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Cycles of life and death: narrative homology and archaeological realities

Lynn Meskell

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

(Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, VI)

Abstract

Egyptian data speak to modern interpreters in many ways; through the rich iconographic repertoire, the materiality of houses and tombs and through the vast corpus of writings left to us. At the New Kingdom village of Deir el Medina (c.1500–1100 BC) each of these data sets is available and can be used dialectically to gain a more intimate knowledge of lifecycles and individual life experience. Using excerpts from the documents and personal letters of the community I present the villagers' own narratives of life experience: pregnancy, birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age and death. These potent vignettes of life potentially have material correlates in the archaeology of the village – the individual houses and tombs which have remained in a remarkable state of preservation. For instance, the Eastern Necropolis at Deir el Medina is layered in terms of the lifecycle: neonates were buried at the base of the slope, followed by children and adolescents mid-slope and adults were buried at the high point of the hill. Using an explicitly narrative style, I aim to show the conjoinings and ruptures between various levels of evidence and, at the same time, allow for a more sensuous and embodied understanding of cycles of life in Egyptian culture.

Keywords

Narrative; historical archaeology; Egypt; village life; mortuary data; life stages.

Sensuous stories

The notion of *biography* has become a popular and evocative genre, particularly in our sister discipline, anthropology. As Alfred Gell argued (1998: 11), anthropologists view relationships in a biographical context, as part of a biographical series entered into at different phases of the lifecycle. Similarly, the relationships archaeologists witness are real and biographically consequential ones in that they relate to the 'life project' of the individual. Anthropological theories, and by extension archaeological ones, are typically about social relationships. To quote Gell: 'The study of relationships over the life course (the relationships through which culture is acquired and reproduced) and the life-projects which agents seek to realise through their relations with others' (1998: 11) allows us to fulfil our intellectual task, that is to explain the context of social relations. The biography and the lifecycle appear inextricably linked, realized through the operationalizing of social relations. A great deal of our lives is taken up with telling stories (Carr 1986: 62), resulting in the coherence of a life story: 'the whole of life is always there, and concern with its wholeness is an underlying and recurring concern. Birth, childhood, youth, and all the intervening stages up to now (wherever "now" is) are always with each of us, unchanging and unfamiliar, yet always subject to discovery and reinterpretation' (1986: 96). I would argue that sensuous biographies, the lifecycle and individual identity are deeply imbricated, evidenced by the overlapping spheres of life – the private, public or civic, the family, the emotional and sexual brought to fruition in the unity of a single life (1986: 74, 79). In an Egyptian context we can apprehend these sensuous stories of life and the progression of the lifecycle as it was experienced by specific individuals (see Kus 1992, 1997). And, while various groups were excluded from official narratives in formal literary sources, be they children, women, slaves, non-elites or outcasts, texts from the village of Deir el Medina document a wider social range of people and their corresponding activities. Reading between the lines of these informal sources we might discover more about those very different perspectives on life. And the silences of the texts can also be counter-balanced or checked by the archaeological sources. To achieve these aims I hope to reinstate their experiences of life through employing cultural information, archaeological data and personal narratives dialectically. Through these thick descriptions of life, a more personalized and emotive dimension of living experience might be discerned.

Linked to the notions of biography and lifecycle is the central concept of time. The Egyptians used the solar year from the beginning of the historical period, while the month was divided into three ten-day periods. Days were divided into twenty-four hours, twelve for day and twelve for night. Hours were not divided, although there was a term for the moment, known as *at*. The ancient Egyptians had a concept of the lifetime, called *aha'u*, and in many instances measured it with the utmost care (Hornung 1992: 58). The optimum human life span was some 100 years plus ten or twenty extra years to attain ultimate earthly knowledge and wisdom. While this was the ideal, the corporeal realities of life were usually very different. Egyptian ideology may have stressed the wonders of the next life, yet the sentiments expressed in didactic texts among others are inflected with fear and dread at the realization of bodily death. Generally, literary wisdom texts tend to stress the importance of living a full life, a life of pleasure and material success. The identity of

each individual was accumulated through life and was used to determine the deceased's fate at the pivotal day of judgement. This was marked by the weighing of the heart ceremony: the just individual was allowed to proceed to the next life whereas the unjust was consigned to a second death and ultimate damnation. One's earthly identity and character were somatic entities or aspects of the individual which persisted after corporeal death and, as such, were part of a cyclical process.

Time, identity, and cultural context are the interlaced frames through which we might apprehend the lifecycle. And in Egypt it appears that the concept of the lifecycle is a more accurate template for life experience rather than the model of *rites de passage* with its specific European lineage and intellectual baggage. Moreover, I suggest that life stages were more marked for men, as opposed to women, who were socialized and sexualized at an early age with less variation through the progression of time than their male counterparts. Finally, there are 'alternative ways of being-in-the-world' (Kus 1998), and we should recognize the specificities of Egyptian experience, despite the threads of commonality which unite humanity.

Coming into the world

While already in the womb, the unborn child was considered a living being and as such required protection in the social realm (Feucht 1995: 94). The newborn was named at birth (Hornung 1992: 178), since without a name the individual could not exist. Mortuary evidence also reinforces that children were perceived as social beings who were also multiply constituted, just as adults were. But we know little of the moment of birth itself and representation of such a liminal event was taboo in Egyptian culture (Plate 1). One likely scenario is that when birth was imminent 'the expectant mother was isolated from the rest of the household, or at least its adult males . . . to the pavilion in which the birth [wa]s taking place. Painted ostraca show women suckling children in an airy pavilion whose columns are wreathed with columbine or bryony' (Pinch 1994: 126–7). If these birth arbours were material, rather than symbolic, they might have been specially constructed outdoor buildings. Other scholars have suggested that they were constructed on roof-tops (Loose 1992: 23). To date, no archaeological examples from either context have been discovered. Iconographic sources from settlement contexts depict women suckling infants while seated on stools or reclining on beds postnatally (Fig. 1). At Deir el Medina it is likely that births took place in the first room of the houses, which have been preserved with fixtures and wall paintings in situ (Meskell 1998a: 219). These rooms were loaded with iconographic images relating to the lives of mature women, specifically sexuality and birth. Parallel examples have similarly been noted at the New Kingdom workers' village at Amarna (Kemp 1979), suggesting this was not an isolated instance. At least six Deir el Medina houses (NE10, 12, 13; SE9; SW6; C5) had preserved images of the deity Bes who was a potent force in women's lives, primarily in regard to sexuality and protection during childbirth. In house SE1 there is a painting of a woman breastfeeding in the first room, other paintings show scenes of grooming. Such imagery is not present throughout the rest of the domestic space at Deir el Medina.



Plate 1 An unguent container in the form of a woman holding a horn-shaped ointment container and with her child strapped to her back. It is likely that the unguents in these vessels were used at childbirth. Vessel dated to the eighteenth Dynasty, c. 1400 BC, EA 24652. Courtesy of the British Museum.

Second month of Inundation, day 23. Those who were (with) the scribe Pashed working for the vizier: Ipuy, Nakhtemmut. Those who were <with> the chief workman Khay: Khamu, Sawadjyt; and Qaha was ill. Those who were <with> the chief workman Paneb: Kasa, his wife being in childbirth and he had three days off.¹

We do not know if there were particular social events surrounding birth and there is no corresponding documentation. While the idea of segregation may be closer to ethno-historic or anthropological accounts of birth in Egypt, the fact that the workman Kasa took time off work to be at home during the birth of his child challenges our preconceptions. Given the notion that births took place in the home, in the first room off the narrow Deir el Medina laneways, then our own notions of privacy need to be rethought. Considering women had many children during their lives, their houses were probably home to a large number of people: male and female, elite and servile, young and old (Meskell 1998a). Undoubtedly people at every stage of the lifecycle shared the same *domus*, and I use this term in the sense of the famous study of village life at Montaillou (Le Roy Ladurie 1980).



Figure 1 Drawing of an ostrakon from Deir el Medina by Bernard Bruyère. The ostrakon is now held in the British Museum; illustration from the Bruyère archive, courtesy of the IFAO, Cairo.

Year 9, fourth month of the season of Inundation, day 13: The day when the eight women came out [to the] place of women when they were menstruating. They got as far as the rear of the house which [...] the three guard posts.²

Another aspect of women's lifecycle, linking sociality and temporality, is obviously the menstrual cycle: the ancient term was *hsmn*. Drawing on the work of Wilfong (1999), we might suggest possible social practices which drew women to certain spaces and at regulated times. He gives detailed descriptions of how menstrual synchrony would have been operative at Deir el Medina and cites texts detailing the names of women menstruating

at the same time over most of the year. He also cites texts, like the day journals, that document how various men took days off work at such times. Given the recorded frequency, this was probably permitted only when there was serious disruption to the household. Wilfong suggests that the 'place of women' was a menstrual hut outside of the village, although the exact location is unknown. *Hsmn* could also take place in parts of the house in later times, and I have suggested (Meskell 1998a: 235–7) that we might have early evidence for this practice in several larger houses at Deir el Medina. However, if these groups of women left the village it obviously had a marked social impact on household relations and functioning. Linkage between time, space and social custom forms a fundamental nexus throughout the lifespan.

Women were responsible for the rearing of children, some with the assistance of female servants or slaves (Plate 2). At Deir el Medina, men – who were responsible for the construction of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, were away for many days at a time. This left women as dominant in the domestic sphere for extended periods. Time and space again conjoined to produce a very specific experience of domestic life. Archaeologically, women are invisible in textual or artefactual terms. Here we must rely on the documents relating to men's lives to illustrate the lifecycle of the house. But as the well-known literary teaching below states, it was a child's mother who did most for it during life and who, in turn, had to be looked after as she approached old age.

Double the provisions your mother gave you, support her as she supported you; she had many burdens in you, but she did not abandon them to me. You were born after your months, (but) she harnessed herself, still, her breast in your mouth for three years while



Plate 2 Middle Kingdom statuette of a woman breastfeeding a child, while being attended by another woman. From the Rogers Fund (1922), 22.2.35, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

*you flourished. Your excrement disgusted, (but she) was not disgusted, saying: 'What shall I do?!' She sent you to school, when you were taught to write, and she waited for you daily, with bread and beer in her house.*³

Although the villagers lived a relatively prosperous existence, the whole process of growing up was fraught with dangers, both explicable and mysterious. There is a considerable body of material culture in the form of amulets, apotropaic items, figurines and written spells to protect children at this liminal time (Pinch 1994). Ensuring the survival of their offspring was obviously of great importance to most parents, many resorting to magical practices to guarantee their safety. But the scores of infant burials at the base of the Eastern Necropolis attest to the difficulties of life (Fig. 2). The lowest part of the slope was reserved for very young children. This region was riddled with small pits, circular, square or rectangular, cut 40–90cm deep into the rock without any internal or external masonry (Bruyère 1937: 11). Here the French excavator Bernard Bruyère discovered infants, but also neonates, foetuses, placentas and organic residues among bloody cloths, and remains of viscera and the mummification process itself. Adolescents of both sexes were designated to the middle section of the hill and adults to the upper portion, with women being more numerous than men. This last point is not surprising given the limited burial options for women: they did not generally have the independent means to construct their own, expensive tombs like those of the Western Necropolis. Thus, the cemetery was spatially stratified along age-determined lines, and this was probably linked to marital status as well.

These burials demonstrate that children of all ages were given meaningful burials, rather than simply being disposed of expeditiously. Yet anthropologists, demographers and sociologists have often been eager to suggest that many ancient cultures did not consider the child a person, or that they did not achieve personhood till a particular age. The mortuary evidence at Deir el Medina challenges such a view. Excavation revealed various modes of burial for very young children: in ceramic amphorae, baskets, boxes and coffins (Bruyère 1937; Meskell 1994). Associated grave goods like beer or ceramics do not belong to the world of the child but to a fully developed adult world and, as such, were symbolic of adult responses to provisions for the afterlife. Moreover, since the placenta, a type of twin self and a powerful spiritual force (Pinch 1994: 130), was buried, this lends weight to the argument that children were already perceived as embodied individuals. Perhaps the physical body itself was all that was necessary to constitute a person whether it survived birth or not. In most cases, a sharp flint, probably used in the delivery operation, accompanies the burial (Bruyère 1937: 12). We know that items such as these which had such close contact with the body of the individual were ritually important items and, as such, were integral to the burial.

The bodies of children were also placed in baskets of various types (e.g. 1373, 1374, 1378, 1383, 1385, DX1, DX2, DX4), and usually contained the child wrapped in a piece of linen and a small number of funerary goods such as plates of food (Bruyère 1937: 12–13). These assemblages were more akin to those of standard adult burials, even though often on a smaller scale, but they did not constitute a specific funerary vision of 'childhood' in any Western sense. The same could be said of box burials (e.g. 1384, 1390). These boxes were either reused domestic objects or specifically created for burial.

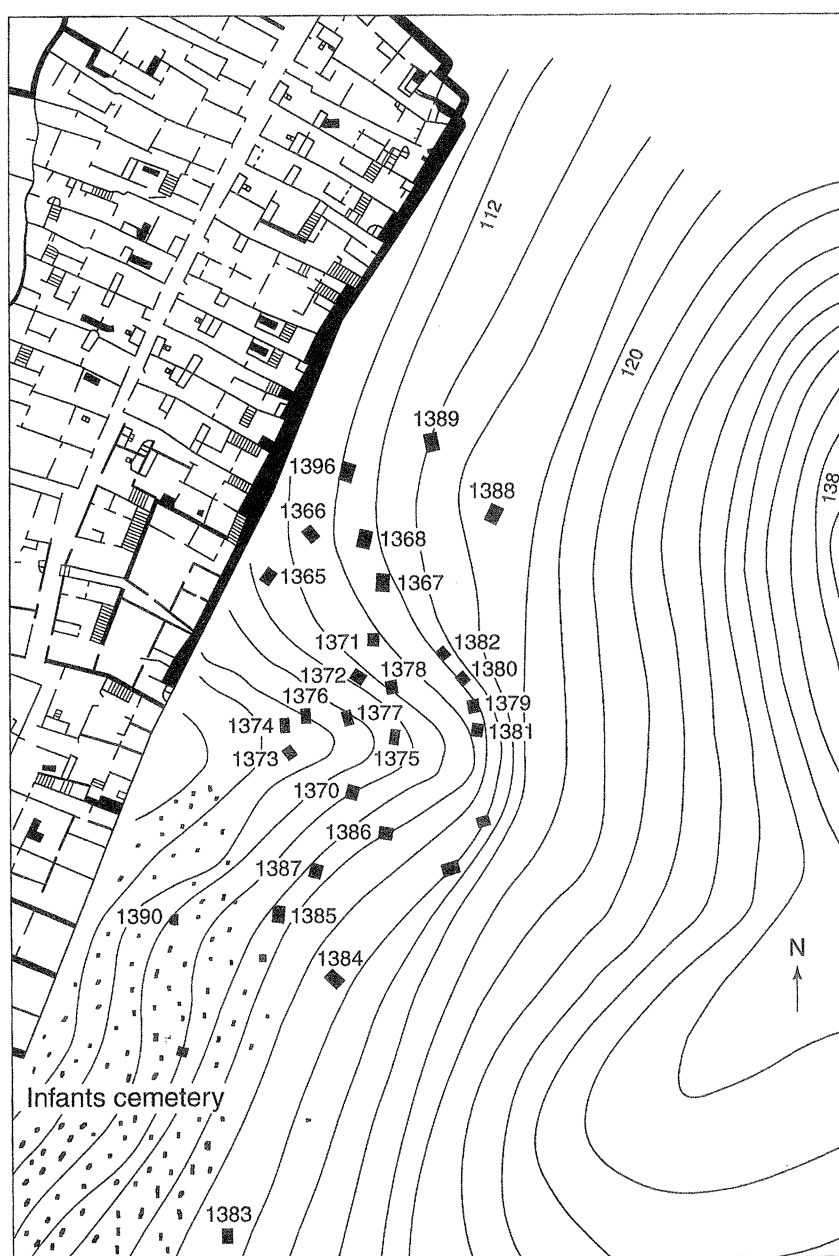


Figure 2 Plan of the Eastern Necropolis, after Bruyère 1937. Numbered tombs with adult burials are marked with a circle, adolescents with a triangle and children with a square. The lower portion of the cemetery was for infants and neonates.

Funerary goods and small items of jewellery accompanied these children to the next life. In accordance with the iconographic representation of children, several of the bodies show that both male and female children had their heads shaved, some with the traditional sidelock of hair. Coffins were also used for small children and adolescents

alike, some coarsely hewn from a tree trunk, others in anthropoid form. While all construction techniques evidenced here were rough, some coffins have a coat of lime wash, others have yellow painted figures and inscriptions which were then varnished. Three children were found together in tomb 1372 surrounded by numerous tomb goods, two children in anthropoid coffins and one in a casket coffin (Bruyère 1937: 161–4). The fact that children were often buried on their own connotes that they were considered individuals and as such warranted their own tomb, quite a common practice in the eighteenth Dynasty. If the cemetery operates a mirroring effect, then this suggests a spectrum, a cycle of life, not necessarily marked by abrupt changes. There was no separate cemetery for children, as could easily have been the case.

*Qenhirkhopshef addresses the woman Inerwau: What means your failing to go to the diviner on account of the two infants who died while in your charge? Inquire of the woman diviner about the death of the two infants, whether it be their fate or destiny.*⁴

We know little of the ceremonies which marked the passing from adolescence to adulthood – if such events were part of the Egyptian repertoire. In adolescence, the shaving of children's heads appears to have ceased. However, the traditional ideas of male and female circumcision have recently been challenged (see Robins 1994; Meskell and Montserrat forthcoming). Scenes of male circumcision, like those in the Old Kingdom tomb of Ankhmahor, may actually relate to the initiation of priests rather than ordinary people. And we cannot rely on the writings of Herodotus on male and female circumcision, since he wrote about Egyptian life in a genre of the world-turned-upside-down. There is no physical evidence for such practices in the Eastern Necropolis, and in one instance the excavator specifically noted that in tomb 1382 the perfectly preserved body of a woman called Nubiyity showed her genitalia to be intact (Bruyère 1937: 188). The old idea of 'pharaonic circumcision' probably has little relation to the practices of ancient Egyptians and it is our own preoccupation with *rites de passage* which have coloured our interpretations. In a society that had no public marriage ceremony it might also be possible that the transition to adulthood may have been a gradual progression that started much earlier than puberty itself. Anthony Giddens suggests that:

[t]ransitions in individuals' lives have always demanded psychic reorganisation, something which was often ritualised in traditional cultures in the shape of rites de passage. But in such cultures, where things stayed more or less the same from generation to generation on the level of collectivity, the changed identity was clearly staked out – as when an individual moved from adolescence into adulthood. In the settings of modernity, by contrast, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change.

(Giddens 1991: 33)

Such a premodern:modern dichotomy, permeated with ethnocentric claims, fails to accord with Egyptian experience of the lifecycle. Similarly, we have attributed to our own culture an emotional complexity and depth of feeling which is somehow distinctive, whereas the ancient data challenge our temporal chauvinism, forcefully highlighting the sensitive and manifold nature of ancient relationships.

Love and other troubles

*I kiss her, her lips parted, I am exhilarated without beer. Oh, how the gap has been bridged! . . . Would that I were her Nubian slave girl, who is her companion in secret! She would bring her (a bowl of) mandragoras [. . .] and it would be in her hand while she was smelling it. In other words, she would grant me the complexion of her whole body!*⁵

Our vignettes of romantic love and emotional maturity in ancient Egypt stem predominantly from the famous love songs of the New Kingdom. These evocative writings demonstrate that ideal love between partners was supposed to be passionate, emotional and sexual. Yet these canonical texts present a unitary picture of harmonious life that tends to flatten out diversity and difference. From private documents it appears that many unions appear to have been based upon real feelings of love, rather than upon social or economic prerogatives. Parents might have orchestrated some marriages, however most documentary evidence points to consensual arrangements between men and women. Since there was no formal marriage ceremony, this suggests that ‘marriage’ was a private rather than public event with the weight of religious and state pressure. Marriage is generally considered a formative ritual, changing life status, with concomitant social reorganization. There were Egyptian phrases that we have interpreted as analogous to this arrangement: ‘bringing a bundle’, ‘to live with’, ‘to found a house’. In terms of ‘bringing a bundle’ this might refer to the provision of bridewealth (Toivari 1998: 1158). These acts of reciprocity also had significant import when things went wrong. A marriage could be dissolved in a manner similar to its instigation. And there are numerous instances of marital problems, adultery and divorce. Both men and women could instigate a divorce, but the ratio betrays a salient disparity – 12:3 in favour of men divorcing or threatening to divorce women at Deir el Medina (Toivari 1998: 1162). In New Kingdom Egypt one could argue that women had a certain amount of social freedom, yet this did not equate to real equality in terms of social standing or economic independence.

*Year 2, third month of summer, day 24, of pharaoh Sethnakhte, life, prosperity, health: (day) Hesysunebef divorced the lady Hel. I spent 3 years giving to her an oi-pe of emmer every single month, makings 9 sacks. And she gave me a sash, saying, ‘Offer it at the river-bank (the marketplace); it will be bought from me for an oi-pe of emmer.’ I offered it, but people rejected it, saying, ‘It is bad!’ And I told her exactly that, saying, ‘It has been rejected’.*⁶

We know much of the lives of these two individuals, as we do for many for the villagers. Hesysunebef began his life as a slave and was later adopted by his master to become a member of the team of workmen. He rose to the important rank of deputy. Devoted to his adoptive parents, he named his children after them and dedicated a stela to his father (McDowell 1999: 50), a considerable financial outlay. His wife Hel formerly lived with the workman Pendua, but was unfaithful to both these men with the same man, the notorious chief workman Paneb. As Andrea McDowell suggests, this infidelity may have prompted the divorce, especially since Paneb had threatened to kill Hesysunebef’s father.

Some intense social relationships and ruptures were enacted rather publicly in the village and were subsequently recorded for posterity. Yet, private life was ideally located in the preserve of the house. There is a passionate liaison between the body and the house: the remembering body is housed, and the body houses (Game 1995: 202). Following Bachelard, one might say that an entire past comes to dwell in a house. The house, like the body, is lived. Individual houses at Deir el Medina have many stories to tell. I have argued that the houses encompass a series of social spaces which offer substantive information about sex, relationships and status. As outlined, the first room was constructed around the experience of mature, elite females and their sexual and procreative lives (Meskell 1998a). The second room, or divan room, was very much a male preserve with very different iconography, fixtures and archaeological finds. It was a room which celebrated the elite males of the household and their deceased ancestors who could be powerful allies in times of need. It is likely that men entertained other high-status individuals of the village in this room, seated on their raised divans and surrounded by the symbols of their ritual and social lives (Meskell 1998a: 229–33). Rooms towards the rear of the house were relatively small and undecorated, reserved for the storage and preparation of food and probably the domain of the female servants or slaves who were provided by the state (Meskell 1997). Such women held servile status, under the control of both elite men and women of the house.

Really, it was not in order that you might become blind to your wife that I took you aside and said, 'You should see the things that you've done [on behalf of (?)] your wife.' You rebuffed me only to become deaf to this crime. . . . I will make you aware of those adulterous acts that your [wife] has committed at your expense.

(Response to the preceding): But she isn't my wife! Were she my wife, she would cease uttering her words (charges?) and get out leaving the door open.⁷

The house should not necessarily be conflated with a home. The texts give an impression that the house was a private domain and that there was a certain sanctity to this space. The idea that a woman might depart the house leaving the door open might suggest a symbolic link between the specific act and the opening up of the household to public view. It may also stress her hasty departure. Some sixty-eight houses were crowded into an enclosed compound at Deir el Medina, arranged in house blocks sharing communal walls and narrow laneways. Steps leading to the roof, located in the rear of the house, facilitated movement across contiguous levels of roofing and allowed for sleeping or other

Table 1 General patterns of domestic space at Deir el Medina

<i>Room 1</i>	⇒	<i>Room 2</i>	⇒	<i>Other rooms</i>
Ritual fixtures		Ritual fixtures		Ovens, cooking area
Cultic objects		Cultic objects		No cultic objects
Female imagery	⇒	Male imagery	⇒	No imagery
Birthing imagery		Ancestor busts		Undecorated
Lit clos		Divan		Processing implements
Female space	⇒	Male space	⇒	Servile space

activities to be undertaken. The close proximity of villagers and the interrelatedness of so many families inevitably led to many trysts and tensions. Life in the village was peppered by social and anti-social events: festivals, robberies, strikes, assaults, infidelities, adoptions and murders.

Tales of adult life

At the outset I suggested that, for young women, the progression of life might not have been as marked as it was for their male counterparts. Girls participated in domestic life from an early age, and were depicted in both iconography and material culture as sexual beings from an early age onwards. There is a whole corpus of artefacts representing adolescent girls, some still having the shaved head of childhood, in a nude or semi-nude state replete with the erotic signifiers of lotus flowers, hip girdles, ducks and musical instruments. Very young women were sexualized and images of them appeared on toiletry objects, spoons, mirrors, bowls, combs, etc. (Robins 1996). All such imagery was loaded with obvious sexual overtones to an Egyptian viewer. The Western perception of a non-sexualized childhood, a sanctified category separate from the overtones of adult life, does not appear to have been operative in New Kingdom culture. The discursive creation of 'childhood' as a separate, desexualized sphere is a relatively recent construction (Foucault 1978: 47; Foucault in Kritzman 1988: 113). I would therefore suggest that the female life-cycle was less marked than one might expect and that their sexual and social roles began quite early in life. Young men may have experienced more marked experiences, moving from the domestic sphere of their mothers to the world of work, specifically the prestigious work of preparing pharaoh's tomb. It also seems likely that girls were much younger at the point of 'marriage' than boys, creating different social expectations of the sexes and their life trajectories.

For an unusually literate village like Deir el Medina, with thousands of personal texts, it is surprising that there is no documentation about the reasons for partner choice, the dates of these events or related celebrations. Such processes are also rendered invisible in the archaeological record. Young couples may have founded a house through the bonds of love, but this did not mean that they could always live alone without the attachments of family. At Deir el Medina it was likely that the new couple would have to live in a parent's house, for reasons of tradition, expense or limited housing (Toivari 1998: 1158). Evidence from Roman Egypt also suggests that married children resided with their parents and the conjugal family was often the result of attrition or death (Bagnall and Frier 1994: 61). Adult life was fraught with the tensions that these domestic scenarios presented in the course of everyday life. The additional accommodation and provisioning of extended family members undoubtedly exacerbated already strained situations.

From Takhentyshepse to her sister Iye . . . I shall send you barley, and you shall have it ground for me and add emmer to it. And you shall make me bread with it, for I have been quarrelling with Merymaat (my husband). 'I will divorce you' he keeps saying when he quarrels with me on account of my mother in questioning the amount of barley required

*for bread. 'Now your mother does nothing for you,' he keeps telling me and says, 'Although you have brothers and sisters, they don't take care of you, he keeps telling me in arguing with me daily.'*⁸

There are numerous texts recording the absolute breakdown of marital relations, that similarly reflect that these ruptures were largely to the detriment of women. Economically and socially, the exclusion of woman from their familial home meant a life of insecurity and poverty. Divorce sealed their fate and, unless their own children provided for them or they re-married, the rest of their lives was guaranteed to be difficult. This was especially true in terms of their burial. For the most part women were included in the tombs of their husbands, examples being Kha and Merit or Sennefer and Nefertiry (Meskell 1998b). But there were examples of women buried on their own, or with other women, in the Eastern Necropolis who might represent single or divorced women. These burials were located towards the peak of the necropolis in the region assigned to adults. If fortunate, these women may have been able to prepare for their own funerary arrangements or, alternatively, relied on their children, mainly sons, for such preparations. In tomb 1371 the poorly preserved body of the woman Nub is buried in an anthropoid coffin, surrounded by her worldly possessions: bed, furniture, mirror, toiletries, ceramics and food (Bruyère 1937: 158–61). Another woman was buried alone in tomb 1380 and on her anthropoid coffin was inscribed the canonical formula *hmt n . . .* or wife of . . . but unfortunately no male name is given. The excavator interpreted this as a mark of her status as a concubine. She too was surrounded by the material culture of death: mirror, baskets, ceramics, makeup, toiletries and jewellery (1937: 175). Lastly, there was the unorthodox interment of two women buried together in tomb 1388. These women appear to be of similar age and had approximately the same type of burial equipment with corresponding cost (Meskell 1999). Despite the excavator's suggestion, there was no male interred with them and the tomb was found basically intact. Individual women, buried alone and perhaps living outside the parameters of family life, probably represent a larger sector of the community than previously realized. Such circumstances were part of many women's lives, at various stages of their lives. The fluidity of the marriage union meant that its dissolution was equally unconstrained, resulting in a number of individuals, at various stages of their lives, who found themselves outside the social order.

From the workman Khnum-mose to his colleague Ruty:

*My son spent two years carrying his water. A wall fell down in his storehouse, and I built it up; and I used 5 donkey-loads of water for it, too. I plastered 3 places on top of his house, and also the stairs of his tomb. His wife spent 40 days dwelling with me in my house, and I provided for her, giving her 1 sack of emmer and 10 loaves. And he threw her out again, and she spent 20 days in the house of Menna, while I supplied 3 oipe of emmer, 1 inet-garment (?), 1 khet-measure of sety-fruit.*⁹

Perpetuating the cycle, perpetuating the family, were central concerns of Egyptian adult life. The continuity of the lineage was probably linked with the notion of the networked self. The Egyptian person was perceived as being connected to family members in an extended network of connections. The individual came from the body of the parent, and this was often expressed as such in literal terms (Pinch 1993: 126). This obviously impacts

upon themes of relatedness and kinship. The pressures to create a family were real and tangible. Those who were infertile consulted village seers for help, visited shrines to the goddess Hathor, adopted other children or purchased magical intervention or objects of material culture which supposedly possessed an efficacious agency of their own. Many of these objects took the form of female statuettes, nude and sexualized, with the associations of erotic iconography. They often accompanied the deceased into the next life, attested in the tombs of Setau (1352) and Sennefer (1159A) at Deir el Medina (Meskell 1998b: 367–8).

Towards the next life

In the later years of the lifecycle it was customary for children to look after their parents. Older workmen at the site might have been provisioned by the state, but they still needed support from their families. One text suggests that older workmen resigned so that their sons could assume their positions (McDowell 1999). In return the son had to regularly provide rations for his father in his retirement, and, in the case of Weskhethnemtet, he gave his father over half his own monthly salary. Moving into old age many people felt financially insecure, particularly single people, widows and unmarried individuals. It was the duty of family members to provide for them, but it was a duty that could also easily be neglected. Recalcitrant children could not be forced to repay the debt to their parents, but legal action could prevent them from inheriting at the point of death. The woman Naunakhte had eight children, but those who failed to support her in life were punished in her will.

This day, the lady Naunakhte made a record of her property before the following court: the chief workman Nakhtemmut, the chief workman Inherkhau. . . . She said: As for me, I am a free woman of the land of Pharaoh. I raised these 8 servants of yours, and I outfitted them with everything that is usual for people of their character. Now look, I have become old, and look, they do not care for me. As for those who put their hands in my hand, to them I will give my property; (but) as for those who gave me nothing, to them I will not give of my property.¹⁰

We often presume that in ancient societies people lived fairly short lives, never reaching what we would consider as old age. However, burial data from the Eastern Necropolis reveal several elderly men and women. The tomb iconography from the site also illustrates elderly individuals with white hair, which replicates the bodies found in various tombs. In tombs 1370, 1379 and 1389 there were elderly men and, in 1379, an elderly woman as well. Representations of the elderly break with the traditional portrayals of the human body as youthful, beautiful and perfect. These images predominantly occur in limited contexts such as private tombs. In old age, men could be shown stooping, with rolls of fat, with white hair or balding. But what was acceptable for men did not *ipso facto* extend to women and it was not customary for women to be portrayed as old and unattractive. In tomb 3 (Plate 3), belonging to Pashedu in the Western Necropolis at Deir el Medina there are various depictions of his aged relatives: his father is shown with completely white hair, his mother with grey, his father-in-law with black hair streaked with



Plate 3 The tomb of Pashedu, TT3 Deir el Medina, showing elderly relatives. Courtesy of J-F. Gout and the IFAO, Cairo.

grey and his mother-in-law completely grey (Janssen and Janssen 1996: 23). Despite these indications, the faces and bodies of these individuals remained youthful. In the nineteenth Dynasty tomb of Ipy (217) the owner is shown with dark hair except for the scene where he is deceased and libating before the gods. At that point he is depicted with grey hair, at the point of exiting this world to the next.

The West is yours, ready for you. All praised-ones are hidden within it; wrongdoers will not enter it, nor any guilty persons. The scribe Butehamun has moored there after an old age, his body sound and intact. Made by the scribe of the Necropolis Ankhefenamen.¹¹

Egyptian culture had no sense of gerontocracy, unlike other societies who placed great importance on the wisdom and teachings of the elderly. Not surprisingly, the end of the cycle brought with it great pains and fears which were duly recorded in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*: 'old age descended; woe is come and weakness is renewing itself; the heart passes the night in pain, every day; the eyes are shrunk, the ears made deaf; strength now

perishes' (Parkinson 1997: 250). Since Egyptian culture stressed the preservation and revivification of the body at the point of death, it must have been frightening to witness and experience corporeal decay firsthand. It is a popular misconception that Egyptian society, replete with a belief system comprised of everlasting bodies and the afterlife, was somehow comfortable with the process of ageing and life's end. Death was depicted as an enemy, as were the physical signs that heralded its coming. Even in the afterlife, the cycle continued: the *ka*, the individual's twin self or vital force lived on, as did other components of the person's individuality, personality identity and moral dimensions. This suggests that Carr's (1986) idea of the continuity of the life project, ultimately the personal biography, was also critical to Egyptian ideology and underscored both living and funerary contexts. The unity of life created a biography which accompanied the individual to the next world, demonstrating that cycles of life and death were deeply intertwined.

Summing up

The concept of the lifecycle is particularly appropriate to Egyptian culture (Meskell and Montserrat forthcoming), and certainly fitting with their living experiences and religious ideologies. And I would argue that this challenges the premodern:modern dichotomies that characterize the influential work of Anthony Giddens. The whole notion of rites of passage, theorized by Van Gennep, was influenced by work of his friend Jéquier, an Egyptian archaeologist (1868–1946). His notions of death and the afterlife as a three-fold phenomenon were derivative of the Egyptian phenomenon (Dominic Montserrat: pers. comm.), and do not sit easily with the evidence for living communities like that of Deir el Medina. It was a recent concept formulated in Europe and not, by default, relevant to all cross-cultural contexts. I have argued that the lifecycle coheres more closely with the Egyptian evidence and that the cycle itself was open to sexed differences. The experiences of adolescence and ageing were significantly different for males and females, with consequent effects in social relations, whether it be earlier sexualization of girls, more marked male maturation or the surfeit of women who were divorced or widowed. Within an Egyptian context, rich in archaeological and textual data, these patterns can be apprehended at an individual level, in the form of personal biographies and narratives. I have utilized these sources dialectically, placing an emphasis on *agency*, *intention*, *causation*, *result* and *transformation* in the social realm (Gell 1998: 6). The lifecycle might be an observable socio-cultural phenomenon, but it also operated at a micro-level as it was experienced in individual lives, and there could be dissonances between the levels. It is through the sensuous stories of Egyptian life, cumulative throughout the course of life's trajectory, that archaeologists can move closer to interpreting the real cultural differences which surround life experience in antiquity.

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Notes

- 1 Translation from McDowell (1999).
- 2 Taken from ostrakon Oriental Institute Museum 13512, excavated at Medinet Habu, although probably deriving from Deir el Medina; translation from Wilfong (1999).
- 3 From *The Maxims of Any* (7, 17–18, 1); translation from McDowell (1999: 38).
- 4 O. Letellier, dated to the second half of the nineteenth Dynasty; translation from Wente (1990: 141).
- 5 Excerpts taken from the Cairo Love Songs, found at Deir el Medina; translation from McDowell (1999: 154).
- 6 Translated by McDowell (1999: 50).
- 7 O. DM 439 dated to the twentieth Dynasty; translation from Wente (1990: 148).
- 8 O. Prague 1826 dated to the nineteenth Dynasty; translation from Wente (1990: 147–8).
- 9 Translated by McDowell (1999).
- 10 *The Will of Naunakhte*, translation from McDowell (1999).
- 11 Translation from McDowell (1999).

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