Offering Tables as Ritual Landscapes. An Anthropological Perspective of Ancient Egyptian *Materia Magicae*

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Abstract: Offering tables have been neglected in the study of ancient Egyptian funerary ritual and have not been adequately handled as cultic/ritual artefacts placed within a mortuary landscape. This paper will apply theoretical approaches regarding the use, context and ritual significance of mortuary ritual artefacts to the analysis of offering tables in order to illustrate the difficulties in understanding such artefacts and identifying viable approaches to defining ancient Egyptian magical practice. It is proposed that offering tables or platters from Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt (ca.2600-1750 BCE) may reflect architectural and topographic features in their design, revealing essential information regarding their ritual use and context. Several such objects display, in miniature, entire canal systems thus indicating the life-giving forces that such irrigation systems transmitted to fields and pools from the inundating Nile water. The offering objects may therefore be ritual landscapes themselves, used as ritual theatres for activating the *ka.*

Introduction

The Ancient Egyptian Offering Table

In ancient Egyptian rituals offering tables constituted a link between the living and a spiritual sphere, providing nourishment to the deceased[1] while their size, shape, material and placement indicated the social status of their users. Most tables could be found in tombs, in the vicinity of false doors or statues representing members of the elite.[2] The tables are made of numerous materials, and there are examples in diverse shapes and sizes, depending on context and time period. Some may carry depictions of victuals, vessels and vegetation, though most commonly they exhibit features connected with water.[3]

Much research remains to be done in connection with these ritual artefacts, not only within the realm of Egyptology, but also in the archaeological record.[4] The offering tables are generally found in museum collections, though so far they have seldom been studied in an all-encompassing manner,[5] and I hope this study will constitute a contribution to this endeavour.

[1] Bolshakov 2001.

[2] Forman – Quirke 1996.

[3] Information is based on an ongoing catalogue composed of over 400 offering tables and similar objects in collections in Egypt, Europe and the USA.

[4] This paper is based on a PhD thesis first started in 2016 at the Department of Archaeology at Durham University UK. Since then, over 400 offering tables, including similar objects from museum collections in Europe and the US have been studied in detail and classified according to a strict methodology allowing the author to interpret the context, use and significance of this type of ritual object in ancient Egyptian funerary ritual.

[5] Important publications concerning the classification and interpretation of offering tables include Regina Hölzl (2002) where she describes, catalogues and analyses an extensive sample of stone offering tables (as well as some pottery offering trays) ranging from the Old to the New Kingdom. Using samples from numerous museums she identifies and categorises different types of offering tables, arranging them in accordance with clear and useful typologies. Even if Hölzl's comprehensive study mentions their potential role in ancient Egyptian funerary ritual, a detailed account of the

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An offering table is essential for the performing of specific Egyptian rituals. Anthropologists are generally reluctant to define rituals. They are quite diversified, change over time and are often performed in a routinely, almost instinctive, manner, though they may also be emotionally engaging.[6] Accordingly, rituals may be carried out as highly structured, repetitively performed acts at the same time as they may be deeply personal. Nevertheless, most anthropologists agree that rituals are actions and if being *sacred* they are connected with and dependent on beliefs, symbols and myths.[7] For our purpose we define rituals as activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed within a segregated area and in accordance with an established order.[8] Action is central to any ritual and the kind of performances connected with offering tables were sacrifices, in the broadest sense implied by the Latin terms *sacra*, sacred things, and *facere*, to do.

Social anthropology is characterized by a holistic approach, meaning that it connects things, thoughts and actions within a specific context, demarcated by time and space. An offering table was part of a specific physical context, a tangible reality, such as a landscape and/or, a tomb. Its use and shape depended on myths, traditions and religious beliefs. Accordingly, an in-depth description of an offering table implies an analysis of its appearance, use and context and thus it also becomes a study of human behaviour (*ánthrōpos*, human and *logos*, study).

An anthropological approach implies that the role of the researcher is critical. How does her/his cultural background influence an interpretation of objects and rituals? The context of our modern world, its moral and ethical attitudes, socio-religious framework and scientific approach, affect our understanding of the ancient past, making us either emphasize or overlook phenomena which may have had a different meaning or importance for those people we are trying to understand.[9] As outlined by post-processual archaeologists, it is plausible that the outcome of a scientific excavation, or analysis, is influenced by the researcher´s own principles and ideology.[10] A persistent ideology with its roots in past centuries makes us prone to interpret our findings in the light of "westernized" ideas about the separation of body and soul, linear thinking, a polarization between culture and nature, cosmos and chaos, male and female, purity and impurity, etc.[11]

Since we are mainly concerned with remains found in connection to burials we might be overly focussed on ancient Egyptian attitudes to death and the dead, exaggerating concerns and ideas related to death and afterlife. Remaining pictures, texts and artefacts might have been concentrated to and used by a specific social class and thus create an eschewed notion of ancient Egyptian society, beliefs and traditions. By letting a section represent the whole we might forget differences in space and time, varied attitudes and behaviour among men and women, social classes and geographical areas. Accordingly, there has traditionally existed a certain disconnection between funerary ritual

context and function of these tables, as well as ritual theory, theological notions and comparisons to other *materia magica*, do not constitute an essential part of the scope of her study. Nevertheless, she emphasizes the fact that offering tables and basins have both symbolic and functional properties and played a vital role in mortuary ritual. There have also been extensive museum catalogues such as Ahmed Kamal (1909)'s early Cairo Museum catalogue as well as Labib Habachi's (1977) Turin Museum catalogue. Nevertheless, offering tables have scarcely to my knowledge been analysed in relationship with and in accordance to funerary ritual.

[6] McCauley – Lawson 2002.

[7] Bell 1992, 19–29.

[8] Essential studies of rituals are Bell 1992; Turner 1969; Schechner – Appel 1990.

[9] See Nyord 2018.

[10] Shanks – Tilley 1992.

[11] Meskell 2002.

and the study of ancient Egyptian material culture.[12] Egyptology began as a discipline interpreting and analysing texts and finds associated with the elite. The archaeology of funerary contexts, such as tombs and mortuary temples dominated the past century and it is more recently that the entire mortuary landscape has obtained an increased attention through the use of phenomenology, anthropological analysis and theological thought.[13]

A persisting problem is the difficulty of studying objects in their original archaeological context, due to grave robbery, antiquated excavation and collection techniques or, incomplete museum records. Furthermore, it is also common to find typological studies as an end in themselves and archaeological reports where artefacts are analysed and quantified, but not placed within a ritual setting, other than a vague location within a tomb.[14]

Ancient Egyptian funerary texts have only recently been associated with physical, mortuary elements.[15] Interpretations of ancient Egyptian theological thought have in the past mainly been based on the transcription and translation of famous text genres such as the Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts and numerous versions of the Book of the Dead, ignoring other traces of written information or their relationship to other material from a tomb.

Furthermore, Egyptology has suffered from a certain degree of "oversimplification", perhaps in a general conviction that ancient Egyptians were obsessed by a yearning for eternal life. The study of magical practice within Egyptology has sometimes also been frowned upon, especially while dealing with objects, which use has been dismissed as "common knowledge", though interdisciplinary analysis has the potential to recontextualise the material.[16] It is difficult to find abundant examples[17] of cross-cultural comparisons and other anthropological methods intended to define ritual practices. Only a few sources mention ancient sub-Saharan rituals in relation to ancient Egyptian magical practice.[18] It seems that ancient Egyptians have been and still are depicted as being independent from neighbouring civilisations and unique in their practices, but this is certainly not the case.

An archaeological approach to ancient Egyptian culture would be to take a point of departure from a specific object found within a specific geographic/spatial context and examine its shape, material, colour, wear and tear. Such an approach could then be further developed through an anthropological approach, which would connect the use and appearance of an artefact to its assumed spatial and ritual context and thus trace its meaning for the people of a specific time and place.

Already Émile Durkheim, generally considered to be one of the founders of social anthropology, emphasized the importance ritual objects have for identifying a religion´s social aspects.[19] Somewhat later, Marcel Mauss described how rituals *sacralise* objects used in religious acts.[20] Based on direct observations of rituals, cultural anthropologists Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz did during the 1960s begin to interpret each element of a sacred act by relating it to the symbolic and communicative context of the society in which it was performed.[21] Such an approach was by Geertz labelled as 'thick description'.[22] While connecting each action to its specific context Geertz emphasized the importance of not making any cross-cultural generalisations. However,

[12] Nyord 2018; Quirke 2015
[13] See Baines – Lacovara 2002; Arnold 2015; Gange 2015; Meskell 2004.
[14] See Quirke 2015; Richards 2005.
[15] Maitland 2018; Hays 2009.
[16] Nyord 2018; Bussmann 2015.
[17] See van den Brink 1982.
[18] See Quirke 2015; Wilburn 2005.
[19] Durkheim 1965.
[20] Mauss 1967.
[21] Turner 1969; Geertz 1973.
[22] Geertz 1973, 3–32.

Geertz was generally not concerned with utensils used during a ritual. He concentrated more on the symbolic functions of ritual behaviour, this while Turner (1977) tried to integrate both action and materials. He defined ritual as "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests".[23]

Turner´s more inclusive definition of rituals may be taken as a point of departure for a thorough investigation of ritual utensils in the field of artefact studies.[24] Archaeological methods have an even more post-processual approach, putting emphasis on "contextual archaeology" and therefore a combination of scientific methodology, ethnographic and anthropological theory, ethical implications, and archaeological processes. As a result, material culture has gained momentum and is not only a diagnostic tool, or an indicator of context, but is provided with symbolic meaning, indicating the imagination and ideology of the individual behind its production, use and disposal.[25] In this sense, "thick description" might be considered as a viable method for understanding the potential use of a ritual artefact. Accordingly, in my study of offering tables and similar material I apply a holistic archaeological/anthropological approach similar to the "thick description" outlined above.

The point of departure will be ancient Egyptian notions about the transforming force of water and how this is mirrored in mythology, rituals and magical practice. Iconography, form, colouring and material are connected with an ideological context. Since rituals are carried out within a specific space, offering tables can be connected with specific ritual landscapes, with the placement of some examples within such known areas. How the spatial context has influenced the appearance of offering tables is discussed in connection with their likeness to tombs, houses, temples and irrigation structures. Lastly, the use of offering tables is linked to written spells, like chants, instructions and lists that have been used to activate their life-giving force and involve participants in the rituals.

Setting the Scene

The creative power of words and imagery was central to ancient Egyptian magical practice and the task of a priest, or magician, was to discern and use the essence, the *ka*, in humans and objects.[26] Magical powers were believed to be inherent in stones, metals, minerals, plants and animals.[27] Anyone who could manipulate objects into becoming charged with divine energies was considered to be a kind of magician, even sculptors and artisans were described as "life givers".[28] The *Ka* was assumed to be a vital force resting in all things, both material and immaterial, while *Heka* was the creative impulse which activated the vital forces in everything, the word actually means "He who propels ka".[29] Liquids, foremost water, were the main vehicles for transferring and maintaining *Heka*.[30] *Heka* was the foremost method to capture the cosmic power of *ka,* generally through the help of water, and channel it through specific rituals. It is important to note that the definitions of *Heka* used here are strictly related to plausible interpretations regarding the use of ritual artefacts such as offering tables, and therefore the mechanics of ritual, rather than defining the complicated and numerous aspects of *Heka* and *Ka*.[31]

[23] Turner 1977, 183.
[24] Hicks 2010.
[25] Hicks 2010.
[26] Pinch 2006.
[27] Ritner 1993, 17; see Aufrère 1997.
[28] Raven 2012, 33.
[29] Raven 2012.
[30] Gallash-Hall 2003, 53.
[31] For further reading on the mechanics of *Heka* see Fitzenreiter 2018; Testa 2017; da Silva Vega 2009; Étienne 2000; Velde 1970.

Water was a means of unifying the forces of chaos, as evidenced in Egyptian creation myths and mirrored in libation rituals, which could be considered as the transference of creative force through "god´s dew".[32] The distributive properties of water carried magical properties from one object to another, thus materialising the essence of a magical utensil. As a life providing entity, active but not alive, water was considered to be transformative, both in its passive and active form.[33] Rituals intended to harness and distribute its force.

To understand the role and use of water we need to consider its function in ancient Egyptian cosmogony. *Nun*, the primeval waters, was regarded as the origin of everything, while the seasonal flooding of the Nile was an obvious sign of water's dynamic life force.[34] Canals and reservoirs may be considered as efforts to harness the chaos and unpredictability of natural forces, to secure welfare and prosperity, and the use of *Heka* may be assumed to have a similar purpose.

The triad of Seth/Osiris/Horus was believed to collaborate to activate magical properties of inanimate objects. Seth was the active agent who killed Osiris and disbursed his energy by dividing his corpse between Egypt's *nomes*. He also deprived Horus of his eye to spread its moisture throughout the universe. Osiris´s efflux and Horus's eye were liquid entities and the cyclic force of water was believed to be set in motion by Seth's actions.[35] The active and passive events described in myths related to the Heliopolitan triad were reflected in the changing states of the Nile. Before the Aswan dam, the Nile became red when its water mixed with soil during the inundation period. Before the inundation, stagnant water remaining in fields and pools became green from vegetation and rotting organic matter and when these organic substances receded through the influx of the vitalizing, inundating Nile water, it became white and creamy. These colours became related to mythology – the red symbolized the death of Osiris and the life-giving qualities of his streaming blood, green symbolized the vegetation nurtured by Osiris´s efflux in his state as a rotting corpse, while white water suggested the milk and tears of Isis, who restored Osiris to life and gave birth to his successor Horus.[36]

As described by Oestigaard (2011), the ancient Egyptian idea of cosmos, like in most creation myths, was centred on water in its various aspects of activity and inactivity. Water does in its stagnant form create life, while in its active form it carries with it the force of life. Furthermore, water "mirrors" cosmos since elements within the sky are reflected onto bodies of water, while their depth indicates access to obscure areas, making it an axis point to realms beyond human existence.[37] Cosmos signifies order and thus allows humans to define themselves and their role in universe.[38] Conman (2003) states that most ritual elements within ancient Egyptian religion reflected a dynamic understanding of the cosmos and its various elements. The sky, Nut, could thus be considered as both an active and ever-changing goddess and as an inanimate body, more like Nun.[39] Cosmos was both stable and in a constant state of flux, dependent on dichotomies between elements that complemented each in such a manner that a perfect balance was achieved, supported by the flux and changing nature of water. Nun, the counterpart of Nut, was often labelled as "the watery one", constituting a connection between the sky and its mutability in the form of water.[40] Both the Heliopolitan and

[32] Blackman 1995, 78.
[33] Oestigaard 2011a.
[34] Rotsch 2005.
[35] Oestigaard 2011a, 30–38.
[36] Oestigaard 2011a, 51–53.
[37] Oestigaard 2011b, 41.
[38] Ragavan 2013.
[39] Conman 2003.
[40] Allen 2011.

Hermopolitan cosmogonies place much emphasis on water.[41] Both cosmogonies indicate the eternal existence of an essential natural force behind all creation, namely fertility and regeneration, supported by a constant presence and flux of water.[42]

While trying to define an individual's place within society it is essential to understand a civilisation's notions about cosmos. What is evident in ancient Egyptian cosmogonies is a need to address the duality and inevitability of nature, expressed through tangible and visible elements, such as water, darkness, and feelings of angst, linked to agency. The Heliopolitan cosmos reflects the legitimisation of royal power as an urge to unify the nation to secure cycles such as the inundation of the Nile and the rising of the sun. The Hermopolitan Ogdoad[43] reflected notions present in almost all societies: what is "hidden" and what is "constant" and what links these notions–namely water, encompassing the entire sacred space, a means to create and transfer the energy needed for creation. In this context, the offering table constituted an essential tool for supporting, harnessing and activating the life-giving force of water.

Various Forms and Appearances of Offering Tables

Offering tables were placed in the proximity of, or inside tombs where they transmitted life providing force to the dead, or in temples and private homes, where they served as a means of communication with deceased ancestors and the divine realm.[44] They were used to bring forth and store *ka*, through basins and other watery features. As cultic objects, offering tables formed the centre of attention and their specific aspects may have influenced their placement in a royal funerary temple, or in the badly lit intimacy of a private tomb chapel.[45] Accordingly, most offering tables are equipped with a spout where the water comes forth to be collected after flowing across the "energizing" surface of the tables and then being poured into the tombs, bringing gifts and services to the inhabitants of another realm.[46] The size, shape, material and placement of offering tables indicated the intentions and social status of their users.

Most offering tables consist of a stone slab with reliefs depicting food and beverages. Several are inscribed with symbols and hieroglyphic texts. However, variations are numerous, as are the beliefs and rituals they reflect, which furthermore changed over time. Spouts are generally present to collect the water, which was then

[41] Ancient Egyptians believed in both tangible and intangible cosmic elements, demonstrated by the Heliopolitan and Hermopolitan cosmogonies. The first one represented a dynamic existence with Osiris as god of regeneration, Isis connected with nurturing and motherhood, Seth representing change and movement, while Nephtys acted as mediator and a complement to Seth. The Hermopolitan Ogdoad (the eight primordial deities worshipped in Hermopolis) maintained cosmic order through masculine and feminine pairs represented by Nun (inertness and water) and Naunet, Kek (darkness), Kauket, Heh (infinity and formlessness) and Hauhet, as well as Temenu (lostness) and Temenet (Allen 1988), commonly referred to as Amun and Amaunet, "hiddenness or wind", see Wilson 1997; Wilkinson 2003; Baines – Lesko – Silverman 1991.

[42] Allen 1988; Bickel 1994, 28.

[43] It is argued that the Hermopolitan Ogdoad does not appear in sacred texts or iconography before the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1650–1550 BCE) or even the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 BCE) and their female counterparts do not appear until much later (Zivie-Choche 2006; Bickel 1994). However, there may also be evidence of a form of the cosmogony which may even date back to as early as the Old Kingdom. Wilson 1997, 728; Borchardt 1913, Bt.21.

[44] The following section is based on observations made during examinations of offering tables and similar offering tables in various museum collections, which in my upcoming PhD thesis are recorded in a catalogue which in detail describes each individual object. A database is currently compiled, providing essential statistical analysis.

[45] Harrington 2015.

[46] Similar ritual processes involving the different phases of water which occur in the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony as described in Roth (1992) as well as the act of planting grain seeds in wooden Osiris Mummy effigies. As you would water the seeds, the grain would grow, just as the inundation would cause the banks of the Nile to overflow with produce. Centrone 2005.

absorbed back into the earth to reach the dead, collected in basins, or recycled and reused. Canals and basins may indicate the number of people to which the table was dedicated. However, they may also illustrate the inundation of fields and canals, indicating the active and inactive states of the Nile. Basins depicted on offering tables may thus be considered as representing the inactive, dormant qualities of water, connecting it to notions like those related to the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, while canals/mazes interlink irrigation fields and may thus be considered as representations of the active qualities of Seth in the Heliopolitan cosmology. During the New Kingdom and later periods, staircases within central basins begin to emerge on offering tables, maybe as a reference to sacred lakes within temple complexes used by priests to purify themselves before their contact with the divine during the required rituals. These features may be present to purify the water and accordingly the offerings, while at the same time they were activating the water.

Some stone offering tables are inscribed with, or have the shape of the *hotep* sign, meaning "to be satiated" or "offering".[47][48]This sign may have been incorporated to represent the table as a tool for offering life-giving liquids to the dead pharaoh, now in the semblance of Osiris and may thus also be considered as a reference of the efflux of Osiris, which within the Nile water brings rejuvenation to the land.

The colouring of an offering table could be considered as a sign of its property as transmitter of magical potency, indicating the different colour of the Nile water described above. Pottery offering trays often contain traces of red paint, which may be a reference to the Red Nile condition and thus the efflux of Osiris, the use of whitewash may indicate the White Nile condition and thus refer to the restorative powers of Isis and Nephtys. Some stone offering tables could apparently have been painted with blackish/reddish hues with natural pigments which would have had a particular effect when in contact with water.[49]

Material used to manufacture offering tables may have had both practical purposes and a symbolic significance. Alabaster, granite and basalt were generally reserved for temples and prestigious tombs, while softer materials such as limestone and sandstone were cheaper and more readily available.[50] The latter were furthermore porous, absorbing materials (especially sandstone), a property that may be assumed to preserve the force of water, due to the moisture remaining in the stone. Steatite (soapstone) erodes easily and water flowing across it could thus release and carry with it magic force previously absorbed through the offering table´s contagious quality. Basalt was a prestigious material reserved for larger temple basins and offering tables. When water was poured over them the basalt may have provided a shimmering effect, making a powerful impression during communal rituals. Smaller offering tables, such as trays and soul houses were usually made out of pottery, or malleable materials, indicating that they can have been manufactured within and for the use in a private household, rather than in specialized workshops.[51] Such offering tables are particularly interesting to study and handle since they often have an "individualistic" character, indicating a personal

[47] Betrò 2010, 56.

[48]  Htp sign – this triliteral sign originates from the predynastic offering ritual of placing loaves of bread and other victuals on a reed mat in front of the deceased within grave-pits. Bolskakov 2001; Taylor 2001.

[49] Numerous stelae dating back to the Middle Kingdom contain natural coloured pigments such as red and green. However, it is difficult to exactly identify the colouring on offering tables present in this study, mostly due to wear and a possible use of liquids. In this context it may be mentioned that the stela of the "Overseer of Artisans *Irtisen*", mentions the existence of methods for making natural pigments water resistant. Barta 1970; Delange 2015, 153.

[50] Aston et al. 2000.

[51] Bourriau et al. 2011.

choice of shape and use, often demonstrated by specific wear and tear.[52]

The Ritual Landscape

Space is understood as a physical and social landscape imbued with meaning through place-bound social practices. A sacred space is generally understood as an area set apart from everyday life, nevertheless this does not mean that it has to contain any specific, tangible constructions made by humans. Space is changed into *place*, if it is socially constructed to facilitate interaction between people and groups, while being based on institutionalized land use through political, religious and economic decisions. This means that a place is constructed in the sense that it generally contains structures made by humans. Temples, and tombs can thus be considered as sacred places.[53] Boundaries between the landscape of the living and that of the dead are not impermeable, both spheres are interconnected and look similar. The connection between a "spiritual" space and everyday life is crucial for an understanding of ancient Egyptian ritual. A sacred/ritual landscape is where *hierophany* takes place, "the explicit manifestation of the divine".[54]

Ancient Egyptian cult sites influenced the design of offering tables. A tomb may, just like an offering table, be considered as being placed between two realms: that of the dead and that of the living. Numerous ancient Egyptian texts indicate that the inner chambers of a tomb are part of the Duat, the Underworld. New Kingdom tombs were cut deep into cliffs and reached through intricate pathways,[55] maybe indicating notions related to Duat and the cult of Osiris.[56]

In the Old Kingdom, a ritual landscape was exclusively dedicated to the king, constituting a "landscape of power", a manifestation of order and cosmos.[57] During the Middle Kingdom the sacred landscape became slightly changed since it became not exclusively reserved for the king, but was also made accessible to the elite and middle classes.[58] In spite of the fact that a sacred landscape was constructed to mirror cosmos and could even be considered as an intent to exercise a certain power over it, its creation was still dependent on the shape and specific character of the actual landscape. As evidenced by sites such as Giza, Saqqara, Memphis, etc., the location of sacred buildings was not only strategic but significantly symbolic, in tune with both the cosmos and social customs and ideology.[59]

Landscape in ancient Egypt constituted an interplay between natural and human-made elements, connected through processional routes. Chapels dedicated to the gods were built close to the quays of the Nile, while tomb chapels were positioned higher up on the slopes, reflecting the hierarchy present in the arrangement of Middle Kingdom towns.[60] The non-elite and the elite were separated in life as in death, something made evident through numerous types of tombs and their positions within necropoleis in Middle Egypt. At sites such as Qaw el-Kabir, Qubbat al-Hawa, Dayr al-Bahri, Beni Hasan, as well as Asyut, there is a clear differentiation between elite and non-elite tombs. At these sites, rock-cut tombs are quite common, sculpted directly into the cliff-face they are usually highly elaborate with extensive courtyards and façades, while directly beneath them are shaft-tombs and shallow tombs, lack-

[52] See Kilian 2012; Spence 2011; Leclère 2001.
[53] Further reading on ritual landscapes and specific case studies in archaeology see Hölscher 2012; for the conversion of "space" into "place" see De Certeau 2001.
[54] Magli 2013, 22.
[55] Harrington 2015.
[56] Quirke 2015, Magli 2013.
[57] Magli 2013, 22.
[58] Or at least there is more evidence for non-royal ritual landscapes during this time period. There are numerous examples for royal ritual landscapes before this, even when considering Predynastic burial sites. Dodson – Ikram 2008.
[59] Love 2004; Arnold 2015.
[60] Richards 2005; Moeller 2016.

ing commemorative superstructures, being reserved for the lower classes.[61] Since they were cut into nearby rock walls, elite tombs were visible from nearby towns and connected by communal processual routes, thus influencing the mind-set of the non-elite.

During the First Intermediate Period, dynastic Egypt endured a turbulent time with a rising "nomarchy" in Upper Egypt composed of local elites often engaged in territorial disputes[62]. New towns emerged within settings deprived of connotations to previous sacred spaces.[63] For the first time elite and non-elite were free to erect elaborate monuments, like stelae and votive chapels, while ritual utensils made in pottery became more common (or at least more commonly found). Traditions from the Old Kingdom blended with new influences, local styles mixed with royal, standardised designs.

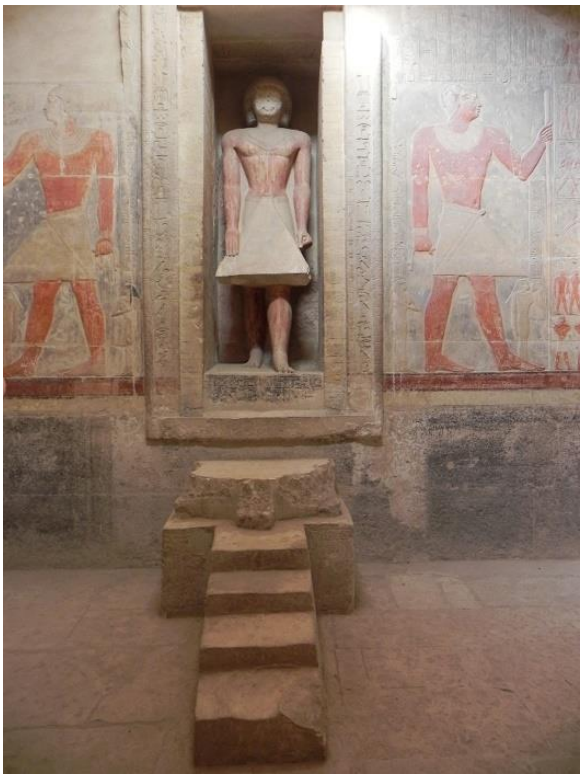

Fig. 1: The Ka statue of Mereruka in Tomb LS10 in the Teti Cemetery in Saqqara. (Lundius 2017).

Local towns and settlements grew in importance, such as Qaw el-Kabir, Deir Rifa, Asyut, Meir, Deir el-Bersha, Beni Hasan.[64] These developments altered the sacred landscape, as well as they gave way to what may be described as "personalised cults", indicated by ritual artefacts not only shaped like everyday objects, but also reproducing royal insignia, indicating an individual, everyday endeavour to get in touch with divine.[65]

Inside tombs, doorways constitute liminal spaces, separating areas that symbolise heaven, earth, and the underworld, indicated by specific imagery, such as sunken vs. raised reliefs, red colours vs. green, the depiction of underworld entities vs. scenes of the living.[66] Statues, stelae and offering tables were positioned by doorways as points of interaction during festival periods, placed in dark areas, but painted with vibrant colours, playing with light. Offering tables found in such liminal spaces were important in rituals intended to activate the deceased within the hidden chambers of the tomb complex. The monumental limestone offering table still found in situ at the foot of the *ka* statue of Mereruka, (Tomb LS10) located in the Teti Cemetery in Saqqara may be an example of such spaces (**Fig. 1**).

Generally speaking, there are three typical shapes of offering tables, including a potential fourth which is classified as a "soul house", due to its similarity to ancient Egyptian houses found in towns.[67] Such "soul houses" have been found in various mortuary contexts, though they all have common features which may be linked to the sacred landscape and mortuary architecture. ***Type A*** (**Fig. 2**) below is an offering tray usually oval with a t-shaped canal in the centre separating the table into two sections, above may depict a courtyard space or in-

[61] Willems 2014.
[62] Kemp 1995, 38.
[63] Arnold 2015.
[64] Arnold 2015.
[65] Arnold 2015.
[66] Harrington 2015, 144.
[67] Spence 2011; Niwinski 1975; Petrie 1907.

Fig. 2: *Type A* – An oval pottery offering tray (*MM13888*), unknown origin, showing traces of red paint and a t-shaped canal. Medelhavsmuseet i Stockholm.

Fig. 3: *Type B* – A limestone offering table *(CG 23.017)* containing a sunken area with depictions of offerings in raised relief, two basins and a canal flowing through an external spout. (reproduced from Kamal 1909, Pl. IX).

ternal offering chambers reserved for ritual offerings, while a second section may indicate an "active" area where water is activated via canals. ***Type B*** (**Fig. 3**) consists of a typical limestone offering table, with a raised or sunken central platform containing offerings encircled by a canal. ***Type C*** (**Fig. 4**) is constituted by pottery offering trays representing a courtyard with offerings, including a shrine/throne positioned at the top of the tray, mirroring chapels or shrines that became common during the Middle Kingdom. ***Type D*** (**Fig. 5)** are "soul houses" which contain a courtyard in front them, depicting offering items and canals.

Offering rituals performed in the vicinity of burial chambers and tombs were generally separated from the actual burial chamber by a wall and/or a shaft and were later in some cases even replaced by symbolic practices and rituals carried out in separate offering chapels.[68] A relevant example of monumental offering tables in situ can be found in the Heqaib Sanctuary on Elephantine Island, dating back to the Middle Kingdom (**Fig. 6**). This example illustrates how offering tables were placed in front of their respective *Ka* statues.[69] Nutrition for the dead was offered by family members, or in the case of the royal funerary/elite cult by priests (*hemu-ka*).[70] They entered accessible areas of the tomb, or nearby chapels and used the offering tables in combination with rituals activating depictions of offering lists and following instructions that were depicted and/or written on the

Fig. 4: *Type C* – A pottery offering tray (*ÄM 14357*) containing a shrine or enclosed structure inside a sunken courtyard containing various offerings and a spout. ÄMP Berlin.

[68] Harrington 2015, 138.
[69] Arnold 2006, 21.
[70] See Eaton 2013; Cauville 2012.

Fig. 5: *Type D* – A pottery "soul house" (*F1939/1.19*) made in coarse-ware with a four-columned façade and external spout. Note that the roof contains a smaller spout and various basin-like features. RMO Leiden.

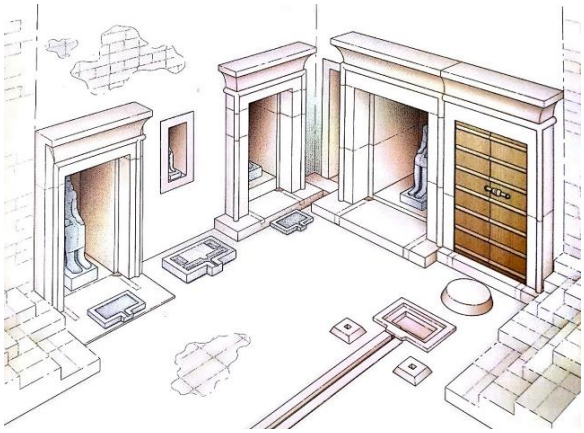

Fig. 6: Reconstruction of the internal features in the Heqaib Sancturary on Elephantine Island in Aswan (ca. 2030-1650 BCE). (Arnold 2015, 21).

walls.[71] That aspects of Middle Kingdom tombs influenced the design of offering tables becomes evident through a comparison between offering tables in the form of "soul houses" and rock-cut tombs and their respective courtyards, for example the rows of elite rock-cut tombs at Beni Hasan, where every tomb has a small square courtyard below ground level reached by a stairway (**Fig. 8**).[72] Most tombs were accessed through a causeway as evidenced by the elite rock cut tombs at Beni Hassan (Upper Cemetery). The offering tray (*E3253*) (**Fig. 7**) from Beni Hassan at the Manchester Museum, UK has a shape similar to the outer space of elite tombs, separating the public area from the secret internal structures.[73]

Fig. 7: A pottery offering tray (*E3253*) from Beni Hassan. Manchester Museum.

The "Upper Cemetery" at Beni Hassan includes elaborate façades with pillars and small covered spaces leading to internal offering chapels and then further into underground burial chambers. There are similar tomb structures at Asyut and Rifeh, as well as at Kahun and Lisht.[74] Less elaborate graves were constituted by "shaft tombs", vertically cut into the bedrock during the Middle Kingdom.[75] Several soul houses (**Fig. 5** above) and pottery offering trays (**Fig. 2&4** above) have been found in the vicinity of shaft tombs (**Fig. 9**).[76] Such soul houses and trays may not only be considered as miniature representations of "houses for the *ka*", but could also have been used as centrepieces in ritual spaces, similar to those in front of elite tombs. Most soul houses have a courtyard, a portico and a façade, as well as a spout, indicating that water was poured over them to become "energized" before being conducted into the tomb shaft via canals, or simply poured into

[71] Taylor 2000, 175; Strudwick 2005, 270.
[72] Snape 2011.
[73] Garstang 2002.
[74] Snape 2011.
[75] Garstang 2002; Arnold 2007.
[76] Garstang 2002; Petrie 1907, 14.

Fig. 8: A photograph of the elite rock cut tombs (BH15 and BH17) at the Upper Cemetery at Beni Hassan. (Ludius 2018).

Fig. 9: Soul house "in situ" next to a brick-lined Middle Kingdom shaft tomb at Abydos. (The Garstang Museum of Archaeology, University of Liverpool).

it.[77] Soul houses could simply be representations of tombs for the non-elite mirroring the monumental structures of elite tombs in miniature. A soul house (E4368) (**Fig. 10**) from Deir Rifa at the MET in New York represents features similar to the façades at the elite cemetery at Deir Rifa (**Fig. 11**)[78]. Another soul house (07.550) (**Fig. 13**) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston from Beni Hasan illustrates how soul

Fig. 10: Pottery soul house (07.231.11) from Deir Rifa (Tomb 72). MET.

houses mirror the facades of elite tombs seen from below (**Fig. 12**).

It is difficult to establish a context for most of the artefacts from early excavations, as their find-spot was often not recorded in detail. It is thus important to try to link them to their wider potential contexts, not only the mortuary landscape, but also by considering their use within a domestic setting, in household shrines.[79]

Another architectural feature alluded to by offering tables could be drainage canals surrounding mortuary temples, as well as irrigation systems present in the fields and/or in the Underworld. Several offering plates display entire canal systems and basins, indicating the life-giving forces such structures transmitted to fields and pools. Canals may also encircle offering plates, as if to limit them and perhaps charge them with empowered water. Several offering tables are manufactured in such a manner that they allow water to cover their entire surface, charging the whole table to an utmost degree. It may be assumed that the varying depths and engravings on the tables indicate

[77] Taylor 2000.
[78] Garstang 2002.
[79] See Quirke 2015.

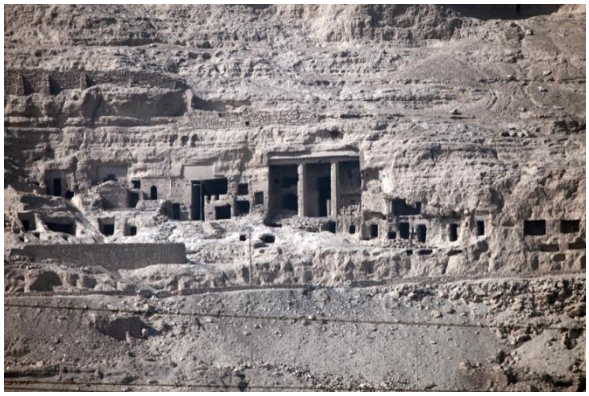

Fig. 11: The elite rock cut tombs of Deir Rifa. (Unger 2010).

Fig. 12: Two-columned façade of Tomb 15 at Beni Hasan. (Buhlke 2018).

that water was "activated" through its movement across the table, making it possible for the *ka* to permeate the water flowing across the table, at the same time as the ritual process could be prolonged in accordance with ritual actions and pronunciations of spells and utterances.[80] Designs on the surface of offering tables may also mimic the natural cycle of water, since water was poured upon them like the annual flood, inundating depictions of food, canals and other life enforcing imagery, and then becoming absorbed back into the earth, or collected in a vessel.

To get an impression of the ritual proceedings and their mimicking of real life it may be illuminating to compare them to techniques still used in Egyptian agriculture, where fields are flooded and separated by canals, similar to the imagery upon and the processes indicated by offering tables. Like the surface of an offering

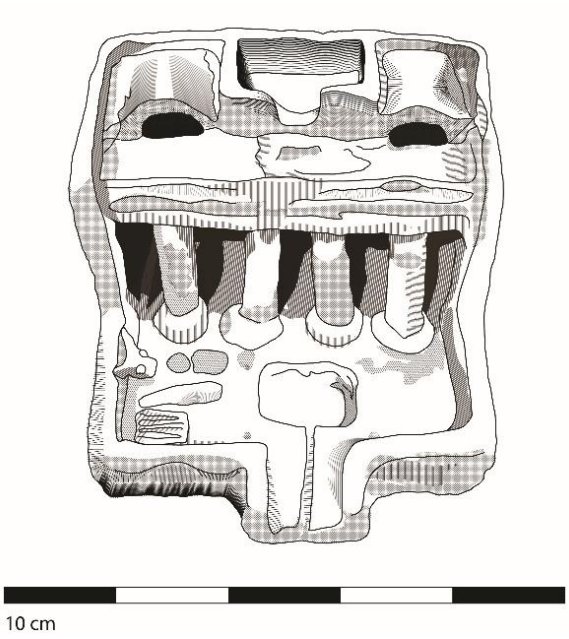

Fig. 13: Illustration of a pottery soul house (07.550) present at the MFA in Boston with numerous basins, canals and spouts also featuring a four-columned façade. (Lundius 2018).

table a field is filled with water and then drained after the water has soaked the ground. Egyptian irrigation fields near the village of Sa el Hagar in the Delta Region in modern Egypt (**Fig. 14 & 16**) and an example of a Middle Kingdom limestone offering table (32.1.213) (**Fig. 15**) from Lisht at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA may be representations of these processes. As seen in Fig. 14, the fields are initially being irrigated illustrating how the water fully covers areas while being separated by canals. These practices may be reflected in the ritual phases carried out upon an offering table: activation (water being flooded/poured) stagnation (water left to seep into the ground) and the final stage: inactivation (**Fig. 16**).

The iconography, form and material, of an offering table was functional, supporting the *Heka* process. Depictions of bread, vegetables, fruits, libation vessels and parts of slaughtered animals, may be considered as remnants of the original function of the tables when victuals

[80] Based on personal observation and handling of offering tables.

Fig. 14: Irrigated fields outside the village of Sa el Hagar in the Delta Region. (Lundius 2017).

Fig. 15: Limestone offering table (*32.1.213*) from Middle Kingdom Lisht containing various basins with interlinking canals leading to an external spout structure. MET.

were placed directly on reed mats or plates to ensure the survival of the deceased's *ka,*[81] real offerings eventually were replaced by reliefs, indicating beliefs in contagious magic.[82] If drained with water, provisions represented by their imagery were believed to transmit their nutritional essence to the liquid. Likewise, symbols of natural fecundity could be reflected by the imagery, shape and forms of the offering tables - lotuses, reeds, water, phallic forms, wombs, etc. transferring their fertility to the water that had been flushed over them. Depictions of vegetation and watery features may also refer to the primordial waters of Nun and the creative flux of the cosmos, as expressed in the Hermopolitan cosmogony. The tables may thus not only be considered as a means to connect the ritual performer with the deceased, but may also nurture, support and guide the inhabitant of the tomb into another realm, relating him/her to a sacred landscape, cosmos, providing her/him with agency as well as a purpose.

While studying offering tables it is important to consider the elaborate offering lists presented both on tomb walls and written down on various objects inside the burial chambers. There is an evident relationship between the table iconography and the iconography of the tomb, as well as an even clearer connection between the positioning of the table and that of the offering lists. Most lists are placed in specific areas in the inner offering chapels.[83] Over time offering lists moved closer to the deceased and were eventually placed within the actual coffin.

Fig. 16: Fields outside the village of Sa el Hagar in the Delta Region post-irrigation. (Lundius 2017).

Considering that the offering tables functioned as a means to interact with the deceased their imagery and the offering lists found in their vicinity indicate the religious importance and meaning of victuals. The specific victuals depicted, and lists were probably chosen since they were believed to be imbued with meaning due to their forms, nutritional value and origin. Food is integrated into religious/magical systems like those observed by Mary Douglas and elaborated in her theories about symbolic boundary maintenance.[84] Likewise, Claude Lèvi-Strauss assumed that everyday experience with things and concepts (like raw and cooked, fresh and rotten, moist and parched) could

[81] Bolshakov 2001; Taylor 2000.
[82] Frazer 1996.
[83] See Barta 1963; Deicher – Maroko 2015.
[84] Douglas 1966.

serve as conceptual tools for the formation of abstract notions.[85]

Finding the Ritual:
Written sources concerning ritual practice in connection with offering tables

There exists a connection between texts reserved for the deceased, which may be found on tomb walls, on various tomb paraphernalia, in coffins and in the numerous versions of funerary 'books', and rituals carried out for the well-being of the dead, not least those associated with the function of offering tables.[86]

Altenmüller (1972), systematised utterances from Pyramid Texts into roughly five rituals assumed to be performed in an official funerary setting: The Funeral Procession, The Great Offering Ritual, The Lesser Offering Ritual, The Ritual for the Royal Statue and The Rites of the Sacred Precinct.[87] According to Altenmüller, rites outlined in the Pyramid Texts may have been actual scripts for both words spoken and acts carried out during a ceremony, while offering lists depicted on the tomb walls might have served a similar purpose. However, the inscribed utterances lack any clear instructions and thus the connection between image and ritual action remains ambiguous.

Rituals described in Coffin Texts, and especially those concerning the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, have been related to Altenmüller's theories regarding funeral rites. In his article "The social and ritual context of mortuary liturgy of the Middle Kingdom (CT Spells 30-41)", Harco Willems (2001) outlines a mortuary liturgy and identifies specific physical events.[88] The texts, myths and rituals investigated by Willems are closely intertwined, making it difficult to decipher real life action performed by the priests and funeral party from presumed activities of the deceased in another realm. A next step in the interpretation of funerary rituals could be, to a higher degree than before, relate written texts to the extensive funerary equipment in the archaeological record, specifying the use of tools and traces of liquids found in tombs. In a more recent publication, Willems (2016) attempts to interpret ritual and votive artefacts found in an almost undisturbed tomb at Deir el-Bersha, dating back to the Middle Kingdom.[89] In his analysis Willems does not only consider the original context of the finds (including several miniature offering tables), but their relationship to each other to decipher the ritual outlined in Coffin Texts. As suggested by Hölzl (2002), even though not explicitly outlined in the texts, offering tables may have played a major role in almost all rituals and especially in the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony.[90]

As outlined above, there have been studies connecting offering tables with mortuary rites described in ancient Egyptian funerary literature. However, this paper emphasises the relationship between offering tables and the ritual landscape that may be discerned in funerary texts, comparing them to the actual mortuary landscape, thus trying to identify their ritual function. In ancient Egyptian contexts three types of religious texts are of particular importance:

Pyramid Texts (Pyr), dating back to the Old Kingdom (2575–2150 BCE) were inscribed on the walls of royal mortuary temples, where ritual practice included utterances repeated in accordance with a strict scheme and within a specific place – thus creating a kind *hierophany*, i.e. a visible manifestation of the sacred which is related to a specific place, a fixed ritual and the use of specific magical utensils. The Pyramid texts could thus be considered as "vehicles for performance" and not as mere descriptions of religious notions.[91] In addition to this, ritual

[85] Lèvi-Strauss 1964.
[86] Harrington 2015; Pirelli 2002.
[87] Altenmüller 1972.
[88] Willems 2001.
[89] Willems 2016.
[90] Hölzl 2002; Willems 2016.
[91] Baines 1991.

activities described by the texts indicate a separation between this world and the one beyond death, while inserting the same level of meaning and agency to individuals in both places, something which Jan Assmann (1977) has labelled "sacramental exegesis".[92]

Pyramid texts reflect certain notions that may be connected to the use of offering tables, for example the recurring theme of the efflux of Osiris, references to the offering table as the Eye of Horus and spatial connotations concerning the movement and actions of the priests during the rituals. Pyramid texts are generally concerned with ritual connections to mythology and their symbolic language may be related to the performance of specific ritual, occasionally with connotations to the handling of offering tables. Accordingly, expressions concerning the handling of the efflux of Osiris, could be described as "taking back the moisture" which had left the pharaoh during his death and mummification, may be interpreted as an indication of the pouring of water over an offering table.

Osiris' efflux could be imagined as existing in the form of different liquids, such as warm fermented beer, which was used to represent the rotting liquids issued from the corpse of Osiris, or cold water which equalled the rejuvenating waters of the Nile inundation as evidenced in a text directed to Osiris:

> *O Pepi! Your water is the inundation; your cool water is the great inundation that comes from you (PT 460).*[93]

The life-giving flow of Osiris' efflux may be interpreted as the inundation, however it could also be imagined as the movement of liquid over an offering table depicting an Egyptian canal system:

> *The canals fill, the rivers flood, and with the cleansing that comes from Osiris (PT 455).*[94]

Certain texts may also allude to libations poured over an offering table:

> *Osiris Unis, accept the foam that comes from you. 1 BLACK QUARZITE BOWL OF BEER (PT 49).*[95]

The offering table as the Eye of Horus may be a reference to Seth who takes the Eye from Horus, causing him to lose power and later he succeeds in restoring his live-giving moisture embodied as his Eye and becomes powerful once again. The offering table embodies this transfer of power:

> *Thoth, get him with it. Come forth to him with Horus's eye. THE OFFERING TABLE. (PT 82).*[96]

Liquids that had been energized through their contact with an offering table might have been alluded to*:*

> *O Osiris the King, take the Eye of Horus, and absorb it into your mouth – the morning meal (PT 63).*[97]

Pyramid texts may also allude directly to ritual practices relating to offering tables:

> *The marshes become content, the irrigation basins flood, for this Meryre on this day on which he is given his akh, on which he is given his control. (PT 457).*[98]

> *You, father Osiris Pepi! Raise yourself from off your left side, put yourself on your right side, toward this fresh water I have given you (PT 482).*[99]

[92] Assmann 1977, 9–25.
[93] Allen 2015: Pyr. U460, Pepi I, 124.
[94] Allen 2015: Pyr. U455, Pepi I, 115.
[95] Allen 2015: Pyr U49, Unis, 23.
[96] Allen 2015: Pyr. U82, Unis, 25.
[97] Incomplete. This interpretation is Pyr. U63: 87, Translated into English by R.O. Faulkner 1969; see also extracts in Allen 2015, 250 and Pyr, U62, Neith, 309.
[98] Allen 2015: Pyr. U457, Pepi I, 123.
[99] Allen 2015: Pyr. U482, Pepi I, 136.

Coffin Texts (CT) (ca. 2130–1630 BCE) were spells placed *closer* to the deceased, since they were written inside the actual coffin and dealt with a personal journey through the Duat, generally constituted by descriptions of its geography, mostly composed of water-systems and irrigated fields.[100]

Coffin Texts often provide advice to the deceased, such as what foods to eat and drink and how to overcome obstacles and challenges in the Netherworld by uttering specific words and phrases and by attending to certain actions, which are described in great detail. Such pieces of advice may be compared to certain ritual acts, perhaps carried out in connection to offering tables:

> *...your bread and your meal are laid on the ground; come to the front of your (offering)-slab. Your spirit is seated (CT 702).*[101]

> *Spell for eating bread from upon the offering-tables of Re, giving oblations in Ōn. […] O you who are at your altar – four times – [..] (CT 165).*[102]

The ritual is often described as taking place in the "field of offerings", a part of Duat, where the offerings are received by Osiris, the dead king:

> *My two plots are in the field of offerings among those who know, and I care for Osiris there; […] I am a pure one who cooks for Osiris daily among those who know offerings (CT 1159).*[103]

Coffin Texts also describe how magically transformed food and drink are ritually consumed to gain force and power:

> *… my bread is the Eye, my beer is the Eye, […] – four times (CT 939) …*[104]

> *He has filled his body with magic, he has quenched his thirst with it (CT 36).*[105]

The "***Book of the Dead"***[106] is a more complex accumulation of sacred texts and are a development of the themes described in the previous texts. By the end of the New Kingdom they were present in almost all elite tombs, on papyri, objects and the tomb walls establishing a "doctrine" behind mortuary rituals and concepts of the afterlife concerning the judgement of the dead and the fate of their *ka*.

The "Book of the Dead" constitutes a further development of the themes found in the Coffin Texts, concentrating on what will happen to the deceased in the Underworld. The individual is increasingly identified with a god, especially Osiris, and is advised to use moral behaviour in order to endure challenges such as attacks from Apep and the judgement of the dead to achieve immortality. This endeavour is supported by sustenance provided via offerings, apparently using offering tables that eventually may lead to the transformation of the deceased into a pure entity.

> *O givers of cakes [and] beer to souls perfected in the house of Osiris, give ye cakes [and] beer at the double season to the soul of Osiris Ani […] (Pap Ani Spell 1: 35).*[107]

The actual presence of the "*Book of the Dead"* in the tomb, may be considered as a guarantee that offering rites, which probably have been carried out using an offering table, may continue to be repeated even after those left behind in life have ceased to exist. Endurance spells

[100] It is important to note that the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts are probably one corpus, which was then modified, extended or reduced over centuries. See Bickel – Mathieu 2004.
[101] Faulkner 1973: CT Spell 702: a-h.
[102] Faulkner 1973: CT Spell 165.
[103] Faulkner 1973: CT Spell 1159.
[104] Faulkner 1973: CT Spell 939.
[105] Faulkner 1973: CT Spell 36.
[106] Am Duat and similar funerary texts
[107] Pap Ani, Spell 1: 35, Translated into English by E. A. Wallis Budge 1913.

tend to end with a repetition of the term "millions of times" and "eternity", thus indicating that the specific ritual could be symbolically repeated forever:

> *Given him are bread and beer and a chunk of meat from the altar of Osiris. He ascends to the Field of Rushes. […] A truly excellent spell (proved) a million times. (Spell 72, T1-2).*[108]

Transubstantiation of the deceased into a divine entity may be evident in extracts from spells which indicate that if rituals are carried out correctly a transformation will take place. The ritual may include the ingestion or use of liquids as a means of transferring divine essence into matter.

> *I have spat (for him) upon the wounds. Make way for me, (that I may pass) <among> you, I am the Eldest of the gods (Spell 147e).*[109]

> *Verily I am one who came forth from the flood and to whom the Overflow has been given, that he may have it available as the Inundation (Spell 61).*[110]

Conclusions

Archaeology deals with tangible objects. In forensic anthropology the shape and wear of a tooth may tell things about the life of the individual it once belonged to. Likewise, the shape, imagery, material, wear and tear of an offering table can inform us about the actual rituals that once were performed in connection with them, as well as beliefs behind these actions. However, to be able to discern the rituals behind an object like an offering table we need to apply a holistic, multidisciplinary approach, not the least insights gained from an anthropological point of view. Just as translation and analysis of an ancient text is in need of an understanding of deeper levels of the anthropological and social meaning of practices,[111] the same approach is also valid for the interpretation of an object like an offering table. Since its birth in the 19th century anthropology has studied people, not only through various means of observation and communication, but also though their use of objects, and the last methodology has been of particul importance for archaeology,[112] sometimes to such an extreme extent that the human behind the object and its use has almost been forgotten. This is one of the reasons to why I in my research made a conscious effort to find how the appearance of offering tables may reflect their ritual use and place within a sacred/social landscape. While doing this I have tried to apply what social anthropologists used to label as "thick description".[113] By handling these objects, closely observing their imagery, material, colour, wear and tear, I may arrive at conclusions regarding the use and meaning they had for people living within a very specific social and geographical context – i.e. the sacred landscape that surrounded them.

Bourriau (1996) stated that "the analysis of the whole context, the entire burial, not just one element in it, has received relatively little attention […]"[114]. However, as outlined by the research quoted above, this state of affairs may finally be changing. Nevertheless, there remain several limitations to the methodology described in this paper. Firstly, it is not without

[108] Papyrus of *M s-m-nTr* from Thebes, 18th Dynasty, Louvre, Spell 72: T1-2, includes a vignette of deceased praying to three mummiform gods standing in a shrine, Allen 1960, 65.

[109] Papyrus of *Ani* from Thebes, 18th Dynasty, BM 10470, Spell 147e: P1-S2, includes a vignette of deceased and his wife in prayer before the spell. The spell is divided into seven sections, each written in front of a gate. At each gate there are three squatting gods: the doorkeeper, the guardian, the announcer, Allen 1960, 137.

[110] Papyrus of *Nwnw* from Thebes, 18th Dynasty, BM 10477, Spell 61:S, includes a vignette of deceased holding his *ba*. In another similar version, the deceased is taking water from a pool with his hands, Allen 1960, 55.

[111] Pirelli 2002.

[112] Nyord 2018.

[113] Geertz 1973.

[114] Bourriau 1996, 1.

risks to place so much emphasis on the object itself while placing it within a potential context, especially when an object lacks its archaeological context and is exclusively compared to similar objects. One remedy to this shortcoming may be to concentrate further on the context of ritual texts, such as offering scenes and offering lists depicted on tomb walls, as well as within coffins, to gain a better understanding of the relation between written texts and ritual artefacts, as well as their potential importance and position within a mortuary setting.

It is important to note that this paper reflects a work in progress. Several theories remain to be studied, tested and developed, especially those dealing with the relation between religious texts and actual rituals, as well as the use and context of "soul houses". Being initially defined as three dimensional "models" similar to the wooden models of daily life present in Middle Kingdom tombs, such as the tomb of Meket-Re (TT280), it is difficult to prove a connection between "soul houses" and tomb architecture and their assumed role within mortuary rituals.[115]. A significant limitation to this paper is its lack of concrete evidence, as well as a description of the socio-historical context of the presented material. The reason for this is simply that these objects are still being studied and a next step would be to pinpoint when and especially why "soul houses" emerged in conjunction with offering trays and water rituals, and why they rather suddenly diminish within the archaeological record.

As illustrated by the examples above, it is evident that offering tables were the central object within the ritual landscape, whether it is a private shrine, elite tomb or royal temple. Accordingly, whatever they may represent is central to understanding ancient Egyptian funerary ritual. Offering tables had their origins as plates of offerings and became an artefactual focus in the tomb that could activate all magical entities via the manipulation of water accompanied by the use of spells – canals for movement, basins for sustenance and storage of energised water. The table itself served as a recurring funerary banquet for the dead where the living could interact with them in a liminal space. By the New Kingdom onwards laity could access temple courtyards and witness spells and rituals performed by the priesthood, allowing the non-elite to experience a closer relationship with the divine – something which may be reflected in the design of offering tables and their further development. These changes in the mortuary cult and in the mindset of the non-elite as well as the elite may be more evident through a study of the offering table.

Any ritual object is part of a context, a ritual landscape, i.e. the environment, daily existence, actions and cosmos which are animated by the faith of a believer, which motivates its shape, material, function and placement. An offering table did not only constitute an integrated part of a ritual site – it became a ritual landscape in itself, not only by mimicking the scenery of which it was part of, but also by becoming the centre of a sanctified environment. Through the handling of it, and its links to the sacred acts and texts, it became an instrument of sacred power – materialising the immaterial.

[115] Winlock 1955.

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Abbreviations

ÄMP Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung in Berlin, Germany.
RMO Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, Netherlands.
MET Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, USA.
MFA Museum of Modern Art in Boston, USA.
CT Coffin Text: Faulkner, R. O. (1973) *Coffin Texts*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips.
Pap Ani Papyrus of Ani: Budge, E. A. (1967) The Egyptian Book of the Dead. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
PT Pyramid Text: The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts (Atlanta 2015).
Spell Book of the Dead: Allen, T. G. (1960) *Book of the Dead*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

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Petrie 1902-3. Soul house next to a brick-lined shaft tomb at Abydos. Image courtesy of ©The Garstang Museum of Archaeology, University of Liverpool.).

Fig. 10
Anon. 07.231.11 Model of a House. [pottery]. Metropolitan Museum New York [online]. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/555830 [Accessed 25 May 2018]. Copyright: Public domain (PD).

Fig. 11
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Fig. 12
A. Buhlke 2018. Façade of Tomb 15 at Bani Hassan, Egypt, August 2018, Beni Hassan. Photograph courtesy of Anja Buhlke.

Fig. 13
J. Lundius 2019. Illustration of a pottery soul house (07.550) present at the MFA in Boston. February 2019, Prague.

Fig. 14
E. Lundius 2017. Irrigated fields outside the village of Sa el Hagar, Delta Region, Egypt. September 2017, Sa el Hagar. Photograph by author.

Fig. 15
Anon. 32.1.213 Offering table. [limestone]. Metropolitan Museum of Art [online]. Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/543911 [Accessed 25 May 2018]. Copyright: Public domain (PD).

Fig. 16
Author 2017. Fields outside the village of Sa el Hagar in the Delta Region post-irrigation. September 2017, Sa el Hagar. Photograph by author.

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