



Food and funerals. Sustaining the dead for eternity

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Source: *PAM 20 (Research 2008)*, 361-371

ISSN 1234-5415 (Print), ISSN 2083-537X (Online)

ISBN 978-83-235-0821-2

Published: Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW),
Warsaw University Press (WUP)

www.pcma.uw.edu.pl - www.wuw.pl

FOOD AND FUNERALS SUSTAINING THE DEAD FOR ETERNITY

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Abstract: Offerings of food play a crucial role in Egyptian funerary religion from the very earliest period well into the Roman era. Different types of food offerings from the Old Kingdom will be discussed, with a focus on the Old Kingdom and offerings from the Polish excavations at West Saqqara.

Keywords: food, offering, offering list, fish, beer, meat, poultry, funeral, death, burial, meal, ancient Egypt, mummy

The number of images showing the acquisition, production, storage, and presentation of food in Egyptian tombs, together with the prominence of the Offering List, is a clear indication of the importance of food for the ancient Egyptians, both in life and in death. In addition to all the images and texts concerned with food, the ever literal and practical Egyptians sought to sustain the dead through eternity by placing actual food offerings in tombs as part of the burial equipment, or bringing them regularly to the offering place(s) in the tomb. Throughout Egypt, the tradition of including different food offerings in the tomb starts in the Predynastic period, continuing well into the Roman period. Most of the foods found in tombs relate closely to the offering lists that are inscribed

on tomb walls. They include several different types of breads, raw cereals, fruits (grapes, figs, dates, jujubes), vegetables (onions, garlic), legumes and pulses, spices and flavourings, jars of wine, beer, and oil, and, most importantly, poultry, meat, and in some rare instances, fish.¹ It has been assumed that subsequent offerings to the dead would also derive from what was considered 'standard' and acceptable. It is these physical offerings of meat, poultry, and fish and their zooarchaeological remains from the Old Kingdom that are the focus of this paper, with an emphasis on the Old Kingdom evidence derived from the Polish mission at West Saqqara, directed by Karol Myśliwiec.

Our knowledge of food offerings, particularly those that are animal in origin, has traditionally been derived from texts

¹ Although fish do not appear in the offering lists, there are instances when they feature in the actual funerary feasts. Perhaps this is a feature of the Memphite necropoleis, although that is difficult to judge given the limited faunal evidence that exists.

and images in tombs, thus providing us with a 'canon' of offerings. Early funerary stelae from Saqqara (Emery 1962: Pl. 3.d) and Helwan (Saad 1969) depict cattle, ducks, and geese. Later, in the Old Kingdom proper, a canonical list of offerings appears, with five pieces of meat and five types of poultry, among other foods on the menu.² The meat offerings, which are frequently more varied in the offering lists, do have certain common elements, such as the ribs (*spr*), the femur (*iw'*), the shoulder/scapula and humerus (parts of the *hps*), and often a boneless piece of meat. The poultry appears to be more standardized. They, too, are five in number, with four waterfowl (often two geese and two ducks), and one pigeon/dove, with the specific type of bird being named: *r3*, *qr*, *sr*, *trp*, *st*, *s*, and *mnw.t*.³

Other Old Kingdom offering lists, particularly those coming from Giza, feature wild animals such as hyena, oryx, gazelle, and other antelope-type creatures (e.g., G 4970, G 5150, G 4940) in addition to the standard menu of cattle and poultry. Unfortunately, as none of the tombs with these extended lists inscribed on the walls have been found intact, it is difficult to tell whether the food offerings placed in the tomb matched those depicted on its walls. Presumably the affluent could afford a more generous and varied offering assemblage, while the less wealthy had to be content

with images that would magically become real and provide for the deceased.

Although several intact or semi-intact tombs have been found throughout the history of archaeology in Egypt, few studies on food offerings have been carried out, as excavators have tended to concentrate on the more glamorous objects that have emerged from tombs. At Saqqara, Emery also reports finding a vast quantity of anatomical remains left as food offerings and horns on the bulls' head benches of the tomb (Emery 1961: 240). He publishes images of food offerings, but generally with no commentary (Emery 1961: Pl. 22), this is also the case of his protégé, Zaki Saad, whose publications of the Helwan cemeteries provide the same frustrations (Saad 1969). Clearly, the Old Kingdom period was rich in such offerings, although excavators rarely carefully documented them.

Thus, details concerning the offerings, the number of animals from which they are derived, and any ritual, social or economic import that their findspot, species, or age might have provided are difficult to ascertain from most older publications. However, recent scholarship has shifted its emphasis to elucidating the more prosaic and, one might say, fairly crucial aspects of Egyptian life: food, the basis of life, as well as a significant focus/manifestation of religious expression. This opens up

² The canonical poultry offerings are better attested than the meat. See Hassan 1948: especially 365–375; Edel 1981: 71 and Fig. 25. Also, see Bárta 1963: Fig. 5 and 4. Sets of five models of fowl are also attested in the late Fifth Dynasty at Abu Sir (Bárta 2003: 24–25), as well as in other collections of model offerings in the Old Kingdom, e.g., see the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts at Boston, in particular (Ikram 1995).

³ These are labelled not only in the lists, but also sometimes on the limestone cases. For the list, see Hassan 1948: 348–375, especially 365. Some bird-shaped limestone cases now in the Dokki Agricultural Museum (D1084 and 1086) from Saqqara were actually labelled *trp* and *r*, while those from Khentika's tomb were almost all labelled: *st*, *trp*, *sr*, *mnwt*, with only one meat box being labelled (*nḥn*).

new avenues of study and fresh sources of information concerning Egyptian culture, society, and economy.

Offerings associated with tombs can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of the original funerary assemblage placed in the burial chamber or directly at its entrance, and is rarely found completely undisturbed (Type 1). The majority of excavated evidence derives from this group, with most of the offerings consisting of cattle or poultry. This is the most commonly identified offering type.

In Old Kingdom burials, particularly at West Saqqara (T.I. Rzeuska, personal communication) and Balat (see below), a second group of offerings is placed at some point within the shaft (shaft offerings or Type 2, for the purpose of this paper). The shaft tomb, G7000x of Hetepheres on the Giza Plateau has an elaboration of this type of shaft offerings, with a niche carved into the shaft wall that contained offerings of pottery vessels and cattle bones (Reisner 1955). This custom might have continued into later periods, but due to a dearth of good archaeological recording, there is little hard evidence to support this at this

time.⁴ In any case, this type of offering is harder to detect unless the tomb is unlooted, although it can be identified archaeologically in the reverse 'heaps' found at or near the mouth of burial shafts, left there often by looters or archaeologists.

The third and final group of offerings is placed near the offering focus of a tomb (e.g., the false door), after the burial, presumably on a regular basis on feast days, both by priests and family members (Type 3).⁵ These offerings might be more varied than those placed in the burial chamber or shaft as these offerings might have been brought several years after the burial had taken place, and as they were not an intrinsic part of the grave goods, it might have been more permissible to vary these. No doubt it would have been more practical in terms of economy. This last group is also probably the most difficult to detect in the archaeological record as these items probably were not left *in situ*. It is more likely that after being consecrated and offered, they would be consumed and then the debris disposed of, perhaps in pits dug in the courtyard of the tomb or on nearby middens, if not removed completely from the premises.

THE FUNERARY ASSEMBLAGE

One would expect the most common animals found in the funerary assemblage to reflect the texts and lists inscribed on the tomb walls. Indeed, for the most part, this seems to be the case, regardless of the time period. Cattle and poultry dominate

the repertoire (e.g. from the Old Kingdom, Ankh-haf at Giza, Medunefer at Balat, Inti from Abu Sir; from the Middle Kingdom, Princesses Ita and Khnumet at Dahshur, Senebtisi at Lisht; in Thebes from the New Kingdom, the finds in the tombs of

⁴ A group of broken vessels was found partway down the shaft of KV63. It is quite possible that these played a part in some sort of ritual; certainly the shaft was otherwise bare save for sand (O. Schaden, personal communication).

⁵ This custom of bringing food to dead relatives continues in modern Egypt, particularly in villages. The food that is brought to the tomb is consumed by the visitors with a small amount kept as a share for the deceased. The food acts as a communal link between the living and the dead, as well as a means of pacifying any unquiet or demanding spirit.

Amenhotep II, Tutankhamun, Maherpri, Yuya and Thuyu, to name but a few).⁶

However, not all of what has been excavated fits into the 'canon' as established by the offering lists. One of the earliest documented funerary food offerings from the Early Dynastic period (Dynasty II) comes from tomb 3477 at Saqqara (Emery 1962), excavated by W.B. Emery. An entire funerary 'feast' was laid out in plates and ceramic vessels beside a dead woman. It consisted of ribs and part of a foreleg of a cow (radius, ulna and a few carpals), pigeon stew, cooked quail, a cooked fish, two kidneys (beef or mutton?), as well as breads, porridge, fruit, cheese and wine. Leaving aside the non-animal foods, the menu of this funerary meal certainly does not fit into the 'canon' of funerary offerings, perhaps because it is near the start of Pharaonic history when the canons had not yet been firmly established. The ribs and foreleg of a cow are part of the standard, as is the presence of the pigeon. Quail does not regularly feature amongst the avian offerings and the kidneys are a very unusual embellishment on cattle-parts that are consumed after death. The most curious of all these offerings is the fish. It was not identified to species, but it had been cleaned and dressed with its head cut off and, according to the excavator, cooked (Emery 1962: 6–7, Pl. 6).

Fish do not appear on offering lists and are rarely shown being brought to the

deceased,⁷ perhaps as they were regarded as too lowly and common creatures to be considered as sufficiently sublime food for the deceased.⁸ It was not as if they were taboo,⁹ considering the wealth of images showing the catching, cleaning and preparing of these creatures. However, they are definitely not considered an 'appropriate' part of the funerary assemblage, and only rarely feature amongst grave goods.¹⁰ Perhaps, as Herodotus writes (II: 36), at certain times of the year specific fish were forbidden due to religious reasons, and then perhaps this stricture did not apply to everyone, but only to priests or others concerned with religious ritual. Thus, this lady's feast does not strictly fit into the canon of offerings, although most of the meat and some of the poultry portions of it are represented. Perhaps in these early times offerings reflect a more personal choice.

By the Fourth Dynasty the repertoire seems to have been well established. Reisner's photographs of the burial chambers of some of the Giza mastabas show food offerings reduced to animal bones, although there is no reference to these in the commentary. G 2000B contained a scapula and possibly humerus, radius, and ulna (foreleg) of a cow, while the image of G 2100A shows the right scapula of a cow, together with some ribs (Reisner 1942: Pls 26.b, 28). No doubt more animal offerings were scattered about the burial chamber, though they are rarely properly

⁶ See Ikram 1995: 200 and Appendix II, and Grajetzki 2003 for examples of tombs containing food offerings.

⁷ An exception to this are the scenes in the Eighteenth Dynasty tombs of Nakht (TT52) and Menna (TT69).

⁸ For fish as food, see Ikram 1995: 34–39 and Brewer, Friedman 1989.

⁹ Herodotus notes that fish were forbidden to priests (II: 37), but not to others, who ate them raw, salted, or dried (II: 77; II: 92). Probably priests, if they were forbidden certain fish, were also deprived of this food during certain festivals/days of ritual. Certainly, the tombs of priests are also embellished with scenes of fishing and preparing fish for consumption.

¹⁰ Some dried fish were retrieved from the tomb of Kha and can be seen today in a bowl at the Turin Egyptian Museum (Turin 8354):

recorded in notes nor are they adequately published. Reisner's notes indicate that Pit G 2381A contained 17 seemingly complete animal skeletons and parts of others; the creatures found included poultry (ducks and geese), beef ribs, and legs of calves (see www.gizapyramids.org/code/emuseum.asp). All of these form the 'standard' offering of the Old Kingdom. The majority of these offerings lay unwrapped, in ceramic vessels (as were those from Saqqara 3477), or might even have been laid on mats on the ground.

Some tomb owners of the Old Kingdom were so literal that they provided limestone cases carved in the shape of these canonical offerings and filled them with appropriate foodstuffs before laying them out in the same order as the offering list at the bottom of tomb shafts.¹¹ A complete example of this is the set found by the Czech Mission in the tomb shaft of Inti at Abu Sir (Bárta 2009; Ikram 2009). These were found in a Sixth Dynasty shaft at Abu Sir and consisted of meat and poultry that were cooked and then placed in limestone cases for the delectation of the deceased in the afterlife. There is no evidence that these were wrapped before being put in their cases, although it is possible that the bandages have disintegrated, together with the meat from the bones. Other similar cases from Senedjem-ib's funerary complex at Giza (G2381 Z, G2385 A) suggest that the offerings were wrapped prior to being placed in the box (D'Auria *et alii* 1988: 93).

It is not only the Memphite tombs that have yielded such typical groups of victual

offerings. Sixth Dynasty burials at Balat in Dakhla Oasis also contained elements of standard offerings: heads and legs of cattle placed at the door of the tomb or within the burial chamber. The ones in the burial chamber are found on large ceramic dishes, together with geese and ducks. As with those found in the Nile Valley, the cattle tend to be about two years of age (Minault-Gout, Deleuze 1992: 125–127; Castel 2001: 55, 67, 265; Valloggia 1986: 59, 60).

There are very few secure faunal deposits from the burial chambers of the tombs at West Saqqara, although, looking at reverse deposits outside of shafts provides a greater number of possibilities. However, one should bear in mind that these deposits might have come from the shafts (Type 2) rather than the burial chambers (Type 1). Though the majority of remains found here come from cattle, a certain number of pigs, sheep and goats also figure. The deposit from the bottom of Shaft 46 [*Fig. 1*] was very secure in terms of its contents. It held the head of a cow, *Bos taurus*, together with the feet (metapodials and phalanges) from two forelegs and one hindleg. These all probably came from the same animal which died before it had reached the age of three years. Although these items can be consumed, they are likely candidates for offerings to the dead that are low-cost, but highly symbolic. The author has seen similar combinations at Helwan. Cattle ribs were also found in conjunction with other cattle parts.

Corridor 2 at Saqqara had several small chapels branching off from it and associated burials. The bones found here were of

¹¹ Examples are found throughout the Memphite necropoleis (Ikram 1995 provides a partial list in Appendix I). Also, in South Saqqara, in the Sixth Dynasty tombs of Khabaukhnum and Henenu, see Jéquier 1929: 66, Fig. 67 and Tomb 29, Fig. 29. They are also mentioned in Brovanski 2001: 127–128, Pls 99–101a, and James 1953: 2–3.

diverse species, including a few cattle leg bones of animals over 2.5 years of age, and some fragments of ovicaprid bones. However, this deposit was contaminated, as indicated by the number of dog and fox bones recovered. Other areas have

yielded a mix of ovicaprid, pig, and cattle bones that might have originated from the burial chamber; notable amongst these is context 1906 K03-19 and Burial 168 that contained an almost complete sheep under 2.5 years of age at death.

SHAFT OFFERINGS

This type of offering, placed deliberately within the partially filled shaft, consisting of food offerings and ceramics, is best attested at West Saqqara (see below) and Balat.¹² Clearly these offerings were linked to an as yet ill-understood and

only (thus far) archaeologically attested part of the burial ritual. Presumably, once the burial chamber was secured and offerings placed both (or either) within and without, the shaft was filled up with sand. At some point during the course of the



Fig. 1. *The head and feet of a cow located at the bottom of Shaft 46 in West Saqqara (Photo J. Šliwa)*

¹² The Hetepheres Giza shaft 7000x has a variant on the theme in the form of a niche, while at Balat Shafts 3000, 5000, and 6000 (Castel 2001: 45, 52, 55, 67) follow the Saqqara pattern. There may be other examples which have gone unnoticed, either by the excavators or by the author of this article.

filling another ritual was carried out, and these offerings deposited. As mentioned above, these can only be detected in the case of an intact tomb or in reverse heaps left by robbers. In the case of the latter, it is difficult to determine, if the reverse heaps only contain the contents of the shaft or portions of the burial assemblage as well. Although at present there is only limited zooarchaeological data from these deposits, it is most probable that the faunal material from them connects with that from the burial chamber deposits, i.e., from the same animals, and thus might also be part of the funerary banquet shared by the deceased and the mourners and priests.

In Balat these remains come almost exclusively from cattle: heads and legs. There are, however, some exceptions. In Shaft 3000, in addition to the skulls of cattle, some ovicaprid bones were recovered (Castel 2001: 45). Generally, the Balat tombs contain the more expensive remains of cattle, rather than the less costly ovicaprid remains. This is probably due to the high rank of the individuals found at Balat.

The material from West Saqqara is similar to that found in Balat, including both cattle and ovicaprids, with the unusual occasional addition of pig remains. At Saqqara, in I/G Shaft 2, the severed left horn-core of a cow was found. The chop marks at its base were clearly visible. Shaft 28 yielded a scapula of a young pig, as well as a fragment of a tibia of a cow. The skull of a juvenile pig, with its permanent dentition just emerging, was found in the reverse heaps of area 1907 K03-32. In another area, probably related to the burial of Merefnubef (I/E N Shaft 1, st. b) the left humerus of an ovicaprid that was about 5 or 6 months old

was found, together with the right scapula of a pig aged about 1.5 years.

As discussed previously, it is possible that the examined deposits from West Saqqara are not of Type 2, but of Type 3. Nonetheless, it is very interesting to find pig bones featured amongst the funerary offerings.¹³ Pigs are definitely not part of the standard offering list and are rarely featured in Egyptian tombs (for a list of several tombs showing pigs, see Ikram 1995: 305). According to Herodotus (II, 47–48), they were forbidden to the ancient Egyptians. In reality, zooarchaeological remains from excavations (Ikram 1995: 29–31; Miller 1990: 125–140; L. Bertini, personal communication; Redding, Hunt 2006) have shown that all classes of Egyptians ate pork, although it was regarded as lower status food. It was not even considered totally impure for priests or temples as pigs feature in the Nauri Decree as part of the holdings of the Seti I temple to Osiris at Abydos and as offerings to different gods in various temples throughout Egypt (Ikram 1995: 31). However, due to the fact that pork was regarded as a lower status food, it was not considered worthy of true funerary offerings, at least in the ideal world of the tomb, both textually and visually. Thus, although the presence of pork is surprising in a funerary context, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that it would have been used. It was certainly a more affordable meat to offer for individuals in a lower economic bracket. Thus, it would make more sense to find offerings of pork among Type 3 offerings rather than in Types 1 and 2, so that the deceased would at least initially have a high level of offerings in the afterlife.

¹³ The author has observed pig bones in similarly dated tombs at Abusir.

POST-FUNERAL (CULT) OFFERINGS

The third type of funerary offering, as mentioned above, consists of offerings that were brought to the tomb in order to support the spirit (and cult) of the deceased on more special occasions. For royal tombs, and indeed for most private ones, there was a tradition of endowing the tomb so that offerings would be made regularly, the funerary priest supported, and the *ka* fed.¹⁴

This endowment plan, however attractive, had its drawbacks: ultimately these endowments lapsed or were moved from one tomb-owner to another. In some cases, for less wealthy tomb-owners, there were no endowments or permanent priests. Such people might have shared priests or simply depended on family members to keep up the tomb and provide offerings on feast days as the tomb assemblage (and decoration) would provide a regular supply of food for the afterlife. It is interesting that in modern Egypt the tradition of graveside visits complete with family picnics continues. This custom is unique to Egypt and has nothing to do with Islam, but rather the Pharaonic past, and is a ritual that is shared by both Copts and Muslims.

Unfortunately, as far as this author knows, no such cultic offerings have been found incontrovertibly *in situ*. It might be possible, however, to speculate about this

using the data from West Saqqara. Most of the tombs that were the source of these data were not grand mastabas, but modest shaft tombs with small offering foci located at the sealed mouth of the shaft. The animal bones gathered from these West Saqqara burials do not come from undisturbed contexts,¹⁵ although the fact that they are in the area of burial chambers and shafts, with no evidence of any secondary exploitation of the site in that area, is strongly indicative of a funerary-cult context. Naturally, determining whether they are an offering of Type 1, 2 or 3 is difficult.¹⁶ The majority of bones recovered from these areas belong to cattle, although other species: ovicaprids and pigs, are represented. The number of pig bones found here is quite surprising.

Merefnebef's funerary complex yielded cattle bones (fore- and hindlegs) of an animal that was between 1.5 and 2 years old (AB24, 25), as well as fragments of ovicaprid ribs (AB32-36), some of which (AB 32) showed evidence of burning. Were these remains of burnt offerings? Other ovicaprid leg bones that had been burnt at high temperatures were also found here (humerus AB36), together with burnt cattle bones (ulna AB27). Charred remains of cattle ribs and limb bone fragments (AB13, 14, 17) were recovered inside the

¹⁴ See Spalinger 1985: 7–20 for an example of an elite endowment strategy.

¹⁵ Many of the cult places from the West Saqqara tombs, from whence bones were studied, consisted of small false doors with offering tables set atop the shafts that contained the bones. Thus, it is possible that any bones left from a series of funerary meals or offerings held at the cult place would form part of the assemblage. Naturally, one cannot dismiss the idea that some of the bones might have been dragged in by dogs, jackals or foxes, all of whom have and continue to inhabit the area and whose remains also form part of these assemblages on occasion. However, for the most part, bones that have been in contact with carnivores bear some evidence of this in the form of distinctive gnaw marks.

¹⁶ The monastery of Apa Jeremiah is at a sufficient distance from this site that it is not regarded as a contaminant. Perhaps there were other similar foundations east of the Step Pyramid or Coptic villages located there, but the distance is still large enough for these not to be regarded as contaminants of this part of West Saqqara.

complex, specifically from areas that have been identified as ‘offering places’ (AB12). Seshemnefer’s chapel has also yielded fragments of cattle and ovicaprid limb bones, together with vertebrae. The far more modest Chapel 15 has yielded very few cattle bones, but a plethora of ovicaprid and pig bones (ribs, vertebrae, metapodia,

and at least two pig mandibles [K03-35]). Similarly, the chapel between 16–17 has yielded portions of pig mandibles. Some fish bones (*Lates niloticus*) were also found in the area of Chapel 15. It seems that a broader variety of foodstuffs was permissible as post-funerary offerings than as burial offerings.

DISCUSSION

An examination of different types of archaeological deposits and faunal funerary offerings at West Saqqara provides a far more diverse socio-economic view of Egyptian funerary customs than might be arrived at through a study of only text and image. Although there are clear challenges in interpreting the different sorts of archaeological deposits found during the course of excavating a cemetery area, it is clear that with careful analysis we can begin to arrive at some sort of an understanding of the real funerary traditions of the Egyptians instead of just the idealized ones presented in the tombs.

The work at West Saqqara, as well as at other sites, shows that there are often three types of deposits associated with burials (types 1, 2 and 3), rather than the two (burial chamber and cult) that have long been considered the norm. Although the

ideal of offerings is, in terms of food, derived from beef, reality differs, perhaps based on economics, convenience or personal preference. Thus, the introduction of pork as part of the funerary offerings shifts our perspective as to what was considered possible, as opposed to what was canonical, and perhaps reflects the different economic status of the tomb-owners of West Saqqara.

Further work on offerings from cemeteries of all periods, both the deposition pattern and content, will surely lead to a ‘truer’ understanding of what actually occurred in ancient Egypt, instead of what the ancient Egyptians projected as the canonical ideal. Ultimately such studies will also serve to elucidate economic variations, and religious beliefs, both of a ‘state’ and personal nature, and provide a more profound understanding of this elusive and fascinating culture.

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