

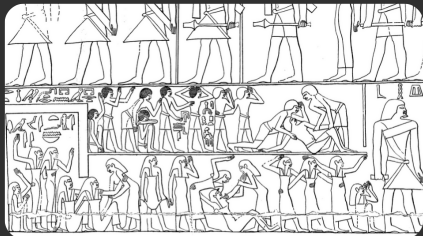
# THE WIDOW'S LAMENT: THE ICONOGRAPHY OF MOURNING WOMEN IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN FUNERARY RITUALS

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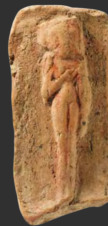
## Introduction

Ancient Egyptian funerary rituals have been documented since the Old Kingdom period and were designed to enable the dead to attain eternal life in the hereafter. These rites comprised a structured set of verbal and gesticulatory behaviors that were performed in a stylized and repetitive manner. Mourning women played a crucial role in these rituals, executing their parts perfectly to ensure the ritual's success. While past scholarship has identified the most frequent mourning gestures, such as raising hands, tears, and falling to the ground, some actions, such as scratched cheeks and exposed breasts, have been overlooked. This study suggests that these acts subtly exemplified women's dominant role in mourning through ideas of impurity and fecundity. Through their actions, mourners maintained world order and imbued hope and security into an otherwise completely sorrowful and dangerous affair.



## Iconographic Identifiers

- Women who mourned the deceased following a prescribed, rigid set of rules to assist in the transition of the dead to the afterlife
- Comprised both divine and human mourners
- Dress
  - long sheath-like dresses held up with one or two straps
  - fillet around head
  - dress knotted beneath exposed breasts
- Gestures
  - one or both hands held open at their sides
  - hands raised and reaching toward their heads
  - kneeling on or falling to the ground
  - reaching for or holding onto the deceased/statue
- Behaviors/Actions
  - Stoicism
  - Wailing
  - Crying
  - Flipping or pulling hair
  - Beating/cradling breasts
  - Throwing dust on heads
  - Scratching cheeks



## Baring and Clutching the Breast

- Not just conveying depth of grief or illustrating indecorous behavior
- Milk of a goddess imbued with divine power
- Way to draw attention to the fertile value of the female breast and reinforce the revivifying function of the rites and the goddess' roles within them
- Dead aligned with Osiris and the infant Horus
  - PT 2089a – Isis grasps her breasts when the dead king reaches the afterworld
  - Song of Nut originally chanted by a mournful Nut calling for the dead Osiris to nurse from her breast
  - Louvre 213 describes the dead receiving the milk of Isis
  - PT 535 – Isis sits down with her arms raised and Nephthys seizes the tips of her breasts to revive their 'brother', Pepi I
  - PT 413 – call upon Teti to raise himself upon receiving divine breast milk of Isis
- Allusions to fertility and birth, as well as a more generalized wish and desire for regeneration and rebirth

## Scratching Cheeks and Decorum

- Decorum determines the content, composition, and placement of representational forms
  - Governs what can be depicted, and where, and how, and addresses questions of appropriateness
- Violent displays of mourning appear to break the bounds of visual decorum, but internal controls exist that maintain order
- Controlled chaos in a ritual can achieve its purpose without the risks unbridled chaos can bring
- Self-mutilation = literal and symbolic externalizations of grief
- A material manifestation of pollution attached to death
- Expresses sorrow/trauma and provides emotional release
- Symbolic identification with the deceased, objectifying the stated yearning for reunion
  - Pap. Berlin 3008, 2, 1-13
  - Pap. Bremner-Rhind, 6.24-7.13; 12.9-12
  - Pap. New York Met Museum 35.9.21, 5.8-9; 5.4-6; 5.11-13; 7.1-4



## Significance

- Before mythological integration, the bereft constantly worried about the immediate, tangible realities of death
- Upon Osirification, mourners' laments became integral to transitioning the dead
- Deceased's fate was likened to Osiris' fortune which provided confidence for the bereaved that the dead would become an *akh*
- Allowed for stabilization of emotions and relief from ambiguity around death and the hereafter
- Represented pain, fear and insecurity as well as hope for resurrection
- Facilitated transition of the dead into the afterlife and themselves into a new role in society after the loss of their loved one

## Future Research Plans

- Situating mourners within the overall funerary framework
- Iconographic analyses of mourning gestures and behaviors
  - Exposed breasts in relation to ideas of impurity and creative potency
  - Self-mutilation (scratching cheeks and blood, beating the breast) and its connection to pollution, impurity, and the eventual rejection/reversal of death
  - Throwing dust/ash onto the head
  - "Persian gesture"
- Integration with verbal lamentations

## References/ Email

