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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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5. Ghosts and ancestors in a gender perspective⁴⁸³

5.1 Research questions and methodological issues

It is certainly significant that the rituals analysed in the previous chapters, such as the OMR and the Tekenu ritual were specifically meant to preserve the bond between the dead father and his living son, likewise, most of the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance or economic issues were addressed to deceased men.⁴⁸⁴ Indeed, based on the data collected in Tables 1 2 and 3, especially the Tekenu ritual clearly appears as strictly related to men.⁴⁸⁵ As for the OMR scenes 9 and 10, it is instead possible to recognise how this ritual could be performed also for deceased elite women. In order to provide just a few significant examples, a depiction of these scenes is indeed attested in the tomb of Tausret located in the Kings ‘Valley (KV 14), a queen who became the actual ruler of Egypt at the end of 19th dynasty.⁴⁸⁶ Another striking instance is the funerary chapel of Amenirdis I, located to the southeast of the funerary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu. The latter case is the most intriguing, and must be understood in the light of the specific context of legitimacy and succession within the religious office of the God’s Wives of Amun during the 25th dynasty, whose ideological discourse used to appropriate stylistic elements typical of the royal ideology concerning the king.⁴⁸⁷ See, in this regard the considerations made by M. F. Ayad:

On none of the monuments of Shepenwepet I and Amenirdis I is the adoption phraseology found in conjunction with these two God’s Wives of Amun, it is only on the monuments of Shepenwepet II, Amenirdis’s niece and successor, that we first find a God’s Wife referring to her predecessor as “her mother” (e.g. on the lintel and jambs of the chapel of Osiris, Lord of Life). There, as elsewhere, Shepenwepet II opts for including the name and cartouche of her deceased predecessor rather than using her own double cartouche. Shepenwepet II likewise solidified her status as Amenirdis’ legitimate heir and successor by erecting a “monument for eternity,” a funerary chapel, constructed of stone, for Amenirdis and performing funerary rites for her, and on her behalf. A tactic later utilized

⁴⁸³ This chapter is an extended version of R. Schiavo 2020.

⁴⁸⁴ A remarkable exception is the external side of the Qaw Bowl – UC 1663, which is addressed to the mother of the deceased to solve an inheritance issue. See chapter 4, section 4.4.

⁴⁸⁵ See chapter 3, section 3.2. Among the 39 sources here collected, the only representation which could be linked to a woman is perhaps the ones in TT 60, an elite tomb built for a lady named Senet, who also held the title of Priestess of Hathor. Yet, it seems the scenes depicting the Tekenu within the funerary procession concerned her husband or brother Antefoker. See chapter 3, section 3.3.3, doc. 2.

⁴⁸⁶ H. Altenmüller 2012, 83-84.

⁴⁸⁷ M.F. Ayad 2016, 90-91.

*by Ankhnesneferibre, who devotes a substantial portion of her so-called “Adoption Stela” to a description of the “proper” funerary rites she performed for her deceased mother.*⁴⁸⁸

Yet, it is undeniable that the documents analysed in the previous chapters mainly concern the male sphere. Such a major focus on adult men belonging to the elite can be explained through the fact that these documents were expressions of a specific ideology aimed at the maintenance of both the family social status and legacy over generations. Women’s secondary role is therefore understandable since they were not officially involved in this kind of transmission of powers within the context of the extended family. Of course, instances of women who were able of independently managing their own business are known.⁴⁸⁹ Yet, their lives and choices and, above all, their role as a guide and mentor for their descendants were rarely recognised by the official elite discourse.

Through a comparison with the wisdom literature, this aspect appears increasingly clear. These texts focused on advices to better manage the relationships with both superiors and subordinates in order to maintain the wealth of the households, and, remarkably, they always took the form of teachings given by a father to his son. As stressed by A. Depla, “there is not a single extant example of an *Instruction* written by a father for his daughter, nor by a mother for her son, or a mother for her daughter.”⁴⁹⁰

Starting from these premises, the present chapter will focus on the so-called “Letters to the Dead” addressed to women. The main aims can be summarised as follows:

- To highlight some specific features concerning the position of women in the ancient Egyptian ancestor worship, with particular attention to the modes through which gender roles were normed by the power relationships in the economical and the juridical spheres linked to the extended family/*3b.t*, and under influence of religious beliefs;
- To figure out the possible ritual background behind these documents.

Further clarifications about the limits of the present investigation are needed. Even though the present chapter is mainly focused on the “female sphere” of the ancient Egyptian ancestor worship, the term “women” is not used here to indicate a uniform category; rather, the main aim is to investigate gender

⁴⁸⁸ M.F. Ayad 2016, 93.

⁴⁸⁹ K. Donker van Heel 2014.

⁴⁹⁰ A. Depla 1994, 29.

roles and norms in relation to a particular ancient Egyptian social group.⁴⁹¹ The data taken into consideration – above all the Letters to the Dead, but also some Coffin Texts spells, Old Kingdom Appeals to the Living, and the documentation from Deir el-Medina – must be understood as expressions of elite culture and the official discourses related to it.⁴⁹² A second restriction concerns the effective nature of the investigated phenomena. The Letters to the Dead have for a long time been considered as intimate personal prayers towards divine beings.⁴⁹³ However, in the light of more recent studies, it is nowadays clear that we have to interpret the diverse document labelled under this *etic* category as evidence of complex rituals that involved whole social groups, rather than individuals.⁴⁹⁴ As has been previously stated, these documents do not show us personal intimate feelings but stereotyped norms concerning how social relationships were created and should be maintained on an ideal level.⁴⁹⁵ The restricted number of textual sources analysed in the present chapter must therefore be understood as an expression of the social expectations⁴⁹⁶ internalised by the elite: how relationships based on gender roles should be realised and – if something went wrong – how to restore the normative interactions between family members, as well between the living and the dead.

Even though the position of Egyptian women, especially when compared with other ancient Mediterranean cultures,⁴⁹⁷ was relatively emancipated, their role in ancestor worship is surprising ambivalent. From a purely quantitative approach, the main documents would seem to outline a cult predominantly focused on men. Most Appeals to the Living are requests made by deceased men to other living men and only a restricted number of documents were written for women or addressed to them.⁴⁹⁸ As for the Letters to the Dead, these written sources were mainly addressed to the male heads of the household,⁴⁹⁹ and, as for the data from Deir el-Medina, among the fifty-five *ḥt ikr n rʿ* stelae collected by R. J. Demarée, in only eight a woman is designated as an “excellent spirit”.⁵⁰⁰

The explanation of such an inequality can be understood in the light of the specific social role played by the Egyptian women within the context of the *ḥt*. Although it is quite common to translate the latter term as “family”, “extended family” or “household,” the actual meaning of this word was more

⁴⁹¹ Regarding the use of Third Wave feminist approach in archaeology and Egyptology, see H. Saleh 2007, 10–11.

⁴⁹² See chapter 4, section 4.1.

⁴⁹³ M. Guilmot 1966, 27.

⁴⁹⁴ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 173 ff.

⁴⁹⁵ See chapter 1, section 1.3.

⁴⁹⁶ “Social expectations” could be defined as “an internalised social norm for society, which guides individuals and organizations to what they should do.” See: K. Hasegawa, C. Shinohara and J. P. Broadbent 2007, 180–181 and 195. Furthermore, the concept of “social expectation” is strictly connected with the concept of “habitus” elaborated by Bourdieu. See: P. Bourdieu 1980, 88.

⁴⁹⁷ A.M. Roth 2010, 200; K. Szpakowska 2008, 102–112; Toivari-Viitala 2001, 135–138 and 187–192.

⁴⁹⁸ S.B. Shubert 2007, 16–61.

⁴⁹⁹ U. Verhoeven 2003. S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 173 ff.

⁵⁰⁰ R.J. Demarée 1983, stelae A6, A39, A40, A41, A44, A45, A51, A52.

nuanced, referring to “a property-owning group of which the members were primarily kin who share rights in an inheritance”⁵⁰¹ and, remarkably, several sources indicate that wives did not belong to the same *ḥb.t* of their husbands. A group of Coffin Texts spells specifically aimed at bringing the *ḥb.t* members together do not show any reference to the deceased’s wife, an element also confirmed by other data, such as a legal statement occurring in an Old Kingdom private tomb, or a royal decree dating to the Eighth Dynasty.⁵⁰² Indeed, according to the ancient Egyptian customary norms, even after her marriage a woman continued to belong to the same *ḥb.t* of her father, and, once the latter died, as “mother” she was juridically considered as belonging to the same *ḥb.t* of her eldest son.⁵⁰³

Paradoxically, this kind of social organization may have contributed to a certain economic independence and emancipation. Given that a woman belonged to a different *ḥb.t* from her husband, she could inherit from her own family and was relatively free to manage her goods.⁵⁰⁴ Moreover both men and women could own their own possessions—even though, with regard to the management of the household and its legacy, there was a strong preference for the “father to son” transmission—and both were able to pass them on to their children.⁵⁰⁵

Another interesting feature is that, although drastically fewer in number, most of the known documents related to ancestralised women do not show significant qualitative differences from the ones concerning men. Only few examples of Appeals to the Living belonging to women are known but these texts show the same formulaic repertoires attested for men, describing the deceased woman as a supernatural being, capable of punishing the transgressor of her tomb or of protecting the living ones who praise her.⁵⁰⁶ Likewise, there are no significant stylistic differences between the *ḥꜥ ikr n Rꜥ* stelae dedicated to women and men.⁵⁰⁷

The only exception under this point of view is given by two categories of documents, the so-called anthropoid busts and the Letters to the Dead. As for the busts from Deir el-Medina it has been argued that the majority of them might portray women, representing thus the female anepigraphic counterpart of the *ḥꜥ ikr n Rꜥ* stelae in ancestor cults.⁵⁰⁸ This theory is intriguing, and a similar function, at least for some of the currently known busts, is certainly grounded. On the other hand, when it comes to

⁵⁰¹ H. Willems 2015, 448.

⁵⁰² H. Willems 2015, 454–461.

⁵⁰³ H. Willems 2015, 463.

⁵⁰⁴ H. Willems 2015, 463.

⁵⁰⁵ S. Lippert 2013, 3; Toivari-Viitala 2001, 96–138.

⁵⁰⁶ S.B. Shubert 2007, 51–52 (O.K. 25).

⁵⁰⁷ The inscriptions attested on the stelae are quite stereotyped. Moreover, no significant differences based on gender were noted. See: Demarée 1983, 178–179.

⁵⁰⁸ N. Harrington 2005.

anepigraphic documents a certain caution in the interpretation of their meaning and function is always required and it was argued that the Anthropoid Busts should not necessarily represent ancestors, but also gods and even living individuals.⁵⁰⁹ Moreover, the elements to identify the gender of an individual portrayed in a bust are often unclear, and it is often difficult to actually understand if these peculiar kind of sculptures portrayed women or men.⁵¹⁰ The Letters to the Dead, instead, could provide more solid data: even though most of these documents were sent to adult men, the requests addressed exclusively to women undoubtedly show some peculiar features that deserve to be investigated.

5.2 Analysis of the Letters to the Dead addressed to women

*Stele of Nebetitef - Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2014.033.001*⁵¹¹

In 1958, a curious stela attracted the attention of E. F. Wente when this was presented at the Cairo Museum to be approved for export. Wente was just able to copy the hieratic text written on its back⁵¹² and, for a long time, the document has been known in the scientific community as “The Misplaced Stela”, and the only data available were the sketch of the hieratic inscription and a brief description of the scene on the front of the stele made by Wente himself:

*[...] a limestone stela, or tablet about a foot high, as I recollect, on the front of which was a painted scene of a man making an offering.*⁵¹³

The object was later re-identified by E. Meltzer in the USA, and it is currently preserved at the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University.⁵¹⁴ The rediscovery of the stele has finally made it possible to check the translation and the interpretations presented by Wente. Although his transcription of the hieratic text was substantially correct, most scholars now agree that Wente

⁵⁰⁹ J.L. Keith, S. Donnat and N. Harrington 2011, 91-100.

⁵¹⁰ J.L. Keith, S. Donnat and N. Harrington 2011, 91-100.

⁵¹¹ Probably from Naga ed-Deir. It can be dated to the First Intermediate Period; epigraphic evidence and strong similarities with the “Anomalous Group” of stele from Naga ed-Deir lead to a more specific date between the 10th and the 11th dynasty. E. F. Wente 1975–1976; R. J. Demarée 1983, 216–217; E. F. Wente and E. S. Meltzer 1990, 215 n. 349; K. Szpakowska 2003, 23, 143, 185; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 53–57; E. S. Meltzer 2008; J. Hsieh 2022, 220-222; R. Nyord, 2021 A, 3-19.

⁵¹² E.F. Wente 1975–1976, 595.

⁵¹³ E.F. Wente 1975–1976, 595.

⁵¹⁴ E.S. Meltzer 2008, 1.

misunderstood the scene on the front face: the person portrayed is without any doubt a woman, to be precise a deceased woman, called Nebetitef.⁵¹⁵

Nebetitef is also the deceased addressee of the two letters written with black ink on the back of the stele, which constitute the only currently known examples of Letters to the Dead written on this kind of medium.⁵¹⁶

The first message (columns 1-5) is sent by a person called Merirtyfy. At first, E. Wente identified the latter with the person portrayed on the front (in his opinion a man) and consequently with the husband of the deceased woman invoked in the two letters:

*Although the two other examples of this name known to me [Merirtyfy] are feminine [...] the representation on the face of the stela is that of man offering, and I am inclined to believe that the writer of the letter was a widower.*⁵¹⁷

On the contrary, we have no reasons to doubt that the writer is a woman:⁵¹⁸ the name Merirtyfy is indeed attested only as feminine, and the gender of the sender is also confirmed by a restricted number of grammatical elements internal to the text;⁵¹⁹ furthermore, this latter assumption can provide useful hints to better understand the meaning of the two missives.

In her letter, Merirtyfy claims to be sick and invokes the help of the deceased Nebetitef to be healed. Moreover, as mentioned in chapter 3, this document also constitutes one of the oldest sources regarding the interactions between the living and the dead through an oneiric experience⁵²⁰:

[1] r dd in Mr-Hrty=fy n Nb.t-it=f iw=t mī <i>h <i>n nd is imn.t hr.t<=t> [2] [n] ib=t
m=t ink mr.t=t tp t³ h³ hr=I sb hr rn(=i) n šb(=i) [3] [ts h]ft-hr=t s^cnh(=i) rn=t tp t³ dr
mr.t n.t h^cw=i ih³ h³=t n<=i> [4] [htf]-hr=i m³=i h³=t hr=i m rsw.t w³h=i n=n.t h.t [5]
[šw] wbnw grg <=i> n=t htp.t

⁵¹⁵ E.S. Meltzer 2008, 3.

⁵¹⁶ E.S. Meltzer 2008, 3 –4.

⁵¹⁷ E.F. Wente 1975–1976, 597 and note b.

⁵¹⁸ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, p. 55 and note b ; R. Nyord 2021 A, 16-18.; J. Hsieh 2022,

⁵¹⁹ R. Nyord 2021 A, 16-18

⁵²⁰ See chapter 3, section 3.1.b.

|1| *A message from Merirtyfy to Nebetitef.*

How are you? Has the West been taking care of you |2| according to your desire?

Look! I am your beloved on earth: fight on my behalf! Intercede for my name! I did not confuse |3| [a spell] in front of you while I was perpetuating your name upon earth.

Expel the illness from my limbs: May you manifest to me in the form of an 3h |4| [...] May I see you fight for me in a dream!

Then I will present offerings to you |5| when the [sun] rises, I will set up offerings for you.⁵²¹

In the second letter (columns 5-7), a man called Khuau asks the deceased lady Nebetitef to fight for him, for his woman, and for his offspring (column 7). In addition, in the incipit of the missive, Khuau addresses Nebetitef as his *sn.t*, a term that can be literally translated as “sister” but could also assume the meaning of “wife”:

|5| *r-dd in hw-3w n sn.t=f |6| [...] n šb(=i) ts hft-hr=t n nhm(=i) h.t r=t iw grt wh3-n(=i)*

|7| *[...] ʿh3 hr=i ʿh3 hr hm.t<=i> hr hrd.w<=i>*

|1| *A message by Khuau to his sister.*

|6| *[...] I did not confuse a spell in front of you, nor I took away the offerings from you. Rather I have provided |7| [...]*

|8| *Fight on my behalf, fight on behalf of my woman, fight on behalf of my children.⁵²²*

According to S. Donnat Beauquier, the identification of the first sender – Merirtyfy – with a woman allows one to argue that she would be no other than Khuau’s wife and, therefore, the *hm.t=i* cited at

⁵²¹ For the translation of this text, I mainly based myself on R. Nyord 2021 A, 10-13.

⁵²² For the translation of this text, I mainly based myself on R. Nyord 2021 A, 10-13.

column 7.⁵²³ In effect, assuming this perspective, the second missive appears as a brief recapitulation of the first one made by a second writer, an element attested also in other letters to the dead.⁵²⁴ Moreover, given the ambiguity of the expression *sn.t=f*, the addressee, Nebetitef, could be identified as Khuau's former dead wife.

Although the term *sn.t* is used as synonymous of *hm.t* with the meaning of “spouse” mainly from the New Kingdom,⁵²⁵ the use of the word *sn.t* as “wife” is attested in another letter to the dead datable to the end of the Old Kingdom.⁵²⁶ Such an element could place the document in a different perspective. The role of Nebetitef appears indeed rather ambiguous: at first sight, she would seem a positive figure, since she is invoked in order to fight on Merirtyfy's behalf against an external enemy. On the other hand, such a heartfelt appeal could hide the attempt to appease a potential malevolent spirit. It would be possible to hypothesise that Nebetitef herself was causing the illness of Merirtyfy because she was upset by her living husband's remarriage.⁵²⁷

This latter interpretation sustained by both me and Donnat Beauquier, has been recently rejected by R. Nyord, whose main arguments can be summarised as following:

1. Merirtyfy seems to play a major role in the mortuary cult of Nebetitef as a “perpetuator of her name” (column 3, *s'nh(=i) rn=t tp t3*), an element that would rather suggest that Merirtyfy was the daughter or a sister of Nebetitef;⁵²⁸
2. Merirtyfy defines herself as “beloved” (column 2, *mr.t*) by Nebetitef, and the term *mr* usually indicates “a downward direction in the social hierarchy, i.e. from parent to offspring, from master to servant”.⁵²⁹

Given that we do not have detailed prosopographic information about the individuals involved in the missives, Nyord is right in sustaining that any interpretation must be made with caution. The major involvement of Merirtyfy in the ritual action addressed to Nebetitef, is not a common feature and, as we will see in most of the other Letters to the Dead addressed to women, the sender is always a man, probably to be identified with the living husband of the recipient. On the other hand, one has also to consider that the so-called Letters to the Dead do not constitute an actual genre recognised by the

⁵²³ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 57.

⁵²⁴ See, for example, the aforementioned Cairo Linen JdE 25675, column 13; for further references see: S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 30–31, Hsieh, 2022, 111–114. See also: chapter 4, section 4.4.

⁵²⁵ Wb 4, 151.9.

⁵²⁶ This is attested in the so-called Cairo Linen JdE 25675, column 1, for further references see: S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 30–31, J. Hsieh, 2021, 111–114. See also: chapter 4, section 4.4.

⁵²⁷ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 57.

⁵²⁸ R. Nyord 2021 A, 18–19.

⁵²⁹ R. Nyord 2021 A, 18.

ancient Egyptians themselves. The presence of an original feature, therefore should not surprise: not by chance the two letters analysed here are the only case of “Letters to the Dead” written on a stela.

As for the ritual action of “perpetuating the name upon earth”, we have to consider that texts such as those analysed here were probably written by using handbooks from which formulaic phrases were copied.⁵³⁰ Therefore, this sentence can hardly be considered as a valid clue to determine the relationship between the sender and the recipient. Within this specific context, this formulaic expression can rather be intended as a reference to the pact of mutual aid between the living and the dead whose actual meaning should be understood as something like “I take care of your mortuary rituals, so you have to act as a benevolent ancestor towards me”. Also, if, as suggested by Nyord, Merirtyfy was the daughter or the sister of Nebetitef, it is indeed odd that such a degree of kinship is never mentioned in the document. If we consider that, on the front face of the stele, Nebetitef mentions the name of her mother,⁵³¹ and in the missive written on the back, Khuau does not show any reticence in mentioning his grade of kinship with the recipient by using the word *sn.t*, there was no reasonable ground for omitting the type of relationship between Merirtyfy and Nebetitef, especially if it was so close.

In addition, if one adopts the perspective according to which Nebetitef might have been considered as the “cause” of Merirtyfy’s illness, the use of the expression *mr.t=t* can be easily explained with the fact that the two letters constitute the written testimony of a complex ritual action – probably enacted at the tomb of the deceased – aimed at appeasing the wrath of an angry dead woman, by transmuting her into a benevolent ancestor. Within this context, the emphasis of being “beloved” by a supernatural dead can be understood as a way to urge the latter to respect the pact of mutual aid between the living and the dead, which perfectly matches with the “downward direction in the social hierarchy”, which, as highlighted by Nyord, characterises the verb “*mr*”.

Finally, there is another aspect that can confirm this kind of interpretation and that Nyord did not take into account. The theme of vengeful ghosts – envious and therefore potentially dangerous towards the living human beings who are replacing their social position on earth – is a well-attested theme in

⁵³⁰ The existence of such handbooks or compendia – see for example the Book of Kemit – used for training scribes are well known (see. Eyre 2013, 95). Moreover, as highlighted by Fischer-Elfert, several Letters to the Dead, the Cairo Bowl in particular, show undeniable affinity with the so-called Loyalist Instruction: the occurrence of similar themes and sentences in both these documents allows us to hypothesise the existence of *compendia* from which scribes could take inspiration to write these kinds of texts (H.-W. Fischer-Elfert 1994, 41-44). Also, Donnat Beauquier has highlighted the presence of similar formulaic expressions in both the Cairo Bowl and the Heqanakht letters, another element that allows to posit the existence of handbooks (see S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 38). See also chapter 4, section 4.6.

⁵³¹ R. Nyord 2021 A, 7.

ancient Egyptian textual sources,⁵³² and as we will be see, this is a recurrent feature characterising all the Letters to the Dead addressed to women.

*The Berlin Bowl Inv. 33573*⁵³³



Figure 26

The Berlin Bowl is one of the very few cases of a Letter to the Dead showing an image alongside the text:⁵³⁴ between the two concentric circles of hieratic inscriptions, one observes the upper part of a human figure, probably intended as a portrait of the receiver (Fig. 36). While some scholars have seen in this image a two-dimensional representation of an ancestral bust,⁵³⁵ in

actual fact it seems more likely to be a variant of the hieroglyph B1 (Fig. 35) mutilated for apotropaic reasons.⁵³⁶

⁵³² See for example CT I 158 a–159 b [38].

⁵³³ Probably from Naga ed-Deir due to internal reference. Datable between the end of the 11th dynasty according to Gardiner and Sethe, to the 12th dynasty according to other scholars (see, in particular: D. Czerwik 1999, 64; J. Hsieh 2022, 245). Main bibliographical references: A. H. Gardiner and K. Sethe 1928, 5–7 and 21–22, plates V and Va; Fecht 1969, 114–115; E. F. Wente and E. S. Meltzer 1990, 214 number 346; Schiavo 2013 A; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 61–63; J. Hsieh 2022, 245–257.

⁵³⁴ Another exception is the Oxford bowl. See S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 71: *Griffith, l'éditeur premier du texte, signale que le dessin au trait d'un sarcophage était discernable sur le fond du bol. Il n'est tout à fait clair si le signe était à l'intérieur ou, plus probablement, à l'extérieur, mais l'encerclement potentiel par le discours de ce signe n'est pas sans rappeler celui de la figure féminine du Bol de Berlin* ».

⁵³⁵ D. Lines 2001.

⁵³⁶ R. Schiavo 2013 A, 36.



Figure 27

The brief content of the hieratic inscription is rather ambiguous. In the incipit the sender stresses that, before her departure, the woman had never shown any resentment towards him (first circle: *in=t 3 r niw.t n.t nhh nn špt=t nb r=i*). Subsequently, the man asks what kind of problem could have caused her conduct, claiming that if the deceased has some recriminations against her relatives, she should forget them, for the good of her offspring (second circle: *ir wn srh m h.t=t; smh sw n ib n hrd.w=t*).

It seems clear that the dead woman is not invoked to solve an external problem; rather, she seems to be perceived as a potentially malevolent spirit who is causing troubles in the family.⁵³⁷ Although the degree of kinship is not mentioned in the text, the woman is explicitly asked to be benevolent for the sake of her offspring (*n ib hrd.w=t*), so it could be argued that both the sender and the recipient belonged to the same family. In this regard, it has been suggested that the anger of the dead woman was triggered by the remarriage of her husband, who is probably to be identified with the writer of the missive, and that the recipient might be concerned about the social status of her children potentially threatened by the new wife.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁷ R. Schiavo 2013 A, 36.

⁵³⁸ A. H. Gardiner and K. Sethe 1928, 7; G. Fecht 1969, 115 and note 1.

The exact provenance of the Berlin bowl is unknown. Gardiner and Sethe indicate that it “was purchased from a Cairo dealer” in 1926.⁵³⁹ Yet, internal evidence seem to suggest Naga ed-Deir, or another site of the Thinite nome.⁵⁴⁰

Gardiner and Sethe reported that a jar-stand of burnt clay (Berlin 22574) was “purchased at the same time and said to come from the same tomb of the letter here analysed”.⁵⁴¹ Notably, the object presents another inscription that concerns the request for a child.⁵⁴²

According to Gardiner and Sethe, although the bowl fits on the jar-stand, they cannot belong to each other, due to the fact that they are made in different materials and seem to belong to different historical phases: 11th dynasty for the bowl, 12th for the jar-stand;⁵⁴³ however, by their own admission, the palaeographic dating of the bowl is based on quite a restricted number of elements⁵⁴⁴ and more recent analyses conducted by both Czerwik and Hsieh dated the bowl to the 12th dynasty.⁵⁴⁵

It is therefore possible to hypothesise that the female recipient of the Berlin bowl was suspected of hindering the fertility of other women belonging to her marital household and, as consequence, the letter was associated with another message written on the jar-stand and addressed to a male ancestor in order to solve the problem. A similar case can also be hypothesised for the so-called Chicago Vessel (Oriental Institute Museum E 13945), a Letter to the Dead concerning fertility issues addressed to a deceased man.⁵⁴⁶ According to Janák, some internal evidence allows to hypothesise the existence of another letter:

*The text was inscribed upon a vessel (probably a bowl) that was placed on the top of a stand and was written by a man to a woman who was probably his grandmother. The reason for composing it was to convince the recipient to litigate on behalf of the sender at the afterworld trial.*⁵⁴⁷

⁵³⁹ A.H. Gardiner and K. Sethe 1928, 5.

⁵⁴⁰ E. Brovarski 1985, 310.

⁵⁴¹ A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe, 1928, 5.

⁵⁴² See: A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 7 ; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 61 and note 123; J. Hsieh 2022, 253.

⁵⁴³ A.H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe, 1928, 7.

⁵⁴⁴ A.H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe, 1928, 7.

⁵⁴⁵ D. Czerwik 1999, 64.

⁵⁴⁶ A.H. Gardiner 1930, 19-22; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 41-44 ; J. Hsieh 2022, 156-168.

⁵⁴⁷ J. Janák 2003, 276-277.

One can thus hypothesise that this “undiscovered” letter was not too dissimilar from the Berlin bowl, and that, perhaps, also the woman addressed in this document was somehow perceived as a threatening entity which needed to be appeased and transmuted into a benevolent spirit.

Munich Cosmetic Vase ÄS 4313⁵⁴⁸

The letter is written on an unusual medium. it is not a globular bowl, as for the most Letters to the Dead currently known, but a little vase (16 cm height, with a max diameter of 14,8 cm), with a cylindrical neck and a thick, flat rim. The morphology is that of a typical container for cosmetic products and due to both morphological and palaeographical elements it is datable to the final part of the 18th dynasty; the provenance is unknown.⁵⁴⁹

The vase shows several decorations: there are six lines of black ink around the neck and, near the bottom, another four horizontal black lines. The body is divided into four sections by vertical decorative elements. The hieratic inscription is placed inside two of the trapezoidal spaces formed by the decorations on the body of the vase (lines 1-6); part of the incipit occupies the upper part of another trapezoidal space (line 1b), while the last line of text is written near the bottom, under the aforementioned four horizontal lines (line 7).⁵⁵⁰

[1] *ḥtp ḥr-ḏd n Ipw-rs-ti* [1b] *ḥr ḏd[=t] sp-2 inn-iw[=t] mi-išs.t* [2] *ti[=tn] m ḥn wḏ³ snb*
m ḥsw imn-R^c [3] *{m} Nswt ntr.(w) m ḥsw Mn nb Ipw* [4] *dī=f n=t ḥs<w.t> mr.wt m sḏm*
n md.wt n t³ ḥm.t [5] *sn=nw.t m=t is ḏd-n=i n=t r-ḏd nn ḥm.t sns.kw(i)* [6] *m dī=t iw(=i)*
n=t r b³k rdi-n=i ini.tw nms.t n<.t> i³rr.wt [7] *š^c.t sḏf ḥḏ.w*

/1/ *Hotep to Ipw-res-ti*

/1b/ *How are you? How are you? Are you all alright?*

/2/ *May you be in a state of Life, Health and Prosperity, (may you be) in the grace of Amon-Ra* /3/ *kings of the gods, (and) in the grace of Min lord of Akhmim!* /4/ *May he (Min) give you praises and love.*

⁵⁴⁸ H. Buchberger 1991, 49-87; Verhoeven, 2003, 31 and note 1; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 25-26.

⁵⁴⁹ H. Buchberger 1991, 50.

⁵⁵⁰ H. Buchberger 1991, 52-53.

*Do not listen to the rumours about the second woman!*⁵⁵¹ /5/ *Consider what I told you:*
“there is no woman since I joined ⁵⁵² /6/ *you”.*

Since I want (to continue) to serve you, I make sure to bring you a jug of raisins, /7/ a
measure of shaset-grains and onions, 50 pieces.

It has been widely discussed whether this text can be considered a message addressed to a deceased woman or a normal letter exchanged between two living individuals.⁵⁵³ In fact, there is no internal evidence that can prove that the addressee is actually a dead person. Nevertheless, the hieratic inscription shows certain elements which are somehow similar to the other documents analysed here.

The main aim of the message is that of appeasing a lady who is jealous of another woman, and the sentence occurring in lines 5-6 (*m sdm n md.wt n t3 hm.t sn=nw.t m=t is dd-n=i n=t r-dd nn hm.t sns.n.kw(i) m di=t* / do not listen to the rumours about the second woman! Consider what I told you: “there is no woman since I joined you) strongly recalls what we can see in another Letter to the Dead addressed to a deceased woman, P. Leiden AMS 64/ I 371 (*hr ptr n3 sn.w(t) m p3 pr bw-pw=i k n w im=sn* / “And behold, as for the sisters in the house: I have not gone in to (any) one of them!”).⁵⁵⁴ In light of this parallel, the final sentence might be interpreted as an offering to placate the potential wrath of a deceased woman.

One has also to consider that the medium – a cosmetic vase – is unusual for a normal correspondence between living persons, and it can match with a ritual purpose whose religious milieu was not too dissimilar to that of the other “Letters to the Dead”.⁵⁵⁵ One has also to consider that vases meant for containing unguent were a symbol of the goddess Bastet often associated to ritual actions aimed at appeasing her wrath as a hypostasis of the Solar Eye.⁵⁵⁶

Therefore, if, on one hand, there are not enough data to identify the Munich Cosmetic Vase ÄS 4313 as a message addressed to a deceased woman, the latter hypothesis cannot be ruled out a priori, especially in the light of the comparison with the other documents analysed in the present chapter.

⁵⁵¹ If we interpret the present document as a message addressed to a dead, the reference to this “second woman” could be interpreted as the second wife of the sender, or another woman living within his household.

⁵⁵² The meaning of the verb *snsn* is usually that of “to associate with; to fraternise” (Wb 4, 172.12-173.31). Yet, as stressed by Buchberger, within the present passage it is possible to recognise also a sexual implication. H. Buchberger 1991, 67-68.

⁵⁵³ U. Verhoeven, 2003, 31 and note 1; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 25-26.

⁵⁵⁴ See next document.

⁵⁵⁵ Yet, see: S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 25.

⁵⁵⁶ A. Joseph 2018, 36.

A letter undoubtedly written by a man to placate the spirit of his dead wife is P. Leiden AMS 64 / I 371. Here the writer begs his wife to stop persecuting him, since – in his opinion – the malevolent attitude showed by the deceased is totally unjustified (lines 1–2 recto):

iri=t iḥ r=i m bt3 |2| p3=i ḥpr m p3y šhr.w bin n.ty tw<=i> im=f

What evil thing have you done against me, |2| for which I come in this miserable state in which I am?⁵⁵⁸

The man stresses how he always looked after her, respecting her both alive and dead. However, the brief reference to the “sisters in the house” sheds an intriguing light on the causes of the anger of the deceased (line 21 verso):

|21|...ḥr ptr n3 sn.w(t) m p3 pr bw-pw=i ʕ n wʕ im=sn

|21|... And behold, as for the sisters in the house: I have not gone in to (any) one of them!⁵⁵⁹

We will hardly know if the sender is sincere. However, the fact that the man needs to emphasise that he has not had relations with other women is itself a significant element. It undeniably testifies that, for the Egyptians, it was common to believe that the spirit of a deceased wife could have a malevolent influence, especially if the living husband gave a certain kind of attention to other women.

*Ostrakon Louvre 698*⁵⁶⁰

O. Louvre 698 is the only letter to the dead written on a piece of limestone and the only case in which red ink is used for the inscription. The ostrakon comes from the new Kingdom settlement of Deir el-

⁵⁵⁷ A. H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 23-25 and plates VIII a and VIII b; M. Guilmot 1973; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 74-76; L. Troy 2015; J. Hsieh 2022, 317-328.

⁵⁵⁸ Here I mainly follow the interpretation by L. Troy. See: Troy 2015, 405.

⁵⁵⁹ I follow the interpretation by Troy. See: L. Troy 2015, 413.

⁵⁶⁰ J. Černý and A. H. Gardiner 1975, 82 and plates 80–80a; J. Černý 1973, 360–370; P. J. Frandsen 1992, 31–50;

Medina, and the sender is a man called Butehamun. Interestingly, rather than writing directly to the spirit, he addresses a long message to the *fd.t* of his dead wife, Ikhtay. The word *fd.t* is a variation of the term *fd.t*. It literally means “box”,⁵⁶¹ but it is sometimes used to indicate containers utilised to store letters;⁵⁶² furthermore, in specific contexts it can also have the meaning of “coffin”.⁵⁶³ This ambiguity is maybe used on purpose by Butehamun to poeticise the text making a sophisticated link between an object used in everyday life for private correspondence and the will to communicate with his deceased wife. In effect, the document in question is far more artistically skilful than the other letters to the dead: it is written in meter, there are “verse points”, and it shows not only various figures of speech, but also a number of educated quotes from the main ancient Egyptian literary genres.⁵⁶⁴ On the basis of these features, S. Donnat Beauquier has argued that O. Louvre 698 cannot be considered a letter to the dead, showing, rather, more analogies with funerary lamentations.⁵⁶⁵ She points out that an ostrakon would not be the most appropriate object for a ritualistic purpose. And although red was traditionally associated with malevolent beings, here the use of red ink could indicate that the ostrakon was used to outline a preliminary sketch of the text. In her opinion, either the final version had to be copied onto the coffin of Ikhtay or it had been written to be recited. Donnat Beauquier, moreover, stressed that in this text the deceased is not invoked to solve a specific crisis, but for a generic intercession. In addition, Ikhtay is not called *ḥ*, as attested in several letters to the dead, but “Osiris,” as in funerary texts.⁵⁶⁶

However, the term *ḥ* occurs once in O. Louvre 698, not as a noun to indicate a blessed spirit, but as a verb. In this regard, according to the interpretation given by P. J. Frandsen,⁵⁶⁷ the deceased is not invoked for a generic mediation to the gods, but for a more specific request:

[6] *nn ky.t m-ḳd=st [...]* *bw gmi<=i> sp bw.t [...]* *gmi st n=t [...]* [7] *š=i m iḏ.t nb ḥ=t*
[...] wšb.t ḥ [8] *n=i mw.t<=i> it=i sn=i ḥn^c sn.t<=i> st iwi tḏy.tw*

O. Goldwasser 1995, 191–205; E. F. Wente and E. S. Meltzer 1990, 217–218; S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 77–83 and 158–163; J. Hsieh 2022, 329–340.

⁵⁶¹ Wb I, 183.15–18.

⁵⁶² The use of *fd.t* with the meaning of “letter-box” is well attested at Deir el-Medina. Remarkably the same sender of O. Louvre 698, Butehamun, uses the word *fd.t* with this specific meaning in some private letters. Cf. R. J. Demarée, 2006, 11 Recto 3.

⁵⁶³ K.M. Cooney 2007, 276.

⁵⁶⁴ O. Goldwasser 1995, 191–205.

⁵⁶⁵ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 160–161.

⁵⁶⁶ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 158–163

⁵⁶⁷ P.J. Frandsen 1992, 37–38.

[6]no instance of wrong has been found [...]. [7] I have appealed to you directly all the time that you might respond [...]. My mother and my father, my brother and my sister [8]are beneficial (*ḥ*) for me: they come; you are taken away.⁵⁶⁸

In Frandsen's opinion, the relatives here mentioned could be understood as other deceased persons. Thus, this sentence could reveal the existence of some troubles between the sender and the recipient. The suggestion could be that the writer is complaining that his dead wife is no longer supporting him from the netherworld, since Ikhtay is the only one among his dead relatives to ignore him.⁵⁶⁹ However this interpretation is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the text is seriously damaged due to several lacunas. Moreover, as stressed by Sweeney, because of standard Ramesside malpractice, it is rather difficult to understand whether the verbs have a first-person suffix (Butehamun as subject), or a second person suffix (Ikhtay as subject). Also, with regards to the participles, it is hard to recognise if they are active or passive: the first option renders Ikhtay as a potentially malevolent entity, the second interpretation could depict her more as a victim.⁵⁷⁰

Finally, the prosopography relating to the inhabitants of Deir el-Medina is well known. Butehamun was a "scribe of the necropolis" and maintained a regular correspondence with his father, Thutmose. The letters by Butehamun clearly show the same calligraphy as O. Louvre 698.⁵⁷¹ Moreover, from several documents a relationship with a woman called Shedemdua emerges, but the elder sons of Butehamun are often cited as Ikhtay's offspring. In light of such evidence, Davies hypothesised that Butehamun remarried Shedemdua after the death of Ikhtay.⁵⁷² Given this last assumption, at first sight, one could posit that the aim of the present text does not differ much from the other letters here analysed: to placate a dead woman angry for the remarriage of her husband. However, the aforementioned correspondence between Butehamun and his father clearly shows that Thutmose survived Ikhtay, since, unlike Shedemdua, she is never mentioned in this corpus of letters, and it is an element that could partially invalidate Frandsen's rendering of the passage reported here.⁵⁷³ Furthermore, we do not have any firm evidence regarding the remarriage of Butehamun with

⁵⁶⁸ I basically follow Frandsen's translation with the exception of *ḥy.tw*, here considered as a stative. Cf. P. J. Frandsen 1992, 37–38.

⁵⁶⁹ P.J. Frandsen 1992, 37–38.

⁵⁷⁰ D. Sweeney 1994.

⁵⁷¹ P.J. Frandsen 1992, 38 and note 31.

⁵⁷² B.G. Davies 1997, 56.

⁵⁷³ B.G. Davies 1997, 56–57.

Shedemdua, and it was also argued that the woman might have been a sister or female relative of Butehamun who was hosted in his house since she was a widow with dependent children.⁵⁷⁴

Given all these elements further evaluations are needed. First, O. Louvre 698 undeniably implies the same religious milieu of the so-called “Letters to the Dead”, since it clearly shows a core belief in which a living person is searching for contact with a departed relative. In addition, although we do not have other examples of letters to the dead from the village, ancestor worship is surely well attested at Deir el-Medina.⁵⁷⁵ Secondly, the connection with the genre of funerary lamentations stressed by Donnat Beauquier is indeed a valid hypothesis, especially taking into consideration the elaborated style of the text and the fact that the missive is addressed to the coffin of the deceased woman.⁵⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the connection between funerary or mortuary texts and letters to the dead is not a surprising fact. The aforementioned CT spells 38–41 (but also 30–37, following Willems’ interpretation) show an undeniable affinity with the letters to the dead,⁵⁷⁷ and it was also suggested that these spells could constitute the liturgy utilised for the deposition of the letters into the tombs on the occasion of the festivals to commemorate the deceased.⁵⁷⁸ So, nothing precludes that, in very extraordinary cases – such as a death occurred at young age, probably caused by childbirth or other violent causes – a rather similar liturgy connected to an apotropaic action could have been performed during the funerals. In this regard, it is suggestive that in a letter sent to Butehamun by his father Thutmose (BM EA 75021) both a “great black *ʿfd.t*” and an evil eye caused by a malevolent dead are mentioned. Unfortunately, due the lacunas the connection between these two elements is not clear⁵⁷⁹ but it could be argued that this passage refers to the troubles with the spirit of Ikhtay and the ritual to placate her.

5.3 How to appease an angry dead woman

In the light of these observations, it seems that the “letters” sent exclusively to a female deceased were written in order to solve certain kinds of troubles caused by the very dead addressee. Why were these women so angry?

The average life expectancy for women was lower than for men.⁵⁸⁰ Moreover, one of the main causes of death was childbirth, a moment that contains a strong symbolic and liminal character itself. Thus,

⁵⁷⁴ B.G. Davies 1997, 56–57.

⁵⁷⁵ R.J. Demarée 1983.

⁵⁷⁶ S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 158–163.

⁵⁷⁷ H. Willems 2011, 344–355.

⁵⁷⁸ H. Willems 2011, 357–358.

⁵⁷⁹ R.J. Demarée 2006, 21–24. I am sincerely grateful to Dr. R.J. Demarée for having brought this document to my attention.

⁵⁸⁰ N. Harrington 2013, 138–141.

we are not very far from the idea that an abrupt ending to life would be capable of transforming a dead person into a malevolent entity.⁵⁸¹

The theme of a spirit that becomes irate because of a premature and brutal death is attested in several cultural contexts. In the Akkadian tradition, for example, the *etemmu ahu*, literally the “foreign spirits”, are described as ghosts whose malevolent behaviour is prevalently due to the absence of a proper burial, either because they died in isolated places far from their loved ones (as must often have happened to soldiers), or because they drowned, or died in a fire.⁵⁸² From this point of view, an interesting case is found in P. Edwin-Smith surgical papyrus, where, in an apotropaic formula, next to the *ḫ.w* and the *mwt.w*, other kinds of malevolent dead are classified on the basis of the type of death as, for example, “the one which the crocodile has taken”; “the one which the serpent has stung”, “the one which has perished by the knife”.⁵⁸³

Notably, we have two examples of spells against female ghosts from magical and medical texts.⁵⁸⁴ A rubric from a spell in the Brooklyn magical papyrus is directed against several kinds of supernatural beings listed in male/female couples, including the group *mwt/mwt.t*; but remarkably a dead female (*mwt.t-ḫm.t*) is cited separately, without any male counterpart.⁵⁸⁵ A quite similar case is attested in the Leiden Magical Papyrus I 348/AMS 26a, where a spell to heal headaches (spell 12; rt.6,4) is meant to work against “a dead female who robs as a wailing woman”.⁵⁸⁶

It is certainly interesting that most of the documents analysed here were in different ways associated with an effigy of the deceased. The letter addressed to Nebetitef is the only example attested on the back of a stele, and, notably, on the front face the female receiver of the missive is portrayed. A stylised image of the deceased possibly mutilated for apotropaic reason is depicted exactly in the centre of the Berlin bowl. P. Leiden AMS 64 / I 371 was attached to a statuette of the dead addressee.⁵⁸⁷ Clearly, sculptures and images of the deceased played an important role in Egyptian ancestor worship.⁵⁸⁸ Such an element is to be connected with an apotropaic practice (well attested to in several magical texts), with the specific aim of dominating a potentially dangerous entity by controlling a (two-dimensional or three-dimensional) representation of her.⁵⁸⁹ Furthermore, also the fact that O.

⁵⁸¹ N. Harrington 2012, 22-27.

⁵⁸² T. Abusch 1995, 588-594.

⁵⁸³ J. H. Breasted 1930, 480-481.

⁵⁸⁴ R. Lucarelli 2010, 6-7.

⁵⁸⁵ S. Sauneron 1970, 7 and 23.

⁵⁸⁶ J.F. Borghouts 1971, 97 and note 168.

⁵⁸⁷ A.H. Gardiner and K. H. Sethe 1928, 9.

⁵⁸⁸ S.B. Schulman 1986.

⁵⁸⁹ R.K. Ritner 1993, 112.

Louvre 698 was addressed to the coffin (*fd.t*) of the deceased could be understood by interpreting the coffin as a mediator, through which the sender could exercise a certain control over his dead wife.⁵⁹⁰

A closer parallel can be found in a sculpture preserved at Louvre Museum (E 10582), which portrays prince Ahmose Sapair, a son of Seqenenra Tao, who died at an early age.⁵⁹¹ The sculpture is inscribed with a text showing significant similarities with the Letters to the Dead, where the young prince is invoked to protect his living family members.⁵⁹² Remarkably, the artifact also shows several mutilations (in the arms and in the legs, moreover the head was cut off, and subsequently reattached) in which some traces of red colour have been detected.⁵⁹³ This element has allowed Barbotin to establish with some certainty that such damages have been deliberately carried out in ancient time to be subsequently restored: a procedure that, according to Barbotin, could be identified with a ritual action aimed at neutralising the negative influence of the prince (who likely turned into an evil spirit due to his premature death) and, therefore, transmuting him into a benevolent ancestor.⁵⁹⁴

On the other hand, other factors must also be considered: in all these letters we may infer that the anger of the deceased was triggered by the second marriage of the husband, or by a certain kind of envy towards women that can potentially replace her social role inside the family. This recurrent feature cannot be interpreted exclusively by the projection of typically worldly sentiments onto the afterlife.

A comparison with the CT spells 30-41 may be illuminating in this regard. As mentioned earlier, these texts ratify the firstborn as new head of the family and successor of the deceased father,⁵⁹⁵ but it is important to stress that this transition was not perceived as peaceful. In several passages the deceased father shows contradictory feelings, especially towards his eldest son who is about to replace him.⁵⁹⁶ In CT I 158 a–159 b [38], for example, it is clearly stated that the deceased father has an ambivalent attitude towards his son and that he wants to bring the latter into the netherworld causing his premature death.

Given this premise, one could posit that for the Egyptians also the dead wife could develop hostile feelings about the second marriage of the living husband. Consequently, when another woman replaced her as wife, such a transmission was perceived as potentially dangerous. In this regard, also accepting Donnat Beauquier's hypothesis, which interprets O. Louvre 698 as a funerary lamentation

⁵⁹⁰ For the use of coffins as “communicative tools,” see: K.M. Cooney 2007 B.

⁵⁹¹ Barbotin 2005, 19-28.

⁵⁹² Ch. Barbotin 2005, 26-28; S. Donnat Beaunquie 2014, 71-73.

⁵⁹³ Ch. Barbotin 2005, 26.

⁵⁹⁴ Ch. Barbotin 2005, 27-28.

⁵⁹⁵ H. Willems 2001, 368–369.

⁵⁹⁶ H. Willems 2001, 342–344.

rather than as Letter to the Dead, this kind of interpretation is still plausible. Since – in our reconstruction – the writer is not facing a crisis caused by a specific external problem (for example, an illness caused by a malevolent entity), but an existential crisis connected with a change of social roles (the premature death of a young beloved spouse and, thus, the fear that she could become a vengeful spirit, especially if another woman was about to replace her), it is thus reasonable to posit that some kind of apotropaic ritual could be performed already on the occasion of the funeral.

This kind of religious idea seems actually well rooted in Egyptian beliefs. A number of archaeological data testify to the existence of special apotropaic actions connected to the inhumation of pregnant women. A so-called votive bed found in TT 14 seems to have been deposited in connection with the body of a young woman who surely died during her pregnancy, probably with the intention to facilitate “the rebirth of mother and child after a happy completion of delivery in their second, eternal life”.⁵⁹⁷ Furthermore, a restricted amount of evidence concerning the special attention paid by the Egyptians to the embalming procedure of pregnant women are known.⁵⁹⁸

Significantly, something similar is attested in connection with an oracular decree of Amonrasonther for Neskhons, the wife of Pinedjem II.⁵⁹⁹ This document shows strong links with the religious milieu of the letters to the dead: the utterance was written on a wooden board and deposited inside the tomb of Neskhons,⁶⁰⁰ as was done with the letters; moreover, from the text it is evident that the female spirit is perceived as a potentially angry entity, capable of persecuting her husband. In addition, according to Smith, the analysis of Neskhons’ mummy shows that the woman was young and pregnant at the time of her death.⁶⁰¹ Thus, it could be argued that some complications occurred during the childbirth causing her demise. On the other hand, it is interesting that in order to protect Pinedjem and his family, the main aim of the texts is to deify Neskhons and to placate her potential negative attitude towards the husband.

From others sources it is well known that the Egyptians had few scruples when faced with neutralising an evil dead person. In a Saitic apotropaic spell, for exorcising a woman possessed by a ghost the threat to burn down the tomb of the malevolent spirit is clearly expressed.⁶⁰² Yet, nothing like this is attested in the decree for Neskhons or in the Letters to the Dead analysed here. In these documents the deceased women are clearly treated with a certain respect: the senders stress quite often their

⁵⁹⁷ M.C. Betrò 2017, 70.

⁵⁹⁸ M.C. Betrò 2017, 68–70.

⁵⁹⁹ B. Gunn and I. E. S. Edwards 1955.

⁶⁰⁰ A. Dodson and D. Hilton 2004, 200–210.

⁶⁰¹ “The skin of the abdomen is loose and pendulous; and the mammillae are large and prominent. These two signs make it certain that Nsikhonsu was parous.” Cf. G. Elliot Smith 1912, 107–109.

⁶⁰² Y. Koenig 1979.

correct behaviour toward the women and always highlight how the angry attitude of the spirits appears unjustified. Moreover, with the only exception of P. Leiden AMS 64 / I 371 and the Munich Cosmetic Vase ÄS 4313, the writers always invoke the female spirits to intercede for the writer with the gods or another ancestor, or even to act as a benevolent being against other enemies.⁶⁰³

If the CT spells 30–41 were focused on the crucial moment of passage in which the main heir replaces his dead father as householder, in the specific context of the Middle Kingdom elite's extended family,⁶⁰⁴ the core of beliefs here highlighted focused on something quite similar, concerning not only the vengeful ghost of a woman angry because of her untimely death, but also, a passage of social status between the living and the dead: a deceased wife and a living woman who took over (or could potentially take over, as in P. Leiden AMS 64 / I 371) her social role. Thus, given these elements, it is possible to posit that the documents here analysed not just show a ritual to ward off an angry spirit, but the will to restore the positive role of an ancestress, healing the pact of mutual aid between the living and the dead for the prosperity of the household.

In light of the elements described above, in addition to funerals, it is also possible to hypothesise other occasions during which these ritual actions might be performed. The appeasing of a wrathful supernatural entity shows indeed a certain affinity with the mythical theme of the wrath of the Distant or Wandering Goddess and her pacification through inebriation, music, and dance. This female divine entity, usually identified with the Solar Eye, embodied the most dangerous manifestation of the sun and was believed able of causing severe diseases. She is often described as the daughter or the wife of the sun god (Ra, Atum, or Amun) and was identified with diverse goddesses, such as Hathor, Sekhmet, Tefnut, Mut, Bastet, Mehit.⁶⁰⁵

The wrathful attitude of the Solar eye against humanity or even against the sun god himself is a recurrent theme in the Egyptian written sources. The first allusion to this myth is found in a Coffin Text spell (CT II 76 4a-b), where it said that the Eye of Atum was sent in search of Tefnut. The New Kingdom *Book of the Heavenly Cow* narrates how the Solar Eye was sent by Ra to exterminate the human beings who rebelled against him. The violence of the goddess was so uncontrollable that, when Ra regretted his decision, the only way to placate the goddess was by intoxicating her with a special type of beer dyed red to resemble blood.⁶⁰⁶ In P. Leiden I 384 (second century CE), and other Greek

⁶⁰³ See Berlin Bowl, second circle: *ir-wn irr-t(w) m msdd.t=t 3 it=t <m> hr.t-ntr* “If it happened against your will: your father is powerful in the necropolis.” Here, the sender is asking the female dead to invoke the help of her deceased father to protect the family from malevolent influences. Cf. R. Schiavo 2013 A, 34–35 and note b. In O. Louvre 698 an intercession to the Lords of the Eternity is explicitly asked between vs 16 and vs 18. Cf. P.J. Frandsen 1992, 33–34.

⁶⁰⁴ H. Willems 2001, 268–270.

⁶⁰⁵ J.-P. Corteggiani 2007, 381–382.

⁶⁰⁶ M. Lichtheim 2006 B, 197–199.

and Demotic sources, the Solar Eye, angry and offended because of an unspecified reason, takes refuge in a foreign country and the choice to abandon her land causes misery for the Egyptians. The goddess is then persuaded to return to Egypt thanks to the intervention of a divine messenger who is able to placate her by narrating a series of fables.⁶⁰⁷ It has been posited that the return of the goddess from a distant land could be intended as a metaphor for a natural phenomenon, such as the heliacal rising of Sirius and the advent of the new year, or the annual flood of the Nile and thus the fertility of the land.⁶⁰⁸ Other scholars have also identified a further metaphorical meaning strictly linked to female fertility – which does not exclude other interpretations related to the astral sphere – such as pregnancy,⁶⁰⁹ the occurrence of the menarche and, therefore, the passage of young girls into adulthood,⁶¹⁰ but also the restoration of women's fertility in connection with the menstrual cycle.⁶¹¹ See in particular J. B. Jørgensen:

*In the association of the myth to the coming of age of adolescent girls, it can be viewed as the female analogy to the coming of age myths of Horus, who grew up in the seclusion of the Delta marshes to return as new king of Egypt and the triumphant avenger of his father Osiris. Both myths are applicable to astral phenomena, but to fully appreciate these myths as something more than natural allegories, we need to remember both the distinction between myth and application and the inherent multivalent meanings and levels of myth – including a possible bodily basis. I am not arguing that we should interpret all episodes in every version of the Return of the Goddess as menstrual mythology. However, for some time now, Egyptian astronomy has been reclaimed from the clutches of new age Egyptology, and hopefully the time is ripe for doing the same for such an important source for mythology as female physiology.*⁶¹²

This mythical theme, therefore, relates to the most crucial aspects of female fertility and, at the same time, it has also to be linked to the most significant transitional moments in women's life, such as the reaching of adulthood and pregnancy. In other words, it likely functioned as the main paradigm for the rites of passage concerning the life cycle of women. As for the Letters to the Dead addressed to deceased women, it is certainly suggestive that the Bremner Rhind papyrus (Ptolemaic Period), taking

⁶⁰⁷ J.M. Smith 1984, 1082-1087.

⁶⁰⁸ J.F. Quack 2002, 286.

⁶⁰⁹ D. Meeks 2006, 239.

⁶¹⁰ J.B. Jørgensen, 2015, 133-135.

⁶¹¹ J.B. Jørgensen, 2015, 147.

⁶¹² J.B. Jørgensen, 2015, 163-164.

up the same version of the myth attested in CT II 76 4a-b, records that the wrath of the Solar Eye was triggered by the fact that the god Atum created a new eye during her absence in order to replace her,⁶¹³ an element that shows a certain affinity with the documents analysed here.

The anger of the Solar Eye cannot be simply neutralised, but she can be transmuted into a protective force able to destroy dangerous evil entities, or being pacified through wise words, music, dance, or feasting.⁶¹⁴ In the aforementioned P. Bremner Rhind it is also recorded that Atum, in order to appease her anger caused by the creation of the new eye, decided to place the goddess on his forehead, transmuting her into the prototype of the uraeus: a symbol associated to protection and power linked to royal dignity.⁶¹⁵

The Solar Eye was therefore considered as an ambivalent entity, whose double nature was often personified by two different goddesses (Hathor/Sekhmet; Mut/Sekhmet) which embodied the two opposite sides – one wrathful and dangerous, the other one protective and benevolent – of the same feminine divine being.⁶¹⁶

A number of attestations are known concerning celebrations specifically meant to pacify the wrath of the Solar Eye in her various forms. The Egyptian name handed down to us by the textual sources is *ḥb-thy*, probably to be translated as “Festival of the Drunkenness” or “Festival of the Intoxication”, in reference to the version of the myth in which the anger of the goddess is appeased thanks to an alcoholic beverage.⁶¹⁷

This celebration is well attested in the Greco-Roman sources, which also provide the most detailed description of the cultic activities related to it, such as dancing, intoxication through beverage or food, and even orgiastic practices.⁶¹⁸ Some scholars have speculated that the origin of the festival might go back to Naqada II.⁶¹⁹ On the other hand, it is important to stress that the *ḥb-thy* is poorly documented for the historical phases prior to the New Kingdom.⁶²⁰

⁶¹³ J.P. Allen 1997, 14-15 and note 12.

⁶¹⁴ R. Jasnow and M. Smith 2010/2011, 36.

⁶¹⁵ J.P. Allen 1997, 14-15 and note 12.

⁶¹⁶ J.-P. Corteggiani 2007, 381-382; Jasnow and Smith 2010/2011, 36.

⁶¹⁷ F. Masashi 2019, 88. For a different translation as “plummet of the balance” see: U. Luft (1992, 188–9). The association of the term *thy* with drunkenness or intoxication is currently the most commonly accepted. See: Z. Horváth: “Luft’s reading is plausible and reasonable from a palaeographic point of view. On the other hand, a feast ‘Before the Plummet’ would be a *hapax* among the Egyptian festival names as opposed to the Feast of Drunkenness which is known to have been celebrated on the same date in the Graeco-Roman period”. Z. Horváth 2015, 131.

⁶¹⁸ R. Jasnow and M. Smith 2010/2011, 9-53.

⁶¹⁹ Jensen 2017, 296-302.

⁶²⁰ F. Masashi 2019, 88.

As for the Old Kingdom, the festival is perhaps mentioned in a calendar from the Sun Temple of Niuserra (5th dynasty), but the text is too fragmentary and its interpretation remains uncertain.⁶²¹ Subsequent sources testify that a *tp^c th* – (festival) before the brewing) – or *tp^c th* – (festival) of the the first brewing – certainly linked to the goddess Hathor and probably aimed at taming her wrathful side, was celebrated during the late Middle Kingdom at Lahun.⁶²² Yet, it is only from the New Kingdom onwards that the data become more numerous and consistent. B. M. Bryan, in particular, has highlighted that during the reign of Hatshepsut, a “porch of drunkenness” was built within the temple of the goddess Mut at Karnak and that this structure was probably meant for celebrations aimed at appeasing the wrathful side of this deity.⁶²³ Textual sources from Deir el-Medina, finally, record that the celebration of the *hb-thy* was linked to Hathor and the consumptions of alcoholic beverage, especially beer.⁶²⁴

According to the religious calendars, the *hb-thy* was celebrated the twentieth day of the month of Thoth (otherwise known as I Akhet, 20), but other data suggest that it could also occur during other days.⁶²⁵ One has also to consider that several regional versions of this festival likely related to diverse local goddesses could have existed.⁶²⁶ Also, according to J.J. Janssen, data from Deir el-Medina seem to suggest that festivals in honour of the goddess Hathor characterised by the use of alcoholic beverages could also be celebrated privately.⁶²⁷ It might be noteworthy that a document from this latter site datable to the reign of Ramesses III, O. Gardiner 61, records that a man celebrated a “personal festival for Hathor” (*p3y=f hb n Hw.t-hr*) in concomitance with the death of his spouse.⁶²⁸ This kind of private ceremony, even though we are dealing with a too restricted number of evidence to be conclusive, could indeed perfectly match with a possible ritual background of the Letters to the Dead addressed to deceased women.

⁶²¹ A.J. Spalinger 1993, 297; W. Helck 1977, 57 and Pl. II

⁶²² Z. Horváth 2015, 131-135.

⁶²³ B.M. Bryan 2005, 182; B.M. Bryan 2014, 103–106.

⁶²⁴ F. Masashi 2019, 88.

⁶²⁵ R. Jasnow and M. Smith 2010/2011, 44.

⁶²⁶ F. Masashi 2019, 88; R. Jasnow and M. Smith 2010/2011, 44.

⁶²⁷ J.J. Janssen 1980, 45.

⁶²⁸ K A. Kitchen 1982, 596: 15–16.