
*Rosetta* **12.5**: 43-50.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Colloquium2012/millward_mourning.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Colloquium2012/millward_mourning.pdf)
Mourning for the Deceased: An Overview of Current Research into the Gestures and Attitudes of Grief in Ancient Egypt

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The presence of mourners in ancient Egypt has certainly been attested by previous scholars, although very briefly and with no real interpretation of the evidence that they present. Werbrouck’s 1938 work does focus solely on the gestures adopted by ancient Egyptian mourners, however, this is now quite outdated and again offers little interpretation. The lack of analysis is quite surprising especially when we consider the wide range of evidence available. This study, which forms my PhD thesis, therefore intends to clarify what gestures and attitudes were adopted by ancient Egyptian mourners, but will also provide an examination of why particular gestures were used and will detail any deviation from the typical gestures of mourning that appeared overtime.

Setting the Scene: the Funeral Procession
The funeral procession was an important element of Egyptian funerary culture and included a formulaic series of episodes. The family and friends would gather at the home of the deceased before the body was transported to the embalmer’s workshop. Once the embalming process (which took 70 days) was complete the funeral entourage gathered once again to take the deceased to their pre-prepared tomb. Depending on the location of the tomb, this episode could involve a voyage across the Nile on funeral barges, this is particularly the case during the New Kingdom when many kings, queens and member of the elite class were buried on the west bank at Thebes. Once the funeral entourage had reached the tomb the deceased would be removed from their sarcophagus one last time whilst the final funerary rites,

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including the ‘Opening of the Mouth Ceremony’, were performed. The funerary items that were carried by some members of the entourage were placed inside the tomb with the deceased and the entrance would then be sealed.²

**Methodology**

Following the establishment of the funeral procession attention was focused on the gestures themselves. This study began by reading a short passage from Herodotus’ ‘Histories’, which provided an initial insight into the possible gestures that were considered ‘typical’ for Egyptian mourners to adopt during a funeral. Herodotus states that:

> When a man of some standing departs from his house all womenfolk of the household smear mud on their heads or even their faces. Then they leave the corpse lying in the house while they and all their female relatives wander here and there in the city beating their breast, with their clothing loosened and their breasts exposed. Elsewhere, the men are also beating their breasts, and they too have their clothing loosened. After this phase of mourning, they take the corpse to be mumified.³

Questions may arise as to how much of Egypt Herodotus travelled⁴ and whom his sources of information were.⁵ However, this passage did help with the recognition of gestures of grief when the images of the funeral procession were analysed in detail. Before this analysis began a list of all possible sources of mourning was complied. This ranges from depictions on tomb walls and vignettes from the ancient Egyptian ‘Book of the Dead’, to amulets and a piece of rare textual evidence. Once completed, each source on this list was carefully studied to understand what gestures it displayed mourners adopting. When turning to look at the visual evidence itself it is unfortunate that no complete depiction of the funeral procession from beginning to

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² For further details on ancient Egyptian funeral processions see Assmann 2001: 300; Hays 2010: 1-14; Riggs 2010: 1-7.
⁴ For a perspective on Herodotus’ travels to Egypt see, Lloyd 2007: 226.
⁵ It is clear that Herodotus did visit Egypt, but it is possible that he remained in the north of the country. We cannot also be certain of where Herodotus’ information originated and if he did indeed speak to Egyptian priests as he claims, see Herodotus 2: 54 and 2: 100, translation Waterfield 2008, how forthcoming they would have been with their information.
end appears in the same source. The only Old Kingdom scene, which illustrates the funeral procession, suggests that depictions of the transportation to the embalming workshop and actions involving this process were favoured during this time, whilst the later episodes of the funeral are not shown at all. In contrast during the later New Kingdom, there are no depictions of the journey to the embalming workshop, although the subsequent stages are shown in great detail. There is enough evidence however, to fully establish what gestures were more ‘typical’ and those that were more ‘spontaneous’ when collaborating sources from different chronological periods.

**Establishing the Gestures of Mourning**

This study has so far established that throughout the funeral procession mourners were present to grieve for the loss of their loved one and they did so by adopting a series of gestures. From the wide range of evidence studied two gestures can be recognised as ‘typical’ due to the frequency with which they appear; these are the raising of arms upwards and the exposure of breasts. All of the studied sources depict 440 mourners with their arms raised and 170 (obviously all female) exposing their breasts. This suggests that these two actions were the ‘typical’ gestures of mourning due to their frequency and the fact that they do not only appear in tomb depictions. Other mediums show these gestures including an Eleventh Dynasty vessel from Dendera and a 19th Dynasty vignette from the *Book of the Dead*. More ‘spontaneous’ gestures include pouring dust or dirt onto the face, possibly to induce tears - which are also sometimes shown on mourners’ cheeks (49 mourners) - mouths open in wailing (20 mourners), and fainting or gripping fellow mourners for support (11 mourners). These latter gestures tend to only appear within the context of tomb decoration and are much less frequently adopted, possibly suggesting that they show mourners displaying more spontaneous gestures of grief.

**Next Steps**

6 Decorated in the tomb of Pepi’ankh at Meir, see Blackman 1924: pl.lxii.
7 Particularly in TT50, the tomb of Neferhotep, see Davies 1973: pl.xxi-xxiv.
8 Petrie Museum UC16126.
9 *Book of the Dead* of Hunefer, British Museum 9901,5.
10 TT181, the tomb of Nebamun and Ipuky in particular shows these ‘atypical’ gestures of mourning, see slide 3401, die Ramesside Archiv in der Ägyptologie Institut an der Universität Heidelberg and Davies 1925: pl.xxii.
Now that the gestures of mourning have been established there will be an examination that has not been completed before, that is assessing all of these gestures and ascertaining the extent to which they show mourners’ genuine emotion over a theatrical performance. Assmann first suggested that within depictions of mourning authentic grief was shown directly alongside theatrical performance. However, he did not state whether one mourner adopts them or whether multiple mourners within the same scene adopt them. At no point will this study suggest that the mourners adopting the more typical gestures of grief are themselves emotionless, but rather that it is the gestures that lack emotion whilst the motivation behind adopting them remains passionately driven. During the funeral procession mourners would have felt a great need of duty to grieve for the deceased as the event was not only a means to transport the embalmed body and its grave goods to the tomb, but it also acted a bridge between the world of the living and the land of the dead. The funeral was well-structured to ensure a good send off for the deceased and as a result mourners were compelled to adopt gestures of grief, not only out of an emotional attachment to the deceased, but also by the long held ideologies of their culture. The deceased had to be mourned and mourned for correctly otherwise they would not reach the afterlife successfully and henceforth die a second death, which was a terrible fate for any ancient Egyptian.

**Initial Conclusions**

At this point it is clear that the raising of arms upwards and the exposure of breasts were the ‘typical’ gestures of mourning. Although mourners’ who adopt these gestures are often in rigid poses with a lack of the dramatic, they were still motivated to act in such a way for love of the deceased. On the other hand, the emotions of other mourners are more prominent as they are shown throwing themselves on the ground, opening their mouths to let out tormented wailing, or fainting. But does this mean the latter are any more emotional than the former? To what extent can a conclusion to this argument be reached? These are the questions that will now be considered. Of course there are many factors to consider when looking at these scenes, such as when they were produced, for whom they were produced and the

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11 Assmann 2001: 310.
13 McDermott 2005: 19.
14 Particularly in the royal tomb at Amarna, see Martin 1989: 38.
amount of artistic license present. However, the initial research into this study has certainly provided some insightful interpretations, which will be built upon further over the next year.
Bibliography


Die Ramesside Archiv in der Ägyptologie Institut an der Universität Heidelberg. Accessed 10\textsuperscript{th}, 11\textsuperscript{th} and 12\textsuperscript{th} October 2011.


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