

Perspectives on materiality in ancient Egypt – agency, cultural reproduction and change

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Materiality and cultural reproduction in non-elite cemeteries

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Introduction

Cultural reproduction has been widely approached on the basis of elite sources and patterns. In general, elite patterns have been interpreted as having trickled down to other social ranks, which assimilated and adapted those patterns. The place and role of non-elite groups in social interactions in ancient Egypt and in other contexts such as Nubia remain unexplored. Examples available only touch briefly upon on the subject, and scholarship has commonly reproduced the idea of a passive reception of cultural patterns by non-elite groups. This is also the case in the context of current discussions of cultural entanglements between Egypt and Nubia. Discussions on the topic tend to emphasise Nubian agency over the acculturation models that until recently dominated Egyptology. However, the role of indigenous non-elites still remains a gap, and a cultural reception approach continues to be adopted in attempting to unveil the place of non-elite groups in social relations.

Here I present some remarks around the idea of cultural reproduction focusing on non-elite mortuary contexts. The arguments summarised here prepare the ground for a ‘bottom-up’ approach. This approach admits a greater participation of non-elite groups in social interactions, and that this created possibilities for negotiating positions and identities through the active manipulation of material objects often associated with Egyptian elites, which from other perspectives could be viewed as contributing to the reinforcement of existing hierarchies. This paper consists more of a discussion of alternative ways of looking at the available data, than an attempt to provide complete answers to the questions I will address.

The paper begins with a general discussion of cultural reproduction in Egyptology and criticism of elitist, top-down approaches to data deriving from non-elite cemeteries. The paper is anchored in a relational perspective on agency and social hierarchies, emphasising social interactions. A relational view on social hierarchies consists of diminishing the role of ‘essentialised’ social groups situated in ranks (e.g. ‘rich’ and ‘poor’) in favour of examining their interactions with other groups. Therefore, I consider that the materiality of non-elite burials plays an active role in social relationships, making possible the appropriation, re-signification and the subsequent creation of patterns attached to specific contexts of interaction. Examples from New Kingdom non-elite cemeteries are explored in order to preliminarily assess the extent to which these statements find echoes in available data.

Cultural reproduction in ancient Egypt

Today scholarship is extensively aware of the mortuary customs of the elite in ancient Egypt. The subject has been explored since the early days of the discipline, with numerous publications dedicated to different aspects of mortuary customs. Despite this level of knowledge of mortuary customs, the panorama eventually reproduced is a generalised perception of the ancient culture. The study of decorated elite tombs, their objects and texts has served as basis for establishing an outline of the mortuary beliefs and customs of the whole society.

Richards identified this phenomenon as the “tomb problem”. In her words, it may be characterised as “a preoccupation with the monumental graves of elite individuals at the expense of accessing the entire range of mortuary behaviour in Egyptian cemeteries” (Richards 2005, 49). Textbooks on Egyptian

funerary culture often generalise patterns found in elite contexts as expressing beliefs and practices of the entire population. There are examples that intend to convey variations to the 'rule', though they do not provide an alternative model for interpretation (e.g., Baines and Lacovara 2002). Current scholarship is gradually increasing our awareness of a greater diversity in mortuary behaviour, which includes several strategies of differentiation played by different groups carrying their own ways of conceptualising the world. For instance, Willems recognises that religious knowledge found in elite tombs of the Middle Kingdom correspond to a specific social group (Willems 2014, 214).

Two other phenomena affect the approaches to cultural reproduction in Egyptian archaeology. The first is the discipline's emphasis on textual sources. Overcoming text-aided archaeologies of ancient Egypt still represent a challenge. Egyptian archaeology is still mainly dominated by its focus on textual sources, which may have led to a blurred perception of social diversity, as textual sources express *par excellence* a specific view on society. In general, material culture provides glimpses from society that are not explicitly present in texts or art (Kemp 1984; cf. Smith 2010, 158–159). Discussions about the limitations of textual evidence are not new in Egyptology (James 1984). Still texts have been widely used in the exploration of social composition and structure in order to unveil the role of different occupations and social groups (Katary 2009).

Scholars agree that from the Middle Kingdom ancient Egyptian literary texts started to mention tangible social events (Parkinson 2002, 13 *passim*). In this context, new expressions appeared making reference to social groups defined in relation to other groups. For instance, Middle Kingdom texts differentiate 'elite' or 'nobles' from the 'people' or 'lower classes' (Zingarelli 2017, 24). However, owing to the discontinuity between texts and material culture, text-based approaches were revealed to be insufficient to minimize the 'tomb problem', and archaeologies of ancient Egypt have been written grounded upon texts, even though materiality offers its own pathways to interpretation (Wendrich 2010, 276).

The overall problem with a text-based approach is the restrictive representation of the past that comes out. Texts were written and consumed by the smallest elite, and literacy was limited in society. Although various levels of literacy may be identified in ancient Egypt, it is estimated that less than one per cent of the population must have fully dominated the written form of the language (Baines 1983, 584). Exceptions may be seen in workers villages such as Deir el-Medina, which would have been constituted by workers who could write and read. Thus, it makes it difficult to place the village's inhabitants within a specific social rank (Lesko 1994; cf. Ambridge 2007).

Another problem derived from text-based approaches is the fact that the literate elite dominated the possibilities of naming and defining other groups in texts (cf. Zingarelli 2017, 29 *passim*). This indicates that texts cannot be seen as directly expressing social composition. On the contrary, textual sources express elite strategies of differentiation in relation to other social groups, e.g. the perceptions of the elite on their own place within the social structure, as well as their own view on "minor" and "intermediate" groups.

The Amarna Period offers examples of different levels of literacy. In various erasures of the name of Amun carried out in this period, for instance in the tomb of Amenhat at Thebes (TT 82), many words carrying the same signs as in the name of Amun were damaged due to misreading and lower literacy levels (Der Manuelian 1999, 288). Archaeology at Amarna also provides examples of appropriation of textual and decorative patterns by non-elite groups in material culture, e.g. 'erroneous' formulaic inscriptions in fragile wooden coffins (Kemp 2012, 262). The non-elites remained outside the context of production of textual formulas and compositions and pictorial patterns, even though these are occasionally found in the materiality of non-elite cemeteries.

Scholars broadly consider the presence of textual formulas in non-elite contexts as emulation of elite patterns by illiterate people. For instance, this is how grammar inaccuracies found in coffins from non-elite burials at Amarna would be interpreted. This view understates agency as it places the non-elites in a passive position within society as a receptacle of elite innovations. Therefore, the elite becomes the driving force of society, spreading in a trickle down fashion its patterns and innovations to other social groups.

A materiality-focused approach may be able to increase complexity in the debate on cultural reproduction. Materiality opens further paths to be explored, including other forms of sociability, and most importantly, non-elite agency. Agency has been a central issue in archaeological theory since at least 1980's; however, scholars have emphasised its vague use throughout the discipline, which has led to some flaws in interpretation (Barrett 2001; Robb 2010).

The discussion on cultural reproduction in non-elite cemeteries may benefit from a 'contextual' understanding of agency. According to Robb, "agency is not a characteristic of individuals, but of relationships; it is the socially reproductive quality of action within social relationships" (Robb 2010, 494). Robb also emphasises the 'relationality' of agency, which materially mediates the entangled relationships between different groups and between them and materiality itself (see Hodder 2012).

This perspective allows us to overcome both the limitations of text-oriented archaeologies of ancient Egypt, as well as approaches lacking consideration of agency to the archaeological record of non-elite cemeteries. The relationality addressed by Robb sheds light onto complex social interactions among which non-elite groups are included. Therefore, the materiality of non-elite cemeteries may be understood as expressing different social interactions between various groups in society. Grounded on this assumption, the debate over cultural reproduction becomes more complex, as emulation and reflection of elite patterns no longer provide complete answers to the questions now proposed to our data sets.

Non-elite manipulations of cultural patterns in materiality now come into focus. It opens space for the recognition of non-elite creativity, social interactions and the strategies of negotiation of positions within different contexts in society through the constitution of social spaces. A relational approach to non-elite agency, in Bourdieu's perspective, would also lead to a breaking "with the tendency to privilege substances—[...] the real groups, whose number, limits, members, etc., one claims to define [...] at the expense of *relationships*" (Bourdieu 1985, 723). It thus breaks with the general trend identified in approaches to Egyptian mortuary contexts that aim to recognise, based on objects' quantities and technological characteristics, specific social groups within the materiality of burials (Lemos 2017).

Therefore, I presuppose that we cannot identify specific social groups in the material record, as has been attempted through textual sources. However, following the relational perspective outlined above on agency and cultural reproduction, material culture is considered as part of the network of interactions in which non-elite groups played different roles according to context. Instead of being approached as purely reflecting social inequalities, materiality now becomes pathway of negotiations of positions and identities.

Social interactions replace a trickle-down view of cultural reproduction, as it opens space for non-elite active engagements through materiality. Non-elite engagements consist of contextual negotiations in society through the creation or modification of existent patterns into other ones carrying different meanings and forms. Therefore, cultural reproduction is seen through the lens of social interactions, which express, on one side, non-elite agency and active appropriations of material and cultural patterns, and on the other, the reproduction of existing social hierarchies through the interactions between

different groups. Interactions amongst non-elites and other groups produced not only appropriated and re-signified patterns, but also generated new ones after contact with other spaces—both social and cultural.

From trickle-down to relationships: social interactions as cultural reproduction

Veblen's 'The theory of the leisure class' (1899) presented the basis of the trickle-down theory of consumption in neo-classical economics. According to Veblen, new technologies and goods would first be introduced into the market at a price level only affordable by the elites. Then other adapted versions of the same goods would be manufactured as time goes through, making lower classes also able to consume innovations. The trickle-down theory presupposes there is a general tendency in hierarchical societies to spread wealth downwards from higher to lower strata.

Later, Simmel applied the principles of the trickle-down theory to fashion. According to his theory, lower classes would emulate fashion patterns of the higher classes in an attempt to emerge within social structure (Simmel 1904). Although Simmel's theory described some general features of fashion in the beginning of the 20th century, its limits become evident when one considers interactions that produce complex networks of cultural innovations.

Some would agree that the trickle-down theory opens space for the agency of lower classes as it acknowledges their adaptations of elite patterns in order to take part in the social process of consumption. However, this may be considered as just one side of the coin. The trickle-down perspective considers that the elites are par excellence the producers of new cultural trends. The approach does not consider the non-elites as cultural producers while diminishing their own contextual specificities.

A well-established interpretation of cultural reproduction and change in Egyptology is the 'democratisation' perspective. In periods of political decentralisation, cultural patterns previously reserved for royalty passed on to local elites and then to other groups. In the New Kingdom, changes in burial customs in non-elite cemeteries are also interpreted in relation to elite variations in burial assemblages (Goulding 2013; Grajetzki 2003).

The idea of elite emulation has also been applied in other ways in Egyptology. This concerns the idea of Egyptianisation and the interpretation of non-elite mortuary contexts. In the first case, publications conveyed the idea that local lower elites in the Levant adopted the Egyptian style as a reflection of Egyptian control over the area (Higginbotham 2000; Flaminni 2010). Objects from daily life, cultic and mortuary contexts have been quantified and assessed in order to unveil local 'imitations' or 'adaptations' of Egyptian patterns (Mumford 1998). Even when admitting a more complex setting of interactions, conclusions have been drawn based on the perception of an emulation of Egyptian elite patterns. For instance, "burials at Deir el-Balah, Tell el-Farah and Beth Shean have produced locally made Egyptian-derived terracotta anthropoid coffins, local 'grotesque' variants, and sporadic funerary figurines" (Mumford 2014, 78).

In the Nubian case, a perspective of cultural reproduction combined with a notion of Egyptianisation of local populations can also be identified. Models of acculturation of Lower Nubia, though, include a perception of the adoption of Egyptian patterns by local elites as a political strategy in order to gain access to power (Smith 1998). Smith notes that more nuanced interaction-based approaches are adopting resistance, rebellion and ethnic solidarity as analytical foci (Smith 2013, 85).

Recently, Egyptianisation has been widely criticised as an analytical tool. The perspective lacks space for indigenous agency and the capacity for creating their own possibilities through the creative

manipulation of material patterns. Egypto-Nubian interactions, for instance, are now seen through the lens of cultural entanglements (van Pelt 2013; Smith and Buzon 2014). The cultural entanglement perspective sheds light onto “the introduction of diversity generated by local choice within the constraints and socioeconomic framework of Egyptian colonial power” (van Pelt 2013, 541).

Even though scholarship has started to highlight indigenous agency, views based on cultural entanglements have focused mainly on the interactions between Egypt and other cultures from an elite standpoint. Appropriations of Egyptian *and* elite patterns by non-elite groups remain understood on the grounds of assimilation (Säve-Söderbergh and Troy 1991). Even when Egyptianisation as a concept has been nuanced or avoided, scholars accept that for non-elite groups “assimilation was top-down, starting with the princes and wealthier members of society and spreading from there to the general population” (Smith 2013, 89).

In both Asiatic and Nubian cases, a lack of local agencies is combined with a trickle-down perception of cultural reproduction. Scholars still see the Egyptian elite as the cultural producer that spreads its patterns on to sub-elites and subsequently to non-elites. The latter hypothetically would adapt outside patterns—both from other cultures and other social hierarchies—into ‘grotesque’ forms of the same patterns. In order to increase complexity in the discussion of cultural reproduction, we should focus on the relationships and interactions amongst multiple agents considered as producers of culture. Therefore, the trickle down and adaptation/assimilation perspective gives way to a realisation of the active transformations that create and communicate new patterns that serve as material mediators for negotiations of identity and status amid non-elite groups in contexts of social interaction.

In non-elite cemeteries, social structures are reinforced in social interactions at the same time that materiality creates possibilities of negotiating positions through interchanges. Therefore, objects in burials are understood as part of a two-way relationship between interchanges of different groups and cultural reproduction of social structures. From one side, interchanges allow the negotiation of positions and the transit of objects throughout social spaces, while the reproduction of social structures occurs on the basis of the differentiation strategies conveyed in specific cultural settings and patterns materialised in objects.

Social interactions in non-elite cemeteries both allow negotiations to be performed and reinforce existing structures of differentiation. The identification of social interactions is given in the transits of objects across different types of burials attached to different groups. A perspective that emphasises relationships also permits us to realise that people with limited resources were able to create their own material categories in order to negotiate their identity and status.

There is a difference between structural and relational poverty (Mosse 2010, 1157). The former sustains the first. This perspective identifies possibilities of accessing material goods, which makes people able to negotiate their space and identity in context, as well as move throughout different spaces of differentiation. It is people’s capacity for crossing social spaces that allows them to negotiate their positions through materiality. However, it is also the movement across spaces of differentiation that reinforces structural hierarchies, as non-elite material creations carry meanings constructed outside elite or sub-elite social spaces. Non-elite agency creates new entangled things after interaction with other groups, allowing them to cross social boundaries. However, those new things reinforce their original place in society, as they do not fit properly outside non-elite social spaces. Therefore, the limits of social fluidity can be seen in the fact that the non-elites can create and materially reshape their world, but cannot effectively be part of other social spaces through which they contextually move.

Social interaction therefore reproduces society and its hierarchies in the creation of new patterns that do

not find place in elite social spaces. This makes us able to acknowledge both non-elite agency and the structural limits imposed on those groups.

Glimpses from non-elite cemeteries

Social interactions as cultural reproduction have twofold meanings. Firstly, it happens in the active appropriation, access and use of outside patterns (both culturally and from other social spaces). Those patterns are converted into new entangled material objects carrying other meanings. Secondly, it is perceived in the invention of new contextually exclusive patterns.

Objects typically associated with elite mortuary contexts are occasionally found in non-elite contexts. However, usually those objects vary in shape, appearance, use and materials. Variations were commonly conveyed as poorer adaptations or copies of elite patterns, although they may be seen today as expressing non-elite agency, creativity and the capacity to provide themselves with other cultural patterns that would allow them to cross boundaries amongst social spaces. This is the case, for instance, with stelae found at the South Tombs Cemetery of Amarna. The majority of the excavated examples are undecorated and not as smoothly carved, though some of those who lived under the same conditions were able provide themselves with more elaborated and inscribed ones (Kemp et al 2013, 69).

At the New Kingdom colonial city of Amara West in Nubia archaeologists have found the fragments of a female coffin lid in tomb G309. The fragile fragments depict a red-skinned face wearing a black wig. In the Egyptian tradition, it is uncommon to find red-painted faces in female coffins from the period (Binder 2014, 77). This coffin may be an example of the use of available patterns in a new fashion. For instance, the coffin seems not to carry any inscriptions—usually found in Egyptian examples—and the red face could have been translated into another pattern in local ground. It may consist of a creative innovation conveying the interaction between cultures and social hierarchies in an entangled object.

When found in non-elite burials, objects containing texts may be considered the most emblematic example of social interactions. In the same way that non-elite-made objects were interpreted as less sophisticated adaptations, the materiality of non-elite texts has been considered the clearest example of non-elite copies. As discussed before, the levels of literacy in ancient Egyptian and Nubian societies must have varied considerably within different social spaces. Even though non-elite groups were able to provide themselves with textual objects, their command of the written language must have been insufficient or null. This is indicated by grammatical inaccuracies found in inscribed objects in non-elite contexts. However, instead of classifying non-elite textual objects as simple adaptations or copies of richer models, those objects show us again non-elite agencies operating at contextual levels. This demonstrates the possibilities for non-elite groups to interact with other groups in order to have access to alternative cultural patterns and subsequently to produce culture by themselves in new entangled patterns.

The New Kingdom cemetery at Medinet el-Ghurob provides us with various examples of inscribed objects found in non-elite burials. Some of those objects were inscribed for people who occupied official positions within the administration of the harem-town, e.g. the shabtis of Menkheper, mayor of Medinet el-Ghurab under Ramses II (Brunton and Engalbach 1927, 11). Such objects do not necessarily indicate they were used in the burials of those individuals whose names we read in inscriptions. Inscribed objects from Medinet el-Ghurab burials may express the possibilities of lower groups to access elite patterns and objects in order to give those objects new meanings and material functions in context. This is also the case of a canopic jar lid found in one of the largest shaft tombs. In the cemetery, there are no traces of mummification, so one should question the function of a canopic jar in such a context. Though as the site was widely looted, this proposition remains a hypothesis, which requires verification against

examples provided by other cemeteries.

In New Kingdom cemeteries in Nubia, a pattern found in larger shaft tombs is their collective use. Unlike elite tombs in the Theban necropolis, which were intended for a single wealthy individual, in cemeteries like Fadrus (tomb 511), Soleb (tomb 11) and Qustul (tomb V48), a great number of individuals was found in larger tombs (Säve-Söderbergh and Troy 1991, 219; Giorgini 1971, 159; Williams 1992, 272). Those tombs provide examples of refined objects such as stelae, masks and inscribed wooden anthropoid coffins. To what extent those tombs represent wealthier individuals or local elites or sub-elites remains a question to be further explored. However, one may assume as a possibility that community engagement would increase non-elites' possibilities of interacting with other groups, therefore being more effectively able to negotiate their identity and position within the social hierarchy (see Stevenson 2009).

Social interactions as both setting for innovation and agency, and also cultural reproduction can be realised in the different material patterns and uses of appropriated objects in non-elite contexts. On the coffin fragments inscribed with the name of Senisenbu at Qustul for instance, the name of Osiris has been incorrectly written, with the throne being substituted by the *rs* sign, as well as the *n* sign (Williams 1992, 153). As with the red-faced coffin found at Amara West, the anthropoid coffin of Senisenbu found alongside non-elite burials probably represents a real individual who created a new pattern for inscribing the name of Osiris.

At the South Tombs Cemetery at Amarna, archaeologists found a set of anthropoid wooden coffins, some decorated with figures of humans and gods and formulaic inscriptions (Kemp et al 2013, 71). The coffins were mainly made of sycamore and tamarisk wood, with gypsum and lime plaster, materials which can be found locally (Skinner in Kemp 2015, 29). Those coffins are comparable with examples found elsewhere in Egypt and Nubia, especially at Qustul and Fadrus. Intersection of social spaces and social fluidity are mainly recognised in inscriptions on the coffins. The texts were reproduced inaccurately on the coffins' surfaces, also attesting access to and other uses of cultural patterns existing within higher social spaces. However, the non-elite coffins at Amarna also provide the identities of some of the individuals buried within, alongside their titles. The most remarkable example is the coffin of Maya, lady of the house, whose mask was carved in an exquisite way (Kemp and Stevens 2008; Dolling 2008; Bettum in Kemp 2015). Although the Amarna coffins were usually restrained in terms of their materials, signs of golden leaf were found in the burials (Bettum in Kemp 2015, 31), which is comparable with anthropoid coffin masks from non-elite burials at Fadrus. The rare realgar pigment was also attested in some of the Amarna coffins (Skinner in Kemp 2015, 29), which comprises one more element for the realisation of non-elite agency and movement across social spaces in order to provide themselves with materials that would make negotiations of identity and positions more effective. A similar case is a female individual found in a pit burial at Fadrus carrying on her hands a blue faience scarab inscribed for the 'God's wife, Meryt-Amun' (burial 147) (Säve-Söderbergh and Troy 1991, 261). It is also an example of use and appropriation of available cultural patterns in local context with the aim of negotiating power and establishing differentiation.

The Amarna non-elite coffins comprise the most remarkable example of social interactions and non-elite agency available as they attest more than the creative appropriation of cultural patterns materialised in new entangled objects. The coffins exemplify the creation of a new, non-elite specific coffin type, created through social interactions and interchanges. According to Bettum, "the Amarna coffins with ritual scenes [comprise] a special sub-type of the black anthropoid coffin used in the Eighteenth Dynasty" (Bettum in Kemp 2015, 32).

Although the coffins from Amarna may be considered a new, *non-elite* coffin type, they are also

examples of how non-elite innovations can reproduce social structures. One may presume that the new pattern found on those coffins does not fit well in the social space within which the black coffin-type was normally used. Differentiations are expressed in the changes of decorative scheme, written inaccuracies etc. But at the same time the coffins convey non-elite possibilities of interacting with social spaces located in a higher social scale, providing non-elite persons the access to cultural patterns that were appropriated in order to create a new entangled object. Entangled objects—a result both of the interactions between different social groups within a given hierarchical structure, and between different cultures—allowed individuals to negotiate their position within individual social spaces, as well as in a broader social setting, creating alternatives that might have worked in specific contexts without changing the main social structure.

Concluding remarks

The examples discussed provide a basis for the perception of the social role of non-elite groups in social interactions. Theirs was an active role, which produced innovations even in a context of domination and colonisation. Considering non-elite individuals as social agents is a way towards overcoming top-down approaches in which a passive role has been attributed to non-elites. However, based on the differences between structural and relational poverty, at the same time that non-elites were able to create their own alternatives, their strategies of establishing social interaction reinforced existing hierarchies. This is due to the fact that their creations would not fit well in other “higher” social contexts.

Therefore, New Kingdom non-elite cemeteries provide a setting where limited material possibilities combine with the power of creating alternatives that open space for other potential interactions. These possibilities include the appropriation of existing material things and cultural patterns, and the creation of new entangled patterns. On the contextual level of relational poverty, alternatives to the norm may arise and play an important role in the constitution of social relations and identities. However, on the level of social structures, non-elite alternatives, identities and worldviews influence little the modification and overcoming of structural poverty and domination/colonisation.

Non-elite agency is expressed mainly in the relational sphere, where they could have access to patterns as they contextually crossed social spaces. Structural poverty, however, remained barely touched. Actually, it was reinforced, as non-elite innovations might have been seen as anomalies within the sets of cultural references shared by wealthier groups.

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