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NON OMNIS MORIAR. REFLECTION ON “RITE DE PASSAGE” IN THE OLD KINGDOM

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Abstract: In ancient Egypt death was the beginning of a passage into the eternal world of the dead. It began at the house of the deceased and ended in the necropolis. Man as a unity of spiritual and corporal elements ceased to exist. Appropriate rituals needed to be performed in order to permit his rejoining and return to life. These were the rituals of Opening of the Mouth, Transformation into *3h*, Feeding of *3h* and Breaking of Red Vessels.

Keywords: Old Kingdom, funerary ceremonies, rites of passage, *3h*, rituals of Opening of the Mouth, Transformation into *3h*, and Feeding of *3h*.

The individual unity that was a human creature was broken at the moment of physical death. Death was not the end, however, but merely a beginning and a passage to new life: “Death is the gateway to the other world in more than literal sense” (Malinowski 2004: 19).

As egyptological studies have long demonstrated, man in ancient Egypt was composed of several elements, such as the body, the name(s), various spiritual “souls” and the shadow. With regard to spiritual elements, Old Kingdom sources have attested only two with respect to a private, i.e., non-royal person: *k3* soul and *3h* creature. The *b3* soul was associated rather with the royal and divine sphere at the time (Wolf-Brinkmann 1968: *passim*; Zabkar

1968: 60–61 mentioned only one inscription from the unpublished Sixth Dynasty tomb of Hermeru at Saqqara, where the *b3* might refer to a non-royal person).

In order for the dead to pass into the Underworld, it was necessary to ensure the existence of all elements, without which life in the other world would not be possible: the body, the *k3* soul and the name. The body was mummified to be a house for the *k3*, while the name was engraved or written on the walls of the tomb, its equipment such as the false door or the offering table, the grave goods, like pottery and tools. Appropriate rituals had to be performed to rejoin and re-create the dead in order for man to be able to pass as a “newborn” creature into the Realm of the Dead.¹

¹ The passage into the world of the dead took place on two independent but complementary levels: *biomorphic* (mummification), and *spatial*, when the dead person was brought to the Realm of the Dead, cf. Assmann 1989: *passim*.

According to Arnold van Gennep's theory of *rite de passage* (van Gennep 2004: *passim*), a classic in its field, any transformation bearing the stamp of passage, including death, occurs in three stages:

1. Separation, that is, isolating the dead from the living,
2. Transition, that is, creating a new "personality",
3. Incorporation of the transformed being into the new community of the other realm.

The first stage was, exactly as van Gennep observed, the least complicated, especially compared with the next stage. This is the stage from actual death to the crossing into the necropolis, that is, crossing from the *profanum* to the *sacrum* in the earthly dimension. It covers the vigil, mourning, also by professional women weepers, procession during which the corpse was transported to the embalming workshop at the necropolis, and deposition of the body in a grave. Representations in tombs often show the journey across a river, because in the Egyptian tradition the necropolis was to be found on the western bank of the Nile. All the procedures of the first stage are attested in images from the walls of the tombs as well as in the texts (Wilson 1944, 203–210; Settgast 1963: 16ff.).

The second stage was the most complicated; it was also the longest and the

most important stage in the rite of passage. During this stage the body was subjected to embalming procedures and the spiritual element(s) to a series of rituals. It was transformed into a being with an entirely new personality, capable of entering the Other World. This stage is evidenced by a number of images in tombs and texts which will be discussed below, as well as a series of archaeologically attested objects, such as palettes with the seven sacred oils and sets used in the Opening of the Mouth ritual.

Once all the activities connected with preparing the body for deposition in the tomb were completed, it was possible to proceed with the procession carrying the coffin. It was preceded ceremonially with ritual pilgrimages to places called Sais and Buto (Settgast 1963: 65–73), where it was greeted by dancers *mww* (Junker 1940: *passim*). Next came other elements of the funeral, such as the procession with papyrus stems. The last stage, which was conducted at the tomb, is the most important one for the dead. It started with the Opening of the Mouth ritual *wpt-r*, during which the mouth of the deceased was opened symbolically, so that he could speak, eat and breathe.² Later came the ritual *s3ht*, which can be translated as Transformation into *3h*, because the existence of the dead in the other world and his attainment of immortality depended on being raised to

² Written and iconographic sources for the ritual of Opening of the Mouth for private individuals are rather modest. The oldest mention comes from the tomb of Merjet (*LD* II: 4–5); cf. Otto 1960: 6–8; Baly 1930: 174. Evidence for performing this ritual is found in tombs of the late Old Kingdom. Special sets of instruments used during this ceremony consisted of: an instrument *psš-kf*, two knives *ntrty* and six small stone vessels: two small jugs *h3ts*, one black, one white, and four cups *hnt*, two black and two white. Black vessels were usually made of basalt, the white ones of limestone or calcite. The set was placed in special stone or wooden containers. One of the ends of the instrument *psš-kf* recalls in shape the split tail-fin of a fish, cf. Van Walsem 1978–1979: 59–60. An identical object was used to cut the umbilical cord of the newborn. Its use in the ritual of Opening of the Mouth was supposed to be a symbolic reference to rebirth after death, see Roth 1992: 146–147; 1993: 78–79. All this indicates that the ritual of Opening of the Mouth was being performed already in the Old Kingdom, and the present author opts for rejecting once and for all J. Assmann's idea (2001: 409) of there being no testimonies from the Old Kingdom.

a new level of existence, referred to as *3h* (Taylor 2001: 31–32; Kees 1977: 115). These rituals appeared for the first time in the mastaba of Metjen in Giza (Fourth Dynasty; *LD* II: 4–5). The deceased was shown standing in two of the scenes, while standing and kneeling before him were the priests-embalmers *wjtj*. The accompanying inscription said that they were performing: *wpt-r*, *s3ht*, and *htp-dj-njswt*, that is, the rituals of Opening of the Mouth, Transformation into *3h* and Sacrifice.

By the end of the Fifth Dynasty, the embalmer-priest *wjtj* in representations connected with *3h* was replaced by the lector-priest *hrj-hbt*. Representations were accompanied by the inscription *s3ht in hrj-hb*, that is, “transformation into *3h* by the lector-priest,” or else *šdt s3h*, that is, “reading the transformation” (Junker 1938: 110).

The same sequence of rituals performed at the tomb, admittedly omitting the Opening of the Mouth ritual,³ is given by a later inscription, from the times of the Sixth Dynasty, carved on the false doors in the mastabas of Neferseshemre in the necropolis by the pyramid of Teti (Capart 1907: Pl. IX, false door on west wall in room III):

prrt-hrw k3 t hnkt hr-tp krrt m-ht s3h.t(w)
f in hrj-h3bt

which can be translated as:

“invocation offering consisting of oxen, bread and beer on the top of the mastaba⁴ after passing the lake, after he had been transformed into *3h* by the lector-priest”.

Another kind of ritual connected with *3h*, that is, *snmt 3h* or Feeding of *3h* (Junker 1934: 62–63), was represented in tombs of the late Fourth and Fifth Dynasties. Similarly as the ritual of Transformation into *3h*, it was performed by the *wjtj* or embalmer. Kneeling, he makes the gesture *hnw*, which usually symbolized joy (Dominicus 1994: 61–65), but could have had a different meaning in the context of a funeral ceremony, expressing the emotion caused by the presence of a superhuman force that was the dead man transformed into *3h* (Assmann 1989: 328). The inscriptions accompanying this kind of representations say: *snmt 3h* or *snmt 3h in wtj*, which means “feeding of the *3h*” or “feeding of the *3h* by the embalmer-priest”.⁵ At present, we are unable to determine the relation between the rituals *snmt 3h* and *s3ht*.⁶ Logic suggests the following solution: to feed an *3h*, it is necessary first to transform the deceased into an *3h*. Feeding of *3h* could have thus been part of the Transformation into *3h*

³ The absence of some ritual in the depiction in the tombs or in the inscriptions should not be surprising, because in the Old Kingdom there was still no canon for presenting or describing funerary rituals, cf. Wilson 1944: 201.

⁴ The word *krrt* means “Stelle des Grabes, wo beim Begraben dem Toten (seiner Statue) geopfert wird (wohl auf dem Dach der Mastaba über dem Schacht)”, see *Wb* V: 61; “Opferstelle (im Grab, wo dem Toten oder der Statue geopfert wird; vielleicht auf Dach der Mastaba über dem Schacht)”, cf. Hannig 2003: 1339.

⁵ Junker 1934: 65; Jones 2000: 405, No. 1492. One has to agree with Junker that the embalmer-priest had nothing to do with the ritual of feeding the *3h* in view of the character of his profession (mummification). Inscriptions clearly indicate that it was this priest who performed the ritual.

⁶ The ritual of feeding the *3h* is found in, among others, the tombs of Khafchufu (Simpson 1978: 14–15, Pl. XIX, Fig. 31), Kaninisut I (Junker 1934: Figs 15 and 16, 148–149, 169, Pl. Va), Seshethotep (Junker 1934: Figs 25, 27 and 33, 180–181, 184, 187; Junker 1938: Fig. 9a, 38; Kanawati *et alii* 2002: Pls 43a, 46, 21, 23–24.); that of Transformation into *3h* appears in the tombs of Metjen (*LD* II: 4–5), Meresankh III (Dunham, Simpson 1974: Fig. 9).

ritual, but it cannot be excluded that it could have been a completely independent ritual, which was performed after the transformation into *3h*. None of the above suggestions can be considered as final at the present stage of research.⁷ Similarly as in the case of the Transformation into *3h* ritual, the sacrifice occurred after the Feeding of *3h*.⁸

Moreover, scenes representing the funeral itself, very seldom represented in the tombs, confirm not only the sequence, but also the places where the funeral ceremonies were performed. Three of these depict activities taking place directly at the mastaba. These are the representations from the chapel of an anonymous mastaba Fs 3078 in Saqqara, the tomb of Tjeti in Hawawish (Kanawati *et alii* 2002: Fig. 12), and the tomb of Debeheni (*PM* III: 236; Smith 1946: 166–167, 171, Pl. 47c; Reisner 1942: 358; Junker 1934: 50; Kanawati *et alii* 2002: 31–32, Fig. 19).

The fullest and best preserved representation depicting this phase of the funeral comes from the above mentioned tomb of Debeheni [Fig. 1]. In the fifth register from the top, there are four kneeling priests *wjt*, shown making an offering. The first two hold small jugs in their hands, the third a cake and a small vessel *nw*, the fourth only one vessel *nw*. The accompanying inscription is: *wdn jht* i.e. making offerings. The fifth priest is standing, holding a vessel *kbh* in his left hand, and the inscription states

snmt 3h in wtj, that is, “feeding of the *3h*”. In the sixth register sacrificial animals are depicted and, below them, seven bearers of offerings who climb a ramp leading to the top of the mastaba. They are carrying fowl, haunches, beer jars, bread loaves and cakes. At the bottom of the representation, next to the mastaba wall, successive gifts are standing, waiting their turn. There is no doubt that we are dealing here with



Fig. 1. Scene from the tomb of Debeheni in Giza depicting funerary rites (After LD 80)

⁷ It should be taken into consideration that changes observed in the inscriptions concerning *3h* could reflect development of religious thought, cf. Goedicke 1955: 225–226. The absence of sufficient comparative material does not permit these changes to be defined. Perhaps we are dealing with an early and late form of the sacrifice ritual, see Dominicus 1994: 80–87; Junker 1938: 103–115.

⁸ The offering ritual in scenes of “Feeding of the *3h*” is performed by *hrj-wdbw*, that is, the Superior of the Offering, who is sometimes accompanied by the inscription *htp-dj-njswt* (Junker 1938: 65; Jones 2000: 603–604, No. 2212). The scenes depicting these rituals refer principally to posthumous worship, yet it is generally believed that they were performed for the first time during the funeral as proved by the scenes in the tombs of Debeheni and Tjeti, for example.

a scene depicting an offering ritual being performed during the funeral at the top of the mastaba.⁹

The remaining two representations recall that from the tomb of Debeheni. In the scene from tomb Fs 3078 (end of Third or beginning of Fourth Dynasty) (*PM* III: 443; Smith 1946: 151, note 1, Pl. 34c; Reisner 1942: 266; Metwally 1992: 27–29, Fig. 18), a procession of offering bearers was depicted, the figures walking up a sloping surface, presumably a ramp. They are carrying an animal leg and heart, a roll of cloth, a cosmetic vessel, a goose and a chest. A scene from the tomb of Tjetj, unfortunately very damaged, also shows a procession of offering bearers ascending a ramp. Ramps leading up to the top of the mastaba are confirmed in the archaeological record (Alexanian 1998: 4–5, Fig. 1; Arnold 2000: 213).

The above discussion leads to the conclusion that the offering ritual took place at the top of the mastaba, presumably close to the burial shaft, after the rituals of Opening of the Mouth and Transformation into *ʒh*, and the placing of the body in the burial chamber.

This sequence of the rituals suggests that the sacrifice was intended not for the deceased but for the deceased transformed into *ʒh*, hence it is interesting to consider what the purpose of this offering was.

The spirit *ʒh* and the role it played in Egyptian funerary beliefs has been the object of many studies (Englund 1978: 17–20). The word comes from the verb *ʒh*, which means “to be effective”.¹⁰ The dead becoming *ʒh*, that is, “effective”, were imbued with superhuman characteristics, proper to the gods rather than to people, which does not mean that they became divine.¹¹ They could act, make contact with the world of the living, influence the fate of people. This is best reflected by the so-called “Letters to the Dead”, a set of 12 texts, of which nine come from the late Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period.¹² The letters were written down usually on vessels (bowls and stand), but copies are known from papyrus, linen canvas and stelae. It is commonly accepted that offerings were made to the dead in these vessels and the dead in consuming them read the letters as well.¹³ Still, there is no proof for this theory. No traces of

⁹ The interpretation of this representation as an offering *phr*, cf. Lapp 1986: 146–149, has not met with approval, see Alexanian 1998: 10–11.

¹⁰ The idea that *ʒh* comes from the verb *ʒh*, that is, “shine”, “glow”, should definitely be rejected, cf. *Wb* I: 13–16 and 33; Friedman 1984–1985: *passim*; and especially Jansen-Winkel 1996: *passim*.

¹¹ Kees 1977: 196; Englund 1978: 17–18, where *ʒh* is defined as divine power; Demarée 1983: 192, who points to the fact that *ʒh* is not a separate being or element of the human spirit, but a level or a way of existence; according to Otto 1942, *ʒh* is an ethereal, transcendental form of the deceased.

¹² Letter on canvas (CG 25974): Gardiner, Sethe 1928: 1–3, Pl. I–IA; Wente 1990: 211; small bowl from Kaw: Gardiner, Sethe 1928: 3–5, Pls II, IIA, III, IIIA; Wente 1990: 211–212; small bowl from Berlin (22573): Gardiner, Sethe 1928: 5–7, Pls V, VA; Wente 1990: 214; small bowl from the Louvre (E 6134): Piankoff, Clère 1934; Wente 1990: 214; El-Leithy 2003: 308; small bowl from Hu: Gardiner, Sethe 1928: 5, Pls IV, IVA; Wente 1990: 215; stand from Chicago (13945): Gardiner 1930; Wente 1990: 213; El-Leithy 2003: 306; papyrus from Naga ed-Deir (N 3737): Wente 1990: 212–213; papyrus from Naga ed-Deir (N 3500): Simpson 1970: 56; Wente 1990: 213; El-Leithy 2003: 307; stela from the Cairo Museum: Wente 1975–1976; Wente 1990: 215.

¹³ Theory proposed by Alan Gardiner and K. Sethe, cf. Gardiner, Sethe 1928: 3; repeated uncritically by Wente 1990: 210; El-Leithy 2003: 305; Pinch 2003: 445; Grieshammer 1975: 864.

offerings were ever found in any of the vessels and the archaeological context of most of the letters is unknown. Whenever it is known, nothing suggests that the vessel was actually intended for an offering, while the fact that letters could be recorded also on stelae, papyri or textiles, seems to weaken this theory even more.¹⁴ It is equally unlikely that the letters were placed with the dead during the funeral or after opening the tomb for the next burial (Pinch 2003: 150).

In the letters, the living wrote to the dead — children to parents, parents to children, spouses to each other — turning to their relatives with their problems (quarrels over inheritance, infertility, treatment of a heavy illness, punishment for the enemy), asking for their intervention in matters which exceeded “human” capacity.

From the texts, it is quite clear that the deceased as *ꜥḥ* could be very helpful and useful, but could also be dangerous and cause problems to the living. Evidence of this is found not only in the Letters to the Dead, but also in funerary inscriptions, in which the dead warned potential looters against the plundering and profanation of the tomb, and demanded that people entering the chapel be ritually clean (*wꜥb*). They threatened that anyone who broke the taboo would fall victim to the *ꜥḥ* (Grieshammer 1975: 866; Zandee 1977: 197–198).¹⁵

In the inscriptions, the deceased is frequently referred to as *ꜥḥ ꜥpr jḥt-f*, meaning

“*ꜥḥ* concentrated on his things” (Mariette 1899: 375b). If the spirit *ꜥḥ* was dangerous, it meant as a rule that the dead had not received proper offerings or respect (Pinch 2003: 150–151). It was in the interest of the living to perform the offering ritual during the funeral so that the spirit *ꜥḥ* would be satisfied and would do no harm to the living. The Egyptians were aware that offerings brought to the tomb as part of a posthumous cult would cease shortly after death (Kákósy 1989: 96). Likely, they were attempting to protect themselves against a situation in which the dead, deprived of offerings, could return as the spirit *ꜥḥ* and take revenge on the living. Hence, the existence of magical procedures during the sealing of the entrance to the burial chamber (painting the entrance white, burning incense and animal sacrifices, see Rzeuska 2005: 444–453), which were supposed to prevent the spirit *ꜥḥ* from leaving the chamber. The Breaking of Red Vessels ritual *sd dšwrt* could also imaginably be included here, hence it should be treated as an element of separation (on the archaeological remains of such deposits, see Rzeuska 2005: 492–512). If, despite this, the spirit *ꜥḥ* managed to penetrate the blocking, the offering left in the shaft was designed to tempt it and prevent it from leaving the tomb (Rzeuska 2005: 444–453). Even so, all these precautions must have been insufficient and clearly the spirit *ꜥḥ* escaped into the world of the living. At least the Ancient Egyptians seem to have seen it

¹⁴ The custom of writing letters to the dead is still alive in Egypt today, see El-Leithy 2003: 308–310; no offerings to the dead have been observed on this occasion.

¹⁵ An excellent example is constituted by the inscription from the tomb of Nenki, *PM* III: 187; Piehl XXXX: 122–123; *Urk.* I: 260, 17; Morschauser 1991: 154. It is not clear whether the so-called curses also refer to the dead. The absence of the words *mwt* or *mwt*, that is, the deceased, which should theoretically be accompanied by a name, if the person is no longer among the living, would contradict this. Abu Bakr, Osing 1973: 129–130. For a list of objects, see Posener 1975: 67–69; 1987: 2–6; on the symbolism of curse texts, see Ritner 1993: 136–142.

this way, as suggested by the existence of priests referred to as *shn 3h*, attested from a deep past (Kaplony 1963–1964: 733, note 302; Jones 2002: 832–833, No. 3036). The role and tasks of priests and priestesses of this kind (women with this function are known to have existed) are still not well established.

The third stage, incorporation, usually encompasses the feast ending the funeral ceremonies, after which the Breaking of Red Vessels ritual took place. This ritual is not confirmed in any of the known iconographical sources from the Old Kingdom,

but it is mentioned in lists of offerings (e.g. Duell 1938: Pl. 67; Firth, Gunn 1926: 95). The *Ramesseum E* papyrus mentions “bearers of red vessels” *hryw dšrwt* (Gardiner 1930: 16; Helck 1981: 155). It would also appear that the Feeding of *3h* ritual described above should also be treated as one of the incorporation rituals [Fig. 1].

Summing up these brief considerations, the burial ceremony during the Old Kingdom in Egypt was subjected to the same divisions and the same universal symbolism as interpreted by van Gennep.

World of the living	RITUAL OF PASSAGE			Realm of the Dead
	Separation	Transition	Incorporation	
Man	Mourning	Mummification	Feast at the tomb	<i>3h</i> creature
Body	Crossing to the necropolis Depositing coffin in the chamber Sealing the chamber entrance	Ceremonial crossing to the tomb Opening of the Mouth ritual Transformation into <i>3h</i> ritual	Pilgrimages to sacred places, procession with papyrus stems Dance of <i>mww</i> Feeding of the <i>3h</i>	Mummified body and its substitutes: statues and images on walls
<i>k3</i> soul	Breaking of Red Vessels ritual			<i>k3</i> soul <i>b3</i> soul ? No certain sources confirming this element with regard to private individuals

Fig. 1. Phases of “rite de passage” in the Old Kingdom

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