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

The sources analysed in the present thesis have highlighted a core of religious beliefs and practices which played a foremost role in the ancient Egyptian religion. Indeed, for the Egyptians the ancestors were not only supernatural beings able to affect the realm of the living, but also a source of legal authority, especially regarding specific socio-economic matters, such as inheritance, succession, the legitimation of certain social roles and the ownership of real estate.

In the introductory chapter, three main research questions have been formulated. Therefore, the results of the present investigation will be summarised below in order to verify whether or not the analysis and the discussion of the data have provided an answer to these questions.

1. *What are the factors intrinsic to the history of Egyptology that led to an underestimation of the role played by ancestor worship in both the juridical and the economic sphere?*

J. Assmann and other scholars are not wrong in underlining that a certain idea of immortality and positive afterlife in the modern world is somehow indebted to pharaonic beliefs. [675] Yet, we have to be aware that the path joining Egyptian thoughts to the conceptions typical of some of current Monotheistic eschatologies has not been linear in its development; several reformulations and new adaptations certainly occurred over time.[676] It is thus possible to identify a (partially) biased narrative of the ancient Egyptian religion. While aspects which have been reformulated in the current religious traditions are overestimated – above all Monotheistic conceptions of a positive hereafter and the concept of "personal piety" typical of the protestant tradition – other beliefs concerning the post-mortem survival have been diminished or ignored.[677]

The incorrect use of the label "shamanism" in reference to the OMR scenes 9 and 10, the Tekenu ceremony and the Haker feast clearly testify to this biased attitude characterising the modern understanding of the ancient Egyptian religion. The use of the label "shamanism" is indeed to be interpreted in the light of the same narrative for which Egyptian ancestor worship has been neglected for a long time. On one side it is possible to identify the so-called *ex oriente lux* bias according to which the Ancient Near East (Egypt included) should be considered as the place of origin of most of the cultural and, above all, religious expressions still existing today. Even though, on the one hand, there is something true in this interpretative scheme, it has been however noted how this kind of

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[675] J. Assmann 2005, 11.
[676] G. Scandone Matthiae 1987, 45-47.
[677] J. Baines 1983, 80; J. Baines 2011, 42; L. Weiss 2015, 179-180.

discourse often entails oversimplified interpretations with the risk of neglecting certain cultural facts and the historical processes related to them.[678] One has also to consider that the first academic studies on Egyptian religion were inevitably affected by the cultural climate of the Victorian Age, above all its interest in spiritism and the so-called "quest for immortality", a factor that could have emphasised certain features of the ancient Egyptian religion, above all the search of eternal life after death.[679]

A major consequence of this kind of discourse is that other kinds of religious beliefs concerning the post-mortem existence – such as the ones here defined as "ancestor worship" – were considered as having a minor role within Egyptian religion or have been often interpreted as mere survival of archaic phenomena belonging to an unspecified 'remote time', or the result of foreign stimuli. In this regard it is also possible to recognise that for a long time Egyptology has been characterised by a lack of engagement with contemporary anthropological discourses. This aspect was already highlighted by J. Baines, who, in "Practical Religion and Piety" underlined how several phenomena which are usually considered "religious" in the study of most societies have been minimised within Egyptology, above all, the practices concerning the interactions between the living and the dead.[680] While Baines mainly focused on "non-funerary" practices, it may be posited that neglecting the role of ancestor worship within ancient Egyptian religion may have also involved a partial misconception of certain rituals concerning both the funerary and mortuary sphere, such as the OMR scenes 9 and 10, the Tekenu ritual, and the Haker feast.

The observations made by J. Assmann in *Death and Salvation* are in part emblematic of this state of the art. Assmann denies the existence of beliefs concerning vengeful ghosts in ancient Egypt, and the textual sources pertaining to the malevolent influence of the dead into the realm of the living should be understood as the result of a Mesopotamian influence.[681] Yet, he considers OMR scenes 9 and 10 as "unique in the history of Egyptian religion; they are an instance of trance or meditation, for which there are no parallels whatsoever in Egypt". [682] Finally, his reflections on the theme of "death as social isolation" as one of the "images of death" characterising the ancient Egyptian culture could be

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[678] M. Liverani 2011, 8-9.
[679] R. Nyord 2018, 76-78.
[680] J. Baines 1987, 80.
[681] "In Mesopotamia, fear of revenants played an important role: the ghost of the dead (*etemmu*) would haunt this world if he had not been properly buried or had died a terrible death. Such fears are widespread; there are societies for which the "border traffic" between the world of the living and the world of the dead can never be entirely managed, and for which there are broad areas of "wilderness" that are closed to culture. In Egypt, such fears played a rather small role. In the Instruction of Any, one maxim is devoted to the akh, a word that we otherwise translate as "transfigured spirit," but which in this context unequivocally has the meaning "ghost," in the sense of the Mesopotamian *etemmu*. A Late Egyptian story that is unfortunately preserved to us only fragmentarily tells of the appearance of such a ghost. But these are exceptions that only confirm the rule, late texts that point to Babylonian influence." J. Assman 2005, 15. However, one has to keep in mind, that textual sources concerning the angry and potentially harmful spirits can already be identified in the letters to the dead of the 3rd millennium BCE, see chapter 4.1 and table 6.
[682] J. Assmann 2005, 313.

regarded as one of the most accurate descriptions of the mechanics characterising the ancient Egyptian "ancestor worship", [683] except that the author never explicitly uses this category in his study.[684]

Rather, all these diverse phenomena taken into consideration by J. Assmann can be better understood as diverse expressions of a single core of beliefs essentially based on the interaction between the living and the dead. The duty of the living descendants was that of taking care of their deceased relatives, by perpetuating their mortuary cult and the periodical food offerings, a cultic action that can be considered as a reflection into the post-mortem sphere of the traditional respect that sons and daughters owed to their elder parents. The neglect of this duty could trigger the wrath of the deceased which could therefore persecute their living descendants in the form of something similar to a "malevolent ghost". The OMR scenes 9 and 10, testify to the importance played by the bond between the deceased father and his living son, and how this bond could be periodically renewed also thanks to a specific ritual involving the "vision" of the deceased father through a special kind of ritual sleep and oneiric visions, a kind of belief which is far from being unique in the history of Egyptian religion since numerous parallels can be identified, such as some of the Letters to the Dead from the 3rd millennium BCE, and the Middle Kingdom Mysteries of Abydos.

It can be said that this core of beliefs, here labelled as "ancestor worship", not only was a fundamental trait of the Egyptian religion, but it also played a foremost role in shaping social behaviours, and the ways through which customary rules were conceived and executed.

To reassess the role played by ancestor worship in the ancient Egyptian society – not only in the context of the house-cult, or as an expression of the lived religion, but also as one of the basic components of both elite funerary and mortuary rituals – is therefore of great importance in order to place the current academic understanding of this ancient culture into a wider perspective. It allows to contextualise the ancient Egyptian religious practices in the light of the typical mechanics characterising the other polytheistic religions of the Ancient Near East and, indeed, in the present thesis it has been possible to establish several parallels between the phenomena here taken into consideration and quite similar religious facts attested in both Mesopotamia and the Levantine area.[685] This kind of perspective also involves the possibility to establish a historical link between the ancient

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[683] J. Assmann 2005, 39-62, 313.

[684] In this regard, it is remarkable that J. Assmann, although he never uses the category "ancestor worship", is clearly inclined in considering the ꜣḫ.w as "ancestral spirits" which reached this status thanks to special rituals (J. Assmann 2005, 33-34); he also established a parallel between the Egyptian practices to which the body was subjected after death in Ancient Egypt and the second burial aimed at transforming the deceased into an ancestor as attested in several cultural contexts (J. Assmann 2005, 31).

[685] See chapter 6.

Egyptian religion and some practices and beliefs characterising modern Egyptian lived religion. From this point of view, it is certainly no coincidence that the re-evaluation of the concept of "ancestor worship" within Egyptology has opened the path to comparative studies aimed at highlighting the connections between modern and pharaonic Egypt. H. el-Leithy, for example, has identified significant parallels between the so-called Letters to the Dead and the practice, attested in modern Egypt, of addressing written requests to the Imam Esh-Shafe'ee, theologian, jurist, and saint.[686] N. el-Shohoumi,[687] E. Wickett,[688] and C. Adams[689] have instead conducted comparative studies aimed at underlined elements of continuity between pharaonic and more recent and even modern Egypt, with a special focus on the religious practices concerning the interactions between the living and the dead in both Islamic and Coptic tradition.

In other words, it could be said that re-evaluating the eminent role played by ancestor worship in pharaonic Egypt has turned out to be an invaluable tool to finally place ancient Egyptian religion in history, rather than consider it as a mere "remote archetype" from which religious conceptions of foremost importance for modern European cultures came.

1) *Is it possible to identify specific ceremonies focused on the passage of power from the deceased head of the family to the legitimate heir, which were strictly intertwined with both funerary and mortuary rituals? If yes, how and where were they performed? Furthermore, what role did women play in this kind of religious beliefs and practices?*

Ancient Egyptian conceptions about the hereafter were rather complex and, as attested since the Pyramid Texts copied in the royal tombs of the 5th dynasty, different modalities of post-mortem survivals overlapped with each other without being mutually exclusive. Besides a celestial hereafter in which the destiny of the deceased was associated to the imperishable stars or the cyclical renaissance of the sun, a further kind of post-mortem existence was structured on the model of the cyclical renewal of earth and nature, a theme strictly linked with the special destiny experienced by the god Osiris:[690] a mythical king of Egypt, killed by his brother Seth and vindicated by his posthumously conceived child, Horus, who was finally able to succeed his deceased father to the throne of Egypt.[691]

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[686] H. el- Leithy 2003.
[687] N. el-Shohoumi 2006; N. el-Shohoumi 2004; N. el-Shohoumi 2002.
[688] E. Wickett 2010; E. Wickett 2009.
[689] C. Adams 2007.
[690] K. Goebs 2003.
[691] M. Smith 2008.

The analysis of the textual sources concerning the OMR scenes 9 and 10 and the Tekenu ritual has highlighted how the latter can be interpreted as dramatic rituals strongly rooted in the Osiris myth.[692] Specifically, OMR scene 10 is to be understood as the outline of a dramatic performance which was based on the same mythical episode described in PT 364. The mythological background of the OMR 9 and the sleeping Tekenu ceremony can be identified in both PT 364 and CT 312. These two texts are to be interpreted as two sides of the same coin. While PT 364 focuses on the installation of Osiris as the ruler of the netherworld, and therefore on the establishment of the posthumous cult dedicated to the deceased, CT 312 concerns the installation of Horus as the legitimate heir of Osiris and the rightful king of Egypt, which metaphorically represented the installation of the eldest son as the new head of the extended family.

The bond between Horus and his deceased father was certainly perceived as a paradigmatic model with regards to matters concerning the legitimation of succession, and both the OMR scenes 9 and 10 and the Tekenu ritual can be interpreted as a "double rite of passage". Their purpose was not limited to the mere transformation of the deceased into a benevolent ancestor. Rather, they also had a specific function in transforming the legitimate heir into the newly recognised chief of the extended family.

It is therefore clear that the "lack of mythology" – considered by several scholars as the proof of the archaic shamanic nature of these rituals – was only apparent. If one keeps in mind that both the OMR scenes 9 and 10 and, probably even the Tekenu ritual, were dramatic rituals concerning a specific episode related to the Osiris myth, the paucity of explicit references to gods and mythology can be better explained in the light of a certain reticence in pronouncing some divine names in specific circumstances, which can be identified with the presence of a wide audience involving different social strata (public performances and/or collective rituals), or the fact that such performances entailed a form of interaction, or even communication in the form of a necromantic action between the living and the dead.

This kind of "double rite of passage" structured on the model of the Osiris myth was not only used to legitimise the passage of power from father to son. The analysis of the Middle Kingdom data concerning the Haker feast, enacted during the celebrations of the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos, have shown how the same kind of ritual was also used in contexts other than succession within elite families. To act as a main ritualist during the Mysteries, for example by performing the role of *s3-*

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[692] Of course, this does not mean that beliefs and practices concerning the cult of the ancestors cannot be involved also into the celestial/solar post-mortem existence. It is indeed important to mention the case of the *3ḥ-iḳr-n-Rˁ* stelae, where the ancestral spirits (*3ḥ.w*) are associated to the sun god. (See: R. J. Demarée 1983, 275-278; L. Weiss 2015, 124 and 181). Yet, as a matter of a fact this feature did not clearly emerge from the textual sources here taken into account.

mr=f, was a way through which the royal power was able to legitimise the social status of his high officials. Specifically, a significant connection has been identified between the privilege of acting as *s3-mr=f* ritualist (a role rather similar to that of the *sem* priest and modelled on the mythical role of Horus as son and protector of Osiris) during the Mysteries, and the possibility of holding the office of Royal Treasurer. Also, the same scheme appears to have been used to formalise the relationship between high officials and their subordinates, since in a number of Middle Kingdom stelae from Abydos, minor officials are often depicted as *sem* priests while performing rituals for their chiefs.[693] It can therefore be argued that ancestor worship strongly affected the social behaviours of the ancient Egyptians and the ways in which they shaped the power relations within their society.

The sources collected and analysed in the present thesis also allowed us to identify the places and times in which this double rite of passage took place. The window of time between the embalming procedure and the inhumation of the corpse – and especially the night preceding the burial –were considered as one of the most favourable moments to interact and communicate with the dead. Remarkably, this aspect finds also suggestive parallels with practices attested in other cultural contexts; for example, in Senegal and Benin important judgments were enacted at night, since this was considered as the moment in which was easier to communicate with the spirits of the dead.[694] One has also to keep in mind that these kinds of rituals could also be re-enacted on the occasion of the periodical commemorations for the deceased, recreating thus the right moment for what we could actually define as a necromantic action. As regard the places, the sacred landscape known in the scientific literature as the "Butic Burial" – which corresponded to an actual space set up between the embalming place and the tomb – and other areas located within the necropolises cited in the Letters to the Dead – such as the *niw.t wꜥ.t,* the *niw.t nḥḥ,* the *s.t mꜣꜥ-ḫrw* or the *iw nsrsr*– were likely perceived as liminal sacred areas, specifically meant for the interactions between the living and the dead.

It was also possible to identify specific ritual actions which were performed within these liminal areas and whose main aim was that of establishing a form of communication with the dead. A ritual sleep, called *sḏr/sḏr.yt,* which could also entail an oneiric vision of the deceased – as those described in OMR scenes 9 and 10, in a restricted group of "Letters to the Dead" – which is also to be linked to the ritual sleep performed by the Tekenu and the *sḏr.yt* ritual enacted during the Middle Kingdom Mysteries at Abydos. A ritualised judgment of the dead, known in the sources with different names – counting of the surplus (*ḥsb.t ꜥ3.w*), "counting (*ip, sip, ḥsb, ṯni*) of the dead (*mwt*) and the blessed

[693] D. Franke 2003.
[694] É. Le Roy 2004, 59-60; A.A. Loktionov 2019, 57.

spirits (*3ḫ.w*)", "judgment in the court of the great god" (*wḏꜥ m ḏꜣḏꜣ.t n.t nṯr ꜥꜣ*) or, more simply, "judgment" (*wḏꜥ mdw, wpỉ*), as attested within the Letters to the Dead.

The existence of a ritual sleep which allowed a form of interaction between the living and the dead can be, once again, explained in the light of CT spell 312. This text narrates of a supernatural communication established thanks to a divine messenger (*ỉrw-Ḥr*), which was sent by Horus to reach the netherworld and can be identified with the very eye of the god himself (*ỉr.t-Ḥr*). Indeed, in the light of the specific ancient Egyptian conceptions concerning dreams, the idea of an eye/messenger able to see the inhabitants of the netherworld can be interpreted as a metaphor to describe the same kind of oneiric vision experienced by the *sem* priest in OMR scene 9. Not by chance, the same mythical episode could also explain the presence of an obscure ritual remark recurring in some versions of OMR 9, *wnw-Ḥr/wnw-Ḥr sḏr* (the messenger of Horus/ the sleeping messenger of Horus).

Remarkably, in another version of the same mythical episode – narrated in Papyrus Chester Beatty I, recto, 14,6-15,8– it is narrated how a supernatural communication between Horus and Osiris was established through an exchange of letters. As stressed by both S. Donnat Beauquier and U. Verhoeven, the latter can be identified as the mythological background of the so-called Letters to the Dead (especially for the documents pertaining to inheritance and succession).[695] Moreover, it is quite grounded to sustain that the ritual deposition of the Letters to the Dead occurred in the course of a dramatic rituals – such as the ritual sleep or the ritualised judgment of the dead highlighted above – which were performed during the funerals or within one of the numerous festivals to celebrate the dead.[696]

The analysis of the sources here conducted did not highlight special ritual actions concerning the relationship between the deceased mother and her living daughter. This result can be explained in the light of specific features characterising ancient Egyptian society: the extended family (*3b.t*), was a legal-economic institution that did not officially include the wife of the family chief. Rather, a woman continued to belong to the *3b.t* of her father even after her marriage, and once her father died, she was included in the *3b.t* of her eldest son. This element can clearly explain why we do not have – at least in the sources belonging to the official discourse concerning the most powerful extended families – a set of complex rituals concerning the passage of a social role from mother to daughter.

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[695] S. Donnat Beauquier 2014, 218-219; see also: U. Verhoeven 2003, 38.
[696] See Chapter 4, section 4.1.

In this regard, interesting information has been gleaned from the so-called Letters to the Dead. The analysis of the missives addressed to women conducted in chapter 5 has highlighted the existence of a ritual aimed at appeasing a potentially dangerous dead. In this regard, one has to keep in mind that most women addressed in these letters had probably died at a young age, perhaps due to childbirth. Moreover, the analysis of the documents has suggested that the trigger of their vengeful attitude can be identified with the possible remarriage of their husband. This particular ritual therefore shows certain common traits with what we have seen for the rituals concerning the post-mortem relationship between the deceased father and his living son: it was indeed aimed at sanctioning the passage of a social role from a deceased wife to the new spouse of a family chief. It is also important to stress that a potentially vengeful attitude of the deceased father towards his living son is clearly described in CT spell 38. It was also highlighted that this kind of ritual action aimed at appeasing the irate deceased woman shows a certain affinity with the mythical theme of the Solar Eye 's divine wrath, and a possible ritual background for these ritual practices could be identified in the festival aimed at appeasing the terrible side of certain goddesses.[697]

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of the present thesis and that the typology of sources here taken into account are by their very nature focused on the male sphere. It would be indeed possible to hypothesise that dead women had a larger role and veneration in contexts other than those of the extended family/*Ȝb.t*. An intriguing research horizon that deserves to be better investigated is certainly that of groups of women involved in specific religious offices, such as the priestesses of Hathor during the Old and the Middle Kingdom,[698] or within the royal sphere, the role of God's Wife of Amun.[699]

2) *Is it possible to recognise an actual involvement of the ancestors in the legal practices pertaining to inheritance, succession and the ownership of certain kinds of properties? If yes, how have these practices evolved over time?*

J. C. Moreno García has highlighted how in Egyptology spiritual matters, like the study of religion, art and literature have been more investigated at the expense of other aspects such as economy, law or sociology. [700] This statement is certainly true. On the other hand, Egyptian religion cannot be

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[697] See Chapter 5, section 5.3.
[698] R.A. Gillam 1995.
[699] M.F. Ayad 2016, 89-106.
[700] J.C. Moreno García 2014.

considered solely as a "spiritual matter"; rather, it was a pervasive fact that invested several aspects of the ancient Egyptian society, including the ways in which the law was organised and executed.

The analysis and discussion of the sources here conducted has highlighted how the ancestors were considered as a source of legal authority, not only with regards to inheritance and succession issues, but also to officially formalise the social status reached by an individual. The customary rule "the property is given to the one who buries" testifies to the strong links between ancestor worship and the possibility of claiming rights over certain assets, an aspect that is even more evident if we take into consideration the Letters to the Dead concerning inheritance issues.

To posit an actual legal value for these letters is indeed quite reasonable. These documents were written according to a standardised pattern which perfectly matches with that of ancient Egyptian legal documents. The texts show explicit references to the Egyptian customary rules concerning inheritance and succession. Furthermore, private letters exchanged between living persons could have a legal value, and the same function cannot be excluded a priori for the missives addressed to a deceased person.

The fact these letters were deposited inside or in the vicinity of the tomb of the deceased recipient is certainly another argument in favour of the actual legal function of these documents. Elite tombs were certainly meant as a tool for social display thanks to which the living descendants of the deceased could officially validate their social position, and exactly for this reason, it is not unusual to find private legal texts written in a monumentalised form within elite tombs. It is therefore reasonable to posit that a written document placed and sealed within a tomb could have had an officially recognised value too. Also, the fact that the ritual deposition of the letters inside the tombs probably took place in the form of a dramatic performance, likely enacted in front of an audience during a somewhat public occasion, such as certain phases of the funerary and the mortuary rituals, perfectly matches with what an ancient Egyptian meant by legal procedure: if taking care of both the funerals and the posthumous cult for the deceased was the standard procedure towards claiming the inheritance and succeeding the late person, it is reasonable to state that this procedure also involved a legal action during which the relatives of the deceased could object to the choice of the heir. Finally, the presence of an audience responds to the need to officially validate a legal statement in front of witnesses.

Indeed, this kind of procedure finds significant parallels in several other cultures where the institution of the extended family played, or plays, a major role. One can even state that the authoritative role of the ancestors in legal matters such as inheritance, succession and real estate ownership was a typical

trait of the polytheistic systems of the Ancient Near East. [701] In addition, this strong connection between funerary rituals, ancestor worship and rules regulating inheritance and succession is also found in the context of African legal pluralism. Within this context, rites of burial and mourning are not only meant for the deceased and his post-mortem existence, but they are above all an official occasion for regulating succession and the division of inheritance. The most striking example in this regard is certainly the famous Kenyan "burial case" of Silvano Melea Otieno, which saw the widow litigating against the brother of the deceased in order to establish where Otieno should be buried. [702] At the time – the second half of the eighties – this lawsuit gained great media attention since it reflected a clash between tradition and modernity occurring in Kenya and involved local movements for women's rights.[703] However, this does not detract from the fact that one of the issues at stake was the effective right of a widower to have access to the marital inheritance since according to the local customary rules "the body of the deceased is perceived like a title deed whose possession bestows legitimacy when there is a disagreement over inheritance".[704] A further confirmation of the strong connection between the care for the dead and certain economic issues was also noted by ancient Greek historians such as Herodotus and Diodorus of Sicily, who reported that for the Egyptians the corpse of the deceased had a valuable economic and juridical value, and mummified bodies could be used to guarantee debts.[705]

Finally, religious and legal practices were strongly intertwined in the ancient Egyptian culture, and the intervention of supernatural beings in legal issues is widely attested. In particular, through a comparison with the oracular practices, it has been possible to establish how certain categories of dead were considered as supernatural authoritative entities, especially with regard to the legitimation of a social status – such as the validation of an heir, or the assignment of a state office – and, notably, starting from the New Kingdom, the consultation of oracles was usually involved in settling legal cases concerning inheritance and real estate ownership.

Most of the Letters to the Dead[706] can be understood as an expression of the patronage network typical of the regional potentates and the actual power gained by the nomarchs during the First Intermediate Period and part of the Middle Kingdom.[707] It was also possible to posit that the ritual context to which these documents belong could be identified with the annual commemorations celebrated in honour of

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[701] See Chapter 6, section 6.2.
[702] M.N. Wangila 2010, 326-343.
[703] M.N. Wangila 2010, 326-343.
[704] P. Stamp 1991, 833.
[705] Herodotus 2, 136; Diodorus of Sicily 1, 92 – 93. See also: G. Purpura 2009, 41-60.
[706] See chapter 4, section 4.1, and table 6.
[707] A. Dorn 2015, 121-122.

the ancestors of the ruling normachal families. Both archaeological and textual sources highlight how the deification of some nomarchs who lived during the end of the Old Kingdom – such as Izi or Heqaib – functioned as a tool of legitimation for the local rulers who descended from them. Indeed, the mortuary cults of these deified nomarchs, essentially focused on their *ḥw.t k₃*, gradually assumed the form of public celebrations.[708] As for the case of Heqaib, for example, it has been hypothesised that already during the First Intermediate Period the celebration of his mortuary cult was reshaped in the form a public celebration which involved an audience not exclusively limited to the descendants of the deceased and during which a procession to his shrine at Elephantine was enacted.[709] The rise of these kinds of festivals, seems to have characterised the whole religious landscapes of the First Intermediate Period and probably occurred in each regional state. At Dayr al-Barshā, for example, H. Willems has highlighted the existence of a processional road which led to the tomb of the local nomarch, an element that perfectly matches with the performance of a public celebration.[710] These periodical commemorations for the deified ancestors of the ruling family could take on diverse functions. Indeed, as mentioned above, it was a moment of social display for the living nomarch, whose power acquired legitimation thanks to the authoritative status of his divine ancestor. Nonetheless, these festivals were also somewhat connected to the renewal of nature and it cannot be excluded that the deified nomarchs were believed able to affect the fertility of both earth and human beings.[711] It also follows that these celebrations also functioned as a means for the social cohesion for the local communities, during which the pact between the local rulers and the elite members could be reinforced. As stressed in chapter 4, some of the Letters to the Dead written to ask for the birth of a child – such as P. Berlin 10482 + P. Berlin 10481 a-b – could be contextualised within this religious framework. Moreover, it cannot be excluded that these festivals were also a moment during which the local authorities managed to solve legal litigations concerning inheritance and successions, or other economic issues, such as those described in some Letters to the Dead.[712]

The foremost role played by ancestor worship as a tool to legitimise the power of the nomarchs is also shown by the fact that, during the final part of the First Intermediate Period, the necropolises and the monuments built to commemorate the deified local rulers become the target of some violent actions committed by soldiers. During the battles between the potentates of Hierakonpolis and Thebes some necropolises and religious centres were indeed allegedly destroyed.[713] An echo of these events

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[708] See chapter 4, section 4.1.
[709] W. Grajetzki 2006, 7-35 and 94-102.
[710] H. Willems 2014, 109-123.
[711] See chapter 4, section 4.1.
[712] See chapter 4, section 4.5.
[713] R.A. Gillam 2005, 56; E. Brovarski 1985, 310.

is found in the *Teaching for Merikare* where the sacking of Thinis/Naga ed-Deir and the destruction of its monuments and tombs is openly condemned by the same Theban rulers who perpetrated them.[714]

Nonetheless, ancestor worship continued to be a key factor. The innovative trait is that, once Egypt was reunified and kingship restored, the celebrations to praise the ancestor were reshaped in a more complex ideological framework aimed at reinforcing the social cohesion between elite members and the crown. As mentioned above, the Middle Kingdom celebration of the Mysteries of Osiris at Abydos likely functioned as a special moment during which the king ratified the conferment of state offices to prominent individuals. Remarkably, the legitimation mechanic was structured as the same double rite of passage characterising elite funerary rituals: to act as a main ritualist during the procession for the god Osiris entailed the acquisition of a new social position officially recognised by the crown. A restricted number of evidence also suggests that similar festivals were also performed in other foremost Egyptian holy cities.[715]

In the final part of the Second Intermediate Period, the Ahmosid family largely used ancestor worship for their own self presentation. The most striking example, in this regard, is the statue portraying the young prince Ahmose Sapair, son of Seqenra Tao, currently preserved in the Louvre Museum. The inscription carved on this monument has been considered by C. Barbotin as a "three-dimensional letter to the dead", whose aim was that of transforming the prince who died at an early age into a benevolent ancestor.[716] With the advent of the New Kingdom, several members of the Ahmosid family were deified, becoming the object of a popular posthumous cult, and their sacred statues were used as oracles, such as Amenhotep I at Deir el-Medina.[717]

In this regard it is important to explain the mechanics of the Egyptian oracles. Indeed, the supernatural entity involved did not manifest his or her will through a human "medium", endowed with special skills and specialised, as in the case of the "witch" of En-dor, in passing the divine messages.[718] Rather, the mantic action was essentially based on the movements made by a divine statue during a religious procession. [719] The statue, placed on a litter, was carried on the shoulders of a group of priests and specific movements that occurred during the procession were interpreted as the answers to yes/no questions. A possible variant was to write two alternative responses concerning the same

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[714] Merikare 68-74; for an English translation see: M. Lichtheim 2006, 102-103.
[715] See chapter 3, section 3.3.5.
[716] Ch. Barbotin 2005.
[717] J.C. Moreno García 2010, 14 ff.

[718] See also I. Finkel 2021, 199-200.
[719] J. Černý 1962.

question and place them on the processional way. In this case, the movements of the statue were interpreted as the divine preference for one of the two options. [720]

Several sources testify that the statues of Amenhotep I used to be consulted during both the Opet feast and the Beautiful Festival of the Valley. [721] These kinds of practices and the religious celebrations related to them occurred also on a local level. [722] At the so-called "workmen's village" of Deir el-Medina, located in the Theban West Bank, Amenhotep I was the object of special devotion. A number of sources show that his statues were used to give oracles, which –starting from the Ramesside Age – played a crucial role in solving everyday life problems as well in the jurisdiction of the village. [723] It is not clear during which occasions the royal statues were consulted by the inhabitants of Deir el-Medina. The data highlight that, in the village, several local festivals were celebrated in honour of Amenhotep I. [724] And, it is quite probable that the deified king used to give oracles during these occasions. [725] O. Cairo CG 25234 provides interesting details about one of these celebrations. The document specifies that the feast involved all the inhabitants of the village: men, women and children. [726] Furthermore, although this is a highly debated issue, it could be argued that the audience was not restricted to the elite, including, rather, the participation of different social strata. [727] However, as stressed by MacDowell, given the importance of these oracles within the juridical system of the village, it cannot be excluded that a procession to consult the deified king, could be arranged on request to solve a specific legal issue. [728]

The oracles of Amenhotep I were consulted for various kinds of questions, such as obtaining information about the health of a distant relative or establishing the price of a certain item. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, this practice played an important role also in the execution of law. Other relevant juridical bodies are well attested in the jurisdiction of the village, above all the $ḳnb.t$, the local court. Therefore, it is noteworthy that especially the causes concerning inheritance litigations and disputes about the possession of real estate were solved by oracular consultation or by the cooperation of this institution with the local court. [729] According to MacDowell this could be explained by the fact that Amenhotep I was perceived as an authoritative voice on matters of legal transmission of property ownership. This deified king was one of the most prominent ancestors of the living ruler

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[720] J. Černý 1962. See also: J.-M. Kruchten 2001.
[721] Y.M. el Shazly 2015, 193.
[722] A.G. MacDowell 1990, 108.
[723] Y.M. el-Shazly 2015, 66, 162-165, and 232; A. MacDowell 1990, 107-114.
[724] H. Jauhiainen 2009, 133.
[725] H. Jauhiainen 2009, 133-136.
[726] H. Jauhiainen 2009, 134-136.
[727] H. Jauhiainen 2009, 136.
[728] A. MacDowell 2009, 114.
[729] A. MacDowell 2009, 114.

in a socio-economic context where the royal power was the most important institution on matters concerning the possession of real estate.[730] Amenhotep I was not the only deified dead king involved in the oracle consultations. A restricted number of sources testify that an oracle of Ahmose was consulted at Abydos during the 19th dynasty, notably for legal disputes concerning real estate.[731]

This involvement of deceased rulers in solving private legal disputes is apparently an innovative New Kingdom trait. Yet, several aspects of the consultation, such as the procession of the sacred statue – usually from a temple to the necropolis and back – clearly demonstrate how this practice arose from a well-established tradition rooted in those processions from the embalming place to the tomb of the deceased which were perceived as the perfect liminal occasion to interact or even communicate with the dead.

Indeed, a certain kind of connection with the ritual deposition of the Letters to the Dead have been identified, especially as regards the mechanics concerning the involvement of the dead in the consultation: a ritual procession in front of a large audience during the occurrence of funerary rituals or a festivals. This element could indeed testify to the importance played by the ancestors in the legal practices pertaining to inheritance, succession and the ownership of certain kinds of properties, an element that characterised ancient Egyptian religion in all its historical phases and was reformulated more than once through history to adapt to social changes.

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[730] A. MacDowell 1990, 114-135
[731] S. Ph. Harvey 1991, 21.