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## Ancestral Cults in Ancient Egypt

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### Summary and Keywords

The ancestor cult was a common feature of pharaonic society, aiming to provide social cohesion to extended families as well as close intermediaries with the netherworld. As active members of their respective households, ancestors were objects of veneration and care but were also subject to social obligations toward their kin. However, the continuity of such cults was not exempt from threats, from gradual oblivion to destruction of tombs. Furthermore, tensions between individual strategies and customary duties toward one's kin were another source of instability, especially when officials sought to create their own funerary services and to transfer them to their direct descendants. Such tensions are particularly visible in social sectors close to the king. The assertion of royal authority depended on the elimination of potential sources of political counterweight, and also on the weakening of kin solidarity among members of the elite. As such, the promotion of the cult of royal ancestors, granting individual rewards to selected members of the court and developing personal contact with gods, was part of this strategy. In other cases, "cultural ancestors" provided prestigious links with golden ages of the past, for instance when authorship of sapiential texts was attributed to famous officials of the past or when scribes wrote graffiti in their tombs. Finally, ancestors and ancestral memories were also invented and manipulated for ideological purposes, such as providing legitimacy in periods of political division or prestigious links with the royal palace and the values it promoted.

Ancestor worship thus appears as an active, multifaceted social activity, operating at different levels (individual, domestic/family, community, palace), whose distinctive idiosyncrasies depended on the context in which it operated. Tensions but also mutual influences permeated all these spheres, thus making ancestor cults a dynamic manifestation of social values, political practices, and religious beliefs in pharaonic Egypt.

Keywords: ancestor, domestic religion, genealogy, kinship, lineage, private religion, social memory

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Ancestor worship played an important role in pharaonic ideology, both in the political (for legitimization purposes) and domestic spheres (cohesion of social units).<sup>1</sup> From the origins of the Egyptian monarchy, lists of monarchs and the records of their principal deeds helped legitimize the power of the kings and represent an ideally uninterrupted link with their prestigious ancestors.<sup>2</sup> Lists of kings and representations of royal ancestors were thus the focus of rituals in temples, aiming to cement crucial concepts like continuity and legitimate rule through the ages.<sup>3</sup> In other cases, some Pharaohs became local “saints,” venerated for centuries as intermediaries and protectors after their death.<sup>4</sup> However, ancestral cults were in no way limited to royalty. From the 3rd millennium BCE to the Greco-Roman period, genealogies carved in rock inscriptions and in private monuments expressed the importance of lineage, family social memory, and noble origins in order to enhance the position and legitimize the authority of individuals, usually members of the central and provincial elite.<sup>5</sup> What is more, it was not infrequent that chapels were erected in honor of prestigious ancestors. Offering inscribed statues, stelae, basins, and other highly prized monuments to them expressed the social importance of the dead and legitimized the authority of donors as their direct or ideal heirs, especially in periods of political turmoil.<sup>6</sup> Finally, individuals not necessarily from the elite requested the aid of deceased relatives and ancestors in order to solve family troubles that frequently endangered the continuity of their households.<sup>7</sup> Invocations of one’s “fathers” in the necropoleis further emphasized the very particular position of ancestors in Egyptian society as active members of the household, and also as intermediaries with the netherworld and the foci of rituals, offerings, and celebrations (including banquets) that helped preserve kinship and social ties. Reciprocity was thus crucial in the relations between living and deceased people. If the eldest son was supposed to take care of his parents, to bury them properly and to present offerings to them, a deceased relative was also expected to help his or her living kin when necessary.<sup>8</sup>

Three particularities should also be considered. On the one hand, the very specific nature of kingship meant that pharaohs included gods among their ancestors, thus marking a clear difference with ordinary people. On the other hand, ancestor worship was an active process, in which officials and members of the elite not only venerated their “fathers”; they also consciously sought to inaugurate ancestor “lines” centered on themselves, on their own tombs and in their funerary services, to the exclusion of other kin. Finally, most of the information at our disposal about ancestral cults comes from elite contexts, so it is possible that such social and religious practice was less relevant for other social sectors, like ordinary people. These social and cultural dimensions marked the extent but also the limits of ancestral cults in ancient Egypt.

## Ancestral Cults, Extended Families, and Social Memory

Ancestral cults and the celebration of the memory of ancestors are inseparable from the social structure of pharaonic Egypt, which was based on extended families.<sup>9</sup> The focus of research on monuments built for individual members of the elite (usually an official or a lady), where inscriptions and scenes celebrate the owner and his/her closest relatives (husband/wife, sons), led scholars to think that the social organization of Egypt consisted of nuclear families. However, these monuments frequently include additional shafts and chambers where other members of the family of the deceased or their subordinates were buried. In other cases, funerary clusters included several tombs which belonged to officials linked by family ties. In cases when genealogical information is particularly abundant (as in the provinces), the reconstruction of the family structure and social connections of the ruling family usually reveals a complex and dense kin network, organized around a dominant branch and with several secondary ones, which usually held less important positions. Old Kingdom (2686–2160 BCE) El-Hawawish and Elkab and Second Intermediate Period (1650–1550 BCE) Elkab are good examples of this organization.<sup>10</sup> Being part not only of the most important local family but also of its dominant branch granted access to and control of crucial economic, symbolic, and social resources. The family of Nykaankh, for example, an official who ruled Tehnah during the early Fifth Dynasty (around 2490 BCE), controlled the local temple of the goddess Hathor and its priestly positions, in return for fields and income. As for late 3rd-millennium Qubbet el-Hawa, the main necropolis of Elephantine, hundreds of ink inscriptions on jars, presented as offerings in the tombs of high officials, record the names and titles of the offerers. These brief texts reveal a dense network of social obligations that linked the deceased (and his/her family) with the most eminent members of Elephantine society, helping thus preserve their cohesion as the ruling local elite.<sup>11</sup> Ancestor veneration or simply remembering the name and the memory of deceased predecessors through rituals and offerings contributed to legitimize the dominant social position achieved by such potentates as well as to classify the local society according to hierarchical symbolic lines.<sup>12</sup> The declaration of Paser, around 1280 BCE (“in the necropolis at [your] side [everyday], that I may mingle with the great ones, the ancestors, and the effective spirits”), is a good illustration of these ideals.<sup>13</sup>

However, ancestral cults were not without ambiguity. Again, the bulk of the evidence comes from elite contexts, so the practices they reveal, influenced by the values of high culture and the royal court, were probably quite different from those of common people. Monumental decorated tombs and the use of writing produced cultural landscapes in which greater individuality, as well as a certain emancipation from family values, helped create a distinctive social memory addressed to future peers, not only to one’s kin. The “appeal to the living ones,” inscribed on many monuments, was addressed to passersby, asking them to recite the name of the deceased in order to keep his memory alive.

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Obviously, only people able to read were the target of these stereotyped formulae. So the deceased official was addressing himself to future officials, and, accordingly, the remembrance of his name did not depend exclusively on the goodwill of his relatives and descendants.<sup>14</sup> A related but more sophisticated practice consisted of inscribing graffiti with excerpts of famous literary texts on the tombs of officials of the past. These graffiti, as well as the attribution of the authorship of literary pieces to ancient illustrious dignitaries (such as *The Teaching of Ptahhotep*, *The Teaching of Kagemni*, *The Teaching of Kairsu*, and *The Teaching of Djedefhor*), helped create a “parallel” ancestral memory, based not on kinship but on cultural links which tied together the members of the scribal class. In other cases, high-culture practices promoted other forms of ancestral cult, centered on deceased pharaohs, members of the royal family, and high officials who became a sort of patron or “saint” to whom individuals could address their petitions and honor their memory, such as Imhotep and Amenhotep son of Hapu.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, conflicts and tensions within an official’s family led to particular practices seeking to emancipate his funerary cult and his social memory from the intervention of other members of his kin group. In other instances the aim of such practices was to confine funerary cults (and the income and benefits derived from them) to the direct descendants of the dead, to the detriment of lateral branches of the extended family. Hence it was not unusual that beneficiaries of royal endowments forbade other relatives from disposing of the fields granted by the king, which were then kept within the nuclear family of the holder and his offspring. This practice is especially well documented in private funerary foundations and in the endowments to royal statues granted to individuals. In other cases the kin of the donor was formally forbidden to split up or use the land granted to his funerary cult, which was then put under the control of specialized priests with the condition that it would be preserved undivided. Finally, the use of a tomb by other relatives could also be forbidden in order to keep in individual hands what seems to have been customarily interpreted as family goods open to collective use. In all these cases it was usual to engage specialized funerary priests (sometimes through contracts) who ensured that the rituals and ceremonies would be properly accomplished, thus dispensing with the intervention of any relative. Building up social memories and defining the role to be played by ancestors (and their cults) thus appears as a complex task where beliefs, social roles, and economic interests were inextricably related.<sup>16</sup>

## A Turning Point: The End of the 3rd Millennium BCE

Information about ancestor cults is scarce before the end of the 3rd millennium BCE. Decorated tombs of the elite were the foci of rituals and family celebrations, but there is little evidence about deceased officials becoming the center of long-term cults, not to mention ancestor cults (Hordejedef, Kagemni, and Mereruka are some of the very rare exceptions). Tomb robberies, usurpation of burials, political conflicts followed by *damnatio memoriae* in the monuments of rivals, destruction of monuments in order to obtain free space for new building projects, internal family troubles resulting in the destruction or the erasure of the name and depictions of the owner of a tomb—all these reveal that monumental tombs were often prone to damage, and even destruction. Therefore, in spite of their pretension to achieve eternal funerary celebrations, the truth is that they were fragile centers of rituals and collective memory. Another aspect to consider is that Memphite cemeteries such as Giza, Saqqara, Abusir, Abu Rawash, and Meidum were organized around the royal funerary monuments built there. The tombs of the officials occupied a subordinate position in an ideal landscape where the king appears as the head of an extended family encompassing his own relatives, his officials, and members of the court (frequently designated as “king’s son” and “king’s daughter”). This circumstance explains the paucity of family information in many of the tombs of these officials, as it was considered irrelevant or unnecessary in this ceremonial setting.<sup>17</sup>

### Elite “Public” Ancestor Worship

Outside the Memphite area and far from the monuments of kings, things were different. There, in the provinces, it was the tombs of the local potentates that formed the core of ideal landscapes encompassing the burials of their own relatives, subordinates, and other members of the provincial society. Moreover, their decorative and epigraphical program often expressed values, motifs, and concerns closer to the ideological needs of these elites, without the formal restrictions imposed by the palatial culture. Authority and legitimacy depended to a great extent on being a member of the dominant local lineage. Thus genealogies, claims of being born into a prominent noble family or into a family of governors, were crucial to expressing status, so when the monarchy collapsed at the end of the 3rd millennium and power was contested by a myriad of petty local chiefs, frequently fighting among themselves, ancestor worship became essential in order to mobilize the symbolic resources needed to assert the authority of the dominant local lineages.<sup>18</sup>

The most noteworthy example was the chapel erected at Elephantine to honor the memory of Heqaib, a caravan leader of the late Sixth Dynasty (around 2225 BCE).<sup>19</sup> What began as a small chapel in the palace of the governors of Elephantine was transformed in the following centuries into a small sanctuary built nearby. Local officials, as well as kings such as Antef II, placed their own inscribed monuments (statues, portable shrines, etc.) there to honor Heqaib. Middle Kingdom governor Sarenput I (around 1930 BCE) restored and enlarged the sanctuary, which remained an important focus of rituals and processions. So the sanctuary of Heqaib celebrated the memory of a prestigious ancestor, and the monuments placed there established a link between his successors and himself that helped legitimize the authority of the local ruling elite. Similar conditions prevailed at Balat, a remote pharaonic outpost in the oasis of Dakhla in the Western Desert. Here a series of chapels that celebrated the memory of the local governors were built adjacent to their palace. They were destroyed by a fire about the end of the Sixth Dynasty (around 2180 BCE). Afterward, only the chapel of the governor Medunefter was rebuilt and became a center of cult for the next two centuries.<sup>20</sup> However, archaeology also reveals a distinctive modality of ancestor worship in the provincial world. In Abydos, for instance, small mudbrick chapels were erected near the graves of Sixth Dynasty and First Intermediate Period (end of the 3rd millennium BCE) individuals in an area called the Middle Cemetery. They housed figurines of Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BCE) individuals who shared in the ongoing offering cult of their ancestors or local notables.<sup>21</sup>

In other cases, reverence toward ancestors took other forms. Djehutynakht, governor of the Hare nome at the end of the First Intermediate Period (around 2050 BCE), claimed to have restored the tombs of his ancestors in a series of inscriptions found in five tombs at Bersheh and four tombs (mainly of governors) at Sheikh Said. Apparently he intended to stress the links between himself and the ruling elite of former times. As for what he meant by restoration, evidence from the recently discovered tomb of Henu reveals that Djehutynakht simply reused ancient tombs for the burial of members of his own family. In

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so doing, the funerary cult in the tomb was reinstated, which was beneficial for the original tomb owner as well.<sup>22</sup> As for the tomb of Ukhhotep II (III according to other authors) of Meir (tomb B4), it depicts a unique scene in which several registers show a list of all the mayors of the town, going back to the Fourth Dynasty (2613–2494 BCE). Perhaps his status as a member of a new lineage of local governors prompted him to produce a genealogy linking him to previous rulers, as if an uninterrupted line of chiefs had governed the province for centuries. So Ukhhotep's scene is a vivid representation of an ideological motif which appears in the inscriptions of many local rulers at the very end of the 3rd millennium, when they claimed to have been born into a family with an old lineage, whose ancestry went back to remote times, as members "of noble stock since the times of God." (original translation)<sup>23</sup> Kings themselves did not forgo this practice. Pharaoh Mentuhotep II (2055–2004 BCE), who reunified Egypt at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, seems to have "invented" a royal ancestor, Mentuhotep I, for whom no contemporary sources are known. Venerated as the king who inaugurated the royal lineage of the Middle Kingdom, Mentuhotep I appears then to be an early example of an invented tradition rooted in the mobilization of real or fictitious ancestors. All these examples reveal the importance of ancestor worship after the end of the Old Kingdom monarchy in legitimizing the authority of the new rulers that emerged then.

The Memphite area departs from this model. The very presence of the Old Kingdom royal pyramids, and the occasional building of new ones by the sovereigns of the late 3rd millennium, helped preserve the traditional role of kings as main foci of rituals and social memory there. This, in turn, made it unnecessary to develop cultural practices based on private ancestor worship, like those that were then flourishing in the provincial world. Old Kingdom kings (Sahura, Nyusera, Neferirkara, Unas, and Teti) thus became not only the center of official cults of ancestral royal figures but also the object of popular veneration of "saints" during the First Intermediate Period.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Pepy I (2321–2287 BCE), his funerary complex witnessed the continuous offering of hundreds of offering basins, false doors (at least 800 and 700, respectively) and other small monuments during the same period, many of which belonged to individuals of a relatively low status, difficult to assimilate to an elite. The association of private memorial cults with the monuments of prestigious kings of the past (especially Teti and Pepy I) and, perhaps, with the remnants of economic and administrative networks still providing offerings to these royal cults offered protection for private cults and prestigious links with royalty and helped transform old kings into prestigious local "saints" or patrons.<sup>25</sup> So kings were often venerated in the royal necropolis as popular accessible figures with the status of outstanding deified individuals, playing the role of mediators between the human and the divine spheres. At the same time, they were the center of official formal cults dedicated to an ancestral royal figure and celebrated by priests and a specialized ritual personnel. Other pious measures, such as the restoration of their predecessors' funerary monuments (and their endowments), were celebrated by kings, and, as also happened in the case of individuals (Djehutynakht is a good example), they provided legitimacy for them as well

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as links with prestigious forebears. Moreover, they served to strengthen the ideal of institutional continuity between past and present.

To conclude the discussion of the modalities of elite “public” ancestor worship, it might be observed that only a handful of individuals of very high social status, such as viziers (Kagemni, Mereruka) and princes (Hordjedef), appear to have become local “saints” from the end of the Old Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> The fact that some of them were considered the authors of literary compositions written centuries later suggests that their memory was not only preserved by their descendants as a “true” ancestor cult; it also survived thanks to a scribal class that celebrated them as cultural precursors and models, especially in troubled times.



### Domestic Ancestor Cults

The end of the Old Kingdom monarchy during the First Intermediate Period (around 2160 BCE), followed by political struggles among regional actors, was concomitant with the celebration of households as basic units of social organization. In the funerary sphere new compositions, like the Coffin Texts, include formulae in which the deceased is considered the head of an extensive household encompassing not only his immediate family and other members of his/her kin group but also a broader social circle made up of “friends,” clients, subordinates, serfs, and other people connected with him/her. The construction of collective mastabas in many provinces also confirms the importance of extended families in funerary rituals, an importance corroborated by the epigraphical record. Many inscriptions in fact include new ideological motifs centered on these social units. One of them concerns the beneficial measures to be taken by the subject of the inscription to ensure the welfare of his *abet* (extended family), while in others what is stressed is the preservation of the ancestral household (the “house of the father”) and its transmission without loss or, better, more prosperous to the next generation.<sup>27</sup> In these troubled times households provided social and economic security, a task in which help was requested from deceased relatives, considered as active members of their kin group. Such a practice is illustrated by a new kind of texts, the so-called letters to the dead, whereby people addressed petitions to deceased members of their families in order to solve domestic problems (debts, inheritances, murder, etc.). Many of them were written on bowls, apparently used in rituals involving the presentation of offerings and the libation of water to a statue, bust, or representation of the dead. While this ritual cannot be properly labeled an “ancestor cult,” it nevertheless reveals the importance of dead relatives and ancestors for the living and for the preservation of their households.<sup>28</sup> In more formal contexts, invocations to forebears and to “the fathers who are in the necropolis” strengthened the links between the living and the dead.

Two spheres emerge when considering the role played by ancestor cult in the 3rd millennium BCE. One is an official sphere, in which the king appears as a sort of ideal household head and ancestor for his officials and members of the court, whose burials surrounded the royal pyramids. In this specific setting private extended families and ancestor cults seem almost nonexistent. The other sphere, the domestic one, is visible in the provinces, far from the capital, especially when the authority of the king had collapsed. It was then that deeper social structures, concealed in official sources under the weight of palatial cultural conventions, emerged, revealing the importance of extended families, ancestor cults, and the integration of deceased kin in the social life of his/her household. Tensions as well as mutual influences between these two spheres (including the reappropriation and reinterpretation of specific developments) marked, during the next centuries, the role played by ancestor cults in the public and private sphere.

## Restoration of the Monarchy and Redefinition of Ancestor Cults (2050-1750 BCE)

When the unified monarchy was restored around 2050 BCE throughout Egypt, a new ideology gradually developed in order to cope with the needs of royal authority. Earlier developments in the sphere of private belief were to be accommodated and reinterpreted within this ideological framework and the values it promoted. The aim was to strengthen the centrality of the king and of official cults and to reduce the autonomy of domestic beliefs as factors of social cohesion for potential counterpowers, a process in which the monarchy succeeded only partially. A royal ancestor (Montuhotep I) was invented and venerated as the source of the Theban royal lineage which finally succeeded in governing Egypt. Furthermore, links with the past were emphasized in what appears to be an “ancestor chamber” erected by Senusret I at the temple of Karnak, where some of his Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period predecessors (Sahura, Nyuserra, and the Theban governor Antef the Great) were venerated.<sup>29</sup> But, at the same time, royal cemeteries never regained their former appeal as centers of ritual adherence to the king, especially at Lisht and Dahshur, but also at Saqqara, where the number of decorated mastabas from the Middle Kingdom is incomparably lower than those of the Fifth and Sixth dynasties. What is more, early Middle Kingdom pharaohs presented offerings in chapels of provincial ancestors (such as Heqaib at Elephantine), perhaps in order to gain the support of the local nobility. As for genealogical information and especially mentions and representations of extended families, they now became common in private monuments, as many stelae from this period reveal. Some provincial officials, like Isi of Edfu from the Old Kingdom and others, continued to be venerated in their tombs.<sup>30</sup>

Under these conditions, the cult of Osiris, formerly associated with the monarchy, became popular in private cults during the First Intermediate Period and afterward, when deceased people generally and not only kings were identified with this god. His temple at Abydos provided an original setting for the integration of private cults within the royal sphere, thus reducing the importance of domestic ancestors. In fact, the increasing popularity of Osiris in private funerary beliefs after the end of the Old Kingdom seems to have led pharaohs to reappropriate and reinterpret this cult. So Twelfth Dynasty kings (1985-1773 BCE) restored the royal tombs of the Early Dynastic Period in Abydos, and they transformed one of them into the alleged burial place of Osiris himself. In doing so, Middle Kingdom kings not only manipulated the ancestral memory of royalty itself but also pursued a strategy of legitimization by emphasizing their ties to the first pharaohs, to the point that King Sesostri III (1870-1831 BCE) chose this locality as his burial place. Furthermore, the Terrace of the Great God associated with the Osiris temple at Abydos became a densely packed area of mud brick chapels and cenotaphs in which individuals erected stelae recording the members of their extended families. The “tomb” and the temple of Osiris, as well as these chapels, thus became part of a local circuit of festivals and pilgrimage in which the royal memory found a new legitimacy and family cults were

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incorporated into the sphere of the official religion. It is significant in this respect that the letters to the dead disappeared at a time when family cenotaphs were being built at Abydos, when hymns to Osiris were inscribed in private tombs, and when scenes depicting the dead sailing to Abydos to participate in the Osirian festivals became quite common in private tombs. The manipulation of ancestral memories thus followed paths similar to those developed during the Pyramid Age: from an ideological point of view, official cults at Abydos sought to reduce the importance of ancestral memory for individuals and to provide them instead with a new one, centered on Osiris and the king (as Horus, son of Osiris). In some way, beliefs which had played a potent cohesive role for kin groups during the First Intermediate Period (i.e., ancestor cults, centrality of one's own household) were now being replaced either by more prestigious and status-enhancing official cults or by new ideals, such as service to the king and holding official functions in the administration and at the court.<sup>31</sup>

## Crisis and Reformulation of Ancestor Cults (1700-1550 BCE)

As had happened three centuries before, the gradual weakening of the royal authority from 1800 BCE was followed by a revival of earlier values seeking to provide security and social cohesion to individuals. So ideological values centered on kin and family ideology became central again. Genealogical information was displayed in tomb inscriptions, and simple shaft tombs were grouped around communal cult areas, so that ritual activity was no longer isolated within each tomb complex but became centered on communal ritual zones. Such a change apparently shows that a larger social group was considered necessary for the protection and provision of the deceased, which had previously been the role of the immediate family. These communal aspect of ritual activity may be observed in some Theban elite tombs, when Thebes was reduced to the role of the capital of a small Upper Egyptian kingdom. The large quantity of stick shabtis, inscribed with many different names, recovered from the niches in the tomb complex of Tetiky—a mayor and “king’s son”—appear to be evidence that a social group, probably larger than Tetiky’s immediate family, performed cult practices in the complex. As for genealogies, they reappear in monuments of provincial potentates, the best known being those of Elkab. In the case of Renseneb’s burial, to his detailed genealogical inscription must be added the fact that, from an architectural point of view, his tomb seems to have served as a large family burial place. As for Sobeknakht II, the importance of his extended family may be guessed from his mention of about twenty male figures represented in his tomb and labeled as his brothers.<sup>32</sup>

As for the Theban royal lineage that finally reunified the country around 1550, it also seems to have shared these same family values. The seated statue of Prince Iahmes, for instance, has been interpreted as a three-dimensional letter to the dead, as it was intended to prevent the potential terrible intervention of a powerful deceased figure in the world of the living. Later on, many members of the royal family of the early Eighteenth Dynasty (1550–1500 BCE) were deified and became the centers of popular cults, as in the cases of Iahhotep, Iahmes-Sapair, Iahmes-Nefertari, or Amenhotep I. However, the case of Prince Iahmes is unique, as it shows the persistence of domestic values and beliefs in a royal lineage of provincial origin prior to the reconstruction of an official ideology encompassing all Egypt.<sup>33</sup>

## Personal Religion and Ancestral Cults in the New Kingdom (1550-1050 BCE)

The reunification of the kingdom under a single sovereign was followed by a deep reformulation and re-elaboration of the official ideology. Its aims were to reinforce the royal palace as cultural center of the kingdom, to strengthen the ties of the monarchy with the elite of the country, and to transform official cults into the main foci of rituals. Not surprisingly, the private funerary sphere once more became very open to the influence, values, and cult forms promoted by the monarchy. That is why, for the first time, the king was represented on the walls of painted Theban tombs, suggesting that the tomb owner was intimately associated with the ruling Pharaoh. Nevertheless, this process took some time, and for a while some iconographic motifs still emphasized the close kinship links that existed between the living and the dead. Banquet scenes were one such motif. They became quite common in elite tomb decoration until the end of the Amarna era, when meals were consumed on very special days (festivals, rituals) and helped preserve a family (or, better, household) memory associating deceased relatives with the living members of their kin group.<sup>34</sup>

However, other cult practices gradually emerged, in which individuality and personal needs as well as direct individual relations between officials and the netherworld (deceased relatives, gods) prevailed over ceremonies involving the participation of one's kin. So new themes appeared in private monuments (such as "personal piety") as well as new funerary practices (such as the introduction of the Book of the Dead in tombs). Gods were also represented in private tombs and statues of gods placed in them. Individuals could ask for divine help directly, even for assisting with current affairs, without the mediation of ancestors or dead relatives. This led to innovations such as the construction of a shrine of the "Hearing Ear" at Karnak, where common people went to have their prayers heard by the god, while private stelae also represented ears to invite the divinity to hear the petitions of the living. Deified officials and members of the royal family, like Imhotep or Amenhotep son of Hapu, were gradually included in the official pantheon of deities, and petitions and prayers were addressed to them. Official religion seems then to be gradually replacing dead ancestors in the traditional domestic sphere when intervention from the hereafter was requested. In this vein it is quite significant that letters to the dead disappeared and were replaced by letters and oracles to the gods during the New Kingdom.<sup>35</sup> Finally, a certain dissolution of family ties and a general trend toward a greater individuality is also perceptible in other social areas, when New Kingdom wills and lawsuits (such as those of Senimose, Mose, Naunakhte, Senmut-Kyky, etc.) attest to troubled transmissions of property, leading in some cases to the disinheritance of some or all potential heirs.<sup>36</sup>

### The Case of Deir el-Medina

Under these conditions, ancestral cults became less important for the elite. But the ambiguity of the weight, on the one hand, of domestic traditions and cults and, on the other hand, of ritual practices and beliefs promoted by the monarchy could inspire original developments in some communities closely linked to the monarchy. This was the case of the artists and craftsmen settled at Deir el-Medina, engaged in the decoration of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Family and domestic ritual activities, like ancestor cults, remained important for them. At the same time, the influence of cultural values and practices linked to the monarchy (including literacy) meant that ancestor worship at Deir el-Medina incorporated and adapted, in a very creative way, aspects and monuments of the official sphere to their own needs. So writing, iconography, and compositional schemas normally reserved for prestigious monuments inspired the production of stelae and anthropoid busts of a very particular nature in order to communicate with dead relatives and ancestors.<sup>37</sup> This was the case with the so-called *3ḥ iqr n R<sup>c</sup>* (“able spirit of Re”) stelae, the great majority of which have been found precisely (but not exclusively) at Deir el-Medina, in some cases in houses but also in chapels and between tombs, thus suggesting that they were the focus of a domestic cult of ancestors. The close link between the stelae and the busts in these domestic cults is confirmed by the fact that many anthropoid busts contain the *3ḥ iqr n R<sup>c</sup>* formula and that the majority of them were discovered in domestic contexts.<sup>38</sup> According to Harrington, ancestor busts served not only to venerate ancestors but also to protect the dwellers of a house. Their protective properties would also explain the production of busts in amuletic form. In general, domestic and “personal” religion at Deir el-Medina sought to preserve and maintain family continuity.<sup>39</sup>

However, the influence of official religion ended up reaching the cult of ancestors and inspired new religious practices centered on kings instead. In the first case, *3ḥ iqr n R<sup>c</sup>* stelae and anthropoid busts have been found in the temples of Hathor and Amun at Deir el-Medina, and their presence there suggests the association of private cults with official cult centers. As for the second case, the scribe Ramose (I), for instance, left a large number of monuments (stelae, statues, etc.) because of his social prestige as instigator and overseer of royal cult within the village, with his own associated Hathor cult. Other officials from Deir el-Medina also put up a series of royal statues and provided for their cult by means of private donations, a practice that emphasized both their proximity to the court and to important patrons and their familiarity with the codes of high culture.<sup>40</sup>

## Ancestors in the First Millennium BCE

Ancestor cults seem to decline at the end of the New Kingdom and in subsequent periods, judging from the absence of clear evidence of this practice in cemeteries and in elite contexts. However, social memory was increasingly mobilized by the elite for their own interests, in a period when genealogies flourished as well as claims to prestigious lineages.<sup>41</sup> Political division, crises of legitimacy, and the emergence of many local powers left their mark on funerary beliefs. In such an uncertain world temples became poles of institutional and economic stability, and the priesthood remained a substantial source of revenue for the elite once income derived from imperial conquest and from a vanishing monarchy was gone. It was then that private individuals set up stelae and statues in the courtyards of temples, covered with lengthy genealogies, sometimes going back in time for more than a millennium. These monuments proclaimed the legitimacy of their owners in the positions they enjoyed (usually priestly and administrative) and helped preserve their memory in protected sacred spaces.<sup>42</sup> Genealogies and inscribed monuments thus contributed to produce and visualize a prestigious social memory inextricably linked to temples (and not to tombs or houses), the main sources of social and symbolic power.

As for the domestic sphere, traces of ancestor worship are elusive, but it seems that funerary beliefs centered on kinship and traditional tensions between family values and high culture codes still remained latent. Statues in temples certainly point to individual cult practices embedded in the codes of high culture, while funerary care after death (mummification, use of sarcophagi, offerings of jewelry and amulets) was apparently affordable by broader sectors of Egyptian society. However, the accumulation of many bodies in collective burials, frequently in reused tombs, shows that family memory, care of the dead, and, perhaps, communication with deceased relatives through rituals observed in these burial places remained central for many Egyptians.<sup>43</sup> What is more, the abundant information about a category of privately remunerated priests specialized in rituals for the dead (*choachytes*), reveals the continuity and importance of private cults for people not necessarily issued from the most affluent sectors of pharaonic society. Finally, the popularity of ghost stories in the 1st millennium constitutes indirect proof of the importance of dispensing appropriate care to the dead, if for no other reason than to avoid unwanted visits from the netherworld. In any case, these conditions are particularly visible in cemeteries used by the elite for centuries, situated around important centers of power (Thebes, Memphis, etc.), and they are perhaps not really extrapolable elsewhere. Thus rural areas like Matmar and Qau-Mostagedda show some differences. Most graves there were single (not collective) burials and consisted of nothing more than a shallow shaft without further chambers, only provided with a few or no funerary goods, as if ceremonies in honor of ancestors had become irrelevant in cemeteries.

## **Ancestral Cults, Ancestral Memories, and the (Many) Social Lives of Ancestors**

The ancestor cult was a common feature of pharaonic society, aiming to provide social cohesion to extended families as well as close intermediaries with the netherworld. As active members of their respective households, ancestors were objects of veneration and care but were also subject to social obligations toward their kin. However, the continuity of such cults was not exempt from threats, from gradual oblivion to destruction of tombs. Furthermore, tensions between individual strategies and customary duties toward one's kin were another source of instability, especially when officials sought to create their own funerary services and to transfer them to their direct descendants. Such tensions are particularly visible in social sectors close to the king. The assertion of royal authority depended on the elimination of potential sources of political counterweight, and also on weakening kin solidarity among members of the elite. So the promotion of the cult of royal ancestors, the attribution of individual rewards to selected members of the court, and the development of personal contact with gods were part of this strategy. In other cases, "cultural ancestors" provided prestigious links with golden ages of the past, for instance when authorship of sapiential texts was attributed to famous officials of the past or when scribes wrote graffiti in their tombs. Finally, ancestors and ancestral memories were also invented and manipulated for ideological purposes, such as providing legitimacy in periods of political division or prestigious links with the royal palace and the values it promoted.

Ancestor worship thus appears as an active, multifaceted social activity, operating at different levels (individual, domestic/family, community, palace), whose distinctive idiosyncrasies depended on the context in which it operated. Tensions but also mutual influences permeated all these spheres, thus making ancestor cults a dynamic manifestation of social values, political practices, and religious beliefs in pharaonic Egypt.

## **Review of the Literature**

Ancestor worship has come to attract the attention of scholars because of the convergence of two major historiographical trends. On the one hand, traditional studies of pharaonic religion were mainly focused on "theological" narratives, pantheons, and official cults celebrated in temples, tombs, and sacred spaces produced and used by the elite; only gradually has more attention been devoted to personal, domestic religion and to private beliefs (including those of common people), the use of humble objects (figurines, amulets), and the practice of markedly gendered rituals related to childbirth, fertility, and magic. On the other hand, the development of social history in Egyptology has stimulated the analysis of previously neglected aspects, especially those concerning



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nonelite sectors of pharaonic society, urban environments, and alternative social practices, beliefs, and lifestyles not well documented in the institutional record. The relation between the two spheres (elite and nonelite) thus appears less unidirectional than previously assumed; in fact, it was punctuated of mutual influences, refusals, and affirmation of differences, crossed by tensions between individual strategies and collective duties. In some cases such alternative practices pursued quite conscious aims, such as the affirmation of kin identity. Ancestor worship was one of its most conspicuous manifestations, and in some specific cases (such as Deir el-Medina), the values and codes from high culture contributed to reinterpreting it. In other cases, however, close contact with official culture proved rather ineffective, as in the South Cemetery at Amarna; the ritual funerary practices of the workers buried there reveal positive but not unanimous ideas of their own as to a spiritual existence after death, and that these ideas were not a simple extension of Akhenaten's official religion.<sup>44</sup>

The publication of a discrete corpus of sources has inspired isolated studies on ancestor worship, each of them stressing a very particular aspect of this ritual practice. The historiographical trends mentioned here have enabled scholars to overcome such a limited approach and to propose more general interpretations. Among these sources the most relevant are: (1) the so-called letters to the dead (mainly from the very end of the 3rd millennium BCE), in which deceased people were considered active members of their households and their help was requested by their kin;<sup>45</sup> (2) the excavation of chapels and tombs where deified Old Kingdom officials were venerated by the local elites, both at Memphis (Kagemni, etc.) and in the provinces (Heqaib at Elephantine, Izi at Edfu, Medunfer at Balat, etc.);<sup>46</sup> (3) the chambers of royal ancestors in temples which record lists or assembled statues of former kings in order to receive an official cult;<sup>47</sup> (4) the ancestor busts and stelae (*3ḥ iqr n R<sup>c</sup>*) excavated at Deir el-Medina (other examples have been also discovered elsewhere), dedicated to close ancestors in order to intercede and aid the living;<sup>48</sup> and finally (5) an unrelated but parallel religious development in the private sphere, the so-called personal piety of the New Kingdom; the fact that individuals directly and privately addressed a deity in order to request its help has stimulated research on private beliefs (sometimes excessively labeled "popular religion"), including ancestor worship.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, a recent trend in Egyptological research focuses specifically on household and kinship organization in ancient Egypt. Extended families appear as the basis of pharaonic society, and in the case of the more important ones their influence was enhanced by patronage and social networks that permeated the whole social structure. Veneration of a common ancestor, a sense of pride in the lineage, solidarity, and reciprocity duties helped preserve the cohesion of these social groups.<sup>50</sup>

## Further Reading

The following titles discuss the role, importance, and manifestations of ancestor cults in pharaonic Egypt. Good introductions are Sylvie Donnat-Beauquier, *Écrire à ses morts: Enquête sur un usage rituel de l'écrit dans l'Égypte pharaonique* (2014); Karen Exell, "Ancestor Bust" (2008); Dominique Farout, "Isi, un saint intercesseur à Edfou" (2009); Nicola Harrington, *Living with the Dead: Ancestor Worship and Mortuary Ritual in Ancient Egypt* (2013); Juan Carlos Moreno García, "La gestion sociale de la mémoire dans l'Égypte du IIIe millénaire: Les tombes des particuliers, entre utilisation privée et idéologie publique" (2006); Juan Carlos Moreno García, "Oracles, Ancestor Cults and Letters to the Dead: The Involvement of the Dead in the Public and Family Affairs in Pharaonic Egypt" (2007); and Pascal Vernus, "La grande mutation idéologique du Nouvel Empire: Une nouvelle théorie du pouvoir politique; Du démiurge face à sa création" (1995).

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