

Chapter Title: The Perception of the Human Body in the Ancient Egyptian Funerary Literature and the Book of the Dead

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Book Title: Death Imagined

Book Subtitle: Ancient Perceptions of Death and Dying

Book Editor(s): KAROLINA SEKITA, KATHERINE E. SOUTHWOOD

Published by: Liverpool University Press. (2025)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.36233612.9>

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Chapter 3

The Perception of the Human Body in the Ancient Egyptian Funerary Literature and the Book of the Dead

Rita Lucarelli

Imagining the experience of death from the etic perspective of the living generally results, in many societies, ancient and modern, into an attempt to understand the spiritual dimension that transcends the bodily one. While the body is seen as related mainly to the living, the soul/spirit part of an individual is conceived as belonging to the realm of the dead. Although depictions of bodies populate the imageries of the beyond in ancient as well as in modern religious cultures, those bodies are interpreted mainly as visual depictions of the *souls/spirits* of the dead, and not as *physical* bodies themselves. The survival and resurrection of the soul, which is discussed in many studies of philosophy and history of religions, is therefore seen in contrast to the decadence of the body, which even when preserved with care through mummification, as in ancient Egypt, it remains on and belongs to the earth.¹

The ancient Egyptian funerary literature and iconography are central sources to understand the conception of the body in their society, although they may at first sight appear confusing since they describe and depict bodies of different kinds: the human, intact and always covered bodies of the deceased, the decapitated or amputated bodies of the damned, the hybrid bodies of the deities, and liminal beings populating the regions of the netherworld. By analysing the textual and iconographical evidence

¹ However, the belief in the resurrection of the body in the Beyond is a central belief in several religions such as Christianity and Judaism. See Candida Moss, *Divine Bodies. Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2019). More, in particular, on the monastic belief in the sacrality of the human body and its resurrection according to Christ's embodiment and the full humanity of Jesus, see Caroline T. Schroeder, *Monastic Bodies. Discipline and Salvation in Shenoute of Atripe* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), in particular chap. 4, pp. 126–57.

available on different media (from papyrus to coffins and tomb walls) that provides images of bodies which are situated in between the reality of death on earth and the imagined experience of life in the netherworld, we may attempt an emic interpretation of the ancient Egyptian world view on issues of thanatology and eschatology such as how the body of the deceased is transfigured in the state of *ꜥh* (ꜥh/Akh), the function of hybridity in the body of deities and demonic inhabitants of the *Duat* (the ancient Egyptian netherworld), and the symbolism of nudity for the defeated bodies of the damned.

It is in the so-called ‘Book of the Dead’ and the ‘Netherworld Books’ that bodies of various human and non-human beings are mostly illustrated and accompanied by texts and captions explaining the main function of the images. In these compositions, mainly dated to the New Kingdom and which collect and re-interpret also earlier ideas on life after death,² we can individuate the specific terminology employed to describe different kinds of bodies and body parts; it is, however, thanks to the images accompanying and often explaining the texts that we can attempt to comprehend the uniqueness of the ancient Egyptian funerary art and religion in relation to the conceptions of the body.³

These images are expression of the so-called *Bildzauber*, ‘figurative magic’ or ‘magic with images’, which enhanced the amuletic function of the magical papyri or objects where the incantations were copied on.⁴ The way ancient Egyptians conceived images is also central for the understanding of images of the body. In the ancient Egyptian language there are different terms that define images in different contexts and according to different literary or magical settings. At least four of them are relevant to comprehend the function of the body in magical and funerary practices and beliefs.

² The Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts are traditionally considered the predecessors of the Book of the Dead and of later funerary compositions.

³ For a study of the body in the earlier funerary literature (Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts), see Francesca Iannarilli, *Il corpo spezzato. Costruire e decostruire la figura umana nella tradizione funeraria egizia* (Venezia: Antichistica 38/Studi Orientali 14, 2024); Rune Nyord, *Breathing Flesh: Conceptions of the Body in the Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Copenhagen: Carsten Niebhur Publications, 2009).

⁴ On *Bildzauber* see Peter Eschweiler, *Bildzauber im alten Ägypten: Die Verwendung von Bildern und Gegenständen in magischen Handlungen nach den Texten des Mittleren und Neuen Reiches* (Universitätsverlag and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Freiburg and Göttingen, 1994). On the use of *Bildzauber* in magical compositions in the Greek magical papyri from Egypt, see Rita Lucarelli, ‘The “Vignettes” of the Greek Magical Papyri. Visual Elements of the Pharaonic Magical Tradition and the Use of *Bildzauber* in the PG’, in *The Iconography of Magic. Images of Power and the Power of Images in Ancient and Late Antique Magic*, ed. by R. M. Hernández, *Studies in the History and Anthropology of Religion* 7 (Leuven: Peeters, 2022), pp. 1–15.

The first term,  (twṯ), could be translated as statue, likeness, and it is especially used to refer to potential manifestations of the god. The semantic classifier (or ‘determinative’⁵) for this term is a mummified figure, which occurs also to indicate the mummy and the completeness and entirety of a body.⁶ This word occurs for instance in the funerary instructions of Spell 137A of the Book of the Dead, which indicate a ritual for extinguishing four torches in milk, which occurred after the ritual of the opening of the mouth and which was performed ‘each time you let your image (twṯ) come to any gate (rryt) of these seven gates of Osiris’.⁷

Another term related to the image of the deceased is  (ššmw), ‘manifestation’ (of a divine being) or ‘guide’,⁸ denoting in particular ritual images enhancing the funerary space of the tomb into the underworld itself, giving therefore agency to the images of gods and liminal beings who were providing access in the *Duat* to the deceased, but also suggesting a new dimension to the manifestation of the deceased in the *Duat* in a transfigured state, separate from the mummified body. The ššmw as ‘image’ occurs indeed in Spell 100 and 130 of the Book of the Dead, which are ritual compositions empowering the deceased so that he can join the sun god’s crew in his boat across the sky; the ritual instructions of Spell 100 say: ‘words to be said over this image ... by placing it on the chest of the transfigured deceased, without letting it touch his body’.⁹

A figured and implicit version of a ššmw could be the composite body appearing in a scene of the 2nd hour of the so-called ‘Amduat’ ‘What is in the netherworld’, which was part of the so-called Books of the Netherworld and was used to decorate the royal tombs of the New Kingdom. It depicts the elongated body of a crocodile with a human head on his back, and it is labelled as ‘One who guides (ššm) those who are in it’; we could therefore

⁵ ‘Semantic classifiers’, which are also called ‘determinatives’, are signs encoding the ancient Egyptian categorisation of the world; see Orly Goldwasser, ‘From Determinatives to Classifiers: Categorisation in the Ancient Egyptian Writing System’, in *Guide to the Writing Systems of Ancient Egypt*, ed. by S. Polis (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 2023), pp. 192–99.

⁶ For twṯ used as adjective for ‘entire, complete’, see <<https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/400242>>.

⁷ For the full text of this spell, see Stephen Quirke, *Going Out in Daylight – Pt m hrw: The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead. Translation, Sources, Meanings* (London: Golden House Publications, 2013), pp. 307–10; on the ritual nature of Spell 137A, see Yekaterina Barbash, ‘The Ritual Context of the Book of the Dead’, in *Book of the Dead: Becoming God in Ancient Egypt*, Oriental Institute Museum Publications 40, ed. by F. Scalf (Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute, 2017), pp. 75–84, in particular pp. 77–78.

⁸ Nyord, *Breathing Flesh*, pp. 12–16.

⁹ See Barbash, ‘The Ritual Context of the Book of the Dead’, p. 80 for the ritual and amuletic context of this spell and its instructions.



Figure 3.1: Tomb of Ramses V and VI (KV 9). Amduat, second hour: boat with crocodile (@Theban Mapping Project Image # 14752).

interpret this composite crocodile figure as a *sšmw*, a guide for the dead king to travel in the netherworld (see Figure 3.1).

When referring instead to the static corpse in the coffin, the terms *ḥt* (𐀓𐀓) and *sḥ* (𐀓𐀓) occur in funerary texts since the Pyramid Texts; these terms contrast with the *bʿ* (𐀓), the bird with the deceased's head that is generally translated as 'soul' because it moves in and out of the body, although also the *bʿ* has a very well-defined corporeal dimension. *Bʿ*, *kʿ*, and *sḥ* are in fact closely related and independent, as the *bʿ* needs to return to the tomb to reunite with the body every night; in the vignette of Spell 89 of the Book Dead of Tjenena (Louvre N 3074¹⁰), the body of the deceased is depicted as a dark, skeletal silhouette, rather than as a mummified body, and it has been interpreted in this scene also as his shadow, *šwt* (𐀓𐀓).¹¹ The title Spell 89 of the Book of the Dead clearly describes the magical function that this text holds for the protection of the body, and for this

¹⁰ <<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010378255>>

¹¹ The shadow as manifestation of the dead in the netherworld and mentioned in the ancient Egyptian funerary literature, has been analysed in Beate George. *Zu den altägyptischen Vorstellungen vom Schatten als Seele* (Bonn: Habelt, 1970) and more recently by Renée Riskalla, 'Shadows in the Hidden Chamber: A Study of the *šwt* in Funerary Texts and Art of Ancient Egypt' (thesis, Macquarie University, 2019). On the vignette of Spell 89, see also H. Milde, *The Vignettes of the Book of the Dead of Neferrenpet* (Leiden: Egyptologische Uitgaven 7, 1991), pp. 187–88.

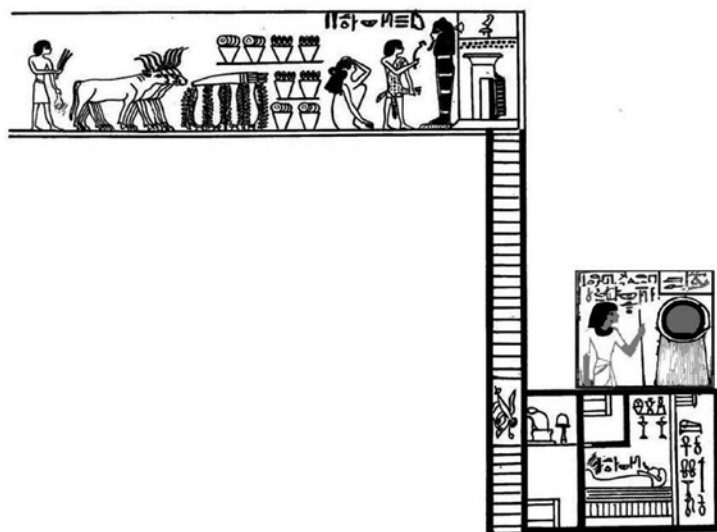


Figure 3.2: Book of the Dead of Nebqed (Papyrus Louvre N 3068), vignette of Spell 1 (sketch by Peter Robinson).

reason variants of Spell 89 are also attested on the sarcophagus. In the final invocation of the same formula, it is said:

May he see his corpse (*ḥt*) and rest on his mummified body (*sḥ*), he will not perish, he will not be destroyed, bodily, forever.¹²

Similar to the already mentioned vignette of Spell 89, the vignette of Spell 92 of the Book of the Dead shows the body of the deceased is often represented by a black silhouette, which also in this case could be interpreted as the shadow or skeleton of the deceased; this may actually be a reference to the body weakened by the *b*'s remoteness, which needs to return to the tomb to breathe new life into the emaciated and abandoned body.¹³

Another interesting illustration is part of the vignette accompanying Spell 1 in the Book of the Dead of Nebqed (eighteenth Dynasty),¹⁴ which

¹² Quirke, *Going Out in Daylight*, p. 205.

¹³ See Rita Lucarelli, 'La protezione del corpo nelle formule del Libro dei Morti', in *Miraggi d'eternità: le mummie egizie dal tempo dei papiri ad oggi*, ed. by N. Reggiani (Parma: Silva Editore, 2024) on the mummified body and its need for protection in the tomb and the netherworld.

¹⁴ Papyrus Louvre N 3068: <<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010003125>>

depicts the ba descending into the tomb to reunite with the body, as also mentioned in Spell 89 (see above); in this vignette, however, it is not the body that is depicted but the anthropoid sarcophagus that encloses and protects it (see Figure 3.2).

Interestingly, the caption on the sarcophagus does not mention a proper term for ‘body’ (*ḥt*, *sšmw*, or *tw*) but the name of the deceased, the scribe Nebqed; the mummified body in the sarcophagus seems therefore to be completely assimilated to the deceased and their name, acquiring an agency of its own. To be noted is that this peculiar vignette also includes a figure of the deceased in his living body, emerging from the tomb itself, as if representing the final rebirth of the deceased after death, not as an *ḥ* (transfigured spirit) as it would be expected but in its physicality. This vignette remains unique among the variants of Spell 1 of the Book of the Dead;¹⁵ it recalls another peculiar scene on an ostrakon found at Deir el Medina, which has been labelled as ‘funeral ostrakon’ since it clearly depicts a funeral and the deposition of three mummified bodies in their coffins within a similar tomb shaft section and subterranean burial chambers, although the *b* bird descending in the burial chamber is here replaced by a human figure (see Figure 3.3).¹⁶

These kinds of images evoke the same two main principles that we find in funerary texts when referring to the body; namely, sustenance (to keep the body intact) and transformation (to become a god).¹⁷ Death is imagined in its full corporeality through the many forms that the deceased’s body can take, from human-headed bird (*b*) to transfigured spirit (*ḥ*). The physical and spiritual dimensions of death are not perceived as opposite but rather as complementary to each other.

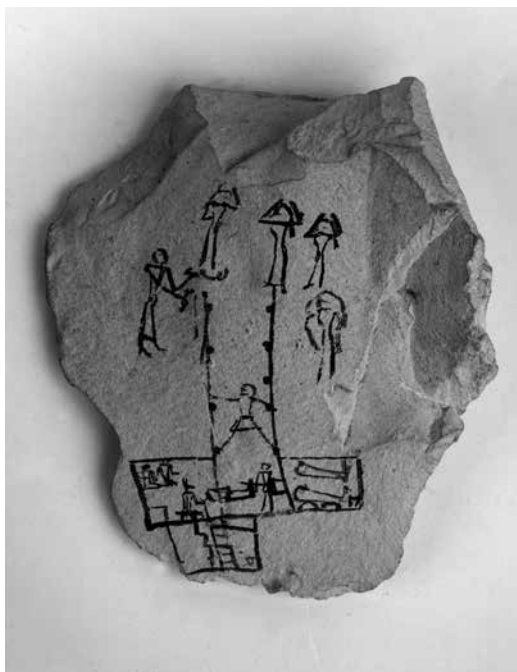
The reality of death, for the ancient Egyptians, started with the funeral and the deposition of the body in the tomb, as we have seen represented in the ‘funeral ostrakon’ and in the papyrus of Nebqed, and continued within the spatial confinement of the burial chamber first, and of the *Duat*, the ancient Egyptian beyond, which from the magical and funerary texts and images appears to be a landscape filled with bodily creatures too. Death

¹⁵ On Spell 1 of the Book of the Dead, see Tarek S. Tawfik, ‘Spell 1 of the Book of the Dead and its Vignette’, in *Handbook of the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, ed. by R. Lucarelli and M. Stadler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 357–72.

¹⁶ On this ostrakon, see Peter Robinson, ‘The Manchester “Funeral” Ostrakon: A Sketch of a Funerary Ritual’, in *Mummies, Magic and Medicine in Ancient Egypt: Multidisciplinary Essays for Rosalie David*, ed. by C. Price, R. Forshaw, A. Chamberlain, P. T. Nicholson, and R. Morkot (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 32–47.

¹⁷ Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2005), thoroughly discusses these two principles and how they are expressed in funerary texts of the Pharaonic period.

Figure 3.3: Ostrakon
Manchester 5886 (Photo
and copyrights by Peter
Robinson).



is therefore imagined as an empowering experience and unique chance to trespass the confinement of the tomb and of the human body itself, by magically acquiring freedom of movement and the possibility to go in and out of the tomb, as expressed in the spells of the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead mentioned above.

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