
FUNERARY RITUALS (PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN
PERIODS)
الطقوس الجنائزية (العصور البطلمية والرومانية)

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FUNERARY RITUALS (PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN PERIODS)

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Christina Riggs

Bestattungsrituale (ptolemäisches und römisches Ägypten)
Rituels funéraires (Égypte ptolémaïque et romaine)

Ancient Egyptian rituals for the mummification, burial, and commemoration of the dead as performed in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods are attested by textual sources and visual arts, as well as by the evidence of mummified bodies. The underlying religious beliefs about death and the afterlife are basically the same as those of the Dynastic period. This article surveys these rituals, identifies their intended purpose, and discusses the classifications in use by Egyptologists today.

تشهد العديد من النصوص والفنون وحتى الموميאות بمصر البطلمية والرومانية على ممارسة الطقوس الجنائزية مثل التحنيط والدفن وإحياء ذكرى الموتى خلال هذه الفترة. لم تتغير أسس المعتقدات الدينية المتعلقة بالموت والعالم الآخر ما بين العصور البطلمية والرومانية وبين مصر الفرعونية. تنطرق المقالة إلى هذه الطقوس وتُعرِّف أغراضهم وتناقش التصنيفات المختلفة المستخدمة اليوم بمجال المصريات.

Ancient Egyptian rituals for the mummification, burial, and commemoration of the dead are attested by textual sources and visual arts from the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, as well as the evidence of mummified bodies. Some rituals have clear antecedents in Dynastic Egypt. Other rituals, in particular the Ritual of Embalming, are known only from Ptolemaic and Roman source material but almost certainly derive from earlier practices for which comparable evidence is lacking (Sauneron 1952). A number of the textual sources are known by versions of their ancient Egyptian titles, such as the *Book of Breathing made by Isis for her brother Osiris*. However, long compositions on multiple-column papyrus often include several “types” of texts, mostly without titles. Although these text “types” can be identified by comparing their content and form with titled examples, this is only a tool

of scholarly classification (Stadler 2004: 570 – 571; cf. Coenen 1995). To the ancient Egyptians, such distinctions may well have been meaningless, and the combination of several text “types” on one papyrus may imply that they were performed together in a ritual context, though this can never be known with certainty.

During the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, new funerary compositions include the *Book of Breathing* (Coenen and Quaegebeur 1995; Goyon 1966; Herbin 2008; Stadler 1999, 2000, 2004), the *Book of Traversing Eternity* (Herbin 1994), and the *Book of the Ba*. These compositions gradually supplant the *Book of the Dead*, the last dated example of which is a copy of BD Chapter 125 inscribed with an excerpt from the *Book of Traversing Eternity* on a papyrus from CE 64 (Stadler 2003). Regional variation was an important factor in the exact forms that ritual texts took, and the

script in which they were written – Demotic at Akhmim, for instance, and bilingual Demotic and hieratic at Thebes. The function of all these books is similar, however: they commemorate the deceased within his or her social group, and secure a good burial, effective transfiguration, and successful rebirth in the afterlife. Another innovation of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods is that the texts address at length how the deceased's *akh* will participate in festivals throughout Egypt, listing major cult sites such as Thebes and Bubastis (Assmann 2005: 225 - 234).

Any or all such texts can be considered to have a ritual character effected through oral recitation and performance. Some scholars, though, distinguish between “funerary literature” written down and deposited with the body, without performance, which was meant for use by the deceased, and “mortuary liturgy,” referring to texts that survive in written form but were intended to serve as scripts for ritual performance by the living for the benefit of the deceased (Assmann 1990: 1 - 45, altered somewhat in Assmann 2008: 31 - 35; cf. Smith 1993: 6). Like debates over the titles and typologies of texts, this distinction may reflect scholarly convenience rather than ancient practice, and Baines (2004: 15 n. 2) argues that it is not possible or meaningful to differentiate between “literature” and “liturgy.” Certainly the performance of ritual actions and processions was central to how Egyptians expressed the wish for an ideal burial: “All the rites will be carried out for you by the *hry-hb* (lector priest, Greek *tarichentes*) at the place of justification, and every procession up to your time” (Papyrus Rhind II, 3 h 3: Birch 1863; Möller 1913).

Continuity, innovation, and regional variation thus characterize trends in both the textual evidence for funerary rituals and the pictorial and material remains associated with ritual performances, such as mummy and tomb decoration. Although there are distinctive traits and developments in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, shaped in part by wider social trends, funerary rituals retain many of the themes, structures, and practices

of earlier periods, and may have been more resistant to change than other areas of Egyptian culture.

Embalming and Mummification

The Ritual of Embalming is known from two hieratic papyri with a Theban provenance, probably dating to the early first century CE (Papyrus Boulaq III and Papyrus Louvre 5.158: Sauneron 1952; Sternberg-el-Hotabi 1988). The ritual was performed by the *hry-sšꜣ* (“master of secrets,” stolist), the *hry-hb* (lector priest), and the *hꜣmw-nꜣr* (“divine chancellor” or seal-bearer), assisted by the *wꜣ*-priests, or embalmers. The text alternates a practical instruction, such as anointing the head or wrapping the feet, with a divine invocation elucidating the action’s magical effect. The special treatment of the head, hands, and feet adduced in the Ritual of Embalming corresponds to evidence from contemporary mummies, many of which are elaborately embalmed, with anointed and gilded skin, and special wrapping or padding in the areas of the head, hands, feet, and genitals (for which see Dunand 1982, 1992; Dunand and Lichtenberg 1998: 97 - 124; Riggs 2005: esp. 211, 217, 243).

Post-Embalming Rituals

Common among Ptolemaic and Roman funerary texts are both lamentations and glorifications (*sšꜣw*) performed after the embalming and mummification of the dead. Lamentations and glorifications were clearly intended for recitation leading up to and surrounding the burial. In lamentation texts, family members or the goddesses Isis and Nephthys mourn and praise the deceased, while glorification texts proclaim – and thus enable – the dead person’s successful transition to a transfigured state of being. The lamentations and glorifications also make references to a vigil being kept over the body of the deceased, like the guarding of Osiris’s body recorded in the *Stundenwachen* texts of Ptolemaic and Roman temples. For example, two Demotic funerary papyri, Papyrus British Museum 10507 and Papyrus Harkness,

contain passages that are related to the *Stundenwachen* spells attested in temples. Such texts may point to a similar ritual being performed for the dead, alongside the mourning rites and *sšhw*. The correct performance of all these rituals enabled the deceased to become like Osiris, acquiring a transfigured state among the followers of the god.

A number of papyri, like the Rhind Papyrus and the *Book of Traversing Eternity*, further attest to the close interrelationship between funerary rituals and temple performances by stating that the deceased will take part in temple festivals throughout the year, especially the Sokar festival during the month of Khoiak. The text on a Roman Period mummy mask refers to the rites of the Khoiak festival (Riggs 2005: cat. 52, 121 - 122, 272, and pl. 5). Although this probably expresses an ideal, rather than an actual, day of burial, it is possible that funerary celebrations could be timed optimally to coincide with other rituals and festivities. Some papyri bear temple ritual texts that originated in the temple *pr-ḥnh* (house of life, scriptorium) and were used in the cult of Osiris before they were adapted for use as private funerary papyri by the expedient of adding the deceased's name (Assmann 2008: 15 - 16).

Mortuary Service and the Opening of the Mouth

Other ritual texts were composed for performance on the day of burial, sometimes in conjunction with the celebration of a funerary meal. One section of a late Ptolemaic papyrus in Demotic (P. BM 10507) is entitled, "The book which was made in exact accordance with his desire for Hor, the son of Petemin, to cause it to be recited as an Opening of the Mouth document in his presence on the night of his burial feast," which points to continuity with the Pharaonic Opening of the Mouth ritual performed on the deceased's mummy at the tomb (Smith 1987). P. BM 10507 is also of interest for the fact that it ascribes agency to the deceased himself in the selection and composition of the text. This particular papyrus comes from

late Ptolemaic or early Roman Akhmim, where priestly families among the local elite may have been more likely to be buried with such papyri, ritual care, and high quality burial goods (Riggs 2005: 61 - 94).

Another Demotic text, Papyrus Harkness, includes a section headed, "The chapters of awakening the *ba* which they will recite on the night of burial" (Smith 2005). This title suggests the time and place of the ritual performance, and "awakening the *ba*" is another function ascribed to funerary rituals like the "glorification" texts. As in the Dynastic period, the interment of the body, after the ideal 70-day period of mummification, could be marked with a funerary meal, perhaps in a temporary structure near the tomb (Frandsen 1992). In the Ptolemaic Period, agreements among members of professional associations can stipulate that members will contribute to the burial and funeral feast when a member dies. One such agreement specifies that the association will sponsor "two days of drinking at the *pr-nfr* (embalming place or funeral tent)" (Papyrus Berlin 3115, in de Cenival 1972: 189; see also Smith 1987: 22 - 24).

Pictorial and Material Evidence

Artistic evidence from tombs, coffins, and mummy masks confirms the central role of ritual performance in the mortuary sphere. Funeral processions featuring *sem*-priests and lector priests feature in the fourth century BCE Tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel, as well as the Roman Period tomb of a woman or girl (House 21) nearby (Petosiris: Cherpion et al. 2007; Lefebvre 1924; Nakaten 1982; von Lieven 2004; House 21: Gabra 1941, 1954; Riggs 2005: 129 - 139). In Dakhla Oasis, the first century CE Tomb of Petubastis also depicts an extensive burial procession (Fakhry and Osing 1982). The Petosiris funeral scene at Tuna el-Gebel includes the purification of the mummy in front of a pyramid-topped tomb, derived from Dynastic depictions of the Opening of the Mouth ceremony (fig. 1).

Mourning women and goddesses appear frequently on all forms of Ptolemaic and

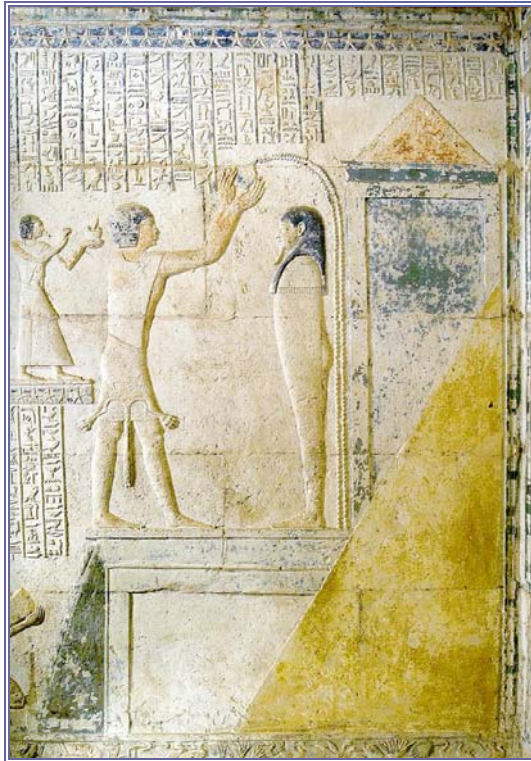


Figure 1. *Sem*-priest purifying the mummy of Petosiris: scene from the chapel (inner room) of the tomb of Petosiris, Tuna el-Gebel, late fourth century BCE (Cherpion et al. 2007).

Roman funerary art, pointing to the fundamental importance of mourning and lamentations in the ritual commemoration of the dead. Processions of deities carry linen and ointments for the mummification of the dead, for instance on a group of first century CE mummy masks from Meir (Riggs 2005: 105 - 129, 268 - 275). Decorated and inscribed linen amulets would have been part of the mummification ritual, mirroring the depiction of such wrappings in the Osiris chapels of Ptolemaic and Roman temples and the identification of the dead with Osiris. Similarly, the depiction of the Sokar barque on a group of third century CE masks from Deir el-Bahri may invoke the Khoiak festival as a component of ritual practice for the dead (Riggs 2000, 2005: 232 - 243, 295 - 301).

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- Figure 1. *Sem*-priest purifying the mummy of Petosiris: scene from the chapel (inner room) of the tomb of Petosiris, Tuna el-Gebel, late fourth century BCE (Cherpion et al. 2007). © IFAO.