CHAPTER 23

Cultural Identity:
Housing and Burial Practices

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A LIFE COURSE APPROACH

Not so long ago archaeologists had few resources for exploring cultural identity through housing and burials in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. Thankfully, recent fieldwork developments have provided substantial new, refined data for increasingly nuanced research questions about cultural identity (Bagnall 2001; Bagnall and Davoli 2011). Likewise, a range of innovative books and articles has harnessed informed theoretical frameworks in order to maximize the potential of this new data (e.g. Collombert 2000; Rowlandson 2004; Riggs 2008 [2005]; Yiftach-Firanko 2009; Vandorpe and Waebens 2010; Vandorpe 2012). These contemporary advances enable the present article to explore cultural identity from an optimistic standpoint as well as suggest new lines of inquiry.

The current work combines scholarship on the life course with housing and burial evidence to explore identity in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. The “life course” concept integrates ageing with embodiment, ritual, memory, material culture, and social identity. This sociological model of the life course considers the human life as a continuum and within a range of social contexts (Gilchrist 2012: 1). As such, the life course approach interrogates cultural identity with respect to continuity and change within an individual’s life.

Debates about continuity and change are critical to questions of identity in Greco-Roman Egypt, ensuring the suitability of a life course approach. In the Eastern Mediterranean, historians and archaeologists focus particularly upon the delicate balance between the Greek and Roman characteristics of society. In Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, the cultural stratigraphy is deeper and more complex than most other regions and requires meticulous study in order to tease out multiple identity shifts during these periods. Ideally, debates about identity in this era could be resolved through highly localized explorations of domestic, socio-economic, funerary, and religious spheres of life and death. The extant sources, however, rarely permit this luxury.

In this contribution, I explore how the dominant ethnic groups, genders, and
localities experienced life course stages in ordinary life and death through the materiality of the house and the tomb. A critique that could be leveled at this approach is that it loses the specificity inherent in identity, which is always contextually contingent. In order to mitigate the issue of context, however, I work through the data by locality and attempt to isolate diachronic change when the data allows it. This contribution cannot claim to explore cultural identity within the life course fully, but it aims to highlight significant themes that will be useful for future exploration of this topic.

**CULTURAL IDENTITY IN GRECO-ROMAN EGYPT**

The concept “identity” conveys the ways in which specific individuals and groups might be differentiated from other individuals and groups within social relationships (Jenkins 1996: 4). In Ptolemaic Egypt, Greek and Egyptian ethnic identity contributed to individuals’ sense of themselves and each other, but ethnicity appears to have had less impact than other facets of identity. Moreover, ethnicity is a thorny concept: although there was a set of legal statuses, these do not map uniformly upon what we might now term ethnicity. An individual’s gender, age, profession, kinship, or place of residence (e.g. town or village; coastal, Nile or desert oases), seems to have impacted their emplacement in Ptolemaic society more substantially. Over time, intermarriage, acculturation in both directions, social mobility for Egyptians and Jews, and the pervasiveness of Greek cultural and administrative institutions, cultivated a social elite who were recognized socially as Hellenes in the Ptolemaic Period (Clarysse 1979, 1992 and 1995; Goudriaan 1992; Derchain 2000, see also Chapter 19). Cross-cultural studies of ethnicity suggest that it is common for the relationship between material culture and cultural identity to shift over time (Jones 1997: 113-115, 124-125, 130-134). In the material world of Ptolemaic Egypt, Greek art forms in Egypt were not exclusively for “Greeks” and Egyptian motifs were not the preserve of the “Egyptians”. Moreover, Egyptian exposure to Classical and Hellenistic Greek art during the Ptolemaic period brought a different way of using images. Artisans began to recreate the observed world in naturalistic sculpture, paintings, portraiture, and public display.

At the time of Roman occupation, “Greek-ness” and “Egyptian-ness” were no longer two discrete states. Instead, being Greek and being Egyptian were just two possible constructions of identity that might complement, blend, or clash with one another (Boozer 2012; see also Hall 2002). The social importance of a person was defined less by ethnicity than by cultural affiliations (Goudriaan 1988: 8-13, 75-7). The constitution of these constructions could vary depending on the context, such as everyday life versus the afterlife, as represented in burial.

After the Roman annexation of the country, Egypt’s political, legal, and economic
organization was changed and social status was more codified than under Ptolemaic rule (Bowman and Rathbone 1992; see Chapter 18). From the Roman vantage, any resident of Egypt who was not either a Roman citizen or a citizen of the chief cities (Alexandria, Naukratis, Ptolemais, or Antinoopolis) was an Egyptian, although those were metropolitans had a distinct status within Egyptians. This catch-all designation applied to metropolites and villagers alike, without respect to ones ethnic descent.

The impact of Roman rule upon the material world was as palpable as its impact upon the political and economic landscape. The combination of broad cultural trends – the spread of elite Roman and Greek portraiture, and the codification of social status – contributed to the increased use of naturalistic portraits in the domestic and funerary spheres. Portraiture in this mode offered a new means of self-presentation with an elite, high cultural form (Riggs 2008 [2005]: 246). These naturalistic portraits were used in conjunction with Egyptian texts and images in funerary art as well as Egyptian treatments of the body. There was significant choice about when and where Egyptian, Greek, and Roman elements could be used in Romano-Egyptian life and representation. These symbolic choices likely betray the identity of the users.

Functionally, there was much blending among the craftspeople who created domestic and funerary material and visual culture. The same workshop could produce objects with varying degrees of Greek or Egyptian representations, which suggests that differences in representational forms were acknowledged and even governed by certain rules of decorum (Riggs 2008 [2005]: 97). For example, funerary mask gilders also decorated temples, and it seems likely that funerary portrait painters were also involved with mural painting in homes, civic buildings and tombs, and in commemorative and cultic painting to be hung in houses or public spaces, such as temples (Cannata 2012: 609). This overlap in craftspeople creates another strand of connection between disparate contexts.

In later Roman Egypt, being Egyptian, Greek or Roman had become more of a cultural than an ethnic distinction. Moreover, it is clear that “Egyptian-ness”, “Greek-ness”, and “Roman-ness” no longer reflected contemporary social concerns. Alternatively, gender, status, and locality continued to carry great significance. As a result, the mutable concept of “identity” is a more useful, multivalent aperture into self-perception in Roman Egypt than ethnicity alone. In contemporary Ptolemaic and Roman society, these components could be modeled and reformed to fit life course needs as required by different groups. The life course approach enables us to consider how various components of identity waxed and waned in different contexts of life and death. These approaches are most appropriate for the extant material since each monument or class of object must be considered within its provenance and date, where these can be established, as well as in terms of how it was used and what it represents.
Social archaeology frequently targets the “household” as a unit of analysis for understanding the lived experiences of individuals and groups. An archaeology of domestic spaces interrogates the spatial locale in which people lived and the material practices that gave meaning to their life course. Children learned about social, religious, gender, and economic roles through their household interactions. Adults perpetuated traditions and participated in overarching social activities. The elderly often took on particularly key roles in religious practices. For this reason, houses allow us to explore the lived experiences of individuals along with important life course traditions.

Ptolemaic- and Romano-Egyptian households, as in many other societies, served as the residential center of production and consumption, the focus of social relations, biological reproduction, and held an essential role in domestic and ritual functions (Allison 1999; Hendon 2004). The occupants of houses in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt could include family members as well as non-family members (Bagnall and Frier 1994), such as servants, slaves, tenants and others. For this reason, the term “family” cannot be equated easily with the material remains of houses (Nevett 2011).

Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptian domestic archaeology is still in the early stages of development, despite a long history of domestic excavation in Egypt. In particular, we have a considerable amount of information about houses from the first to fourth centuries AD from various parts of Egypt, but we do not have stable interpretations of this material and we often lack desirable detail for exploring nuanced questions of identity.

Our current evidence of domestic architecture suggests that houses could range between more traditional pre-Ptolemaic house forms to Classical Mediterranean-style structures. Decorative motifs, portable objects, and residues from food consumption offer a similarly wide range in options for household consumption practices. Unfortunately, most previous excavations of houses segregated artifacts and architectural elements from their original contexts, with the result that only general statements can be made about domestic assemblages. In other words, due to both methodological and analytical constraints it is not possible to explore the ways in which individual households combined architecture, portable objects, diet, and decoration. We can say very little about how individual households functioned in different socio-economic groups, ethnic groups, regions, and so on. Moreover, we do not have a sufficient range of plans for excavated houses, which makes it difficult to determine the geographic spread, diachronic development, and prevalence of various house types (Boozer 2015b).

Moving from this fragmented picture to a detailed, nuanced, and contextual analysis will require the fuller publication of older excavations as well as fully published new excavations. Despite having only a broad-strokes understanding of domestic life, we have a number of sites from which we can begin to gather data together in order to
understand the lived experiences of households in discrete regions and periods of Greco-Roman Egypt.

The Fayum: Karanis, Soknopaiou Nesos, Tebtynis and other towns

Most prior research on Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptian domestic contexts has taken place in Egypt’s Fayum region (Map ¶¶). This region became a nexus for domestic studies due to the papyrological rescue missions led by Grenfell and Hunt in the early 1900s. These missions exposed numerous, well-preserved houses in the region (Grenfell, Hunt et al. 1900). Because the primary objective of these missions was to salvage papyri, the resultant publications lack contextual and architectural data. In addition to Grenfell and Hunt’s rescue missions, other excavations took place in the Fayum, although the robustness of this data varies considerably.

The University of Michigan excavated two of the most famous Fayum sites in the early twentieth century: Karanis (Kom Aushim) (1924-1934) and Soknopaiou Nesos (Dime) (1931-1932). The material recovered from these sites is invaluable for the present study since both sites produced a wealth of material data on domestic architecture and artifacts. Karanis has become the type-site of Romano-Egyptian domestic architecture, due to its high state of preservation and the care with which it was excavated compared to previous work on Romano-Egyptian houses. Since the 1930s, Karanis has appeared in numerous publications as a representative Romano-Egyptian settlement, but one should be wary about exploiting it too readily as the Romano-Egyptian domestic type site (Boozer 2015b).

There are two major caveats that must be kept in mind when employing Karanis houses for comparanda. First, the Karanis houses have not been fully published and this selectivity obscures the most common houses occupied by typical households. Second, the publications that do exist for Karanis houses organized finds into material categories rather than contexts (e.g. individual houses). It is not possible to determine which types of objects, texts, and architectural features co-occurred with one another and what the distribution of house types, objects and texts looked like across the site without consulting the Kelsey archives. A recent project has targeted specific areas of Karanis for re-excavation and targeted excavations in new areas (Cappers, Cole et al. 2013). Re-excavation has revealed previously unpublished features, while new excavations have revealed more refined data on house types than previously published, although the new structures were found to be preserved only at foundation level. Third, new research has argued that the chronologies established by the excavators for Karanis require significant down-dating (Pollard 1998; Cappers, Cole et al. 2013). It is also clear that level equivalences across the site are inconsistent (Boozer 2015a).

Broadly, the published evidence suggests that buildings at Karanis aligned into blocks of habitation (Husselman 1979: 10, Maps 4-5). The houses that were described
and drawn were predominately made of mud brick with only small amounts of wood used (Husselman 1979: 34). Flat roofs were common, except in cellars, which were vaulted. Most houses were elongated and had multiple stories, with cooking taking place in courtyards that were either private or shared. The walls were often plastered and covered with a thin lime wash. A black wash was most common with white accents painted horizontally across the mud brick courses. Decorations were minimal and were usually found in niches, often representing religious scenes, and typically painted in maroon and black (Husselman 1979: 35-36, pls. 18, 19a, 21b, 22a, 24a, 24b, 25, 102a). The extraordinary range in recovered material culture provides evocative glimpses into trade relationships (amphorae), craftsmanship (painted pottery), daily life (miniatures, basketry, adornment, textiles, figurines and so on) and diet (botanicals, fauna) (Gazda and Wilfong 2004).

Wilfong has argued that although practically none of the published material from the Michigan excavations reflects Egyptian culture, there are numerous unpublished representations that combine Egyptian and Greco-Roman visual expressions (Wilfong 2012: 232-33). This combination can be found among the statues, terracottas, murals and other unpublished photographs, facsimiles, and objects from Karanis that are housed at the Kelsey Museum and in the Cairo Museum. For example, a recent re-examination of wall paintings highlights the use of Egyptian gods in a large granary for apotropaic purposes (Wilson 2013).

The University of Michigan also excavated houses at Soknopaiou Nesos. Only the coins, papyri, and specific architectural elements received attention in the single published excavation report (Boak, Peterson et al. 1935). The houses appear to have been built contiguously, and each had a courtyard to support domestic cooking needs. These structures were built directly onto bedrock. The largest house excavated had an internal courtyard (aithrion). All of the structures had a central-pillared stairway leading to upper floor(s) and often also to cellars. Poor quality wall paintings were found in some of the structures (Boak, Peterson et al. 1935: 9-10, figs. 4, 6, 7). These wall paintings have been considered more “indigenous” than the ones from Karanis, but Soknopaiou Nesos, like Karanis, requires more refined re-evaluations in order to interpret these findings.

Other sites from Egypt’s Fayum region are even less well documented. Hawara, located at the entrance to the Fayum, is a particularly important site for Roman Egypt, although it perhaps is best-known for the pyramid of Amenemhet III (12th Dynasty). Uytterhoeven’s new volume (2010) provides an excellent compendium on Hawara domestic and funerary data. Sadly, little can be made of the ruinous Romano-Egyptian domestic remains, except that they seem to have a square or rectangular footprint averaging less than 100 m² in area and with an adjoining exterior courtyard. These houses seem to have been multistoried, with only two or three rooms on the ground floor (Nowicka 1969: 115; Uytterhoeven 2010: esp. 322-4).
Another Fayum site, Tebtynis (modern Tell Umm el-Bagarat) provides domestic comparanda for the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, although there are significantly fewer published houses from Tebtynis than Karanis and Soknopaiou Nesos. Most Tebtynis houses date to late Ptolemaic and early Roman periods, and the published plans show houses with a square plan. One house, which dates to approximately the first century BC through the first century AD, has a peristyle contained within the house (Grimal 1995: 590-1, fig. 14; Hadji-Minaglou 1995; Davoli 1998: 179-210; Hadji-Minaglou 2007 and 2008: 126-7, fig. 4). These Fayum houses also were analyzed typologically, so it is not possible to connect finds, architectural features, and the plans of houses in order to reconstruct what each individual house looked like.

Oxyrhynchus and Upper Egypt

Moving to other regions in Egypt (Map ¶¶), we find a different range of fragmentary data on Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptian houses. Oxyrhynchus (modern el-Bahnasa) is located approximately 160 km south of modern Cairo. Oxyrhynchus provides us with a wealth of papyri dating to the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, revealing remarkable detail about the community that once resided there. The urban layout, domestic structures, and material remains are described also, although the publication of material remains is paltry.

Grenfell and Hunt initiated excavations at Oxyrhynchus between 1899 and 1907 as it suffered from sebakhin looting (Egyptian peasants who dug sebakh, fertile earth). Darbishire published a plan of the site in 1908 and later Petrie published a plan emphasizing the theater from his work in 1922 (Petrie 2007). The houses are not well-represented in these selective plans. A 1993 mission of the Islamic branch of the Supreme Council of Antiquities uncovered some Roman period stone houses on the site (Padró 2007). These stone houses appear to corroborate textual evidence, which suggests that the wealthier houses were built of stone and the cheaper ones of sun-dried brick. Houses in the city sometimes ran to three stories, and normally were built with a cellar and a small courtyard (about 15 square yards) containing a well. It seems that at least one house had a private bath (Turner 2007: 144, 147). Even more opulent houses existed as well. The unique plan of one such house survives, showing three courtyards, one of which is called an atrium, which potentially contained an impluvium (Oxy. XXIV 2406) (Bowman 2007: 173). Recovered papyri also suggest that poorer strata were catered to and that there were high apartment buildings (one is mentioned at seven stories in Oxy. XXXIC 2719), as we know from other areas of the Roman Empire (e.g. Alexandria, Ostia, Rome).

Other areas of Upper Egypt, such as Elephantine, have produced houses. Elephantine is an island in the middle of the Nile as part of modern-day Aswan in southern Egypt. Unfortunately the results of the urban excavations are difficult to interpret because only portions of the domestic structures have been exposed (although,
see Arnold, Haeny et al. 2003). According to the excavators, these houses were broadly similar to the excavated houses at Karanis.

**Alexandria and the Egyptian north coast**

The north coast of Egypt provides us with several examples of Roman Mediterranean housing. Alexandria, the premier city in Roman Egypt — and one of the chief cities of the Roman Empire — is poorly visible to the archaeologist today. Even so, archaeologists have begun to recover the remains of villas and other elaborate housing structures that potentially contained workshops and apartments in a single structure (Rodziewicz 1976 and 1984). These structures have not been holistically explored, such that we can understand the architecture, artifacts, ecofacts, and textual data as a unit.

Marina el-Alamein (ancient Leukaspis or Antiphrae), a smaller Greco-Roman port town, produced several sumptuous dwellings. These houses contained a central court surrounded by two or three portico wings, while the smaller dwellings had just one wing of a single column. Typologically, these houses recall portico and peristyle houses of the Classical Mediterranean (Medeksza and Czerner 2003: 21). To date, these houses have not been fully published, although preliminary reports exist.

**Western Desert**

Egypt’s western desert contains a wealth of well-preserved domestic remains, which add considerably to more fragmented data that we have from the Nile Valley and the Mediterranean coast. The Kharga Oasis has produced partial data on houses. Douch, located at the extreme southern edge of Kharga, contains a large number of domestic structures. Architecturally, these houses reflect Roman Mediterranean influences, as can be seen particularly in the use of inner peristyles and interior courts (see Reddé, Ballet et al. 2004: 25-74).

Recent excavations in the Dakhla Oasis have contributed a range of Roman period houses from multiple sites that have been excavated using modern techniques. Kellis (Ismant el-Kharab) provides an abundance of data on local Dakhlan domestic life. The site has undergone careful, contextual excavation since 1986, under the direction of C. Hope as part of the Dakhla Oasis Project (DOP). At this stage, it is possible to summarize the Kellis houses on the basis of the numerous preliminary reports.

Roman Kellis domestic architecture typically consisted of a single-story structure with barrel vaulted roofs. A staircase provided access to the roof, which often was used as additional work and storage space. Within the house, there was typically a central courtyard area surrounded by living and workspaces, although some houses had rear courtyards in addition to or instead of the central courtyard. Walls were mud-plastered and often contained strips of whitewash along rear walls and around doorways and wall...
niches (Hope, Kaper et al. 1989; Knudstad and Frey 1999). Presumably this whitewash illuminated these dark spaces, particularly when lamps were placed in the niches.

A closer examination of the Kellis houses yields diachronic information on house development. Area B, in northern-central Kellis, primarily consists of extensive complexes. Area B dates from the first through third centuries AD and shows a continuous development of buildings, some of which were more formal than others. A sub-area contained within this zone, Kellis Area B3, contained lavishly decorated houses with bright geometric motifs. The B3 sub-area contains a series of large residences that may be contemporaneous since they all share a north wall (Hope, Bowen et al. 2006). Hope suggests that these Kellis residences contain architectural parallels to Roman atrium houses at Italian sites such as Pompeii, rather than drawing upon Egyptian architectural norms (Hope 2006 compares them to Pompeiian houses, such as in Zanker 1998: 135-56, 192-203).

House B/3/1, located in the eastern portion of Area B, has finds largely dating to the late first to early third centuries AD. House B/3/1 has a more Classical style layout than is commonly associated with Egypt. House B/3/1 has a clustered plan of access and a central open area (Room 1b) (Hope and Whitehouse 2006: 318; Hope et al. 2006: 23-31; Hope 2007: 33). The organizing principle for this house was bifurcated around two rooms rather than around one room, which may have been an attribute of wealthier Dakhlan houses, if we compare it to Amheida House B1 (below and Boozer 2015c).

Area C is located in the far eastern extremity of Kellis and contains blocks of structures as well as a visible furnace and kiln debris. The Area C structures date to the second and third centuries AD. These Area C buildings drew upon Classical models in their arrangement, as indicated by the placement of living and workspaces around a central open courtyard. Kellis House C/2/8 has a square plan, and the rooms were arranged around a central open courtyard. From the surface, Kellis House C/2/10 shares a similar square plan and central open courtyard, but it has not been fully excavated, and reconstructions must be tentative at this time. Area C at Kellis was a vernacular and industrial zone comparable to Area 1 at Amheida. Structures from Area C tend to be uniform in plan (Hope, Bowen et al. 2006: 29; Hope and Whitehouse unpublished: 1). The final publication of the Kellis houses promises to be a groundbreaking publication.

Moving to the western portion of Kellis, known as Area A, we find churches, a bath house, and domestic structures. This area of the site is located just east of a cluster of temples, a church, and the western tombs. Hope’s team excavated a cluster of houses in Area A. The Kellis Area A houses are single-story elongated structures dating to the late third to fourth century (Hope 1991: 41). Houses from this area contain well-preserved barrel vaulted roofs over the rooms that surround a central open courtyard. House 3 has a central, open court (room 6) around which the unroofed stairs (room 7) and main barrel-vaulted living quarters (rooms 2-5, 8-10) clustered (Hope 1991: 41-2; Hope et al. 1989:1, fig. 1). Likewise, House 5 in Area A/9 dates to the fourth century, is somewhat elongated,
has a central room through which other rooms were accessed, and all of the rooms were barrel vaulted (Hope 2003: 238).

Trimithis (modern-day Amheida), located in the western portion of Dakhla, is a large city that appears to have been occupied consistently for many millennia. The systematic excavations, directed by R. Bagnall, began in 2004 and two houses have been completed, along with portions of additional domestic and other structures. In the center of the site, as defined by the visible mapped footprint, House B1 appears to be consistent with Dakhla domestic norms. B1 was occupied in the fourth century AD for approximately 30 years, as suggested from current analyses of the ostraca and archaeological deposition (Bagnall and Ruffini 2012). House B1 has a clustered plan with two rooms serving as major entry points to other rooms. The wall paintings from House B1 are particularly notable for their prominent representations of scenes from classical mythology (Fig. 23.1). Among the scenes, one figures the personification of Polis, which is presumed to be Trimithis herself. A substantial corpus of ostraca suggests that one of the owners, Serenos, was a city councilor (Bagnall and Ruffini 2004). The correlation between his civic role and this representation strongly indicates the importance of this status for his identity within Trimithis (Boozer 2010).

House B2, located in the northeastern portion of Trimithis, offers a simpler structure that dates to the late third and early fourth centuries AD (Boozer 2015c). Architecturally, House B2 also follows Dakhlan domestic norms in that it has a dodged entrance, a clustered plan of access, and under-stairs storage areas (Fig. 23.2). The recovered objects, architecture and ostraca from this structure indicate a complicated intertwining of cultural influences. It is particularly notable that objects used primarily by women appeared to have been more conservatively “Egyptian” in influence than the ones used by men (Boozer 2012). This differential mixing of cultural influences suggests potential for exploring the overlap between ethnic affinity, gender and economic stratum in future domestic excavations.

This overview of evidence from domestic life suggests the capacity for future work upon identity in daily life. In particular, re-evaluations of significant sites (e.g. Karanis, Soknopaiou Nesos) could yield new insights into current, theoretically informed questions about individual identities. At this time, it appears that individual households adapted the multicultural material vocabulary at their disposal to suit their own needs. It seems possible, given data sets from Kellis, Trimithis and Karanis, that more elite houses contained more “Classical” material and visual culture and possibly that men also moved
on more towards Mediterranean norms than did women. The lived experiences of these individuals suggests fluidity between cultural signifiers as they relate to ethnicity, but that rules of decorum influenced gender, age, and economic appropriations of these same signifiers.

**Burial Practices**

Moving to burial practices, we encounter different phases of the life course: death and the afterlife. We have considerably more evidence upon which we can draw for these phases than for the lived phases of the life course. Egyptian funerary religion overwhelmingly dominates our view of ancient Egypt throughout all periods of its history. This dominance is due to selection-bias in excavation as well as the high preservation of the material culture recovered from burials and commemorative contexts. Despite this academic preoccupation with burials, it is clear that death and the afterlife were formative stages in contemporary perceptions of the life course. This significance is supported by documentary, material, and visual remains from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods.

Death, as the ultimate rite of passage within the life course, carries particularly strong symbolism in Egypt. The pervasive belief in the afterlife created a reciprocal bond between the living and the dead: the living could offer prayers for the dead and the dead could interact with the living (for good or evil). The Ptolemaic- and Romano-Egyptian burial marked one point within an elaborate sequence of mortuary rights performed upon the body, the tomb itself, and the rituals among the living. Emphasis on the body as the site of divine transfiguration was integral to Egyptian conceptualizations of the cosmos, and in elite and pictorial representations, gods always had assumed human or partly human forms (Hornung 1983: 107-25).

Continuity seems to be a crucial feature of Egyptian funerary religion and therefore a profound understanding of the long-standing burial traditions in Egypt is necessary in order to unlock the meaning of burial practices in Greco-Roman Egypt. This archaism can be found in the textual tradition (Szczydlowska 1973; Smith 2006: 16-7, 650-62; Assmann, Bommas et al. 2008: 227-498; Smith 2009; Stadler 2012 and forthcoming) as well as the funerary art (Riggs 2006 and 2008 [2005]) and architecture of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt.

Despite the “timelessness” often found in Egyptian tombs, changes did occur. Identifying these changes and their significance is one of the key challenges to scholars of Romano-Egyptian burials today (Riggs 2010). The complementarity of continuity and change can be seen in two trends in Romano-Egyptian mortuary practice: the reuse of extant tomb or sacred spaces and the combination of new funerary goods (e.g. shrouds) with older material (e.g. sarcophagi).
During the Roman period, the preferred method of disposal for the dead remained corpse inhumation (Riggs 2008 [2005]: 1). Moreover, there is evidence that mummification gained favor in the Roman period among groups who might otherwise have used Greek forms of inhumation (Riggs 2010: 346). Standards of mummification did not “decline” in Roman Egypt, as has been asserted at times (e.g. using evidence from Dush and Kom el-Samak in western Thebes). Instead, as at every period, there were varying standards of quality, which will have depended upon factors such as cost, materials, methods, and the skill of the embalmers (Riggs 2010: 345).

Unfortunately, we lack adequate textual evidence for the production of mummies, burial assemblages, and tombs in Roman Egypt. We do know that many artists seem to have worked in the back room or the courtyard (aule) of their house and lived in urban centers (Cannata 2012). Others seem to have been attached to temples, and still others appear to have traveled to find work, taking their tools with them in order to work on commissions (Ling 2000: 101). These working conditions suggest strong ties between what modern-day scholars might consider to be different genres of art between domestic, funerary, and temple contexts.

Among the arts employed in funerary material culture, the so-called “mummy portraits” are among the famous funerary material culture from Roman Egypt (Walker and Bierbrier 1997). In addition to these portraits, we have painted shrouds, cartonnage masks, mummy cases, the human remains themselves (mummified, un-mummified, and cremated), and other associated funerary art and objects (Riggs 2002; Riggs 2010: 351). Many more varieties of mummy masks were created in the Roman period than prior phases along with additional new accoutrements. This vast repertoire of material remains enables a multi-faceted exploration of mortuary practices and beliefs in Roman Egypt. Much like in houses, the intertwining of various traditions within a single interment suggest that our own divisions between modes of self-representation may not be appropriate (Riggs 2002: 95). Such material suggests the value of close contextual scrutiny of burial assemblages.

The synchronic representation of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman motifs is complex and, despite a lengthy research history, is still not well understood. Castiglione (1961) famously described a “dualité du style” for the tombs he examined. This “double style” or “hybrid style” has permeated the literature over the years. The complex combination of influences is certainly correct, but the catch-all term employed is descriptive rather than explanatory of the wide range of combinations that could occur between Egyptian, Greek, and Roman influences. In most dual-system objects or monuments, the figure of the deceased follows Hellenic norms and fills a prominent position (Riggs 2002: 97), but we cannot fully unpack the various associations with different cultural signifiers within tombs yet. Unfortunately, only a handful of decorated tombs have been adequately excavated and recorded, so we can say little about decorative interactions between periods (Borchardt 1913; von Bissing 1926; Kaplan 1999; Yamani 2001).
At this stage, we can suggest that funerary art contains “survivals” and “revivals” of the past, as well as “innovations” (Riggs 2010: 348-9). The funerary art of Roman Egypt, like the burials themselves, comfortably deployed standard, pharaonic symbolism alongside more novel and contemporary iconography since diverse forms were relevant, meaningful, and understood (Stadler 2004; Riggs 2008 [2005]: 33). The visual duality that could take place in funerary art proved to be highly effective and was an enduring component of commemoration and display.

Gender differentiation appears to have been significant during the Roman period and there was an increase in the variety of ways that genders were represented. Funerary texts and visual representations suggest that there was an increased concern with individualizing the deceased by maintaining the gendered role, identity, and body that individual had assumed in society into the afterlife (Riggs 2008 [2005]: 41). Dead males were associated with Osiris (Smith 2006) and dead females were linked to Hathor (Smith 2005: 88). This gendered association was marked both through funerary literature as well as object inscription and representations (Riggs 2002: 96; Smith 2006 and 2009: 1-10). The imagery used for Romano-Egyptian women was more wide-ranging than for men (Riggs 2008 [2005]: 103). It also seems to have been more permissible to represent a girl or a woman with a blend of Egyptian, Greek and Roman elements than a man (Riggs 2008 [2005]: 125).

Although Riggs shows that some of the imagery associated with women may be new to the Roman period, Smith has shown that the link between a deceased male and Osiris was long-standing. The reasons for these associations between the deceased and a particular divinity resulted in the deceased assuming the role of a devotee. “Connectivity” was an important organizing principle in Egyptian thought about the human body as well as society (Assmann 2003 [2001]: 430-1), and also, apparently, in death (Smith 2006: 336). This principle appears to have extended into the Roman period.

Locality continues to be important during the Greco-Roman period, as the excavation of cemeteries reveals great diversity in local practice. These locales show various options for the use of space, tomb decoration, and treatment of the body. The Roman period preference for using older burial grounds reflects the ways in which cemetery space served to mediate between communities and the landscape and comprised a significant aspect of traditional burial practice. This reuse of space could take two forms. First, cemeteries might be expanded to include later phases of burials. Second, it was possible to reuse tombs from earlier periods in order to emplace the dead in previously hallowed ground (Riggs 2010: 347). This fluidity between continuity and change appears to characterize the burial evidence at our disposal. I now turn to some of the local examples of burial practices to show the geographic range in traditions.

Alexandria
The necropolis and funerary architecture of Alexandria has a long history of research (e.g. Schreiber 1908; Breccia 1912; Pagenstecher 1919). The most well-known sites are the Hellenistic Shatbi, Sidi Gaber, Mustafa Pasha, and Anfushi, and of the later Roman periods, such as Gabbari, Mex and the catacombs of Kom al-Shuqafa (Bonacasa 2002). The monumental tombs of Alexandria are the best preserved of all of the ancient monuments from this famous city. There is only one tomb, the Alabaster tomb, in the eastern part of the city, which is in the Macedonian style. It is the only preserved tomb that was built above ground and covered with a tumulus. It must have been a royal monument (Venit 2002: 8-9) within the vicinity of the palaces but outside of the city walls (Grimm 1996: 60).

Most of the Alexandrine tombs were cut deeply into the nummulitic limestone that underlies the city. Although these tombs draw upon Egyptian traditions with their loculi and open courts, the architectural details draw primarily from a classical repertoire from daily life (Venit 2012: 116). Despite this Classical influence on architectural details, Egyptian iconographic motifs make a strong appearance in these tombs (Venit 2002: fig. 41).

The Roman period tombs of Alexandria continued the general Ptolemaic tomb layout, but they substitute a triclinium-shaped chamber for the kline-room found in their Ptolemaic predecessors. With respect to decorative motifs, the Roman tombs contain a richer range of Egyptian decorative details than the Ptolemaic tombs (Venit 1997, 1999, and 2002: 124-45), indicating the increased mixture between these cultural elements. The myth of the rape of Persephone is particularly prevalent among these tombs (Guimier-Sorbets and Seif el-Din 1997).

Middle Egypt and Tuna el-Gebel

Moving up the Nile, we find more evidence of cultural intermixing, although the character of this intermixing varies depending upon locality as well as diachronic changes. Recent research at Tuna el-Gebel reveals that it is the largest known Greco-Roman necropolis in Egypt (Lembke 2012: 207) and much of this necropolis dates to the Roman period. Much of it remains unexcavated.

Ptolemaic tombs at Tuna el-Gebel already showed a striking combination of Greek and Egyptian iconography in different styles (Lefebvre 1924; Gabra and Drioton 1954: pl. 1). There is evidence for the Greek custom of cremation at early Roman Tuna el-Gebel in the form of objects that may be interpreted as urns and recesses in the interior of tomb pillars that are too small to contain mummies (Lembke 2010: fig. 15; 2012: 213), which adds to previous arguments that cremation was employed in some instances at this site (Bernand 1969: 377-86, no. 97; 1999: 160-2, no. 71; it is worthwhile noting that Petrie (2007) thought he saw signs of cremation in the tombs he examined at Oxyrhynchus in 1922).
In the Roman period, three different types of tombs were used: stone “temples”, “houses” of mud-brick, and tomb pillars built out of stone or mud-brick (Lembke 2010: 234, 236). In addition, some of the Roman tombs were composed of both mud-brick and local nummulitic limestone (e.g. M 11/SS, Lembke 2012: 210; 2007: 80-1, fig. 7). The Roman period tombs of Tuna el Gebel that combined mud-brick architecture with a house-like character, led Gabra to term these tombs “houses” (Gabra, Drioton et al. 1941) since Egyptians traditionally used stone for tombs, while mud brick was associated with domestic architecture. There is no absolute binary in building materials, however, as the pyramid chapels at New Kingdom Deir el-Medina (among other sites) employed mud brick in a mortuary context. We also have seen the use of stone for house construction at Oxyrhynchus. Most of the Tuna el Gebel tombs have two rooms and most of the later, stone-built tombs consist of only one room (Lembke 2012: 210). During the Roman period, temple-tombs dating to the Ptolemaic era were reused, sometimes with new epitaphs added to the old tomb (Lembke 2012: 209).

Some early Roman house tombs show a dominant Egyptian style (Gabbar, Drioton et al. 1941: pls. 10-14, 15.1, 15.2, 16, 16.1, 17.1, 17.2; Riggs 2008 [2005]: 129-39). One tomb, T 5/SS, dating 100 AD, offers a particularly intriguing combination of a Greek façade with an Egyptian-style interior (Lembke and Willkening-Aumann forthcoming). This site is also home to a pyramidal tomb, which has been termed “Egypt’s last pyramid” (Kessler, Brose et al. 2008), although the pyramidal tombs at Amheida are later in date. The decoration of the Tuna el-Gebel tombs increasingly begins using Classical iconography within the tombs from the first century AD onward (Lembke 2012: 214). Classical iconography is particularly dominant from the second to third centuries AD and often draws from Classical mythology (Gabbar and Drioton 1954: pls. 4, 12, 14-16, 21-22; Lembke 2007: 83, fig. 15). Classical myths, drawn from Oedipus, the Trojan horse, the Oresteia, and the rape of Persephone are well represented (Gabbar and Drioton 1954: pls. 14-16). These myths can be found represented in villas and are also familiar from funerary contexts in other regions of Egypt, such as the Kom el-Shuqafa catacomb in Alexandria (Lembke 2012: 219).

In the later tombs, Egyptian-themed decoration was rare and often limited to a single scene (Riggs 2008 [2005]: 130-1; Lembke 2012: 218). Moreover, the stone temple tombs as well as the tomb houses increasingly do not cover the mummies in shafts, but present them openly on a couch or kline. This practice indicates the increasing influence of Roman ideas upon mortuary habits as it does not fit with the Egyptian tradition of hiding the body to preserve it for eternity (Lembke 2012: 216).

The objects associated with these tombs suggest that annual food and drink festivals took place from the early Ptolemaic until the late Roman period (Lembke 2007; Helmbold-Doyé 2010: 134-5; for food and drink in mortuary contexts, see Lembke 2010; for a critique of Lembke’s argument, see Stadler forthcoming). Egyptian offering tables
and funerary service objects also have been found at the site, suggesting that traditional Egyptian practices were also possible (Lembke 2012: 219).

**Upper Egypt**

Moving further up the Nile into Upper Egypt, we have yet more suggestions that locality had a strong influence upon burial practices. The Theban region was marked by conservatism and a strong local identity, which may have resulted in a level of resistance against the Alexandrian government during the Ptolemaic period (Blasius 2002; von Recklinghausen 2007; Stadler 2012: 18-9; see Chapter 3).

Mortuary practices at Thebes regularly show strong conventional tendencies, even while other areas of Egypt experienced limited changes while under Roman rule (Lajtár 2012: 182). This traditionalism can be traced through an ongoing emphasis upon pharaonic Egyptian traditions (Stadler 2010/2011 and 2012: 144). A persistent element of Theban burial practices in the Roman period is the secondary use of earlier Middle Kingdom through Late period rock-cut tombs, and the adaptation of older funerary material. Some of these reused areas took place in tombs (Kákosy 1995; Riggs 2003: 191-5), while others took place in the basements of abandoned houses (Montserrat and Meskell 1997: 186-93; Riggs 2003: 195-8; 2008 [2005]: 205-17). The material culture and texts also show signs of conservatism (Riggs 2006). For example, burials in Thebes were more likely to include funerary papyri than other burials in Roman Egypt (Riggs 2008 [2005]; Stadler 2010/2011 and 2012: 144), which shifted away from this traditional practice.

Not much remains of ancient Antinoopolis, although its grid layout and some of its occupational history are clear. Fortunately, A. Gayet, a French archaeologist, worked at Antinoopolis for many years in the early twentieth century, examining numerous graves dating from the third to fifth centuries (Calament 2005). These burials included painted shrouds and very fine, shaped, wooden mummy portraits, which are worthy of mention (Aubert 2008: 169-227, 264-70, 275-8, 285-95, 298-308). Shrouds were used for the first time in the Roman Period and the presence of these innovations in Antinoopolis is notable, given the conservatism in the area. Shrouds consisting of large sheets of linen with painted decoration were used to envelop the mummy completely. The flat surface of the shroud offered the artist and viewer an additional space for decoration (Parlasca 1966: 107-8, 167, 251, pl. 57, 1; Bresciani 1996: 35-59; Aubert and Cortopassi 1998: 123 (no.73), 63 (no. 20); see also Uytterhoeven 2010).

**Western Desert**

As with the domestic evidence discussed previously, the Western Desert provides well-preserved and intriguing new evidence of mortuary identity in Greco-Roman Egypt. The
tomb of Petosiris in Qaret al-Muzawwaqa (Dakhla Oasis) is one of the best preserved decorated tombs from all Roman Egypt (Osing et al. 1982; Whitehouse 1998) and also one of the best-known sites in the Dakhla Oasis. It dates to the first century AD on the basis of Demotic graffiti (Osing et al. 1982: 102). The full-length portraits of a figure presumed to be Petosiris reference a Greek, rather than a Roman, cultural identity (Fig. 23.3). It was not uncommon for men of Petosiris’s social status to wear Greek clothing (compare Chapter 19). It also seems that women followed Greek dress fashions at this time. The tomb of Petubastis, located next door, also has lavish decorations. The surrounding rock cut tombs at Qaret al-Muzawwaqa are primarily simple single-chamber tombs devoid of decoration (Whitehouse 1998; for the tombs of Petosiris and Petubastis, see also Chapter 34).

Dakhla Oasis Project (DOP) excavated multiple cemeteries associated with Ismant el-Kharab (Kellis). Some burials are located to the north of the settlement on either side of the wadi that runs from the north-east to the west of the settlement (Hope 1988: 162). The West Cemetery consists of a large number of small-chambered tombs dating to the Ptolemaic and early Roman Period. The East Cemetery, which is situated on a broad plain east of the wadi, consists of simple rectangular pit graves that cut into the red Nubian clay and dating to the late third to early fourth centuries AD (Birrell 1999: 29). Some of these retain mud-brick superstructures and enclosure walls (Mills 1982: 99).

The West Cemetery contained a substantial number of mummified bodies with heads oriented to the west. Many of these bodies had painted and gilded cartonnage masks, one of which most certainly references the god Tutu, who was the principle deity of the Main Temple of Kellis (Birrell 1999: 38). The bodies of the East Cemetery were simply wrapped in linen cloth and few of the graves contained artifacts (Birrell 1999: 41; for more on cartonnage from the Ismant el-Karab cemeteries, see Schweitzer 2002).

Of particular note is North Tomb 1, which was the largest tomb found in any of the cemetery groupings (Hope 2003). This tomb was published in brief by two earlier archaeologists (Moritz 1900: 466-71; Winlock 1936: 20-1, pls. XI-XIII), but has been re-examined by the DOP. North Tomb 1 has only one room built out of stone, which was painted in pharaonic style, while the rest of the tomb was built out of mud brick and decorated with Classical-style painted plaster. The tomb dates to the early second century AD on the basis of stylistic comparisons (Kaper 2003). The skeletal remains were found to be highly disturbed, but it is estimated that there were 35 burials containing 20 adults and 15 juveniles (Dupras and Tocheri 2003: 197-9). Many of these disturbances may be due to Christian reuse of the tombs in this area (Hope 2003).

A Ptolemaic and Roman necropolis was found in Bahariya Oasis in 1995 and over 30 tombs have been exposed once excavations began in 1999. These tombs are known as
the “Valley of the Golden Mummies” because some of the mummies are guilded in a thin layer of gold, while others are covered in cartonnage with scenes depicted. Still others were found inside anthropoid coffins or wrapped with linen. The tombs themselves usually consisted of an entrance, delivery room and two burial chambers (Hawass 2000). The iconography on the cartonnage and the portable objects found with the bodies primarily reference pharaonic gods and mythologies.

Douch, in the Kharga Oasis, provides us with unparalleled physical evidence of a single village in Greco-Roman Egypt with nearly 800 individuals examined in the published reports. Results suggest close connections with the Nile Valley as well as a potentially poor diet, which resulted in stunted growth. Of note is that the temples and funerary practices of Douch maintained traditional religious cults (Dunand, Castel et al. 1992; Dunand and Lichtenberg 1995; Dunand and Lichtenberg 1998; Dunand, Heim et al. 2002), which may reflect the long-standing connections between the oases and Thebes, a conservative bastion (see above). The mummification techniques employed at Douch were generally poor.

In summation, the published tombs indicate strong regionalization with respect to the degree of conservatism and transformation that burials experienced under Ptolemaic and Roman rule. This regionalism is reminiscent of the regionalism found in temples, which is logical due to the close relationship between mortuary ritual and religion. Transformation appears to have been more common not only in particular regions, but also among women. While men appeared to be more commonly represented as Greek or Roman, women often contained a complex intertwining of visual systems. These rules of decorum indicate strong differences between male and female representations more so than ethnic differences alone.

**CONCLUSION**

The concept “identity” is a useful aperture into self-perception in Greco-Roman Egypt, since being Egyptian, Greek, or Roman had become indicators of culture and status rather than simple ethnic distinctions. A life course approach enables us to explore how various components of identity waxed and waned in different contexts of life and death. These approaches are most appropriate for the material since each monument or class of object must be considered in its provenance and date (where these can be established) as well as in terms of how it was used and what it represented. Moreover, it is clear that simplified conceptions of “Egyptian-ness”, “Greek-ness”, and “Roman-ness” that we perceive in the past did not reflect concurrent divisions in society. In contemporary Ptolemaic and Roman society, these components could be modeled and reformed to fit life course needs as required.

Material and visual culture, alongside architecture, change meanings between life-
use and death-use. It is impossible to understand the meanings of Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptian material worlds unless we trace out these meaning changes fully. By joining together the worlds of life and death, we can begin to see some potential trends that would be worthy of future explorations into cultural identity.

Architecture and objects associated with life course rituals are prime candidates for memorializing: they become connected with an identity, a specific person, time and place, and represent status transitions. The materiality of houses and tombs represented longevity and the temporal connections between past, present, and future in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. The transfer of items between the household and the burial may indicate meanings and properties that ancient peoples considered to be inherent in these objects. These objects could be connected with life-transforming events and these objects could also serve as conduits for actions within the Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptian life course (Gell 1998).

Funerary contexts show more connections, broadly speaking, to pharaonic traditions than do houses. The reasons for this traditionalism may vary by region, but there may be conservative ideals related to death or a strong association between death and pharaonic imagery (Stadler forthcoming). Egypt was often considered to be synonymous with death in the ancient world (and in the present day), which may have encouraged the use of Egyptian symbols in mortuary contexts.

It seems that men appeared to be represented more frequently with “Mediterranean” attributes in both life and death, particularly among the upper echelons of society. By contrast, women appeared to take on more traditional or blended approaches to their cultural affinities. In the life sphere, domestic objects relating to protection and cooking often show similarities to long-term practices in Egypt. In death, women show a more fluid range of styles than did men. Data on the various ages of gendered groups is difficult to come by, although it would certainly be worthy of additional study to determine how children and the elderly expressed cultural affinities. Naturally, these suggestions may be altered with future fine-grained explorations of both life and death worlds. Fortunately, there is every reason to believe that recent trends that have begun exploring cultural identity will continue and will promote new understandings.

**FURTHER READING**

Davoli summarizes research on Fayum settlements as well as some of the issues with the University of Michigan methodologies and publication practices (Davoli 1998: 73-116, in Italian). For an overview of the documentary and archaeological research at Oxyrhynchus, see papers in Bowman, Coles et al. 2007. More research upon the material remains from Oxyrhynchus certainly is possible. The Dakhla Oasis Project has numerous publications available, which provide both preliminary and more finalized perspectives on finds.
An excellent starting place for examining the material remains of Romano-Egyptian burials is Rigg’s exemplary volume (2008 [2005]) as well as her numerous articles. Smith’s volume, *Traversing Eternity* (2009), provides a comprehensive introduction to the textual aspects of burial traditions.

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