
Intimate Archaeologies: The Case of Kha and Merit

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Intimate archaeologies: the case of Kha and Merit

Lynn Meskell

Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities of reading life histories from Egyptian material culture in mortuary contexts. The burials of partners, such as Kha and Merit, clearly illustrate that social inequality was operative between husbands and wives at Deir el Medina. It demonstrates the social negotiations conducted by family members and the potential social tensions faced at the moments of death and burial. This analysis seeks to recentre individual relationships in antiquity and reinstate the central issues of human intention and emotion.

Keywords

Egypt; Deir el Medina; individuals; social relations; partnerships; mortuary archaeology.

Introduction

Accessing individuals in the past is an explicit aspect of a postprocessual archaeology. Related fields such as anthropology, sociology and feminist theory have similarly demonstrated considerable interest in the construction of individuals, persons and bodies in a host of cultural contexts. In our discipline, this desire for an archaeology of individuals has been much touted (see Johnson 1989). Although there have been cogent illustrative case studies, archaeology still tends to ignore the relationship of the individual to society in favour of treating individuals simply as micro versions of larger social entities. This is achieved by extrapolating from the supposedly representative sample of *society* to the assumption that subjects are the normative constituents which aggregate to make the whole (Meskell 1996: 10). The emphasis on collective structures and categories has left the individual sadly under-theorized. Anthropology has now shown that the pursuit of representativeness is often a fictional search. According to Cohen (1994:7):

[i]n the past, our concern with groups and categories, that is, with the social bases of social relations, has largely ignored the dimensions of the self and self-consciousness,

and may therefore be regarded as dealing with bogus entities . . . as fictitious ciphers of the anthropologist's theoretical invention.

At the Egyptian New Kingdom site of Deir el Medina (c.1500–1100 BC) this situation can be remedied by closer attention to the tomb data, especially those from secure contexts (Fig. 1). Deir el Medina (Plate 1) was founded to house the workmen who constructed the royal tombs, along with their families, in close proximity to the Valley of the Kings. There are over 350 tombs surrounding the village dating from New Kingdom times to the Christian period. For the purposes of this paper only tomb data from the Eighteenth Dynasty will be discussed. The mortuary evidence suggests that individual resolutions or negotiations surrounding factors of age, sex, class, marital status, etc., can be examined in reality, rather than just heuristically. The tomb of Kha and Merit is a case in point. Burial data are of a specific form and may not always directly correlate to life experiences, but, given the particular nature of Egyptian mortuary practice, some measure of overlap with the living sphere can be inferred – especially in the Eighteenth Dynasty. During this period the community at Deir el Medina, in keeping with general cultural trends, constituted their tomb goods around the living world using items from everyday life. Thus tomb goods might inform our knowledge on individual life experience and, more specifically, the complex web of social negotiations between men, women and children at specific socio-economic levels.



Plate 1 The archaeological remains of Deir el Medina. Photo by the author.

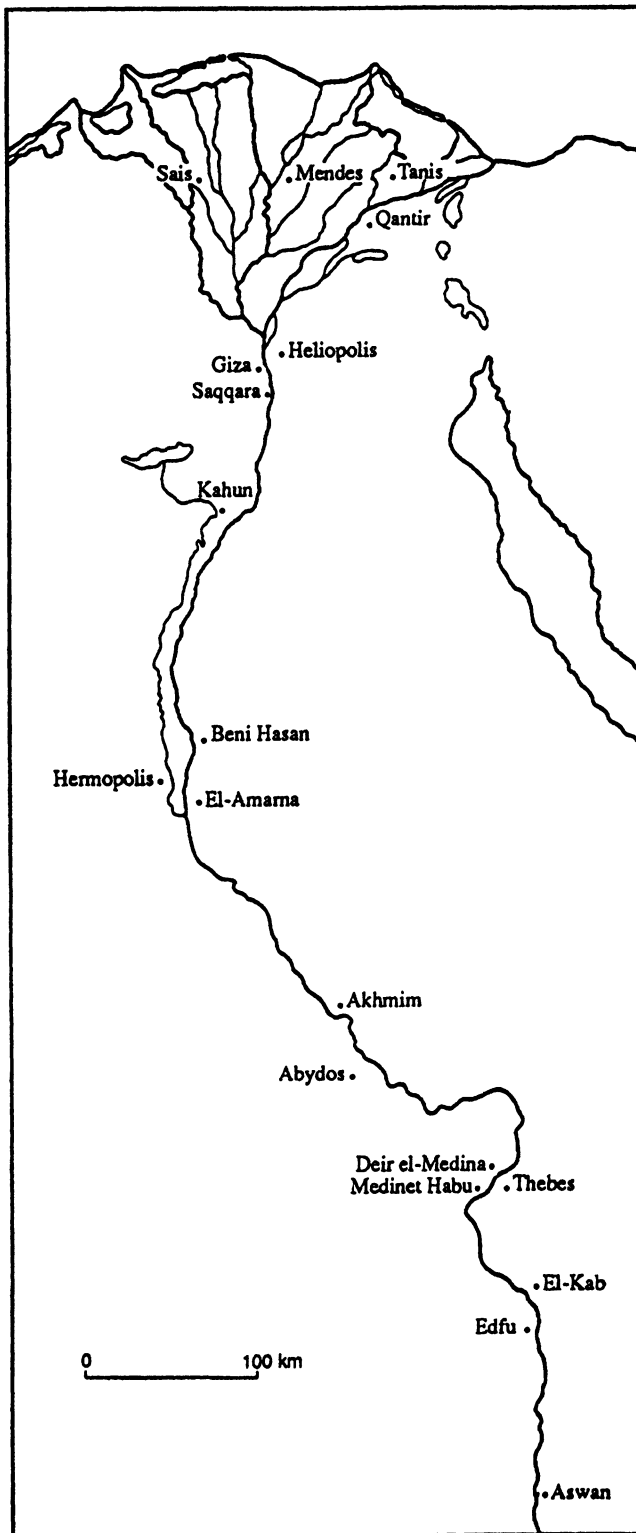


Figure 1 Map of Egypt, showing the location of Deir el Medina.

Using the rich suite of artefacts present in Deir el Medina tombs, it is possible to reconstruct individual life histories and to make social inferences based on variation. There are straightforward indices of variation, neatly summarized by Wason (1994: 93–4): differences in artefact type, e.g., sculptor's tool, jewellery, female figurine; differences in quality of workmanship, e.g., coffin manufacture, statuary, decorated boxes; differences in raw materials, e.g., stone vessels versus imitations, gold versus faience; differences in source material, e.g., foreign vessels, imported stone; differences based on inclusion of utilitarian or non-utilitarian goods, e.g., objects from the living world versus those belonging to the mortuary sphere. Each of these taxonomic differences is present with the tomb data from Deir el Medina and potentially offers insight into individual experience and life histories. As Hodder rightly asserts, 'to look at objects by themselves is not really archaeology' (Hodder 1991: 4); rather it is the extrapolation from material culture to social meanings which should be our primary concern. Added to this we have at our disposal textual data and cultural information which can add another layering of social meaning to these ancient lives.

Material culture and life histories

Death and burial were pivotal events in the lives of the Egyptians, and were considered transitional events in the larger scheme of things. However, this did not deter people from expressing fears and grief over its acknowledgement, as in the ancient literary text, *Dialogue of a Man with his Soul*: 'If you think of burial, it is agony, it is the bringing of tears through making a man miserable, it is taking a man from his house, being cast upon the high ground. You shall not come up again to see suns' (Parkinson 1991: 132). Inbuilt within Egyptian culture was the facility to prepare for one's own death and those of the immediate family. It would seem that at Deir el Medina, in the Eighteenth Dynasty, people were aware and vigilant of this highly personal task. The villagers prepared for their own burials by contracting tombs to be built and coffins and statuary to be made. We possess documents recording these transactions at Deir el Medina. Tomb assemblages were highly variable at this time, reflecting individual life experiences and personal choices, rather than standard responses to death and the afterlife. Obviously the deceased were not directly responsible for the moment of burial, and we know from the texts that family members, particularly sons, were responsible for the interment process and funeral event itself. Sons (and/or daughters) were prepared during life for the deaths of their parents and instructed as to their wishes. Individual choices were made concerning bodily treatments, possessions to be included, favourite items and foodstuffs, funeral arrangements, etc. Much of this would have been discussed during life, and negotiations made between relations as to what should be interred or, alternatively, inherited. Tensions must have periodically arisen and jealousies presumably flared, when goods were divided between living and dead individuals. This may have been regulated by parents who inscribed their goods, literally marking them as individualized objects which would accompany them into the afterlife, deterring greedy or forgetful offspring (McDowell pers. comm.). A range of highly individual choices can be seen in the tomb assemblages at Deir el Medina.

In the case of Kha and Merit (discussed below) we see reflections of individual life histories and choices mediated by direct family members such as their sons, Nakht and Userhat, at the moment of burial. Those responsible for burial must have had considerable impact upon the assemblage itself, whether burial decisions were made by a remaining spouse or by their offspring. Unfortunately little of this information remains. However, we do know from textual information at the site, such as the famous *Will of Naunakhte* (Černý 1945), that children could be disinherited or given smaller shares of property if they failed to look after their parents. If inheritance disputes could not be settled amicably, they could be taken to the oracle of Amenhotep I in the village for resolution (McDowell 1998). Part of the concern in Egyptian society was that provisions were maintained for the individual after death, not merely in old age. The well-known Egyptian adage was 'Give property to the one who buries.' Naunakhte's will implies that favourite children were singled out and no doubt Naunakhte's favoured son, Kenherkhopshef, would inevitably be responsible for his mother's burial and the maintenance of her mortuary cult. In sum, social negotiations surrounding death and burial relied on familial responsibilities and agreements and, as in our own society, the family is the primordial source and locus of such trust (Miszta 1996: 157).

The richness of the material data at Deir el Medina allows social analysis at this level. In a recent study (Meskell 1977b) two approaches to the archaeological data of the village have been adopted to illustrate the potential for an archaeology of individuals. First, specific artefacts can be targeted which express social meaning and negotiations, whether it be the desire for magical intervention or personal troubles revolving around fertility and children. Second, contextual analyses of specific tombs and individual burials might provide a social profile for those individuals and the social relations reflected in the mortuary sphere – the burials of Kha and Merit provide the case study.

An example of the first approach entails working from a more general archaeological level. The data collected suggest that there are certain groups of artefacts or artefact types which allow insight into daily practices and individual beliefs: items of magic, work-related objects, leisure items, toiletry articles, etc. (Plate 2). These artefacts reflect the unique personal world of the individual to a greater degree than perhaps mundane ceramics, linen or furniture, although these too certainly have their individualistic traits. If one examines magical or ritual items within the tomb assemblages, there are some highly idiosyncratic items, which often defy explanation, as well as some which may be more informative on a social level. For example, in the Eighteenth Dynasty Eastern Necropolis tomb (1370) of the woman Maya and her unnamed male companion there was an array of unusual finds: gazelle dung in a basket, a small wood and ivory casket containing small pink and green stones, scented earth kept in a linen sachet made into a bag and tied twice, and shells kept in a basket, all of which may represent magical constituents. The knotting of string for such a bag was very important as it literally *bound* the magical forces together. In the same tomb there were three ceramic miniature coffins made especially for winged insects. These coffins were surrounded by a double necklace of blue and white beads. Presumably, this couple engaged in a variety of obscure magical practices, for protection or wish fulfilment, and perhaps Maya was one of the 'seers' or wise women of the village (see Baines 1991: 171). A Nineteenth Dynasty letter from the site written by Kenherkhopshef to the woman, Inerwau, asks 'What means your failing to go to the woman diviner on account of the two



Plate 2 Tomb finds from Deir el Medina. Courtesy of the IFAO.

infants who died while in your charge? Inquire of the woman diviner . . . whether it was their fate or their destiny' (Wente 1990: 141). We also know that dung was often used in magical spells (Pinch 1994: 128, 134), whilst shells had potent magico-sexual connotations since they often resembled female genitalia and could be amuletic as well (Pinch 1994: 107). In tomb 8 the woman Merit wears a girdle of gold cowrie shells around her hips, presumably acting as both jewellery and as amuletic protection for the afterlife (see below). Pebbles could also be amuletic, especially if they were suggestive in shape, and they are found in several Deir el Medina tombs. The insects are more difficult to interpret. However, many animals were used in magical practice and the fact that they were in coffins suggests they had some ritual significance. Thus, specific items of material culture can reflect individual histories, social tensions and personal problems – items of magic or ritual being particularly telling examples.

In the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of the man, Setau (tomb 1352), a number of items concerning fertility magic are also present. The tomb contained his body, that of a woman – presumably his wife, a young female and a small boy. In the vault the excavator found several bed models, a reclining ceramic female figure and a painted statuette of a female nursing a child, all of which have magical associations. Such figures were placed in or in the vicinity of the tombs. Female figures served as fertility or sexual charms, offering a successful sex-life in the hereafter and the birth of healthy children. They were intended to ensure a successful resurrection of the deceased by reanimating him/her in the tomb (Pinch 1994: 97, 100, 153). Even the poorest individuals attempted to buy such magic for purposes of fertility, and several of the villagers of Deir el Medina wrote about their childlessness and invoked magic to remedy the situation (Pinch 1994: 132). The fact that Setau is buried with two quite young children might suggest an avid concern with the next generation, and with ongoing fertility in this life and the next. Thus, he or his wife may have either made

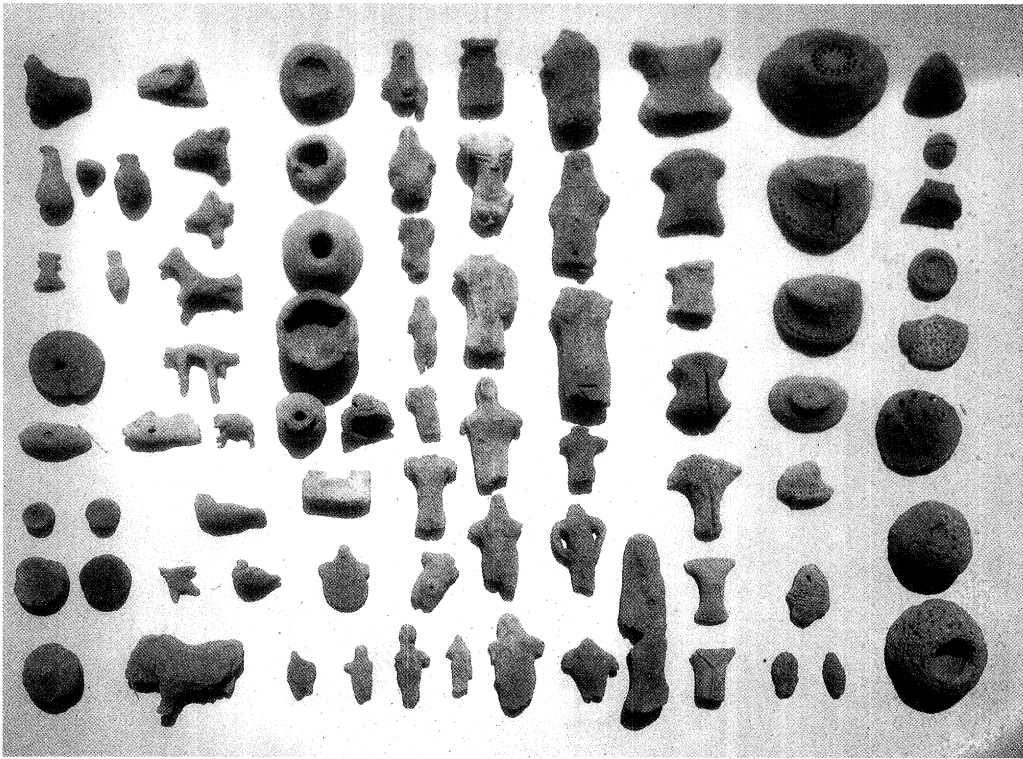


Plate 3 A selection of figurines and clay sculptures from Deir el Medina. Courtesy of the IFAO.

or purchased the various figures during life, or, alternatively, other family members may have included them specially for the tomb, knowing the importance of this issue (Plate 3). A personal letter from the site includes an insult from one man to another concerning his inability to father children: 'You are not a man since you are unable to make your wives pregnant like your fellowmen' (Wente 1990: 149). Thus the state of childlessness would seem to be a significant point of tension in social, economic and personal spheres for the people of Deir el Medina. Another tomb reflecting similar social concerns, dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty, is that of Sennefer (tomb 1159A), also in the Western Necropolis. In the vault itself was found a female figure, or talisman, which had red and black painted features and a piece of cloth tied around the stomach. Again this type of figure is linked to fertility and sexual matters, either in the living world or in the next world. Sennefer also had earthly experience of child mortality since he was buried with a very young child, interred in a plain box placed near the coffin of a woman, whom we presume to be his wife, Nefertiry. Again such personal items of material culture can be interpreted as reflecting individual situations or mediating social relationships and change.

The life of Kha: innovation and identity

Kha was chief workman in the Eighteenth Dynasty under the reigns of Amenhotep II, Tuthmosis IV and Amenhotep III and his complete burial assemblage offers an invaluable

opportunity to gaze upon two individuals – Kha and his wife Merit. Unlike many of the individuals we know from the later Ramesside period, we know Kha and Merit from the archaeological, rather than documentary, record. The couple belonged to a class of people who must have had considerable social interaction with Egyptian nobility, possibly even royalty, evidenced by the specific personal items showing contact. One might suggest that Kha's position as chief architect afforded him a unique relationship with the ruling pharaoh. Kha constructed an elaborate tomb, probably unlike most contemporary constructions at the site (Plate 4). The general period of wealth and his own specific prosperity may have led him to emulate the ranks of the nobles themselves (cf. Cannon 1989: 438). Nearby in the Valley of the Nobles, Eighteenth Dynasty men of rank like Sennefer



Plate 4 The tomb of Kha (8). Photo by the author.

(tomb 99) were buried in tomb complexes consisting of multiple vaults with rock-cut chapels, surmounted by a single large pyramid (see Strudwick 1994). This trend continued and developed in the later Ramesside period in the Theban region. However, in the Eighteenth Dynasty only a handful of tombs at Deir el Medina appear to have substantive superstructures and it is likely that Kha was the first to construct a pyramid tomb complex. Certainly his wealth and status would have afforded him the luxury of such an innovation, and his skill as chief workman the ability to bring it to fruition.

Kha not only emulated the elite tombs of the nobles, but may also have instigated a material change which was to have social ramifications in the following dynasty. The pyramid complex tomb took hold in the Nineteenth Dynasty, becoming the standard burial type, and facilitated the burials of larger numbers of related individuals. This shift from the burial of single individuals or couples in the Eighteenth Dynasty to the later generational tombs is marked at Deir el Medina. Later tombs of the Ramesside period are filled with successive generations and extended families, like those of Neferrenpet (tomb 336) with some seventy-four bodies (Bruyère 1926: 80–113). Tombs of prominent related individuals are placed together, as in the case of Amenahkt, his sons Nebenmaat and Khaemteri in tombs 218, 219 and 220 respectively. The whole notion of a burial complex becomes a standard practice at this time, which may signify a range of social and religious sentiments. The focus on the generational tomb may be a response to financial constraints, or more likely a concern for providing for larger family groups with all their attendant associations. This later practice stresses lineage and family links in a material and embodied manner, whereas Eighteenth Dynasty tombs focused microcosmically on the individual. The need for a demonstrable lineage may have arisen as a result of job competitiveness. We know that the village was extended in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties, additional dwellings constructed and the labour force increased. Perhaps the economic climate in turn affected social and mortuary practices and these in turn utilized the shift toward tomb complexity and aggrandisement witnessed in the time of Kha. Thus the practices of individuals like Kha merit attention, especially since he exists within such a well-documented context. In this manner, we might be able to map the mechanisms of change – even in categories as supposedly rigid as class, status and socio-economic group.

The individual burials of Kha and Merit (tomb 8)

The intact tomb of Kha was excavated by Schiaparelli in 1906 (Schiaparelli 1927), and its contents subsequently transported back to the Turin Museum. Both husband and wife had what appear to be wealthy burials, yet this obvious wealth masks an inherent social inequality between the two. What is immediately striking in that assemblage is the differential wealth present between Kha and his wife, demonstrated by the sheer number of items inscribed with Kha's name alone or that belonged to him by virtue of his trade and rank during life. Items of intrinsic value, such as metal vessels (Plate 5) or tools, are clearly and visibly attributed to Kha in his own right. From the personal items in his tomb we get a sense of Kha's life, his responsibilities, rank, pharaoh's admiration for his skill and his ultimate wealth. His cubit is covered in gold leaf, for example, a personal gift from



Plate 5 Metal vessels from Kha's burial in tomb 8, now in Turin Museum. Photo by the author.

Amenhotep II. He also had a balance pan, a folding cubit, two palettes and a writing tablet. An X-ray analysis has shown that Kha has a gold 'necklace of valour' around his neck under the many layers of wrappings. This type of ornament was supposedly bestowed upon individuals by pharaoh himself, and Kha was royal architect. Several of Kha's more expensive items have this supra-economic prestige value, whereas Merit's do not. Approximately 196 objects can be attributed to Kha and only 39 to Merit individually, while 6 inscribed items seem to be shared, in that they name both persons. This demonstrates a material inequality between husband and wife. Such imbalance would have been obvious to the family at the moment when Merit was buried – but hers is not an exceptional case. Generally, the representation of a woman's life is overshadowed by her husband's in the tomb context. It should be noted that, whilst we refer to such individuals as husband and wife, we know that marriage as a ceremony or legal state did not exist in Egypt, and it is better to see these relationships as economic and procreative unions which were often, but not always, monogamous (Bryan 1996: 36). Divorce of a kind was also available.

It is not difficult to build up a picture of Kha as an individual. Apart from his elevated position as chief workman, demonstrated in the texts as well as the specialized items we find in his tomb, we also have insight into his personal life through his clothes, jewellery, furniture, toiletries and favourite pastimes. His gaming-board was most likely to have been used in life, and, in fact, almost all the goods present in the tomb show some signs of use. One could go on further reconstructing a picture of Kha, but what of Merit? She is known more by association than as an individual in her own right, though we do have a clear image of her attention to grooming. She may own individual items such as a bed and headrest, etc., although we do not know what occupied her time, what activities she was engaged in. In her collection of 'favourite things', make-up jars, kohl jars, razors,

combs and pins predominate. But adornment does not equal activity in any real sense. Moreover, such items were not specific to women but also belonged to the world of men. It is not simply that Merit has quantitatively less than her husband, it is also the scale and qualitative disparity which is significant. While Kha has boxes with careful painting and engraving, Merit's tend to look hasty and poorly executed. The hieroglyphs on almost every item, with the exception of her wig box, are rough and almost careless. Her wig box is probably the finest of her belongings. While these points might seem small in isolation, taken together they suggest that at the upper end of the middle classes there were considerable differences between the sexes in the mortuary sphere.

It is likely that Merit died before her husband, since she was placed in a coffin that was originally constructed for Kha, and inscribed with his name. It was certainly a less expensive project than the series of coffins that Kha had created for himself. This is significant since Merit apparently did not have a coffin in preparation for herself, whilst Kha was making elaborate preparations for himself. There is no evidence to suggest that this was a result of an early death. Similar patterns are seen repeatedly at Deir el Medina. It appears that afterlife preparations were concentrated around the lives of husbands, rather than wives. The relative difference in wealth that we see in their individual possessions is replicated in the coffins themselves. Kha has a very large black outer sledge coffin, and two anthropomorphic coffins in black and gold showing fine craftsmanship, whereas Merit has a smaller sledge coffin and only one gilt anthropomorphic coffin. Furthermore, the workmanship on her coffin is noticeably poorer than her husband's and the overall outlay is simpler and cheaper. This is important since the choices made at the point of burial were made by Merit's husband and possibly sons, Nakht and Userhat, and as such were conscious decisions. Whilst her own highly personal possessions (e.g., wig, toiletries, clothes, furniture) were carefully included for her needs in the afterlife, her family decided that she would have significantly less than her husband/their father at his time of death. It is not simply a matter of a wife like Merit dying first, thus having less than her husband who survives her and at his death takes an entire household's contents with him. Instead, we are witnessing the results of conscious decisions surrounding the inclusion of individual belongings, and their respective wealth.

If we examine the elaboration of the bodies, the relative difference in wealth is also very evident between husband and wife. Merit's body was not prepared and wrapped as well as Kha's and as a result her body is not as well preserved. Neither body was embalmed. However, unlike her husband, Merit has a mummy mask made of stuccoed linen and the striped wig was marked out alternately in blue paint and gold leaf. The face was gilded, eyebrows and eye sockets inlaid in blue glass, and the eyes made of opaque white and translucent black glass (Curto and Mancini 1968: 78). Both the mummies of Kha and Merit, when X-rayed, were found to be decorated with fine jewellery, though again sexed discrepancy is evident. Kha was buried wearing a collar made up of a string of gold rings, the gold necklace of valour; a long necklace of spun and plaited gold supporting a heart scarab; a *tyt* amulet probably in carnelian; a *ururet* amulet in the form of a snake's head, probably also in carnelian, on the forehead; a pair of gold earrings; and a bracelet on each arm made of a strip of gold (Curto and Mancini 1968: 78–9). Merit's body revealed a broad collar made up of eight strings of hard-stone plaques; two pairs of gold earrings; and a girdle hanging low on the pelvis consisting of eleven gold plaques linked

Table 1 Price list of tomb goods for Kha and Merit calculated in Egyptian *deben*.

<i>Goods of Kha</i>	<i>Deben</i>	<i>Goods of Kha</i>	<i>Deben</i>	<i>Goods of Kha</i>	<i>Deben</i>
funerary sledge	60	2 bronze vases	48	scribal palette	1
linen pall	50	copper vessel of Kha	24	fragments of leather strips	0.5
gold necklace of valour	135	1 silver & 1 metal filter	264	2 scribal/paint sets	4
gold necklace	40	2 white wooden tables	30	white painted box of Kha	25
gold heart scarab	40	2 bronze amphorae stands	48	small wooden box of Kha	10
carnelian amulet	40	4 decorated linens	200	wood & ivory box of Kha	25
carnelian uraeus	40	wooden statue of Kha	15	alabaster bowl	1.5
gold earrings	24	wooden shabti with tools	15	5 bronze razors	10
2 gold bracelets	110	inscribed shabti coffin	15	1 bronze spatula	4
2 gilt inner coffins	400	miniature coffin	15	2 blue faience rings	8
wreaths of flowers	3	inscribed wooden chair	40	leather satchel	1
wooden bed	20	stone shabti of Kha	15	needles in holder	3
wooden headrest	5	2 decorated canes	6	wooden wedge/tool	0
Book of the Dead	60	clothes of Kha	1395	6 tubes of pigment	18
leather sandals	2	gold cubit measure	40	bronze tweezers	2
bronze bowl and stand	34	electrum cup	120	2 kohl jars & stibia	6
garlands of flowers	1	adze	7	whetstone	0
fine woven mat	5	5 wooden smoothers	5	large calcite amphora	15
4 canes with linen	4	chisel and blade	15	wooden box of Kha	25
1 painted stool	10	whip stock	1	6 alabaster vessels in box	90
3 alabaster perfume vases	75	balance pan & box	5	bronze bowl with handles	24
4 wooden boxes of Kha	100	pilgrim flask	2		
3 canes, metal ends	9	wooden folding stick	6		
2 copper situlae	48	4 cement blocks	0	TOTAL	3919
<i>Goods of Merit</i>	<i>Deben</i>	<i>Goods of Merit</i>	<i>Deben</i>	<i>Goods of Merit</i>	<i>Deben</i>
sledge coffin	60	linen	65	conical ceramic vessel	2
gilt sarcophagus	200	basket with lid	3	3 wooden combs	3
gilt funerary mask	35	decorated toiletries box	25	3 wooden pins	1.5
2 pairs of gold earrings	48	3 calcite alabastra	45	alabaster bowl	1.5
1 jewellery collar	10	glass vessel with duck's head	2	ceramic bowl	1
gold cowrie shell girdle	30	glass kohl jar & stibium	2	round basket	3
wooden bed	20	conical alabastron	15	wig of Merit	40
bed linen	100	bronze conical vessel	24	wooden wig box, inscribed	40
wooden headrest	5	3 bronze razors	6	TOTAL	787

by five strings of glass or faience beads. These plaques are in the form of bivalve shells, which were symbolic of female sexuality in ancient Egypt. In fact, Merit has considerably less in the way of jewellery than her husband and it is made from less expensive materials. The jewellery present in the tomb also challenges prior sex-based assumptions that women are generally the wearers of jewellery and elaborate ornamentation. Similarly, there is considerable overlap in jewellery types, again challenging normative assumptions: both men and women could, and did, wear earrings, bracelets, rings and necklaces. In many cases the discovery of personal ornamentation in tomb contexts cannot be linked directly to women.

Table 1 presents a costing analysis on the individual goods of Kha and Merit, using Janssen's (1975) price list of goods from the village during the later Ramesside period. Given the likelihood of inflation, the stated prices can only be used as relative approximates for Eighteenth Dynasty costings. Prices are given in *deben*, a proto-currency which is literally a measure of copper. Although these costings are estimates and subject to further refinement, the results clearly illustrate the sex-based difference in number of artefacts attributable, their intrinsic quality and, therefore, cost. My analysis suggests a considerable difference between the direct cost of burials for Kha (3,919 *deben*) and Merit (787 *deben*). Added to this are the associated finds which again reiterate this initial disparity. Many of the goods I have designated as associated with Kha bear his insignia, even his name, and are usually objects such as ceramics and other vessels. Since he was the last to be buried it might stand to reason that these goods were part of his funerary provisions: they total 680.5 *deben*. Shared goods designed for the couple are at a minimum, costing only 129 *deben*. Most of these items are decorated boxes, some of which name the couple, and many were presumably included at the time of Kha's burial. Because we have the wig-box of Merit with her clearly inscribed name, we know that such naming of goods was possible for women's belongings. That it occurs so infrequently is the point of this study, and a salient pattern that we see repeated elsewhere at the site (Meskell 1997b). The constitution of these tomb goods says something about how Merit was represented in life as an individual and how she was prepared for the afterlife. If this was a single case, it might be interesting, but the conclusions would not be far reaching as such. However, investigations of other tombs in the Western Necropolis at Deir el Medina reveal similar patterns.

Embedding individuals

Evidence from the Western Necropolis reveals repeatedly a pattern of sexed inequality throughout the Eighteenth Dynasty (Meskell 1997b). At this elite socio-economic level there were noticeable disparities in the quantity and quality of goods provided for women and this may reflect something of the relative social status of men, women and children during life, not merely in death: these reflections were not arbitrary, but cognizant choices. So, as wealth and status increased, the relative wealth of wives or female partners declined significantly in the mortuary realm. For the elite at Deir el Medina, the tomb was very much a male sphere and constituted around a man's life on earth. It is important to have

a set of general cultural patterns derived from larger scale analyses such as these. Such a study provides a social framework from which to discuss social inequalities in the mortuary sphere, the primary vectors of difference being rank (or wealth), sex and age. But these variables intersect in fluid ways. For example, whilst for Eighteenth Dynasty burials in the Western Necropolis difference is constituted around sex and to a lesser degree age, for the less affluent individuals in the Eastern Necropolis the major criterion was age and possibly marital status. There was little sex-based inequality in this cemetery. So at Deir el Medina the primary social divide was based upon wealth, which then splintered off into inequalities based on age or sex, depending on cemetery context. These general social principles provide only one level of social reality within which individuals were free to manoeuvre. The burials of Kha and Merit fit quite neatly into this pattern, though there are always exceptions and the extensive variability illustrated at the site calls into question the construction of rigid social models. Elsewhere I have argued that such models are inherently limiting and inadequate for the discussion of individuals and individual practice (see Meskell 1994, 1996, 1997a). Hastrup (1995: 79–80) has also critiqued the desire for social constructionist models, likening them to the ‘fax-model’ of the internalization of culture. This implies that the individual simply copies a set of shared notions about the world, and reduces socialization to a process of getting the original through the fax machine!

The mortuary practices we witness at the site need not be passive reflections of social organizations, they can be the product of active social and personal choices and strategies, which might even compromise the dynamics of social relations. Perhaps we have to view such social relations/realities as operative on several levels, acknowledging certain tensions between those social levels. For instance, emotive relationships were experienced between living individuals: between lovers, partners, parents and children, etc. and there are significant textual data and material practices to substantiate this. Layered upon this were cultural practices and beliefs about the social positions of husbands, wives, children and family members. I would suggest that the social negotiations we witness, materially, in the Eighteenth Dynasty tombs at Deir el Medina were influenced greatly by *these* interactions. This provides our material basis for the quantification of social inequality. Contrasting with these social experiences are the material expressions of partnerships and familial bonds. So that tomb assemblages, like those of Kha and Merit, may not replicate any real equality of feeling between husband and wife, rather they reflect the social inequality of the sexes at this elite level. Moreover, in an Egyptian context, the domestic, mortuary, textual and iconographic data might each present different profiles of life. Each of these dimensions existed in antiquity, resulting in their own specific social stresses and contradictions. People pursue their own subjective ends, rather than simply acting as cultural dupes (Meskell 1996: 7). Again we have to move reflexively between an analysis of how social structures impact upon people’s lives and an analysis of how individuals, through choice and action, shape those structures (Collier and Yanagisako 1987). Indeed, moving from the general analyses (nomothetic) to the identification of individuals (ideographic) always manifests in some disjuncture – and we should not expect these dimensions to cohere easily.

Conclusions

Send the message and say to her, since you are close to her: 'How are you doing? How are you?' . . . 'Woe, gracious faced one, there is no-one like her.'

(Letter from Deir el Medina scribe, Butehamun, to the coffin of his dead wife, Ikhtay.
Translated by Paul Frandsen 1992: 31)

Understanding individual relationships in an historic context may appear to be an easier enterprise than for prehistoric scenarios. But the wealth of evidence from Deir el Medina also yields more checks, less flexibility and more contradictions. The mortuary evidence at Deir el Medina draws attention to some of the contradictions of Eighteenth Dynasty family life. It demonstrates how preparations were made for the afterlife, both during life and at the time of burial, and how the material interests of husbands, wives and children diverged. Mortuary practices were themselves an arena in which social contradictions and tensions were acted out and resolved – a process which highlighted real inequalities between men and women which in other social contexts may not have been so marked. In these discussions of death and burial, we should also consider the emotive dimension (Tarlow 1992; Meskell 1994). Archaeologists still remain locked in the language of objectivity, so that the subjective experience is excluded. This serves to negate past subjective experience as well. One should not mask the 'emotional force of bereavement by reducing funerary ritual to orderly routine' (Rosaldo 1986: 186). In this context, the Egyptians themselves had much to say: 'none comes from there to tell of their state, to tell of their needs, to calm our hearts until we go where they have gone' (from the tomb of Intef, in D'Auria et al. 1988: 36).

The tomb of Kha and its contents reflect his particular position as royal architect with its attendant status, his own personal wealth and life history. But the tomb also says much, indirectly, about his wife Merit and about the inherent social inequality between the sexes more generally. The study potentially tells us something about the personal relationship between the husband and wife, reflected in material terms, and similarly about relationships with their children. Traditional scholarship always posited women as having comparable status with their male counterparts in various spheres, comparing Egyptian women's legal, economic and social freedoms to the plight of their Mediterranean contemporaries. Yet materially this is not borne out in the mortuary (or domestic) sphere at Deir el Medina. There are only a few instances where a woman would have material equivalence to her male relatives, and fewer where it exceeds it. One example already discussed is tomb 1352, where a woman had significantly more burial goods than the man, Setau. Such examples require further analyses.

Whilst we possess love letters and poems of romantic love between partners from Deir el Medina, and obviously these close attachments were real and compelling, this presents a picture which is often at odds with the materiality of social relations we see evidenced in the tombs. Moreover, these letters all appear to be written by men and corresponding accounts and sentiments from women are sadly absent. Concomitantly, the archaeology of the settlement site and the tombs under investigation highlight the importance and high profile nature of men's lives, at the expense of their female counterparts. The invisibility of beloved wives and children in material terms seems at odds with the documented

expressions of love and emotional bonding that the villagers themselves claimed in their letters: 'it is love of her that makes me strong! She shall cast a water spell for me. I see my heart's love standing right before my face!' (McDowell 1998). A multi-dimensional analysis might present a range of different vignettes, yet this complex picture of life may be closer to the elaborate contradictions of reality, both in the past and present. In sum, an archaeology of individuals and their social relations is possible, if the questions we ask, and the interpretations we offer, allow the people of the past intention, volition and agency.

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