



EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

**EGYPTOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY:
HISTORIOGRAPHY, THEORETICAL EXCHANGE, AND CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT**

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“Egyptology is ... a prolific branch of the great science of anthropology”
—Francis Llewellyn Griffith, inaugural lecture
at Oxford University, 1901¹

The origins of Egyptology as an academic discipline in the late 19th century were rooted in anthropology, with foundational figures such as William Flinders Petrie explicitly linking their work in Egypt to broader theories of human development. During the mid- to late 20th century, however, an increasingly isolated Egyptology emerged from the growing professionalization of these two fields and the specialization of Egyptologists into progressively narrower sub-disciplines. While a small number of Egyptologists made some notable attempts during this time to increase the engagement between Egyptology and anthropology, the two fields remained resolutely separate, with Egyptology generally privileging cultural-historical approaches over the broader theoretical discussions that occupied researchers in anthropology. However, in a current academic climate that stresses the value of interdisciplinarity, there has been an increasing trend among Egyptologists to adopt a more outward-looking stance and reconnect their work to conversations in related disciplines by making use of anthropological frameworks. While attitudes to this development and the potential rewards it may bring are still divided within the field of Egyptology, such approaches offer the potential to improve our understandings both of ancient Egyptian evidence and of the discipline of Egyptology itself.

This volume collects 12 papers that were presented at the Lady Wallis Budge Symposium held at Christ’s College and the McDonald Institute, University of Cambridge, on 25–26 July 2017. The Symposium aimed to explore some of the recent developments in the use of anthropological theory in Egyptology in order to examine critically the advances such methods can offer to the understanding of a variety of Egyptian material, what potential problems the encounter between traditionally separate academic traditions may bring, and what contribution Egyptology may offer debate in the broader social sciences.

The papers demonstrated that anthropological approaches have great potential to elucidate ancient evidence from the Nile Valley, with contributions proving the utility of such approaches for comprehension of issues such as (among others) kinship, imagery, material culture, and intercultural relations. Anthropological frameworks utilized by symposium participants included the “ontological turn,” theories of the body, semiotics, and theories of pollution. Some papers also took a more reflexive stance to the symposium brief, and explored what the unusually long time-depth, state of preservation and ongoing

public interest in Egyptology may have to offer to the understanding of broader anthropological problems.

One of the traditional core topics of social anthropology, that of social structure, forms the main focus of several of the papers. Ideas of purity and spatial access lie at the core of Maitland's analysis of social stratification on the basis of written and visual evidence from the Middle Kingdom. Under the heading "Dirt, Purity, and Spatial Control: Anthropological Perspectives on Ancient Egyptian Society and Culture during the Middle Kingdom," she argues that such notions lie at the core of elite conceptions of social structure upheld, *inter alia*, by manipulations of space and spatial separation connected with ideals of purity observed only by the upper classes. Anthropological theorizations, notably that of Douglas, who regards notions of purity and dirt as by-product of cultural classification practices, prove highly pertinent for identifying and analysing such phenomena in the written and pictorial records of Egypt.

Olabarria takes up the classical anthropological topic of kinship, especially as it has come to be articulated in the "new kinship studies," where previous notions of kinship based on fixed, unchanging essences have given way to a view of kinship categories as more fluid and performative. In her paper "A Question of Substance: Interpreting Kinship and Relatedness in Ancient Egypt," she discusses the notion of "substance" as one of the ways in which a given society can conceptualize what is shared between people related by kinship, arguing that a prime candidate for such a notion in Middle Kingdom Egypt would be the central socio-religious notion of *ka*.

Social relations on a much larger scale form the backdrop of Howley's study of cultural contact in the paper "Power Relations and the Adoption of Foreign Material Culture: A Different Perspective from First-Millennium BCE Nubia". Studies of ancient culture contact tend to focus on the adoption by a colonized people of their colonizers' cultural forms, a model which does not, however, fit well with the evidence from first-millennium Nubia. Instead, Howley argues that the use of Egyptian and Egyptianizing material culture by the Kushite ruling class in this period is better understood by models that focus on internal value systems, notably that of a prestige goods economy, than by the kind of postcolonial models most commonly invoked for understanding ancient culture contact.

Recent work in anthropology has revitalised interest in how the worlds in which people under study live may differ radically from that of the anthropologist's own society. Under the heading of "the ontological turn," this has led to new approaches to traditional anthropological dichotomies such as body-object and nature-culture. Against this background, Brémont re-examines traditional Egyptological interpretations of motifs from the natural world as expressions of the chaotic domain of nature conquered by culture in her paper "Into the Wild? Rethinking the Dynastic Conception of the Desert beyond Nature and Culture." She argues that this conventional understanding skews the evidence in important ways, and that the underlying notion of the conquest of nature by culture stems more from the conceptual background of the modern scholar than from the ancient Egyptian sources. Instead, she urges us to attempt a more nuanced understanding of human-animal relations, where the "natural" world has its own place in the Egyptian ordered cosmos.

With its starting point in a widely-discussed notion in the ontological turn, Nyord poses the question, "'Taking Ancient Egyptian Mortuary Religion Seriously': How Could We, and Why Would We?," suggesting that historical disciplinary baggage forms an important obstacle to Egyptological interpretations of its sources. He argues that this is particularly true of ancient Egyptian mortuary religion, which has been interpreted since the mid-19th century in terms of a "quest for immortality" which is immediately understandable to a modern audience, but less easy to corroborate in the sources than we often think. Nyord argues that we need to see such conceptual baggage for what it is, and that recent work in anthropology and archaeology provides more viable alternative approaches to Egyptian attitudes to death and the dead.

Wendrich's paper, "Mutuality in Exploring the Past: Ethno- Experimental and Community Archaeology," also centers the influence of the modern world on our understanding of the ancient past and makes clear its ethical ramifications. She argues that the intersection between Egyptology and anthropology can be a productive space not only methodologically, as with her own work on ethnoarchaeology, but also to inform a reflexive attitude to the discipline and offer a productive way to begin the difficult task of responding to postcolonial critique of the disciplinary norms of Egyptology. Based on her years of experience of field research, she contends that it is necessary to engage deeply and honestly with local communities

where archaeology is done. True mutuality, she argues, can both improve our understanding of the archaeological evidence, and start to address the inequalities inherent in our discipline.

Conversely, the body and sensory experience is a recent focus in the social anthropology of the last few decades that exploits the similarities between ancient and modern experience. Two of the papers in the present volume, those by Price and Zinn, focus on different aspects of this area of study. In a bid to move beyond the traditional privileging of the sense of sight, Price collects clues from visual and textual sources about the role of the sense of smell in ancient Egyptian lifeways in her paper “Sniffing out the Gods: Archaeology with the Senses.” She presents a case study of banquet scenes from New Kingdom tombs, which she argues contain many details indicating sense-related experiences. In turn, the use of particular smells in rituals can be connected to wider Egyptian religious ideas, such as that the divine presence is indicated by particular smells, notably that of incense. In this way, Price shows how a new focus on sensory experience can fruitfully complement more traditional work (for example) on Egyptian religious conceptions.

In Zinn’s paper, “Did You Sleep Well on Your Headrest?—Anthropological Perspectives on an Ancient Egyptian Implement,” the author takes up the interpretive challenges posed by two unprovenanced headrests in a Welsh museum collection. She argues that, given the crucial importance of archaeological context for traditional Egyptological interpretations, anthropological theoretical perspectives can be particularly useful in the case of unprovenanced objects. For the headrests, this raises questions not only about sensory experience, but also about the very tight interplay between objects and bodies and the theoretical ways in which such a distinction may no longer matter under “New Materialism” perspectives. Zinn further presents an experimental case study which shows that a fuller, bodily and tactile engagement with the headrests was able to significantly amend impressions of the objects based on purely visual examination.

Moving away from archaeology, anthropology may also offer productive new approaches to the written and iconographic record of ancient Egypt. The developed body of theory on semiotic analysis informs our understanding of various sign systems of very different order, from writing and iconography to much more covert ‘signs’ embedded in societal structures such as myths. Semiotic analysis and its conditions lie at the core of Uildriks’s paper “Building a Predynastic: The Construction of Predynastic Galleys.” Tracing the history of interpretations of a particular motif on Predynastic pottery back to Petrie, Uildriks argues that while widely accepted, its conventional interpretation as a representation of a galley rests on an evidential basis which is far from firm. Instead, the proposition and subsequent acceptance of the interpretation turns out to have been shaped significantly by its social and historical scholarly context. Based on an enlarged data set showing the variability of the motif, Uildriks questions the idea that all versions must necessarily stand in a one-to-one relationship to a particular represented object, and drawing on semiotics and pragmatism he suggests ways to move beyond the question of reference in this sense entirely.

Based on ideas from Cardona’s anthropology of writing, Iannarilli revisits the old Egyptological question of the use of incomplete hieroglyphic signs for human beings in the Pyramid Texts, at a time when the full forms of those signs had already been firmly established in other contexts. In her paper “Write to Dominate Reality: Graphic Alteration of Anthropomorphic Signs in the Pyramid Texts,” she argues that the phenomenon can fruitfully be understood as the result of adjustments made to the writing system to make it suitable for a new context. Such changes can be further elucidated using a general model of “anthropological codes” developed by Eco, although the specific need for making such adjustments to the writing system in the first place arise from more specifically Egyptian ideas about the creative power of language and writing.

In “Death and the Right Fluids: Perspectives from Egyptology and Anthropology,” Pehal and Preininger Svobodová analyze the structural roles of bodily fluids in Egyptian conceptions and rituals of death. They argue that the roles of the four fluids—blood, milk, efflux, and semen—can be understood in terms of a semiotic square based on the interplay of pairs of binary oppositions such as RED vs. WHITE, MASCULINE vs. FEMININE and functions that occur INSIDE vs. OUTSIDE the body. They suggest that the results of this analysis can operate as a point of departure for interpreting Egyptian death rituals in terms of classical anthropological ritual frameworks like those of Hertz, van Gennep, and Bloch and Parry. In doing so, Pehal

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and Preininger Svobodová argue that even apparently highly particular notions like the ancient Egyptian notions of the roles of efflux can be opened up for cross-cultural comparison by understanding them as part of a semiotic system, which in turn offers new insights for both sides of the disciplinary divide.

Vanhulle's paper "Boat Symbolism in Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt: An Ethnoarchaeological Approach" also deals with iconography, but does so informed by anthropological methodologies of cross-cultural and/or diachronic comparison. He traces the use of the boat motif, notably within what has been argued to be metaphorical representations of the struggle between order and chaos (also explored in Brémont's paper). He suggests that this meaning of the boat can be related to later texts in which the boat occurs as a metaphor for society or the state. Such a use of the boat as symbol or metaphor has been identified in other cultures as well, and while he carefully avoids drawing direct inferences from one culture to another, Vanhulle argues that such cross-cultural parallels can nonetheless inform the interpretation of the Egyptian data set in a more heuristic way, notably regarding the *kinds* of boats that would be likely to fulfil the function as a metaphor for community.

WITH approximately 50 participants hailing from four different continents, the 2017 Budge Symposium was a truly stimulating two days of discussion that showcased the potential of the intersection between anthropology and Egyptology to contribute to both disciplines. Both the depth of interest in such approaches, and the depth of interesting work, became clear. The number of early career scholars who contributed, we hope, marks the beginning of a new, more outward looking Egyptology through which the potential of the Egyptian archaeological and textual record to contribute to wider debate in the humanities and social sciences will be more fully realized. The symposium was made possible by the financial support of the Christ's College Lady Wallis Budge Fund and the DM McDonald Grants and Awards Fund, while invaluable administrative and logistical assistance was provided by Emma Jarman, Patricia Murray, Joanna Chase, Kevin Keohane and the rest of the catering team at Christ's College, and Rennan Lemos. Their contributions are gratefully acknowledged here. The editors also wish sincerely to thank Noreen Doyle for all her hard work in typesetting this volume.

REFERENCE

Griffith, Francis Llewellyn. 1901. *The Study of Egyptology: Inaugural Lecture Delivered in the Ashmolean Museum on May 8, 1901*. Oxford: Hart

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¹ Griffith 1901, 9.