Mourning at funerals was one of women’s major public performance genres in ancient Egypt. Laments were recited or improvised by the wife of the dead man, by his children, and by groups of male and female mourners who may have been members of his household, his friends and colleagues, or hired professionals. People of more modest means were probably mourned by their family alone. Unlike laments in other cultures, these were not eulogies of the dead person but were texts that played a magical role in his or her revival in the afterworld, just as the laments of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys had revived their murdered brother, Osiris.

By analysing the representations of male and female mourners in text and picture, and the interaction depicted between women and men at funerals, we can gain some notion of the type of behaviour the Egyptians expected from women and men in this particular situation. On the other hand, we also need to take individual variation into account, since people do not necessarily conform to the gender strategies promoted in their particular society. Gender is only one of several factors operating simultaneously: at times the relative status of the participants or their closeness to the dead person may be more salient.

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1 This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation, founded by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities (grant no. 797/98). Many thanks to the Griffith Institute archive, Oxford, for permission to refer to unpublished materials from their archives, and to Dr. Diana Magee, for making this material available for study. Many thanks also to Nir Lalkin, Liat Qatzel, Adi Qenan and Hila Sherman for help in various stages of its preparation. Most of the texts in this article are quoted from E. Lüddeckens, Untersuchungen über religiösen Gehalt, Sprache und Form der Ägyptischen Totenklagen, MDAIK 11 (1943). The texts are cited as “Lüddeckens no. 43”, etc.


4 L. Meskell, “The Somatization of Archaeology: Institutions, Discourses, Corporeality,”
Although Egyptologists tend to interpret funerals as a performative act that transferred the dead person into the afterworld, for the Egyptians mourning also served as an emotional outlet for the bereaved.\(^5\) However, focusing on the expression of personal grief may be a modern and post-modern preoccupation.\(^6\) Texts in ancient Egyptian tombs are predominantly magical and performative; this may indicate that the Egyptians viewed the funeral ceremonies in this way, or it may indicate that this is what the Egyptians thought appropriate to commemorate in tomb inscriptions.

The laments accompany pictures in the tomb chapels of the elite. We might characterise the texts under discussion as “the literate tip of a non-literate iceberg”,\(^7\) because although most pictures of funerals in elite tomb-chapels include mourners, many of these representations lack an accompanying text.

Egyptian elite tombs usually had two components: a burial chamber and a chapel. The burial chamber was kept sealed and blocked unless it was opened for funerals. The chapel, by contrast, was open at all times for offerings to sustain the dead person’s spirit in the afterlife and could be visited by the general public. Offerings of real food were reinforced by pictures of food production and presentation on the chapel walls, which the ceremonies of the funeral would activate to make magically available to the dead person in the afterworld. Moreover, the chapel decorations cover a much broader range of topics, including the funeral itself.

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