus Brooklyn 37.1799 E

³³⁶ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 148-149 and 167-172; S. Donnat Beauquier 2019, 52-56.

³³⁷ S. Donnat Beauquier 2019, 53.

³³⁸ For a complete list of the documents labelled as “Letters to the Dead” see: J. Troche 2018, 4-5; see also Tables 1 and 2; Donnat Beauquier 2019, 52 and note 28.

Then, other documents will be considered. Indeed, the Oxford Bowl does not show an epistolary form, although it clearly testifies to a ritual action involving a deceased and an inheritance issue.³³⁹ Similar observations can also be made for a bowl found in a tomb at Qubbet el-Hawa.³⁴⁰ As regards the so-called Moscow bowl, although it is undeniably a letter concerning legal aspects, it is questionable whether the recipient may actually be a deceased person.³⁴¹ These documents will be discussed in a separate section together with other two documents – the so-called Hu bowl and P. Naga ed-Deir 3737 – which show a possible involvement of the deceased in economic issues.

4.3 Juridical rules and customs concerning inheritance and succession

The present chapter aims to demonstrate the actual legal function of some Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues. In order to pursue this goal, the pertinent documents will be analysed according to the following methodological criteria:

- To verify if the content of the letters shows explicit references to Egyptian laws and customs concerning succession and hereditary transmission of property;
- To verify if the content of the letters shows a common structure or recurrent stylistic patterns, which could fit within ancient Egyptian legal procedures;

It is thus necessary to provide an excursus on the most relevant aspects of ancient Egyptian administration of justice.

The actual existence of written testaments is the subject of discussion and a topic connected with a wider debate concerning the role of written laws in the ancient Egyptian society. Scholars have indeed identified a specific terminology – above all the word *hp* – that seems to indicate the involvement of written documents to present judicial processes,³⁴² if not properly “law”.³⁴³ It must be stated, in this regard, that several transformations must have occurred over time and no attestations of the term *hp* are known during the Old Kingdom.³⁴⁴ Moreover, a number of evidences clearly indicates the importance of customary rules.³⁴⁵ Even the so-called *Legal Code of Hermopolis*, often deemed “the first Egyptian written code of laws”, should rather constitute a transposition of customary rules, in

³³⁹ Doc. 24. See also: J. Hsieh 2022, 296-303; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 69-70 and 151-152; A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe, 1928, 26-27.

³⁴⁰ Doc. 21. See also: J. Hsieh 2022, 270-276; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 67-69.

³⁴¹ Doc. 25. See also: J. Hsieh 2022, 303-309; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 25-26; U. Verhoeven 2003, 31 and note 1; A.H. Gardiner and K.H. Sethe 1928, 27-28.

³⁴² A.A. Loktionov 2019, 121 and ff.

³⁴³ C F. Nims 1948, 243-260; A. Bats 2014, 95-113.

³⁴⁴ A. Bats 2014, 95-100.

³⁴⁵ A.A. Loktionov 2019, 161-162.

other words a kind of handbook which collected a series of judicial decisions considered as paradigmatic.³⁴⁶

As regards inheritance and succession, it is possible to identify a well-established custom – which seems to have remained stable over time – according to which the main heir was the first-born male (*s3-smsw*, in the later texts, *šr ʕ3*).³⁴⁷ This rule must be contextualised within a social system essentially built around the extended family and the patronage network: the death of the family chief did not entail, thus, just a mere passage of goods and properties to the living descendants, but a mechanism of succession for which the heir/eldest son acquired the social role and the duties of the deceased. It follows that although the firstborn was the sole heir, he had certain moral obligations towards the other members of the family, such as having to take care of them; but, in actual fact, the sources show that this responsibility could sometimes be eluded.³⁴⁸

Another essential requirement to claim an inheritance was the obligation to deal with the burial of the departed.³⁴⁹ Funerals were certainly expensive events. The complete ritual, owning a tomb equipped with all the necessary objects and, above all, maintaining the posthumous cult of the deceased were indeed an elite prerogative and an action of social display.³⁵⁰ As underlined in the previous sections such grandiose and expensive ceremonies were not a mere religious ritual to praise the dead, but a powerful ideological tool for the self-presentation of the living in order to ratify their social position.³⁵¹

A strong connection thus emerges between the funerary/mortuary cults and the juridical system, an aspect that matches perfectly with the beliefs and the practices examined in the previous chapter. In this regard, several literary sources describe the importance of family solidarity, outlining an ideological and inspirational framework where the main duty of the *pater familias* was to take care of his relatives and servants, which, in turn, had to fulfil their duties to make the family prosper.³⁵²

³⁴⁶ P.W. Pestman 1983, 14-21. K. Donker van Heel 1990; T. Logan 2017, 81-110.

³⁴⁷ S. Lippert 2013, 2-3.

³⁴⁸ S. Lippert 2013, 2-3.

³⁴⁹ S. Lippert 2013, 4.

³⁵⁰ In this regard, very useful is the notion of “functional materialism” introduced into the Egyptological discourse by K. Cooney: “I suggest the term functional materialism as a comprehensive model to describe a cultural mechanism at work in a hierarchical society. This model explains the powerful drive to expend economic surplus on socioeconomically and religiously charged material objects – objects which simultaneously embodied multiple interacting ritual and prestige purposes”. K.M. Cooney 2007, 260.

³⁵¹ See chapter 3, section 3.4. See also: K.M. Cooney 2007, 260 and ff.

³⁵² This is indeed a theme of crucial importance in the so-called *Loyalist Instruction*, where the solidarity between the different components of the society (king, vizier, elite member, servants, etc.), likewise the cooperation between the diverse members of the extended family, is considered as an essential pillar to achieve and maintain the prosperity of Egypt. On the *Loyalist Instruction*, see: G. Posener 1976; H-W. Fischer-Elfert 1999.

This pact of mutual aid – that the Egyptian perceived as an expression of Maat³⁵³ – was also one of the pillars on which ancestor worship was based, since the interactions between the living and the dead were regulated by the same patronage framework, so that the descendants must take care of their dead in exchange for supernatural protection.³⁵⁴

Especially during the Old Kingdom there must have been a greater predominance of orality over the written word. Legalistic inscriptions incorporated in the decorative program of elite tombs are well attested;³⁵⁵ but, notably, in order to describe the inheritance a father left to his son they often employ terms that clearly refer to the orality sphere, such as *wḏ'-mdw* (“divider of words”).³⁵⁶ The use of such a terminology seems to suggest that the last wishes of the family chief were expressed orally and in front of witnesses³⁵⁷ and, in the light of the customary rule mentioned above, it is not surprising: why would it be necessary to write a legal document if the eldest son had automatically right to succeed his father? In addition, the monumental context of these inscriptions perfectly matches with the customary rule “the property is given to the one who buries”, well known from several sources.³⁵⁸ It can be argued, thus, that this typology of texts was not perceived as a mere contract aimed at regulating the passage of goods, but also as an ideological tool to officially ratify the customary succession from father to son.

Although the order of inheritance was regulated by the customary rules that privileged the eldest son, there were indeed methods to sanction the passage of properties for non-normative testators or non-normative heirs. The *imy.t-pr*, well attested since the Old Kingdom, was a contract in which goods and property, but also succession of the social status and the rights related to it, could be transmitted from one individual to another.³⁵⁹ Some scholars have proposed an identification of such documents with the testaments of the modern Western law, but this parallel is not entirely legitimate.³⁶⁰ An analysis by Logan of the *imy.t-pr* written between the Old Kingdom and the New Kingdom has indeed revealed how these were prevalently stipulated in cases where the usual rules of the first-born were not applied.³⁶¹ Likewise, the aforementioned legalistic inscriptions, also the *imy.t-pr* were usually

³⁵³ In this regard, J. Assmann introduces the definition of “vertical solidarity” that has to be understood as an expression of the Egyptian concept of Maat. Cf. J. Assmann 1990, 248 and ff.

³⁵⁴ In this regard, it is indeed noteworthy that the Letters to the Dead often show sentences and expressions that undeniably refer to the same ideological substratum of the Loyalist Instructions. See: H-W. Fischer-Elfert 1994, 41-47.

³⁵⁵ N. Strudwick 2005, 187-208.

³⁵⁶ D. Czerwik 2009, 38; A.A. Loktionov 2019, 100.

³⁵⁷ D. Czerwik 2009, 38.

³⁵⁸ J. J. Janssen and P. W. Pestman 1968, 137-170; P. W. Pestman 1969, 58-77.

³⁵⁹ S. Lippert 2013, 5-6.

³⁶⁰ T. Logan 2000, 49-73.

³⁶¹ “In Metjen the property goes from his mother to his children, thus skipping a generation. Nikacankh, the Tomb in the Khaefra Necropolis, Sennuankh, etc., are not legal texts but proscriptions warning descendants not to sell the endowment

monumentalised and written within sacred spaces, such as tombs, funerary chapels or, starting from the New Kingdom, the accessible courtyards of temples.³⁶² It could be stated, thus, that the public display of the testator's instructions played a foremost role in ratifying the passage of property or succession.

Some consideration must also be made concerning the role played by the wife of the *pater familias*. During the third millennium BCE (from the Old to the Middle Kingdom) one of the most important Egyptian social units was the *ḥb.t*: something rather similar to the extended family without totally overlapping it. It included kin and dependants sharing rights over an inheritance but, notably, wives were never formally considered as members of their husbands' *ḥb.t*.³⁶³ Rather, a woman belonged, as a daughter, to the *ḥb.t* of her father; and as a mother, to the *ḥb.t* of her son. It appears, thus, clear that wives were not perceived as normative heir when the testator was the husband. Even in the later historical phases, when the *ḥb.t* as institution lost its importance, the data available to us clearly highlight how wives did not inherit from their husbands, but it was assumed that the eldest son, as a legitimate successor, would take care of his mother.³⁶⁴ In this regard, from the New Kingdom onward, it is possible to recognise particular dispositions, above all fictitious adoptions, that allowed a husband to literally adopt his wife, to bequeath her part of the patrimony. This *modus operandi* is attested in very specific situations. For example, when a man remarried with a rather younger woman and the couple did not have children, or when there was a male heir, born from a former spouse, who was, therefore considered the legitimate successor of the *pater familias*, without having the duty of taking care of the new wife of his father.³⁶⁵

One must mention also another practice attested since the Old Kingdom: a householder on the verge of death, whose heirs were too young to manage the inheritance, might indicate a guarantor to deal with the patrimony; the guarantor in turn would have transmitted the paternal inheritance to the legitimate heirs when they came of age.³⁶⁶

or to transfer it by *jmyt-pr* 'to anyone, except he must give it to his eldest son.' These then are prohibiting the transfer to someone other than the eldest son". T. Logan 2000, 66.

³⁶² T. Logan, 2000, pp. 66 and ff.

³⁶³ H. Willems 2015, 448 and 454- 461. This aspect is further discussed in chapter 5, section 5.1.

³⁶⁴ S. Lippert 2013, 2-7.

³⁶⁵ K. Donker van Heel 2016-2017, 75-86; B. Muhs 2017.

³⁶⁶ Such a practice would have been in effect since the 6th Dynasty, as shown by Fr. Berlin P 9010. The papyrus, in fact, describes a dispute over inheritance that contrasts the firstborn of the deceased to an individual who claims to possess a document (*sh*) that gives him the role of guarantor of properties, a function defined as: *wnm n sbi-n = f*, literally "one who benefits (of goods) without being able to damage them". See: K. H. Sethe 1926, 72.

In certain circumstances such a framework must have favoured episodes of corruption and abuse of power that damaged the weaker elements of society. A wealthy widow with one or more young children must have represented an easy target for unscrupulous individuals, even amongst relatives.

It is certainly significant that in the main texts concerning both royal and elite self-presentation – not only from Egypt, but from the whole Ancient Near East – it is emphasised with a certain frequency how, in order to restore and maintain the social order, it is necessary to take care of “the orphans and the widows”.³⁶⁷

A quote from the ‘*Teachings for Merikare*’, dating to the Heracleopolitan 10th dynasty, gives a clear picture of these kinds of situations:

[47] *Yri m3̄.t w3̄h=k tp t3̄ s=gr rmt.w m 3̄r.(w) h3̄r.t m nš(.w) s hr ih.t it=f*
m hdi [48] *sri.ww hr ns.wt=sn*

“Act according to Maat, so you will endure upon the earth. Console those who weep! Oppress not the widow and do not drive away a man from the goods of his father: do not deprive the greats of their positions!”³⁶⁸

In the light of the aforementioned Egyptian customs concerning inheritance and succession, the three prohibitions listed in this passage should indeed be understood as actions strongly interrelated with each other: condemned is the practice of depriving of their goods and social role the young orphans belonging to the most prominent families by oppressing the widows of the elite members. As is often emphasised in the study of ancient and modern law, such a clear prohibition can indicate how such behaviour must actually have been a relatively common malpractice. The problem must have been especially relevant – a social scourge, one should say – if it is taken into consideration that even the myth of Isis and Osiris was basically about a widow with a young son who was deprived of his position.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁷ C. Fensham 1962.

³⁶⁸ For the translation I based myself on the hieroglyphic text provided in: J. F. Quack 1992, 172-173 (lines 47-48).

³⁶⁹ U. Verhoeven 2003, 37.

4.4 Analysis of the Letters to the Dead concerning Inheritance issues

*The Letter on Linen, Cairo JdE 2567*³⁷⁰

The support of the letter is a rectangular linen cloth (25 cm x 39 cm). The hieratic text is laid out in 12 columns, but a thirteenth column has been added between the tenth and the eleventh, probably because of lack of space. The document dates to the 6th dynasty and is one of a few cases where the exact place of finding is known: a tomb at Saqqara, belonging to the recipient of the letter, a man of high rank called Sankhenptah.³⁷¹

The sender is the widow of the recipient, a woman called Irti; however, the additional column between the tenth and eleventh can be considered as a second short letter in the name of the son of the couple, Iy. Both ask for revenge for a series of abuses and confiscations carried out against them by a group of people that include a woman named Wabet, two men called Isesi and Ananekhi (probably mother, father and son) and someone called Beheseti, who, according to some interpretations³⁷² could be identified himself with the spirit of a dead man against whom Sankhenptah is incited to fight in order to overcome the antagonists.

It is surely worth noting that the means with which Sankenptah must have his revenge is by means of a supernatural trial (*wḏ^c-mdw*), through which the living and the deceased could interact with each other (columns 10-11):

[10] *i(w)=k rḥ-t(i) ii(=i) n=k ʒy ḥr wḏ^c-mdw ḥna Bḥsti ʒy sʒ n-
ḥḥi ts tw r=sn [11] ḥna it.w=k sn.w=k ḥnms.w=k skr=k Bḥsti ḥn^c ʒy sʒ
n-ḥxi*

[10] You know I have come to you in this place for the judgement of Beheseti and Ananekhi, the son of Aay. Rise up against them [11] together with your father and brothers, and your friends! May you bring down Beheseti and Ananekhi son of Aay.

³⁷⁰ The document is currently in Cairo Museum (JdE 25675). For the main bibliography, the photo and the transcription of the text, see: A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 1-3 e 13-17, table I and table Ia; B. Gunn 1930, 148-151; E. Bresciani 1990, 32-35; E. F. Wente and E. S. Meltzer 1990, 21; H. Willems 1991; S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 75-80; R. Schiavo 2013 B, 29-34; G. Miniaci 2014; J. Hsieh 2022, 111-127.

³⁷¹ A.H. Gardiner e K.H. Sethe 1928, p. 1.

³⁷² S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 65 e nota 25; H. Willems 1991, 189.

As mentioned above, this supernatural judgment involving the dead seems to have little in common with the traditional *psicostasia*: it is not a judgment on the moral attitude the deceased had during his life in order to establish his post-mortem fate. Rather, it can be identified with the ritualised judgment of the dead performed during the elite funerals, and re-enacted within the mortuary rituals, which probably coincided with the ritual deposition of the letter.³⁷³

The situation described in the missive is actually quite confusing. It is difficult to decide with any certainty what sort of relationship existed between the people involved. However, one might reasonably think that the antagonists are related in some way to the writer and his family,³⁷⁴ or that they can justify the exploitation because of a debt contracted by the deceased.³⁷⁵ Moreover, apart from some cases of homonymy (there are several individuals with the same name involved), there could also be cases where a person is given various names.³⁷⁶ Apart from the numerous interpretative discordances, scholars nonetheless agree that the son of the couple must have been very young at the time of the facts, practically a child.³⁷⁷ Such a factor would explain the reason why, overturning the traditional hierarchies of the Egyptian family, it is predominantly the widow who speaks, leaving the son a very marginal role, especially if we remember that it was the latter who was most affected by the situation, as the legitimate heir of Sankhenptah.

After a short *incipit* characteristic of the epistle form, the text begins with the description of a series of events (col. 2 – 9):

[2] *tnw-r^c pw nw ii-n wp(w).t(y) n Bḥsti r msk³ m wn<=i> ḥms-k(wi) ḥr tp=k
m rdi-t(w) nis-t(w) Iri.t s³ Iii* [3] *r sb³kk n wp(w).t(y) n Bḥsti m dd=k sdḥ sw n
snd Ii wr rp ḥ.t* [4] *n 3tw.t tw ḥr.t <=i> ḥsf s³ n s r ndr.wt=f mk ḥm w^cbw.t
ii.ti* [5] *ḥn^c Issy iw b³-n<=sn> pr=k it-n=s ḥ.t nb(.t) wn.t im=f r snḥt Issy
[6]mr=sn sm³r s³=k m snḥt s³ Issy iw it-n=s I3s.t Iiti n-^cnḥi* [7] *m-^c=k
i(w)=s ḥr it.t ḥt rmt nb n ḥm=k r s³ it.t wn.t nb(.t) m pr=k*

³⁷³ See chapter 3, section 3.3.3. See also the observations made by Willems with regards to CT spell 149. H. Willems 2014, 186-187; H. Willems 2001, 370-372.

³⁷⁴ H. Willems 1991, 189-190.

³⁷⁵ This is the hypothesis by H. Willems (1991, 190-191).

³⁷⁶ Iy is the name of both the son of Irti and Sankhenptah (column 2) and of the father of the latter (column 3 and 9). Moreover, the name Ini is to be intended as a nickname for Iy the elder as is clear from column 13. In the text there are also mentions of three different people named Ananekhi: a servant stolen from Irti (column 6), another one called “the son of Ai” (column 10-11); Ananekhi, son of Uabet (column 13). The latter two could be the same person if the name Ay is considered as a nickname for Isesy.

³⁷⁷ S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 65; H. Willems 1991, 190.

|2| This is a summary of when the messenger of Beheseti came for the skin (*msk³*). I was sitting at your bedside and the son of Irti, Iy, |3| was called to carry out the juridical procedures (*sb³kk*) with the messenger of Beheseti. You said then: “Hide it! On the honour (*snd*) of Iy the elder: ³⁷⁸ may the wood of bed under me rot |4| if the son of a man is deprived of his property!”. And then Wabet came together |5| with Isesy: they plundered your house! She took away all the things that there were to make Isesy rich; |6| they, indeed, wanted to make your son poor and make the son of Isesy rich. She took away Iaset, Iti and Ananekhi from your hand; |7| She is taking away all the dependents of your majesty, after taking everything that was in your house.

This text can be interpreted in diverse ways. According to most scholars, this was a series of events that took place shortly before the death of the recipient of the letter and continued after his death. ³⁷⁹ Donnat Beauquier is of a different opinion and claims that this passage – like every other description of events found in the Letters to the Dead – actually refers to a ritual context, in this specific case, the funeral of Sankhenptah himself.³⁸⁰ These different interpretations are strongly connected with different readings of various terms which play a vital role in the general understanding of the text.

As regards the term *msk³* (column 2), Gardiner and Sethe proposed that it might be a synecdoche that indicates the mattress or divan on which the dying Sankhenptah lay;³⁸¹ Gunn, however was the first to translate this literally: “skin”, or “leather”.³⁸² However, even using this reading of the term leads to various contrasting interpretations. Willems, for example, underlines the important economic value given to leather, suggesting that at the origins of the confiscations that Irti and her young son had to endure was a problem linked to unpaid debts.³⁸³ In a previous publication I hypothesised that the term referred to a legal document written on a sheet of leather.³⁸⁴ Yet, in the light of what has been observed

³⁷⁸ For the term *snd* with the meaning of "respect", see: *FCD*, 234.19. The term is indeed used to indicate that feeling of reverential respect mixed with awe and fear that is typically addressed to the head of the family, or to the elders, in several traditional societies. In this regard, see the expression *snd-n = i it=i im³-n=I n mw.t=i*: "I feared my father (that is, more correctly" I respected my father ") and I was benevolent with my mother"; an expression that often occurs in a number of Old Kingdom elite tombs. See, for example, W.K. Simpson 1976, 20, Pl. 15-17 and fig. 33; N. Kanawati, M. Abder-Raziq 1998, 31-36, Pl. 18 and Pl. 58.

³⁷⁹ A.H. Gardiner and K. Sethe 1928, .1-3; H. Willems 1991, 183.

³⁸⁰ S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 79-80.

³⁸¹ A.H. Gardiner and K. Sethe 1928, 1.

³⁸² B. Gunn. 1930, 148-150.

³⁸³ H. Willems 1991, 190.

³⁸⁴ R. Schiavo 2013 A, 133; The interpretation given by G. Miniaci (“the verb *ms* “bear, give birth”, Faulkner, Dictionary, 116, “gebären”; “erzeugen”; “schaffen”, Wb II, 137, 4-138, 17, which relates to the world of “procreation”,

in the previous chapters, the hypothesis – made by S. Donnat Beauquier – of a possible symbolic role of the *msk*³-skin thanks to which it was possible to claim privileges over the inheritance of the deceased,³⁸⁵ seems indeed the more reliable.

As shown in the previous chapters, a piece of leather, called *msk*³, played a foremost role within a ceremony characterising elite funerals, the Tekenu ritual.³⁸⁶ Also, *msk*³.*w*-skins were involved in a ritual action enacted during the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos, thanks to which a special status and certain economical privileges could be reached.³⁸⁷

Reference to the legal sphere could be supported also by other clues. Firstly, the use of the term *sb*³*kk* (column 2), derived from the verb *b*³*k*, “to explain”, “to justify”. The unusual causative form of the lemma, characterised by the doubling of the third radical, is quite rare: as Donnat Beauquier notes,³⁸⁸ it is attested in only one other document, the P. Berlin 8869, a private letter dating to the 6th dynasty.³⁸⁹ Notably, this message describes a series of crimes committed by a count named Sabni, and it is significant to note that, once again, the context is that of a legal dispute over the possession of some goods. It is also important to stress, that the person asking for this skin is an individual called *wpw.ti* (column 2). As demonstrated by Valloggia, this is a term that didn’t simply indicate a messenger, but a high-ranking delegated official of the patronal authority:³⁹⁰ an element that could reinforce the idea that the *msk*³-skin had an actual symbolic value officially recognised not too different from an actual legal value.

Accepting these interpretations, the subsequent situation could be outlined as follows: on the one hand the antagonists try to justify their actions by the possession of the *msk*³-skin and the rights related to it; or – according to the version told by Irti – by the fact that they extorted the piece of leather using force. On the other hand, the widow and the young son present a legitimate request, as it was the custom that the first-born son would be the only and legitimate heir.

“infancy”, and the noun *k*³, “Lebenskraft” Wb V, 86, 10-89, 11 or “Nahrung”, “Speise”, Wb V, 91, 3-13, which might be connected to the sustenance necessary to support life. Hence, *msk*³ could signify something that contributes to the offspring’s survival, a sort of inheritance, or better still, a child’s inheritance”) does not seem enough grounded. Even the interpretation of the 2nd century BCE document from which he took inspiration seems forced (G. Miniaci 2014, 39), especially in light of the role played by the *msk*³-skin within the funerary rituals highlighted in the previous chapter (See Chapter 3, section 3.2.4.

³⁸⁵ S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 68-71.

³⁸⁶ See chapter 3, section 3.2.1.b.

³⁸⁷ See chapter 3, section 3.3.4.

³⁸⁸ S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 72.

³⁸⁹ C. Manasse 2006, 153.

³⁹⁰ M. Valloggia 1976, 64.

The senders of the letter mention the deceased's wishes twice. The first time, in the text we just analysed above, in columns 2-5; the second, even more specifically, at the end of the letter (column 12):

|12| *sh*3 *nw dd-n =k n Iri.t s3 Iii pr.w it.w tw3.w m dd =k pr s3 sp-2 grg s3=k*
pr=k mi grg=k pr it=k

|12| Remember the things you told Irti's son, Iy: "The houses of the fathers must be respected - and you also said - the house of the son is of the son!".
May your son found your house, as you founded your father's house.

Most of the scholars who have analysed the so-called Cairo Linen agree on the fact that these sentences refer to something that happened shortly before Sankhenptah's death.³⁹¹ The only dissenting interpretation comes from Donnat Beauquier who suggests that it could be an effective phrase expressed by the deceased head of the household during a necromantic consultation:

Il convient toutefois là encore d'envisager la possibilité que ces paroles fassent référence à une prise de position post-mortem du défunt Sânkhenptah. Le verbe « dire » n'est en effet pas seulement utilisé au sens propre pour décrire le processus de communication entre vivants. Il est aussi utilisé pour évoquer la communication avec la sphère divine, en particulier dans le compte rendu de procédure oraculaires.³⁹²

The parallel noted by Donnat Beauquier with the oracular practices is certainly well founded. Indeed, other scholars interpreted this document as a proof of ancient Egyptian necromantic practices.³⁹³ On the other hand, though it is correct to contextualise the Letters to the Dead within an articulated public ceremony, and though their function could be comparable with that of the subsequent oracular practices, it seems more likely that this sentence was pronounced by Sankhenptah while he was still alive – indeed, as stressed in the previous section, the last wills could be orally expressed in front of

³⁹¹ A.H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 1-3; H. Willems 1991, 183.

³⁹² S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 73.

³⁹³ S. Morenz 1949.

witnesses – and reported in this letter with a specific aim. If we consider the facts narrated by Irti as a detailed description of past events, the document could be considered as a “defence plea”. It means, that the letter could be interpreted as the transcription of the arguments used by the wife of the deceased to defend her rights over the inheritance. The fact that the letter was deposited inside the tomb of the recipient highlights a certain affinity with the legalistic inscriptions that, during the same historical phase, were usually transcribed on the tombs walls to officially ratify the right of succession of the legitimate heirs.³⁹⁴ This aspect could suggest that the letter here taken into consideration may have had a certain kind of official value and could perhaps testify a juridical procedure solved through a ritualistic action performed in the necropolis.

*The Qaw Bowl, UC 16163*³⁹⁵

The medium on which the text is written is one of the most frequently used for the Letters to the Dead: the same type of bowl used in mortuary rituals and in some performative practices.³⁹⁶ In this case it is a terracotta bowl with a diameter of 19cm and a depth of 6cm. It presents inscriptions in hieratic on both sides; these are placed in six columns on the inside and ten on the outside.³⁹⁷ They actually form two separate letters, sent by the same sender, a man called Shepsi, and addressed to his father (on the inside) and his mother (on the outside).

The document can be dated to the beginning of the First Intermediate Period. As for the Cairo Linen, the archaeological context is known. The artefact was discovered during Petrie’s excavations at Qaw el-Kebir in 1924. Inside tomb n.7695 the archaeologist found the remains of a man, some objects and the bowl in question placed under the head of the deceased.³⁹⁸ The small size of the tomb meant it could only hold one body and there is no information about the identity of the deceased.³⁹⁹ It has been suggested that the letter might have been given to a mediator – a friend or a family member who had recently died – who would have brought the letter to the intended addressees.⁴⁰⁰ However, it is not possible to exclude that the body might have belonged to one of the men cited in the document, such

³⁹⁴ S. Allam 1990, 31-33; N. Strudwick 2005, 49.

³⁹⁵ The document is currently held in the Petrie Museum in London (UCL 16163). For the copy of the hieratic text: A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 3-5 and 17-20, table II and table II a; B. Gunn 1930, 148-159; E. Bresciani 1990, 66-68; E.F. Wente and E. S. Meltzer 1990, 211-212; D. Farout 2004; S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 80-86; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 35-40; R. Schiavo 2013 A, 135-140; G. Miniaci 2016, 88- 105; J. Hsieh 2022, 128-155.

³⁹⁶ On the function and meaning of bowls in relation to the ritual of the Letters to the Dead, see: S. Donnat Beauquier 2002, 209–236.

³⁹⁷ A.H. Gardiner and K.H. Sethe 1928, 3.

³⁹⁸ A.H. Gardiner and K.H. Sethe 1928, 3.

³⁹⁹ A.H. Gardiner and K.H. Sethe 1928, 3.

⁴⁰⁰ On this issue, M. O’Donoghue 1999, 87-90.

as the father of the sender (presuming thus that the parents might have been buried separately), or the brother of the sender, Sobekhotep, who actually plays a crucial role in the facts narrated.⁴⁰¹

The situation described in this letter is similar to the one of the Cairo Linen. Shepsi asks his parents for supernatural help in order to solve a quarrel about some property. It is interesting to note that the harmful influence of Shepsi's deceased brother, Sobekhotep, seems to have favoured the confiscation Shepsi fell victim to. This document also presents a request submitted by Shepsi to his parents so that they could perform a supernatural judgment against the brother:

On the outside – letter to the mother (column 4):

|4| ḥA wp(i)=t wi ḥn' Sbk-ḥtp

|4| May you offer a judgment between Sobekhotep and I!

On the inside – letter to the father (column 9)

|9| ir n=k ir.t wd' mdw <wi> ḥn'=f sh'.w=k ḥn'<=k> m niw.t w'.t

|9| Make a judgment between him and me, as your scribes are there with you in the Only City.

An analysis of the letter written to the father shows a number of elements common to the Cairo Linen. In the same way, after a typical *incipit* of the epistolary genre, the writer narrates a series of events that occurred in the past (on the inside, column 2-4):

|2| tnw-r' nw S'=k r ith r bw n.t(y) sn<=i> Sbk-ḥtp im in=k |3| ḥpS n k' m iw
s'=k im ḥn' n-w'=f m dd=k iw n <=i> sn.w (?) ḥms wnm=k |4| iw'f





|2| This is the memorandum of when you reached the enclosure, the place where my brother Sobekhotep was; when you brought |3| a bull's leg and your son arrived with Enuaf and you said: "May (you) be welcome! Sit and eat |4| the meat."

⁴⁰¹ G. Miniaci 2016, 88-105. On the other hand, Miniaci's hypothesis, according to which the aim of the document is to obtain the help of the deceased brother through the intercession of their parents does not seem valid. Rather, the fact that the writer of the missive emphasises that he was the one who took care of his brother's funeral clearly shows that the main focus of the document is an issue concerning the inheritance of Sobekhotep.

The full understanding of the text is hindered by some palaeographic and philological problems. Firstly, the word *ith* (column 2) has been translated by Gardiner and Sethe as ‘prison’, a meaning that would make the text more obscure.⁴⁰² However, based on a parallel with a document dated only slightly after this one, (P. London UC 32157 = P. Kahun LV.1), Donnat Beauquier has hypothesised that this lemma may actually have a more generic meaning, probably indicating a funerary structure.⁴⁰³

A further problem of interpretation is given, moreover, by the name of one of the characters found in



the second column; the group of hieratic signs  lends itself to different readings. Gardiner and Sethe hypothesised as a possible reading *sn <=i> Sbk-htpw*, thus identifying the individual with the same deceased brother of the writer mentioned in the fourth column of the outside. Nonetheless, the two Egyptologists, based on palaeographic observations, preferred a different interpretation: they interpreted *sn* as a proper name and transliterated the sign  as  (*s3*), rather than as  (*sbk*), thus translating *s3 sn Htpw*, "Hetepu, the son of Sen".⁴⁰⁴ Such a choice was probably the result of their excessive caution and, as Donnat Beauquier pointed out, the first interpretation seems the most likely.⁴⁰⁵

Several studies so far examining the Qaw Bowl agree in identifying the episode narrated in the initial part of the text with the funeral for the recipient of the missive (the father of the sender), or with another commemoration in his honour. In particular, Donnat Beauquier⁴⁰⁶ and Farout⁴⁰⁷ claim that it may be a ritual through which Shepsi invokes the help of his father, who, once revived, speaks – in first person or through a medium⁴⁰⁸ – inviting the sender to sit down and feast. However, a different interpretation could be considered, namely that the fact narrated does indeed refer to a funeral, but rather than the funeral of the father, it could be Sobekhotep's.⁴⁰⁹ This hypothesis is supported by what was later said in the same document:

⁴⁰² A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 3.

⁴⁰³ S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 82-83.

⁴⁰⁴ A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 4 and 15.

⁴⁰⁵ S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 82-83.

⁴⁰⁶ S. Donnat Beauquier 2009, 84.

⁴⁰⁷ D. Farout 2004, 51.

⁴⁰⁸ According to Farout, the man named Enuaf mentioned in the second column would have had this role. See: D. Farout 2004, 51.

⁴⁰⁹ A similar hypothesis was proposed by Gardiner and Sethe, but later dismissed because of the name found in the column 2: "We were, therefore, for a moment tempted to read 'my brother Sebekhotpu instead of Son's son Hotpui, and to imagine that the allusion was to that brother's funeral obsequies". See. A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 4.

|4| in i<r>r-t r=i r-gs=k ni ir.t-n dd.t-n sʒ=k ir<r>-t n sʒ=k im in sn<=i>
 krs-n(=i) sw i<n>-n(=i) sw m [...] |5| rdi-n=i sw m-m smy.tiw=f sk it-
 Sm^c r=f m ḫb.t d(β).i.w mnw 1 it-Sm^c 6 |6| mh^c.w šns mh.t sk ir<=i> n=f
 tm.t iry ir-n=f nn r sʒ=k im nfy sp 2

|4| Why did someone act against me in your presence, on the instigation of my brother and without this son of yours ever having done or said anything? I took care of his burial; I brought him back from [the city of ...] |5| and I placed him among his (loved) ones who are in the desert.⁴¹⁰ Because of him I have contracted a debt of thirty measures of southern wheat: a dress, a tool-*mnw*, six measures of wheat from the south, |6| linen, sweets, a cup-*mht*. Although I have done for him what has never been done (for a brother), he has done these things very badly towards your son.

The writer clearly states that he was wronged by his brother's spirit despite of the pious and commendable behaviour he had in his regard: not only did he recover the body of Sobekhotep from another city, but he paid the huge expenses for his funeral. This is a detail that is particularly interesting, especially if we take into account what follows in the text. Exactly as was found in the Cairo Linen, some words pronounced by the deceased man are written down:

|7| sk dd-n=k n sʒ=k im mn iš.wt nb(.wt) m sʒ=i Špsi m<=k> ḫh.wt <=i> it.t
 in |8| Šri sʒ Hnw

You said to your son: “all of my possessions will remain with my son Shepsi”. Instead, look! My lands have been taken |8| by Henu, son of Shear [alternative interpretation: Henu, son of the son].

It is important to remember that one of the most important rules that regulated the passing down of inheritance stated that this inheritance was to go to whoever dealt with the funeral of the deceased. With this in mind, it is clear why Shepsi emphasised this point, almost pedantically listing the details of the goods he had used to give his brother a fitting burial. This begs the question as to who Henu son of Sheri (*Šri sʒ Hnw*) is and on what basis of pretext or rights he was able to take possession of

⁴¹⁰ The term *smy.tiw* literally means “the ones who belong to the desert”, therefore the dead; the use of the suffix pronoun *f* might indicate that the corpse has been buried among his relatives. For a similar use of the term see: J. J. Clére 1985, 85-86.

the lands belonging to Shepsi. As the writer mentions a debt, a reasonable hypothesis is that this is the person with whom it was contracted. However, such a theory wouldn't explain the reason why Shepsi asked his parents to "make a judgement" against his dead brother Sobekhotep. So, it would be reasonable to identify Henu as an heir to Sobekhotep, and thus to propose an alternative reading: to consider *šr* not as a proper name,⁴¹¹ but as a noun, "young boy, son" and therefore translate the phrase as "Henu, son of the son", or rather the grandson of the father of Shepsi, the son of Sobekhotep, the nephew of Shepsi.⁴¹²

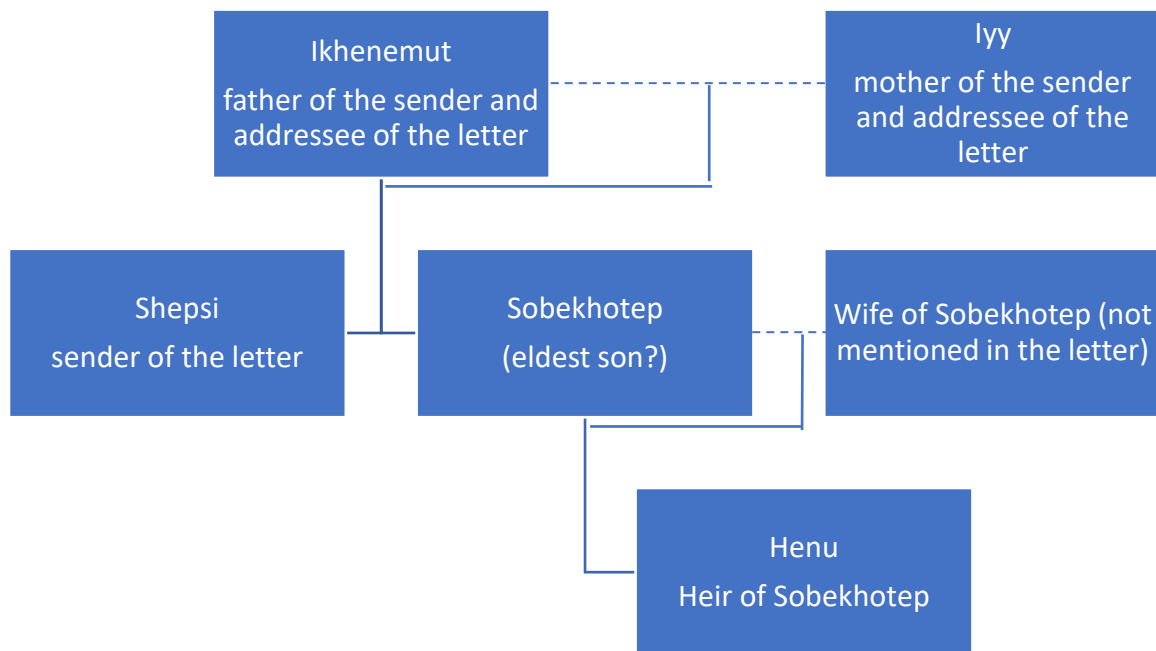


Figure 25 Reconstruction of kinship ties of the individuals mentioned in the letter

One could posit that Sobekhotep was the older brother of Shepsi and thus the legitimate main heir of Ikhenemut, but he died prematurely, probably before his father, and thus before receiving the family inheritance. Shepsi, in this case, would have been the only heir of the *pater familias*, but also, since he arranged the funeral of his older brother, would be in a position to push aside his brother's legitimate heirs, who would then have made an attempt to reclaim their father's inheritance.⁴¹³ One shouldn't forget however that we have the version written by Shepsi and that the possibility exists that some awkward details might have been omitted deliberately.

⁴¹¹ *RPNI* 329.9.

⁴¹² I was not able to find other attestations for the expression *šr sš*; however, there are examples of similar expressions that are usually translated with "nephew". See, for example, *pš-šri n pš-šri*. See: R. Hannig 1995, 899.

⁴¹³ In Metjen's tomb there is an example of an *imy.t-pr* done by a woman for her nephews. See: T. Logan 2000, 66.

The facts narrated in this document, thus, could be interpreted in the light of the same dynamic recognizable in the Cairo Linen: a man is depriving the son of his deceased brother of his property and social position, by oppressing the widow of the deceased.

It is no doubt significant that a recurrent pattern can be found in both the Cairo Linen and the Qaw Bowl: in both cases, indeed, alongside the detailed narration of a recent event in which the writer gives his version, a phrase spoken by the deceased is found recorded in direct speech in which the writer is explicitly recognised as the only legitimate heir. In addition, notably, both the documents were certainly found inside a tomb, an element that allows a parallel with the legalistic inscriptions usually written on walls of tombs in order to ratify the rights of the legitimate heirs over the inheritance of the deceased.

*P. Brooklyn 37. 1799 E*⁴¹⁴

The letter is written on a papyrus sheet 23 cm high and 17.8 cm wide; the text, in abnormal hieratic, laid out in 19 lines on the *recto* and one of the *verso*. The state of preservation of the document can be considered excellent, except for a few small scattered losses and a larger one which compromises the reading of the 19th line on the *recto* and the only one on the *verso*. Based on internal evidence, a provenance from the area of Thebes has been proposed.⁴¹⁵

The P. Brooklyn 37.1799 E is certainly a rather peculiar document. It belongs to a historical period quite anomalous for the Letters to the Dead – the second half of the 7th century BCE⁴¹⁶ – during which the religious practice of the Letters to the Dead seems to have been abandoned. One has indeed to take into consideration that apart from the document in question, the most recent Letters to the Dead, the missive sent by Butehamun to his deceased wife, is dated between the end of the 20th dynasty and the beginning of the 21st, so ca. 1070 BCE.⁴¹⁷

However, the contents are surprisingly similar to the documents previously analysed and also in this case, it is possible to reconstruct a controversial dispute about issues regarding inheritance.

The writer, a woman called Iretiru, addresses a man, Tenehem⁴¹⁸ – probably her deceased husband – to get revenge for some unjust confiscations. Despite the difficulty in reconstructing the complex

⁴¹⁴ This papyrus is part of a collection of the Brooklyn Museum. (P. Brooklyn 37. 1799 E). R. Jasnow and G. Vittmann 1992-1993, Tafel 2-3. K. Donker van Heel 2013, 25-28; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 80-86.

⁴¹⁵ R. Jasnow and G. Vittmann 1992-1993.

⁴¹⁶ R. Jasnow and G. Vittmann 1992-1993.

⁴¹⁷ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 80-86.

⁴¹⁸ For a different rendering of the name see K. Donker van Heel 2013, 25.

relationships between the people mentioned in the text, it cannot be excluded that some of the people indicated as antagonists are in fact close relatives of the writer herself. Specifically, Jasnow and Vittmann claim that the person most involved in the actions carried out against Iretiru, a certain Hersaiset, may be not only the brother of Tenehem, but also the second husband of the writer herself.⁴¹⁹

After the appeal to the deceased, the woman describes a crescendo of abuses. First, her clothes, precious objects and servants are removed:

Recto, 2 – 4:

[2] *n(β)-šš nš hrw nty* [3] *tī<=i> n-im=w m-šs m-dr.t Ns-Hr (sš) Hr-sš-Īs.t*
mw.t=f Īr.t=w-r=w hr=f (wy) [4] *tšy=f nšy=k hbs (n) gns iw=i ršy n-im=k*
hr=f

[2] There are numerous thefts of which [3] I am the victim at the hand of Nesher, son of Hersaiset, his mother is Iretiru. He has stolen from me. [4] He has taken your clothes with force. “I will rejoice over you”, he said.

Recto, 11 – 12:

[11] *tšy=f nšy=k hmt.w hn^c š hbs tī=f tī<=i> sw* [12] *bnr m-sš šp<=i> n(β) hđ*
nty [...] tī=f tī<=i> 3 hm

[11] He has taken your copper and three textiles from me; he has made me [12] give away, after receiving it, the money with which [...] he has made me give away three servants.

Lastly, from some internal evidence, one can assume that the woman has been evicted from the house of the deceased husband; something that can be deduced from the words of the deceased, recorded here too in the first person:

[8] *i-ir=w n md.t i-dd=k n=i dy* [9] *m-ir hš^c.t(=i) pšy (?) pr Īr.t=w-rw hms*
{sw} n-im=f nh

⁴¹⁹ R. Jasnow and G. Vittmann 1992-1993, 24.

[8] They have gone against the words you said to me in this place [9] “Do not abandon me! This is the house, oh Iretiru, in which you must continue to live!”.

Noteworthy, also in this document it is possible to recognise the same recurrent pattern identified in the other two documents previously analysed. In the incipit the writer describes in detail events that have happened in the past that coincide with a list of the injustices suffered. Then, it follows a sentence that the deceased recipient of the missive said when he was still alive. In addition, thanks to some internal evidence (the line written on the verso), it is possible to posit that the letter was placed inside the tomb of the recipient or in its vicinity:

[**Verso 1**] *ḥr-s³-is.t s³ Thhm (s³) Nḥt-t³-mw.t [...] ṣ sw (Hr)-r³=f (n) t³ ḥ.t
tnhm*

[**Verso 1**] Hersaiset, son of Tenehem son of Nekhettamut [...], recite it before him (at) the tomb of Tenehem

4.5 Other documents

The following analysis is devoted to two particular categories of documents somehow connected to the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues:

- Other Letters to the Dead which seem to allude to economic issues: the so-called Hu Bowl and P. Naga ed-Der 3737.
- Other documents belonging to the same religious milieu of the Letters to the Dead, but that from a formal point of view cannot be considered as written pleas addressed to the deceased: the so-called Qubbet el-Hawa Bowl, Oxford Bowl and Moscow Bowl.

Hu Bowl, UC 16244 – First Intermediate Period ⁴²⁰

The artifact comes from tomb Y84 at Hu (Diospolis Parva), hence the name attributed to it, ⁴²¹ and it is a plea written by a woman to a deceased man, likely her husband. ⁴²² The nature of the request is

⁴²⁰ A.H. Gardiner and K.H. Sethe 1928, 5 and 20-21, pl. IV and IV a; A. Roccati 1967, 323-328; S. Donnat 2014, 44-48; J. Hsieh 2022, 198-210.

⁴²¹ S. Donnat 2014, 44.

⁴²² S. Donnat 2014, 44.

quite obscure. Something bad is happening to the daughter of the sender because of some malignant dead.⁴²³ Yet, at columns 3 and 4 it is possible to read:

|3| *n iri.t n<=i> r=f n wnm<=i> išw.t=f n rdi=f h.t n s³.t<=i> irr.t pr.t-hrw*
n(i) |4| n ³h hr sbi.t hr tp(yw) t³

|3| There is nothing I have done against him. I did not use (literally “eat”) his goods, nor did he give anything to my daughter |4| with which to perform the funerary offerings for an Akh-spirit who protects those who are on earth (in the realm of the living).⁴²⁴

The sentence implies that both the sender and her daughter were not able to enact the proper rites for a certain deceased, probably because of a litigation concerning an inheritance which prevented them from benefiting from certain goods. Indeed, the word *wnm*, at column 3, is to be intended as a juridical term, “being the usufructuary of something”.⁴²⁵ The sentence, thus, could be interpreted as a veiled threat aimed at convincing the deceased to help the two women in a legal dispute similar to those described in the documents examined in the previous section.

*P. Naga ed-Deir 3737, MFA 38.2121 – 6th /11th dynasty*⁴²⁶

The document was found in a pit located in the courtyard of tomb N 3737 at Naga ed-Deir, which belonged to a prominent man called Meru.⁴²⁷ Remarkably, a wall decoration preserved in this tomb depicts all the individuals cited in the letter: the owner of the tomb, Meru, his son, Heni, and a *d.t*-servant called Henu.⁴²⁸ The sender of the letter is Heni, who invokes the help of his deceased father to seek protection from Seni; the latter was probably already dead when the missive was written, since Heni claims to be haunted by the oneiric apparitions of this individual.⁴²⁹

As already mentioned, Seni was a *d.t*-servant of Meru, thus a person who has to take care of the estates linked to mortuary cult of the deceased.⁴³⁰ In this regard, it is important to stress that mortuary

⁴²³ S. Donnat 2014, 44-46.

⁴²⁴ For the translation I have mainly based myself on the interpretation of the text given by Roccati: *irr.t* is a passive imperfective participle referring to *h.t* (A. Roccati 1967, 327).

⁴²⁵ A. Roccati 1967, 326.

⁴²⁶ W.K. Simpson 1966, 39-52; A. Roccati 1967, 324-326; K. Szpakowska 2003, 20-26 and p. 185; S. Donnat 2014, 48-51; J. Hsieh 2022, 169-185.

⁴²⁷ S. Donnat 2014, 48.

⁴²⁸ M. O’Donoghue 1999, 90 and fig. 1.

⁴²⁹ This aspect of P. Naga ed-Der 3737 has been elaborated in chapter 3, section 3.1.b.

⁴³⁰ Wb 5, 511.1; D. Jones 2000, no. 3747; J. C. Moreno García, 2013, 1045-1046.

cults played an important role within the whole Egyptian economic system. The tombs of the pharaohs, as well as those of the elites, were endowed with agricultural estates and workers were in charge of the production of food offerings. Furthermore, one or more persons were appointed for the performance of the offering rituals.⁴³¹ As regards the royal sphere, this provisioning system was certainly majestic. The crown used revenues from rather extensive agricultural estates, involving a considerable number of individuals in the production of food offerings as well for the performance of the rites.⁴³² For the elite, instead, the existence of private institutions is well attested since the 3rd millennium BCE (Old Kingdom).⁴³³ In these cases, the personnel in charge of the mortuary cult was employed through specific contracts and the supplies came from private properties belonging to the family of the deceased; on the other hand, it was not uncommon for high officials to obtain a perpetual mortuary endowment subsidised by the crown and sometimes this last system coexisted with a private one.⁴³⁴

The economic interests related to mortuary endowments had to be conspicuous and, remarkably, legalistic texts inscribed on elite tomb walls firmly forbade the conversion of the lands destined to these institutions to other purposes.⁴³⁵ Such a peremptory prohibition suggests that individual egoism was always around the corner and could entail problematic situations, certainly related to economic issues between the various parties involved. If we interpret the P. Naga ed-Deir 3737 in the light of this perspective, the request of the sender has to be understood within a more complex framework in which the economic interests linked to elite mortuary cults played a crucial role.

Qubbet el-Hawa Bowl, Cairo JdE 91740 – Middle Kingdom ⁴³⁶

The artifact was found at tomb 30b at Qubbet el-Hawa, datable to the 6th dynasty. Yet a palaeographic analysis of the inscription indicates the 12th dynasty.⁴³⁷ The text inscribed on the bowl cannot be considered as a proper Letter to the Dead, since it is not a plea addressed to a deceased. Rather, the document concerns an economic transaction for the reuse of a tomb, likely the same one in which the artifact was found.⁴³⁸ Therefore, under this point of view the Qubbet el-Hawa bowl is very interesting

⁴³¹ S. Allam 1974, 131-146.

⁴³² H. Vymazalová 2009, 337.

⁴³³ S. Allam 2007, 15.

⁴³⁴ J.C. Moreno García 2013, 1045-1046.

⁴³⁵ N. Strudwick 2005, 49-50.

⁴³⁶ E. Edel 1987 93- 105; H. Goedicke 1988; S. Donnat Beauquier 2019, 66-69; J. Hsieh 2022, 270-276.

⁴³⁷ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 68.

⁴³⁸ H. Goedicke 1988, 195.

for the purpose of the present chapter, since it seems to imply that a document concerning an economical transaction and buried inside a tomb could have had a certain kind of legal value.

Oxford Bowl, Pitt-Rivers 1887.27.1 – Second Intermediate Period ⁴³⁹

The provenance of the document is unknown and its dating is problematic. The palaeography and some grammatical features indicate that the text was written during the late Second Intermediate Period; on the other hand, the morphology of the bowl is typical of the 12th /13th dynasty. ⁴⁴⁰ The document cannot be considered as a proper Letter to the Dead: the text is not written in epistolary form, nor is it a plea addressed to a deceased person. Nevertheless, the Oxford Bowl undeniably belong to the same religious milieu of the three letters written to solve inheritance issues analysed here. The text is a statement concerning the transmission of an inheritance from a fugitive called Meniupu to a family who took care of his burial:

*dd in Tti-ꜣ sꜣ Nni Mni.w-pw ii wꜣrw sꜣnh sw it=i mw.t<=i> (idn.w ?) [...]
hm.t=f Tti mwt=f kꜣrs sw tꜣy=i mw.t in hꜣi =s Nni dd n=s kꜣrs sw iwꜣ sw*

Words said by Teti-a, son of Neni: Meniupu came as a fugitive, my father and my mother took care of his nourishment. The substitutes (?) [...] ⁴⁴¹ his wife, Teti. Then, he died and my mother buried him. It was her husband who said to her: “bury him and inherit from him”.

Although this brief text cannot be considered as a plea addressed to a dead, it shows all the main stylistic features identified for the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues previously analysed. There is the narration of an event that occurred in the past, and a clear reference to the Egyptian customary rule “the property is given to the one who buries”. Moreover, this reference occurs in a speech attributed to the father of the writer, Neni, whose words were *verbatim* reported on the document.

⁴³⁹ A.H. Gardiner 1928, 26-27, Pl. IX; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 69- 71; J. Hsieh 2022, 296-303.

⁴⁴⁰ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 69.

⁴⁴¹ This part of the inscription is not clear. I mainly followed S. Donnat Beauquier here (2014, 69-70). For a different interpretation of this sentence see J. Hsieh 2022, 296-298.

One has also to take into consideration that the situation narrated in the Oxford Bowl is somewhat atypical. The document does not concern a litigation between siblings over the inheritance of an ancestor. Rather, it is a statement through which Teti-a can claim the inheritance of the fugitive Meniupu, inheritance that already belonged to the mother of Teti-a, Teti, (probably already dead when the document was written), since she was the one who took care of Meniupu's burial.⁴⁴²

Moscow Bowl, Moscow 3917b – 18th dynasty ⁴⁴³

The letter is written by a man, Neb, to a *w^cb*-priest called Khnem-em-wasekhet and it is about some issues concerning the inheritance of a woman who recently died, Tita, who was the former wife of the sender. At first sight the document may seem an ordinary letter exchanged between two living persons, since it is never explicitly stated that the *w^cb*-priest Khnem-em-wasekhet is a deceased man. On the other hand, as already stressed by A. H. Gardiner and K. Sethe, the fact that, in the last line of the letter, the recipient is threatened with a formulaic expression quite similar to that used to ward off malignant spirits, or to convince the ancestors to act in favour of their descendants, such a possibility cannot be excluded a priori.⁴⁴⁴ Finally, the fact that the text is written on a bowl and not on an ostrakon, would be another good argument for identifying this document with a proper Letter to the Dead, since ordinary letters are rarely written on this kind of medium.⁴⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the archaeological context in which the object was found is not known. If it were from a tomb, the Moscow Bowl could certainly be linked to the same religious milieu of the other documents analysed here.

4.6 Results

The analysis of the Letters to the Dead regarding inheritance issues has highlighted the presence of a recurrent common scheme, partially recognizable also in the Oxford Bowl. Indeed, in these documents, it is possible to identify a detailed description of past events and the transcription of a speech delivered by the deceased recipient of the missive, in which the sender is proclaimed as the rightful heir.⁴⁴⁶ If we keep in mind that the most ancient document, the Cairo Linen JdE 25675,

⁴⁴² S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 69-70.

⁴⁴³ A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 27-28 and Pl. XI; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 25-26; U. Verhoeven 2003, 31 and note 1; J. Hsieh 2022, 303-309;

⁴⁴⁴ A.H. Gardiner and K.H. Sethe 1928, 27-28.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid. Contra: U. Verhoeven, who considers the Moscow bowl as a common letter exchanged between living persons (U. Verhoeven 2003, 31 and note 1).

⁴⁴⁶ For the specific case of the Oxford Bowl, we can identify both a narration pertaining to past events and a speech of an authoritative ancestor verbatim reported. However, the situation is more complex. The writer is claiming the

belongs to the 3rd millennium BCE, while the more recent one, P. Brooklyn 37.17 99 E, is datable to the 7th century BCE, the existence of a formal structure that has remained consistent through centuries is certainly impressive.

This feature is even more striking if one considers that the category “Letters to the Dead” is to be meant as a label invented by modern scholars and not as an actual literary genre recognised by the Egyptians themselves.⁴⁴⁷ The documents currently labelled as “Letters to the Dead” can be quite different from each other and, as mentioned above, the category did not necessarily include documents written in epistolary style. If one also takes into consideration that these documents were written to appease a potential malevolent dead, as well as to ask the intercession of an ancestor, it is possible to affirm that the documents currently labelled as “Letters to the Dead” have to be understood as the written evidence of diverse kinds of rituals which had to be enacted for different purposes, and likely also in different occasions. Given this starting point, the observation made by S. Donnat Beauquier that the practice of sending a written plea to a deceased was probably recreated more than once through Egyptian history, and that it is impossible to recognise a unique scribal model from which all the documents currently known are derived is certainly valid.⁴⁴⁸ Yet, for the specific case of the letters concerning inheritance issues, the presence of a recurrent stylistic scheme is undeniable, and its existence allows us to hypothesise that these letters were written according to a specific prototype. The point is that, probably, such a prototype did not belong to a literary textual genre, but to legal practice. Indeed, a standardised form appears to be a distinctive trait of Egyptian legal texts and the fact that the Egyptians used to consult legal casebooks and form books to write their legal documents since the earliest stages of their history has been proven.⁴⁴⁹ As pointed out by T. Logan, “each different legal document probably had its own restricted legal meaning and distinct formulary”;⁴⁵⁰ the main problem in this regard is that for the most ancient phases of Egyptian history the existence of legal form book can only be demonstrated indirectly, by identifying recurring patterns in texts which show a legal aim.⁴⁵¹ So, the recurrent stylistic pattern highlighted here can be

inheritance of a fugitive, which was previously claimed by his deceased mother (who was probably already dead when the document was written). The mother was indeed the one who enacted the funerary rituals for the fugitive, according to the will of her husband (who is also the father of the sender). In this case, the speech reported is that of the deceased father (or father in law? See: J. Hsieh 2022, 299 and note f) of the sender, who allowed his wife of to take care of the posthumous destiny of the fugitive and, thus, to obtain his inheritance.

⁴⁴⁷ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 208-219.

⁴⁴⁸ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 218-219. It has been hypothesised that a possible model for the Letters to the Dead could be identified with a text reported within the first sections (I-XVII) of the *Kemyt* – a compendium used for the training of the scribes. Cf. D. Klotz 2009, 136-140. Yet, the subsequent work by S. Donnat has shown how this hypothesis was not grounded. S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 167 and ff.

⁴⁴⁹ T. Logan 2017, 104-105.

⁴⁵⁰ T. Logan 2017, 81.

⁴⁵¹ T. Logan 2017, 81.

considered as an argument in favour of the actual legal value of the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues.

In this regard, it is also noteworthy that the documents analysed here were certainly written keeping closely in mind the Egyptian customary rules concerning inheritance and succession. The long, detailed descriptions of past events strongly resemble a defensive plea through which the writer profiles himself on the side of reason. This is particularly clear for the two letters written by widows, the Cairo Linen JdE 25675 and P. Brooklyn 37.17 99 E. The incipit of these documents consists in a long list of abuses suffered by the two women: both the kinds of goods that have been taken and the abusive conduct adopted by the antagonists are indeed reported in great detail. The letter addressed to the father written on the inside of the Qaw Bowl (UC 1663) could be interpreted in the same way too, but, in this specific case, we can observe the other side of the coin: given that the sender is claiming the inheritance of his deceased brother, it follows – although it is not explicitly said – that his aim is to override the rights of the widow and the son of the latter. Also, the narration of past events described in the Qaw Bowl is perfectly functional to the claim of the sender: the reference to the ritual banquet – likely occurred during the funerals of the brothers – and the long, detailed list of the expenses the writer faced to bear the funerary rituals must be indeed interpreted in the light of the Egyptian customary rule according to which “the property is given to the one who buries”. Therefore, also in this case, it can be argued that the function of the text was rather similar to that of a defensive plea aimed at profiling the writer as legitimate heir.

The speeches of the deceased recipients, transcribed *verbatim* in all the documents analysed here, have to be interpreted in the same way. As stated above, in Ancient Egypt it was custom that the last wishes of the family chief were expressed orally and in front of witnesses.

It is therefore clear that the letters analysed here were written according to formulaic standards that has some legal value and that their content not only shows clear references to the customary rules pertaining to inheritance and succession, but can even be compared to an elaborated defensive plea. One has also to take into account that private letters could be used as legal documents from the Old Kingdom onwards.⁴⁵² A letter was indeed perceived as physical evidence of a communication, which can testify what happened and what was said in specific circumstances, especially if sealed and kept in an archive or in another place – such as a tomb – which according to the emic perspective of the Egyptians, had a rather similar function.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² K. Baer 1966, 1-9.

⁴⁵³ C. Eyre 2013, 94-100.

As already mentioned, the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues were placed inside the tomb of the deceased recipient, or in its vicinity.⁴⁵⁴ Moreover, the ritual deposition of these documents was enacted during the funerals, or during specific festivals celebrated to praise the dead.⁴⁵⁵ Thus, in order to demonstrate whether these letters had an actual or fictitious legal function, one has to clarify what an elite tomb really symbolised for an ancient Egyptian, and if the ritualised deposition of a written document inside it during a public performance could have had an officially recognised legal function.

Monumental tombs were considered as a means of social display since the Old Kingdom. A tomb not only testified the high rank reached by the deceased buried in it, but it was also a medium aimed at displaying the social status of the living descendants of the latter.⁴⁵⁶ This is particularly clear in Old Kingdom elite tombs, whose decorative programs often incorporated private legal texts. As stressed by N. Strudwick, these texts could be transcribed inside the tomb or in the funerary chapel, while in other cases the inscription could take the form of slabs or stelae placed in the area of the tomb of the person concerned.⁴⁵⁷ This monumentalisation of private legal texts within elite tombs has to be intended as a procedure for keeping a document safe in a place, the tomb, which also had a sacred function, and was also aimed at officially formalising legal documents in order to guarantee and perpetuate their validity.⁴⁵⁸

In the light of these elements, it is reasonable to assume that the act of placing a written document inside a tomb or in its vicinity should have had a rather similar function: if it was common practice to ratify the status of the chosen heir through legalistic inscriptions written on the tomb wall of the donor,⁴⁵⁹ it follows that the action of transcribing a speech delivered by the *pater familias* – in which a specific person is named as rightful heir – and to put this written document inside his tomb or in its surroundings – should have had a clear recognizable meaning, aimed at ratifying the status of the heritor.

One has also to consider what has been highlighted in the previous chapters: the performance of the funerary rituals was indeed meant as a “double rite of passage”. On the one hand, these ceremonies were meant for the burial of the deceased and his integration into the realm of the dead; on the other

⁴⁵⁴ See chapter 3, sections: 3.2.1; 3.2.2; 3.2.3.

⁴⁵⁵ See chapter 3, section 3.1.1.b.

⁴⁵⁶ S. Allam 1990, 31-33.

⁴⁵⁷ N. Strudwick 2005, 49.

⁴⁵⁸ S. Allam 1990, 31-33; C. Eyre 2013, 94-100.

⁴⁵⁹ S. Allam 1990, 31-33. D. Czerwik 2009, 38 and ff.

hand, the rituals also aimed at validating the new status reached by the heir of the deceased as the legitimate successor.⁴⁶⁰

It can therefore be stated that the action of placing a written document inside a tomb during a public performance could have had an officially recognised legal function. If we take into account that to perform the burial and the mortuary cult for a deceased was a legal prerequisite to claim his inheritance, it cannot be excluded that these rituals also entailed a moment during which the relatives of the deceased could object to the choice of the heir, thanks to the letters analysed here and the ritualised actions related to them. This moment could be identified with the ritualised judgment of the dead,⁴⁶¹ during which the deceased had the possibility to punish his enemies and anyone who threatened his family.⁴⁶²

The connection between legal and religious ambit is recognizable even within modern legal systems,⁴⁶³ and as regards Ancient Egypt it is beyond doubt that the boundaries between these two spheres were even more blurred. Moreover, the involvement of supernatural entities within juridical cases is well attested in Ancient Egypt, as testified by the oracular consultations, particularly widespread starting from the New Kingdom.⁴⁶⁴

Without going into detail about the various theories concerning the role of the so-called personal piety within Egyptian religion and the access to the divine sphere by non-royal people,⁴⁶⁵ it is undeniable that the processions of divine statues on festival days were one of the privileged moments for a direct contact with divine entities.⁴⁶⁶ It is also well known that oracular practices were strictly limited to moments of cult statues processions, since one of the most common consultation procedures was based on the movements made by a sacred image during a parade.⁴⁶⁷

Oracles were consulted for several reasons, including the assignment of important offices, such as those of viziers or high priests and, in some cases, they played a major role also in legitimising the accession to the throne of sovereigns.⁴⁶⁸ It should be also underlined that Egyptian oracles did not

⁴⁶⁰ See chapter 3, section 3.4.

⁴⁶¹ See chapter 3, section 3.3.3.

⁴⁶² This is particularly clear in CT 149. See: H. Willems 2014, 186-190. Furthermore, as mentioned above, this spell was certainly involved in the ritual deposition of P. Berlin 10482+10481a-b. See: I. Regulski 2020, 330-331.

⁴⁶³ Known from different parts of the world. Just to take two examples. B. I. Bittker et. Al. 2015; R. M. Scott 2021.

⁴⁶⁴ S. Allam 1973, 17-30.

⁴⁶⁵ M. Luiselli 2008; L. Weiss 2015, 1-11 and 179-180.

⁴⁶⁶ M. Stadler 2008.

⁴⁶⁷ J.-M. Kruchten 2001.

⁴⁶⁸ M. Fukaya 2012, 202-203.

only involve gods, but also deceased kings that gained a special post-mortem deification, such as Ahmose I at Abydos or Amenhotep I at Deir el-Medina.⁴⁶⁹

Especially the data from Deir el-Medina testify how the oracle of Amenhotep I played a foremost role within the local juridical system. Even though other juridical bodies characterised the jurisdiction of the village, above all the *Knb.t*/local court, it is noteworthy that the lawsuits concerning inheritance litigations and disputes about real estates were mainly solved by means of the oracle, or through the cooperation of this institution with the local court.⁴⁷⁰ Moreover, a stela from Abydos – which is one of the most ancient sources concerning the rise of the oracular practices – shows that Ahmose I was consulted for the purpose of a litigation concerning real estate property.⁴⁷¹

It is therefore possible to identify significant common traits between the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues and the oracular practices:

- Both were linked to processions: the parade of the sacred image for the oracles; the funerary procession from the embalming place to the tomb – or a similar ritual action performed within the mortuary rituals – for the Letters to the Dead;
- Both may regard disputes concerning the possession of real estates;
- Both may concern the conferring of a social status: to legitimise the heir of a deceased, to assign a state office, or to ratify the ownership of real estate.

As for the last point, at first glance it might seem that the kind of supernatural beings involved were rather different: the spirit of a deceased relative for the letters to the dead concerning inheritance issues; a deified king or a god for the oracular practices. However, as has been already highlighted, the differences between a “god”, and an “ancestor” must have been somewhat nuanced for the ancient Egyptians: the word traditionally translated as “god”, *ntr*, could refer to both royal and non-royal dead.⁴⁷² Likewise, the word *ꜥḥ*, usually translated as “effective spirit” or “ancestor”, actually indicated a special status which could be attributed not only to a distinguished category of dead, but also to certain gods.⁴⁷³ Also, as stressed by Julia Troche, the distinction between an *ꜥḥ* and a *ntr* was not clear-cut.⁴⁷⁴ Especially during the First Intermediate Period – when local rulers maintained independent power over regional states – the apotheosis of the ancestors of the nomarchal family in

⁴⁶⁹ A. MacDowell 1990, 121.

⁴⁷⁰ A. MacDowell 1990, 114-135.

⁴⁷¹ S. Harvey 1998, 121.

⁴⁷² chapter 1, section 1.2.1.

⁴⁷³ R.J. Demarée 1983, 213-218.

⁴⁷⁴ J. Troche 2021, 4.

charge and the festivals related to the latter played an important role in exercising power,⁴⁷⁵ and therefore also in the execution of law. Furthermore, some of the public ceremonies during which the oracular petitions were enacted, such as the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, could be considered as articulated celebrations which also involved a commemoration of the dead.⁴⁷⁶ In this regard, the procession from the Karnak Temple to the necropolis located in the Theban Westbank shows significant similarities with the elite funerary processions which led the deceased from the embalming place to the tomb.⁴⁷⁷ As for the oracles consulted during the Opet Festival, it must be underlined that the latter celebration was aimed mainly at establishing the divine status of the ruling king by confirming his divine ancestry as the son of the god Amun, and therefore as an earthly manifestation of this god. Last but not least, as already stressed by Sylvie Donnat Beauquier, the “letters to the dead” weren't just addressed to the spirits of the dead; rather, some excerpts seem to suggest that these documents were also addressed to the gods and that the dead were probably invoked as mediators between the divine sphere and the world of men.⁴⁷⁸ This interpretation could be also confirmed by some Old Kingdom sources. For example, in some Appeals to the Living, the deceased tomb owner declares that he will drag his enemies in front of a *d³d³.t* court presided by the Great God, a deity which is probably to be understood as a personification of royal power, sometimes assimilated to both Ra and Osiris.⁴⁷⁹

The picture that emerges from the data taken into consideration seems therefore to suggest a phenomenon of progressive centralization of a certain type of legal procedures involving the authoritative role of the dead and the public ceremonies related to them. These practices found their first written attestations after the collapse of the royal power (end of the 6th dynasty) but we can reasonably suppose that they were older and more common than the written sources suggest. The spread of the so-called letters to the dead during the First Intermediate Period has to be linked to the rise of the local potentates and as an attempt to reformulate effective legal procedures in line with nomarchal ideological self-presentation. Subsequently, once the reunification of Egypt had taken place, these practices were reshaped and re-adapted to be included into the royal ideology (see, for example, the rise of the Haker feast within the Mysteries of Osiris, where the same dynamics used to confirm the succession of the heir within elite funerary rituals were re-enacted for the god Osiris and used for the assignment of state offices). The rise of oracular practices during the New Kingdom can

⁴⁷⁵ J. Troche 2021, 114.

⁴⁷⁶ A. von Lieven 2015, 298-299; N. Harrington 2013, 115-122.

⁴⁷⁷ A significant parallel in this regard could also be established with the aforementioned processions characterising the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos, which led the cultic image of the god from the temple to his presumed tomb at Poqer. See chapter 3, section 3.3.5.

⁴⁷⁸ S. Donnat 2010, 89.

⁴⁷⁹ See chapter 3, section 3.3.3.

thus be seen as a further step in this general process, which substantially saw the progressive absorption of previous local traditions linked to the self-presentation of the elite into the sphere of royal ideology. The most concrete religious fact that reflect this phenomenon is the instauration of the posthumous cult of Amenhotep I and the numerous festivals celebrated in his honour in the Theban area.⁴⁸⁰

Remarkably this is a kind of impetus that also characterised the historical evolution of the ancient Egyptian administration of justice. Indeed, while the Old Kingdom was characterised by the coexistence of a centralised legal system with several local realities, the political crisis that accompanied the rise of the First Intermediate Period saw the increasing importance acquired by local justice systems, as a symptom of the seizure of power by the regional elites. With the advent of the Middle Kingdom, the restoration of a centralised royal power required a more centralised legal system, with the crown aiming at absorbing and reshaping local traditions for its own advantage. This was a process that reach its acme during the New Kingdom, when the concept of *hp*-law arises in a more concrete form.⁴⁸¹

Yet, it would be a mistake to consider the oracular consultations as a direct derivation of the letters to the dead.⁴⁸² Rather, both practices testify to the importance of public celebrations in honour of the dead and the authoritative role played by certain categories of supernatural dead in the settlement of legal matters – especially in relation to landed property and the legitimation of social roles – and how these beliefs gave rise to new types of legal procedures over time.

⁴⁸⁰ H. Willems 1996, 114; Y.M. el Shazly 2015, 193-195.

⁴⁸¹ M. Campagno 2006; A.A. Loktionov 2019, 152-161.

⁴⁸² S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 80-86.