

Ancestors' worship at home:
An example of texts and material sources working together

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Abstract

In ancient Egypt the deceased were an integral part of the world of the living. The dead kin were perceived as extended family members and a bilateral relationship was developed between the two worlds. The deceased expected to receive from the living all the due rituals and offerings in order to ensure their well-being. Fulfilled all the needs of the dead, the living might expect their assistance and protection in everyday life problems.

It's in the context of this relationship that we see emerge the ancestors' cult as an integral part, and with high relevance, of household religion, attested since the Middle Kingdom.

The possible knowledge about this domestic religious practice results from both textual and material sources. It is the combination of texts, objects, and structures that makes possible for us to understand the motivations underlying this practice and where and how it was accomplished.

Keywords: ancient Egypt, household religion, ancestors' worship, textual and material sources.

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Introduction

In ancient Egypt the dead were an integral part of the world of the living. The deceased kin were perceived as extended family members and a bilateral relationship was developed between them (Baines 1991, 147, 153; Baines and Lacovara 2002, 21; Meskell 2002, 206; Szpakowska 2008, 199; Teeter 2011, 148).

It is in the context of this relationship that ancestors' worship emerges as a central part of household religion, attested since the Middle Kingdom.

The aim of this paper is to present a general characterization of ancestors' worship at home in ancient Egypt, considering the motivations, the existing sources for the study of the theme, and the way the cult was performed. To do so we will rely both on the contribution of textual and material sources¹, highlighting the inputs of each kind of source.

The ancestors' worships in ancient Egypt: motivations

Before looking at ancestors' worship at home we should start by trying to understand the reasons behind the performing of this practice. We will look at this issue broadly considering that whether it was done in the tomb or at home the motivations were the same.

In ancient Egypt the dead were divided in two groups. The *Akhu*, the justified dead, the blessed spirits who had obtained the passage to eternity (Demarée 1983, 189-278; Posener 1981; Teeter 2011, 149; Friedman 2001, 47-8). And the *Mutu*, the unjustified or damned dead, those who died violently or untimely, who did not receive the due rituals and did not obtain the passage to eternity (Szpakowska 2008, 160-1; 2009, 801-3). In this context we will consider the first ones.

The *Akhu* were understood as a powerful force who had a special relationship with the gods, mainly with Re (Teeter 2011, 149; Harrington 2005, 83-5; 2013, 7; Griffin 2007,

¹ Between 2010 and 2015, I conducted a PhD research devoted to household religion in ancient Egypt which was mainly focused on the material sources. A key result from this research is a database gathering the vestiges, with a confirmed or potential religious nature, from 30 settlements, dated from the Early Dynastic Period to the Late Period, located in the Egyptian territory and in Nubia when under Egyptian domination (Mota 2015). The material sources considered for this paper arise from this database.

138-9; Friedman 1985, 85). They were entities with the ability to communicate with the living and intervene in their life (Harrington 2013, 8). Is this ability that grounds the relationship between the living and the dead.

As Demarée (1983, 214) explains: “Deceased (usually near)² relatives were considered to have wide powers (...)”. Baines and Lacovara (2002, 22) said: “Thus, the dead could claim to act on behalf of the living in the next world. In a manner akin to the king, they mediate between the gods and the humanity.” Teeter (2011, 150) adds: “*Akhu*’ were thought to be able to intercede with the gods on behalf of the living.”

In this domain, textual sources are particularly enlightening and within them the letters to the dead are considered the best ones to understand this relationship (Donnat 2007, 6; Harrington 2013, 34). These letters were texts with an epistolary form written in different materials – like bowls, linen, vessels, stelae, etc. – and then placed in the tomb of the consignee (Donnat 2007).

The senders commonly used these letters to ask the deceased for their help in various matters of daily life and these texts reveal both sides of the relationship: what the living expected from the dead and what the dead expected from the living.

The following are passages of some letters that we consider as being illustrative of this relationship.

- Louvre Bowl E 6134 – A letter from a mother to her deceased son:

“May you make obstruction against male and female enemies who are evilly disposed toward your household, toward your brother and toward your mother. It is a mother who addresses her able son Merer[i]: As you were one who was excellent upon earth, so you are one who is in good standing in the necropolis. For you invocation offerings shall be made; for you the haker-feast shall be celebrated; for you the wag-feast shall be celebrated; and to you shall be given bread and beer from the offering table of the Foremost of Westerners (Osiris).” (Wente 1990, 214)

- Hu Bowl (UC 16244) – A letter from a sister to her deceased brother:

“It is a sister who addresses her brother, the sole companion Nefersefekhi: Much attention – it is profitable to give attention to one who cares for you – [...]. It is for the sake of interceding on behalf of a survivor that invocation offerings are made to a spirit. So punish the one who is doing what is distressing to me since I will triumph over whatever dead man or woman is doing this against my daughter.” (Wente 1990, 215)

- Letter in a stela (Cairo Museum) – A letter from a husband to his deceased wife:

“Now since I am your beloved upon earth, fight on my behalf and intercede on behalf of my name. I did not garble [a spell] in your presence when I perpetuated your name upon earth. Remove the infirmity of my body! Please become a spirit

² Teeter (2011, 145-150) states that the dead with whom the living related to were close family members recently deceased. This is based on genealogical studies performed on stelae and ancestors’ busts.

for me [before] my eyes so that I may see you in a dream fighting on my behalf. I will then deposit offerings for you [as soon as] the sun has risen and outfit your offering slab for you." (Wente 1990, 215)

- Chicago vessel stand (The Chicago Museum – E13945) – A letter from a son to his deceased father:

"Moreover, let a healthy son be born to me, for you are an able spirit." (Wente 1990, 213)

- Cairo Bowl (Cat. General 25375) – A letter from a man to a deceased family member:

"Fight on her behalf anew this day that her household may be maintained and water be poured out for you. If there is naught from you, your house shall be destroyed. (...) Fight on [her] behalf: Watch over her! Rescue her from whoever, male or female, is acting against her. Then shall your house and your children be maintained. It is good if you take notice." (Wente 1990, 215-6)

These texts show us that the living appealed to the dead as protectors, helpers and enablers. From the deceased kin they expected support in daily life problems such as solving quarrels, having a child, and ensuring the favor and protection of the gods against all enemies, whether humans, demons or even gods (Teeter 2011, 148; Donnat 2007, 61-2).

However, the intervention of the dead depends on the action of the living³, this is, it was expected that the living acted in the correct manner in order to ensure a good relationship with the dead (Teeter 2011, 150).

The deceased had needs. They were as reliant on nourishing – food and drinks – as when they were alive (Baines and Lacovara 2002, 21; Muller 2001, 32). Their ability to function depends, in part, on having material sustenance (Friedman 2001, 48), so, they depend on the living to guarantee that they receive what they need – all the funerary offerings and due rituals – to ensure their wellbeing. Other texts, besides the letters to the dead, convey this idea. Some examples:

- Appeal to the living from Pahery tomb in El-Kab

"I have become an equipped [blessed spirit],
I have furnished my place in the graveyard.
I have what I need in all things,
I shall not fail to respond.
The dead is father to him who acts for him,
He forgets not him who libates for him,
It is good for you to listen!" (Lichtheim 1975, Vol. II, 20)

- Appeal to the living from the Herymeru tomb at Sakara

³ Bommas (2011, 164) compares the relationship between the living and the dead with the principle of right action dictated by Maat, the principle clearly expressed in two passages of the Eloquent Peasant: "Act for him who would act for you" and "A good deed is remembered. This is the precept: do to the doer to make him do." (Lichtheim 1975, Vol. I, 182 and 174). For more details, see Mota (2015, 210-11).

“However, with regard to any person who shall make invocation offerings or shall pour water, they shall be pure like the pureness of god, and I shall protect him in the necropolis.” (Strudwick 2005, 220)

- Tomb inscription from Ankhmeryremeryptah tomb in Giza

“(Then) you shall make invocation offerings of bread and beer
As I have done for your fathers themselves.
Since you wish that I intercede on your behalf in the necropolis,
Then teach your children the words of making invocation offerings
For me on the day of my passing there.
I am an excellent *akh*.” (Strudwick 2005, 268)

As these texts show, the dead expected that anyone would perform the actions that ensured their well-being. However, it should be within their family that this obligation would be more felt, as we will see in the following texts:

- Cairo calendar (day 16, month Messori, season Shemu)

“(...) to give water to those who are (in) the underworld [...] Ennead of the west. It is pleasant to your father and your mother who are in the necropolis.” (Bakir 1966, 48)

- Teaching of Ani

“(...) Libate for your father and mother,
Who are resting in the valley;
When the gods witness your action,
They will say: "Accepted."
Do not forget the one outside,
Your son will ad for you likewise.” (Lichtheim 1975, Vol. II, 137)

Fulfilled the needs of the dead, the living could expect them to hear their appeal and get help and protection. This idea is especially evident in the letter from the Hu bowl: “It is for the sake of interceding on behalf of a survivor that invocation offerings are made to a spirit.” (Wente 1990, 215). Nevertheless, if the dead were unsatisfied they could be perceived as a threat, they could cause every kind of chaos and turmoil (Demarée 1983, 277-8; Teeter 2011, 148), becoming comparable to Mutu (Harrington 2013, 22). We can see this idea in two different texts:

- Letter from the P. Leiden I 371 – A letter from a husband to his deceased wife:

“To the able spirit Ankhiry: What have I done against you wrongfully for you to get into this evil disposition in which you are? What have I done against you? As for what you have done, it is your laying hands on me even though I committed no wrong against you. From the time that I was living with you as a husband until today, what have I done against you that I should have to conceal it? What [have done] against you? (...) Now look, you are disregarding how well I have treated you. I'm writing [you] to make you aware of the things you are doing (...).” (Wente 1990, 216-7)

- Teaching of Ani

“Satisfait le génie, fais ce qu’il d’ désire.
 Tiens-toi exempt de son tabou,
 Et tu seras préservé des nombreux dommages qu’il cause.
 Garde-toi de toute perte.
 La bête du troupeau qui est volée dans les champs,
 C’est lui qui agit ainsi.
 Quant au manque dans l’aire de dépiquage dans les champs,
 ‘C’est le génie!’ dit-on aussi.
 S’il met la perturbation dans sa maison,
 C’est avec la conséquence que les coeurs se désunissent.
 Aussi le supplient-ils tous.” (Vernus 2001, 252-3; Posener 1981, 393-401)

Thus, we may say that ancestors’ worship was a way to guarantee that the deceased kin were a friendly support and not a threat. And, if the dead feel dissatisfied, it was a way to solve the problem and re-establish order and wellbeing.

The ancestors worships at home: the sources

Now that we briefly outlined the motivations underlying the ancestors’ worship in ancient Egypt, it’s time to look at the sources that demonstrate that this kind of cult occurs not only in the tomb but also at home.

Considering textual sources, we have a passage from Cairo Calendar (day seven, month Mechir, season Peret) that clearly states that the dead should be worshiped at home:

“Make invocation offering to the spirits in your house. Make *'gbt*-offerings to the gods, and they will be accepted on this day.” (Bakir 1966, 31)

Unfortunately, texts do not tell us much more than this. For this subject we should rely primarily on material sources. Material sources such as architectural structures, objects, and decorations, although not in a clear or truly explicit manner, attest that ancestors’ worship at home goes back to the Middle Kingdom. Let us look at these sources.

At Askut, a Nubian fort, were identified two altars: the first from the Middle Kingdom (end of the XII Dynasty/beginning of the XIII Dynasty) and another with uncertain dating but probably between the end of the Second Intermediate Period and the beginning of the New Kingdom (Smith 1993, 498-500; 1995, 102).

The Middle Kingdom structure consists of a niche modelled with plaster and surmounted by an Egyptian type cornice. In front of it there was a pedestal. The niche would be used to place a stela and the pedestal would serve to place the items used in the cult. This set was located in a reception and family reunion room (Smith 2003, 128). In an adjacent room was found a stela that would be used to worship a family ancestor. Smith (1993, 66) believes that this stela was used in the altar thus he assigns to the all set a role related to ancestors’ worship.

The latest altar, located in the house of Meryka in the Southwest sector of the settlement is outlined by Smith (1993, 497): “A small altar was built at this level in room 32a, and was connected to an earlier drainage pot set flush to the tile floor. When found it still contained a funerary stela dedicated by Meryka. [...] The layout of the building, is clearly domestic in character, similar to moderate to large sized mansions at Amarna. Nothing in the associated finds would suggest anything more than a household shrine, the earliest example of a type well known from later New Kingdom in houses at Deir el-Medineh and Amarna.”

This altar comprises a niche for a stela – just as it was when it was discovered – and a frontal elevation for libations. At the base there was a vase for the liquids used during rituals (Fig. 1).

In addition to the stela dedicated to Meryka – of rough work, with hieroglyphics inscriptions where is noticeable the standard offering formulae in the upper level and the representation of two figurines (a seated man in the right side and a standing one in front of him) in the low level (Smith 1993, 497 and 499, Fig. 18) – were also found, by the altar, two incense burners, a lion head in faience, and a persea fruit in the drain (Smith 2003, 130).

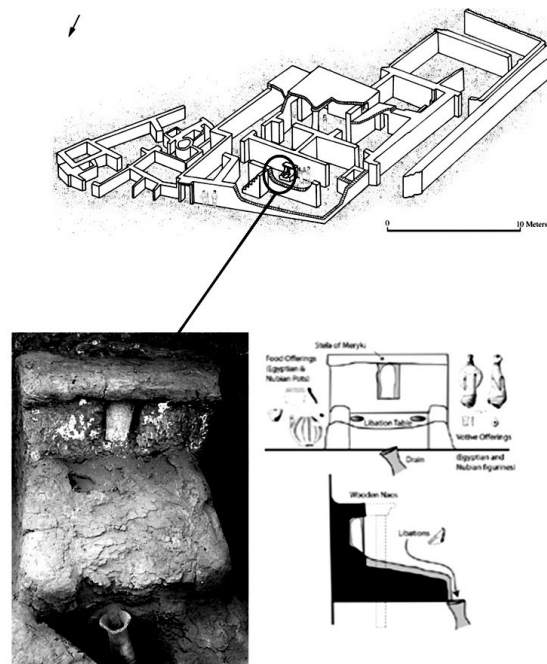


Fig.1: Reconstitution of the house of Meryka (Askut), image of the domestic altar and its reconstitution (Smith 2003, Figs. 5.3, 5.26 e 5.29).

Besides these two sets, in Askut were also found, in houses, objects usually associated with funerary rituals: a type of offering table called *soul-house*. Initially their presence at home was understood as a re-use, but factors like the characteristics of the settlement, the quantity, their presence in other settlements (like Buhen), and the other vestiges pointing

out to an ancestors' worship at home, lead to the current believe that *soul-houses* had at home the same use that they had in tombs (Smith 1995, 66; 2003, 128).

At Lisht, a settlement in the Fayum region, we know that there was an indefinite number of domestic altars (Mace 1921, 12), but we have detailed information about one of them (Arnold 1996, 15), which is exactly an example of an altar devoted for this practice.

This altar, located in the central room of the house A.13 (in the West border of the settlement), was a mudbrick pedestal on top of which was located a stela made by Ankhu and dedicated to his deceased father Mentuhotep (Arnold 1996, 17). Sadly, in this settlement we do not have other vestiges that help us to elaborate a more complete characterization of this set.

These examples show composite situations where the presence of a stela clearly related to ancestors' worship allow us to assign them a function related to this practice. Nevertheless, there are other vestiges that might also be related to ancestors' worship at home, but we could not claim with absolute certainty since they did not have associated materials that validate this idea. This is the case of the offering tables⁴, stands, incense burners and basins found at Elephantine, South Abydos, Buhen, Lahun, Mirgissa, Semna, Shalfak and Uronarti. These objects are cult related but we do not know if they were used to worship ancestors or divinities (Mota 2015, 175-6).

At Lahun, another settlement in the Fayum region, we have a different kind of source: a decoration. Petrie (1891, 7, Pl.XVI-6), found the oldest known domestic decoration with a potential religious motivation (Quirke 2005, 85-6). And all points out to a representation of ancestor worship. It is a parietal polychromatic painting representing an offering scene. The composition is complex, with different elements. The emphasis lies on two human figures in the centre of the first level of the image. One figure is bigger and is sitting, the other one is smaller and is standing in front of the first one. The seated figure is receiving offerings placed on a table in front of him (Fig. 2).



Fig.2: Parietal decoration of a house of Lahun (Petrie 1891, Pl. XVI.6).

⁴ The existence of offering tables at home goes back to the First Intermediate Period. At Abydos (Kom es-Sultan) was found one of these pieces, but the situation is the same, we do not know what its real use was. Probably, considering the scarcity of the presence of gods at home during this period and also during the Middle Kingdom, they would actually be used in ancestors' worship, but we do not really know (Mota 2015, 175 and 224-239).

We may assume that this painting not only illustrates a religious behavior, but it could also act as a framework to its accomplishment at home.

This collection of sources allows us to see that in the Middle Kingdom some houses could have structures, objects or decorations that attest the existence of ancestors' worship at home. However, the image of this reality is blurred. Fortunately, there is a case that takes our understanding one step further. At Kom el-Fakhry (Memphis), in 2011, the Mit Rahina Field School team identified a house (late 12th / early 13th dynasty) where existed a set that illustrate, clearly and with no room for misinterpretations, a domestic space aimed for ancestors' worship.

The Kom el-Fakhry altar, as I prefer to call it, comprises a stela and an offering table arranged together (Fig. 3). The stela had three levels of decoration: the first shows an offering table, the second a seated couple both holding a lotus, and the third has a female kneeling, with a lotus in her hand, in front of a little offering table. This level was probably a late addition. The offering table was rectangular with a small furrow to drain the liquids. It was decorated in high-relief with two tall jars, breads and the leg of an animal. Next to this set was also found a small statue of a man and a woman (Fig. 4), most likely Nyka and Sta-Hathor, the couple represented in the stela, and two fragments of a statue of a dwarf (similar to those found at Lahun) probably used as a stand or to burn incense (Tavares, Kamel 2011, 6; 2012:6).



Fig.3: Set of stela and an offerings table from a house at Kom el-Fakhry (Tavares, Kamel 2011, 6).



Fig.4: Elements of the 'altar' shown above and also a couple figurine that was found in association (Tavares, Kamel 2011, 13-14).

Although it is a singular case, this altar attests a reality which other remains, less eloquent, only allow us to have a glimpse of.

Going forward in time, let us look at the New Kingdom sources.

Dating from this period we have not only the well-known and already much studied anthropoid or ancestors bust and the *Akh iqr n Re* stelae, but also other vestiges, like offering tables, an offering stand and amulets.

The offering tables and the fragment of an offering stand originating from Deir el-Medina, contrary to those dating from the Middle Kingdom, are surely related to this practice since they have inscriptions with a direct link to it (Bruyère 1939, 246, 276-7, 329, Figs. 147 and 200; Weiss 2010, 200). For example:

- Iuy offering table

“(...) for the *Ka* of the able spirit of Re, *Iuy*...” (Demarée 1989, 147)

- Aḥmose offering table

“A boon which the King gives (to) Anubis... (That they may give breathing of) the sweet air of the North-wind for the *Ka* (of) the able spirit of Aḥmose.” (Demarée 1989, 145)

The *Akh iqr* stelae are a well-studied source so we will not go much further with their presentation⁵.

In domestic context were found only eight of these stelae: 7 in Deir el-Medina and one in Medinet Habu. However, Demarée (1983, 279), believes that much more of them come from Deir el-Medina houses: “To begin with, from the evidence available we have been able to conclude that the great majority of the *3ḥ iqr n Rc*-stelae do indeed originate from Deir el-Medina [...]. As far as can be ascertained most of these Deir el-Medina stelae appear to have been found in the Village itself, i.e., not in the adjacent necropolis.”⁶

The *Akh iqr n Re* stelae, called like this due to mandatorily contain this formula⁷ – the excellent⁸ spirit of Re – were stelae whose decoration contained the dead – the dedicatee – sitting holding a lotus flower to his chest, with the other hand outstretched to an offering table, or grasping a cloth or an *ankh*-sign (Friedman 1985, 84-5; 1994, 112). The dedicators could also appear making offerings or worshiping the dead.

Besides the figurines, the stelae had an inscription which, in addition to the required formula, could be more or less elaborate. The inscriptions can range from the simple mandatory formula with name of the dead – “The able spirit of Re, [NN], justified” – to longer and more complex texts that could include various deities, the titles of the deceased or a complete list of offerings, for example:

⁵ For a detailed study on the *Akh iqr n Re* stelae see Demarée (1983).

⁶ See also Teeter (2011, 149).

⁷ Griffin (2007, 130) states: “The common element which makes the stelae unique is the *3ḥ iqr n Rc* hieroglyph formula which is used to describe the dedicatee.” Although these stelae arose in the New Kingdom, the *Akh iqr* concept exists since the Old Kingdom (Harrington 2005, 71).

⁸ *Iker* also mean effective, perfect, skilled or meritorious (Griffin 2007, 138).

- Amenemone and Kha'emnūn stela

“The Osiris, the able spirit of Re, *w^cb*-priest of Djesert-Amun, Kha'(em)nūn, justified on every day forever. The Osiris, the able spirit of Re, *w^cb*-priest of Djesert-Amun, Amenemone, justified. His son ... *w^cb*-priest of Djesert-Amun, Nebwen. Re, the great god.” (Demarée 1983, 15-6)

- Pay stela

“A boon which the king gives (to) Harakhty, Lord of Heaven, King of the gods, that he may give an invocation-offering (consisting) of bread, beer, oxen, fowl, incense, cool water, and all pure sweet and pleasant things, for the *Ka* of the able spirit, Pay.” (Demarée 1983, 34)

This kind of texts is very similar to those we saw in the offering tables and offering stand from Deir el-Medina.

According to Demarée (1983, 258), the *Akh iqer* stelae clearly illustrate the relationship between the living and the dead: “(...) the dedicatees are denoted as *ḫw / ḫw iḳrw*, ‘able spirits’. [...] They were those deceased who required and deserved to be taken care of through the medium of offerings from their relatives upon earth, but who, on the other hand, could also act in the favour of those relatives, in which role they sometimes functioned as ‘mediator’. This two-way communication evidently required what we might describe as a ‘place of contact’, a function which in other similar instances was fulfilled by a stela. The stela was the point to which offerings could be brought and contact established between living and deceased relatives through prayers and supplications.”



A

B

C

Fig. 5 a) Ancestors bust (Amara West) in N. Spencer, A. Stevens, M. Binder. 2014. *Amara West. Living in Egyptian Nubia*. London: The British Museum; **b)** Ancestors bust (Deir el-Medina) © Musée du Louvre (E 16348); **c)** Ancestors bust (Kom Rabia) in L. Giddy. 1999. *Kom Rabi'a: The New Kingdom and post-New Kingdom objects. The survey of Memphis II*. London: Egypt Exploration Society: Pl. 14, 82.

Another kind of material sources that also appeared in the New Kingdom, and again with special emphasis in Deir el-Medina, is the anthropoid or ancestors busts⁹. In the houses

⁹ Like the *Akh iqer* stelae the anthropoid or ancestors busts are a well-known and studied vestige. For more information see Keith-Bennett (2011) and Exell (2008).

were identified 15 busts: 11 at Deir el-Medina (Fig. 5b) and one at Amara West (Fig. 5a), El-Ashmunein, Kom Rabia (Memphis) (Fig. 5c), and Sesebi. We should also mention a set of about thirteen busts probably coming from the settlement debris at Deir el-Medina (Keith-Bennett 2011, 11-2).

These are busts with human head, with or without a wig, and with the neck placed on human shoulders on top of a base. The busts have heights ranging between 10 and 25cm and could be of different materials, mainly limestone or sandstone. Many of them would be painted, prevailing the red and yellow colour. They could have several decorative elements such as necklaces and lotus flowers. Of the approximately 190 known busts only five have inscriptions and its content is a matter of debate since they are not very clear in their purpose (Friedman 1994, 114-5; Exell 2008; Keith-Bennet 2011; Harrington 2013, 51).

The uncertainty regarding the inscriptions goes hand in hand with the uncertainty as to the nature of these busts. Harrington (2005, 74), states: "(...) *the busts remain enigmatic.*" And Donnat (Keith-Bennet 2011, 94), says: "La fonction de ces objectes n'est pas clairement établie." However, the most common perspective is that they were objects of worship in the domestic context (as they were in funerary context) and that these figures would most likely be representations of deceased ancestors (Harrington 2005, 71; 2013, 59; Friedman 1985, 94 and 97; Keith-Bennett 2011, 94).

As to who these busts represent, current research indicates the possibility – based on the scant inscriptions and iconography – that they were mainly women: "(...) l'immense majorité des bustes à perruque tripartite devaient représenter des êtres féminins, peut-être des ancêtres féminins spécifiquement attachés à la protection de la famille et de la procréation." (Keith-Bennett 2011, 96) So, the busts are essentially female figurines as opposed to *Akh iqer* stelae that were mainly devoted to men (Keith-Bennett 2011, 96; Harrington 2005, 74 and 78).



Fig.6: Representation of stela with a female figure worshipping an ancestor bust (Abydos - necropolis) In A. Mariette. 1880. *Abydos: description des fouilles (band 2): Temple de Sêti. Temple de Ramsès. Temple d'Osiris. Petit temple de l'Ouest. Nécropole.* Paris: Pl. 60.

Regarding the way these busts were used, we know, thanks to the fact that one of them was found next to a niche in a Deir el-Medina home (Friedman 1985, 83; Exell 2008, 1), and two stelae – one found by Mariette in funerary context at Abydos (Fig. 6) and another of unknown provenance (Fig. 7) currently in the British Museum (BM 170 - Mota 2015, 219, Figs. 244 and 319), – that they would be placed in the niches identified in homes or on altars in the form of pedestals.



Fig.7: Stela associated with the ancestors' worship. The upper level represents, in relief, two busts, and the lower level shows a woman making offerings to a bust. © Trustees of the British Museum (BM 170).

The stela of Abydos shows a woman making libations and burning incense to a bust placed upon an altar. The British Museum stela shows, at the upper level, the representation of two busts and at the lower level a woman making offerings to a bust placed in a similar way to those from the Abydos stela. Thus, the busts could be placed in niches or altars and then a relative, probably the woman of the house, would provide him/her the due rites to ensure the well-being of both.

The idea of protection associated with *Akhu* and the anthropoid or ancestors' busts is also noticeable in twenty-one amulets, in the form of anthropoid bust, found at Tell el-Amarna. Stevens (Keith-Bennett 2011, 253), states: "The form of the remains implies the specialized function of the wear and their presence among settlement suggests they could be worn during life. (...) If intended as representations of the (recently) deceased, the amulets could have been intended to protect the wearer, a role that would seem to group them again with Bes and Toeris images."

Finally¹⁰, in this enumeration of domestic sources for the study of ancestor worship, we must refer a type of vestige which interpretation of its presence at home has not yet been conclusive: the false doors.

¹⁰ Note that only have been mentioned the sources which the binding with ancestor' worship has been, somehow, established and is accepted. We left out, for example, the female figurines since the uses that are usually assigned to them are more related to fertility than to the dead. However, we cannot fail to mention the work of Backhouse (2012), where the author points out the possibility of a connection between these figures and the cult of the dead.

False doors were an architectural structure which presence in homes occurs exclusively in Deir el-Medina¹¹. False doors were, as the name implies, structures similar to doors, stylized, which were built into the walls of the houses. They were typically known from the funerary context in which they were understood as a contact point between the living and the dead (Meskell 2004, 69).

As to their functionality at home let us consider the words of Weiss (2010, 197): “We do know that there was a vivid ancestor cult in Deir el-Medina and hence the common interpretation for the false doors at Deir el-Medina serving as a point of transition between this world and the next, i.e., enabling the communication between the living and their ancestors seems to make good sense”. This association of false doors to a cult of ancestors is also advocated by Meskell (2004, 69): “In the household context false doors provided a portal between the world of the living and the dead and were an ever-present reminder of their eternal presence. For all their ingenuity and presence, the dead required a material conduit, whether the false door or the ancestral image.”

However, in the same paper, Weiss (2010, 203) also suggests a broader interpretation of these structures proposing the idea that the false doors could be a generic cult place, potential two-dimensional altars, which ritual approach does not lie only in ancestor worship but in something more wide-ranging.

Thus, false doors, whose religious nature is clear, could be intended for the ancestor worship or have a broader function similar to an altar.

To sum up, the sources for the study of ancestors' worship at home – mainly material sources – show us, explicitly or not, that this kind of cult in domestic context existed since, at least, the Middle Kingdom, and it could be identified in several ways like structures, objects and decorations.

These sources – with the help of the textual sources – also allow us to try to understand the behaviors that formed this kind of cult.

The ancestors' worships at home: the cult

The considered sources, textual and material, domestic or not, show us that ancestors' worship consists in making offerings, libations and burning incense, being that these procedures when performed at home mimicked those that occur in the tombs.

The offerings were mentioned in several textual sources already analysed: the letters to the dead from the Hu bowl, Louvre Bowl E 6134, and Letter from a husband to his wife, the appeal to the living, the Cairo Calendar and Pay *Akh iqer* stela.

And they are also mentioned in the offering tables and basins from Deir el-Medina:

- Irynūfe offerings table

¹¹ Due to their similarity, these sources are sometimes compared with vertical niches of Tell el-Amarna. Unfortunately, they also present difficulties of interpretation (Mota 2015, 76).

“A boon which the King gives (to) Osiris, Pre-eminent in the West, the good God, that they may give all good and pure things for the *Ka* of Irynūfe.”

“A boon which the King gives (to) Anubis, Pre-eminent in the Divine booth, that they may give all good and pure, pure things for the able spirit of Re, Irynūfe.”
(Demarée 1989, 148-9)

- Irynūfe offerings basin

“A boon which the king gives (to) Re-Harakhty that he may give all that comes forth on his altar for the *Ka* of the able spirit Irynūfe.

A boon which the king gives (to) Atum, Lord of the Two Lands, Heliopolitan, that he may give receiving the offering-bread in the front of Re for the *Ka* of Irynūfe.”
(Demarée 1989, 148-9)

As we have seen, the relationship between the living and the dead was grounded on an exchange of favours: the living fulfilled the dead’s needs and the dead ensured their support, help and protection. The needs of the deceased were in death the same as in life and therefore they relied on the living to, eternally (Teeter 2011, 128), receive the necessary assets to ensure their survival.

Pay Akh iqer stela is very clear about what the dead expected: “(...) that he may give an invocation-offering (consisting) of bread, beer, oxen, fowl, incense, cool water, and all pure sweet and pleasant things, for the *Ka* of the able spirit, Pay.” (Demarée 1983, 34)

In short, the dead should receive¹² food products that included various types of cakes, breads, meats, beverages such as beer and wine, fruits and vegetables. This is, offerings consisted of goods aimed to feed the deceased, which was an essential element for the guarantee of obtaining and maintaining the state of *Akh* and his availability to be cooperative towards their living relatives (Teeter 2011, 128; Friedman 2001, 48; Englund, 2001, 565).

Libations and incense burning, which we consider together because they were practices that usually occurred in parallel, were also ways to worship the dead (Blackman 1912, 69). These practices are mentioned in the Letter to the dead of the Cairo bowl, in the Cairo Calendar, in the Ani Teaching, in spells, appeals to the living and Pay *Akh iqer* stela. Regarding the material sources attesting these practices we have incense burners, libation basins and the images in the referred stelae from Abydos and the British Museum and in *Akh iqer* stelae like those from Djoserka and Dhutmose (Demarée 1989, 129-134, Pls. XII and XII – A.49 /A.50).

Borghouts (1980, 1014), says about libations: “The ritual of pouring out of a liquid is a widespread practice in ancient Egypt religion throughout all periods.” And Assmann (2005, 355), states: “Libation was the central rite in mortuary cult (...)”.

Libation consisted in pouring water, a logic that could be construed as an offering. To make a libation was to make an offering of water (Borghouts 1980, 1014; Poo 2010, 4). Burning incense could also be understood as making an offering. This approach derives

¹² For more details about how the offerings were made, see Mota (2015, 221-2), and Teeter (2011, 130-1).

from the meaning attributed to both substances, this is, what was offered was what water¹³ and incense meant and could provide.

Pouring water and burning incense were understood as ritual actions that meant purification, they both purify the space and the receptacle of the rite (Assmann 2005, 356; Borghouts 1980, 101; Goyon 1984, 84; Poo 2001, 4). However, these actions could have additionally a deeper meaning.

Blackman (1912, 72)¹⁴, analysed these practices based on Amon Ritual and considers that both substances had divine origin: "Like the libations, the grains of incense are the exudations of a divinity." Thus, these offerings mean giving to the dead (and the gods) elements with a rejuvenating and vivifying capacity. Blackman (1912, 75), explains: "(...) it becomes quite obvious why the burning of incense and the pouring of libations are so closely associated in the funerary and temple ritual. Both rites are performed for the same purpose – to revivify the body of the god or man by restoring to it its lost moisture. Under the form of libations it was believed that either the actual fluids that run from it, or these of Osiris himself, were communicated to the corpse. In the case of fumigation with incense it is the latter of these two ideas that seems to have prevailed, namely that the body was revived not by the restoration of its exudations but receiving those of Osiris."

To conclude, libations and incense burning could correspond to purification moments and also to offerings of products that potentially could have a divine nature, corresponding to substances emanated from the body of Osiris with vivifying properties.

Texts and material sources demonstrate that ancestors' worship at home consisted of the same actions as the ancestors' worship in the tomb: offerings, libations and burning incense. These practices ensured to the dead all the things they needed to maintain their status, well-being and willingness to help.

Conclusion

As already mentioned, the ancestors' worship sought, in its various expressions, to ensure the well-being of the dead providing them with all their needs and offering them the possibility of a more promising existence in death. In return, the dead would act, for their family, as an enabling assistant, as an intermediary and not as a dangerous and threatening entity.

The texts and material sources found in houses help us to understand how this relationship between the dead and the living worked and how the cult was done.

The textual sources are very useful to understand the underlying motivations for this cult – in the tomb and at home – and also to understand how the cult was performed. The material sources, which attest that the ancestors' worship was made at home since at least the Middle Kingdom, show us the physical presence of the rituals associated with this practice and, together with the textual sources, demonstrate how it was accomplished.

¹³ Note, however, that water is also regarded as essential to the dead as well as foods (Assmann 2005, 356-7).

¹⁴ See also Assmann 2005, 355-6.

Thus, the input of these two typologies of sources is the ideal way for us to know and understand this facet of household religion in ancient Egypt.

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