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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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Propositions

1. Ancestor cult was a salient trait of ancient Egyptian religion. Also, religious practices aimed at placating the dead played an important role in the execution of justice.
2. The so-called Letters to the Dead do not exist as a literary genre. They are written sources testifying to diverse ritual practices, in particular, the letters addressed to deceased women testify to the existence of articulated rituals aimed at appeasing an angry spirit, whose wrath was triggered by a tragic, premature death.
3. The rituals aimed at appeasing certain wrathful deceased, especially women, had their mythological background in the Myth of the Distant Goddess and were probably performed during one of the festivals connected to Hathor.
4. The actual legal function of some “Letters to the Dead” concerning inheritance issues should be taken more seriously: they could testify to articulated ritual performances aimed at validating the choice of the legitimate heir.
5. The absence of mythological references within certain Egyptian written sources tied to ancestor cult (such as OMR scenes 9 and 10, or the Letters to the Dead) is deceptive. These texts had their mythological background in some episodes of the Osiris myth. Also, the absence of explicit mythological references could be explained by the fact that these rituals were meant as dramatic, collective rituals to be performed in front of a large audience (involving diverse social strata and even the dead).
6. The mysterious Tekenu scenes depicted in several elite tombs could be interpreted as the representation of an actual dramatic ritual enacted during the funerary procession. Its mythological background can be identified in an episode of the Osiris Myth described in CT 312.
7. The ritual remark *wnw-hr* recurring in OMR scene 10 should be translated as “the messenger of Horus”. It is probably a reference to the mythical episode described in CT 312.
8. Hathor is a marginal deity in the Pyramid Texts (where her name is mentioned only a few times), while she plays a major role in the Coffin Texts.
9. The so-called “democratisation of the afterlife” is an oversimplified interpretative scheme, which did not consider the complexity of both ancient Egyptian religion and society. While the appropriation by the members of the elite of symbolism and traits tied to the royal sphere are well attested, one must also recognise the opposite phenomenon, which is well attested too: the appropriation into the royal ideology of elements typical of the elite self-presentation.
10. Two wooden artifacts preserved at the Museo Egizio in Turin (Turin 2457 and 2458/1), can be interpreted as pieces of a palanquin which was used during the processions of the statues portraying Amenhotep I.
11. Some scholars have rightly pointed out that, in Egyptology, the study of religion has been more investigated at the expense of other aspects such as law or economy. However, given that religion was a pervasive force in Ancient Egyptian culture, religious sources could be used to better understand other aspects, law, and economy included.
12. Cats can improve PhD candidates' scientific productivity by stimulating the production of endorphins and therefore increase neurotransmitters that may help with symptoms of stress. Also, cats' love for electric devices, especially laptops, provides PhD candidates with a good excuse to be stuck in front of their computer screen and write.