



Call for Papers:

Bodies in Ancient Egypt: Subjects, Objects, Media

Conference of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in cooperation with the WWU Münster, Institut für Ägyptologie und Koptologie

Date: 15th-17th July 2022

Conference venue: Münster, Germany

Organizers: Uroš Matić, Alexa Rickert, Dina Serova

Host: Angelika Lohwasser

Description

Ancient Egyptian bodies have been the object of Western fascination since antiquity. From Roman perceptions of Ancient Egyptian deities as monsters (Juvenal) to Victorian mummy unwrappings, and the horror of the mummy in dark Romanticism, Ancient Egyptian bodies have been selectively chosen to fuel different fantasies. This fascination continues to be part of modern imagination in genres such as popular culture and Sci-Fi.

Egyptology has since the 19th century produced vast knowledge on the Ancient Egyptian body, by focusing primarily on funerary aspects of Ancient Egyptian culture (e.g., von Lieven 2011; Nyord 2009). Advances in philology, lexicography and linguistics have significantly improved our understanding of magico-medical texts and emic perspectives on the human body and its functions (e.g., Pommerening 2017). Feminist and gender studies have found their way in Egyptology in the 1990s, criticising the androcentrism on Egyptology and focusing on bodies of others than men. Different paradigm shifts and turns of the last few decades, such as hermeneutics, semiotics, social-constructivism, phenomenology and most recently the ontological turn in anthropology and archaeology continue to echo through Egyptology, but are still not part of the dominant discourse (e.g., Meskell and Joyce 2003). This is also the case for the 'body turn' in the humanities as well as social and cultural sciences which came largely unnoticed by Egyptological scholars as an important epistemological turning point. Simultaneously, the theoretical discussions outside Egyptology have rarely considered Ancient Egyptian evidence. Therefore, there is still a need for an interdisciplinary dialogue. Theories are as good as the data on which they are built are sound.

In order to foster this dialogue, it is necessary to leave many assumptions behind and seriously consider the limits and possibilities of both different theoretical and methodological backgrounds and the primary evidence at hand. Bodies in general can be thought of as subjects with bodily functions, abilities and disabilities, agencies and desires. Being considered as active protagonists, bodies have the potential to shape, control and contribute to the production of society. Such an understanding of the body goes beyond the Cartesian mind body-split and opens the way to an embodied understanding of life. Bodies can also be thought as objects, since they can be violently devoid of abilities and agencies, and turned into victims and body parts (Matić 2019). But this is also the case when individuals or groups of individuals are etically imagined and described as biologically, culturally or socially pre-determined entities lacking self-rule and decision making. Last but not the least, bodies and body parts can be media, with the possibility to communicate knowledge, different messages, ideas, norms, desires and postulates (e.g., Serova 2019; Lohwasser 2012). As carriers of attributes and attributions, bodies incorporate their social, cultural and physical environment. Thus, they can be read, perceived, and decoded. Clearly, bodies can simultaneously occupy any of these positions, opening the space of ambiguity and tension. To tackle these different analytical approaches and ways bodies could have existed in Ancient Egypt, we ask the following questions:

1. How are bodies represented, shaped and modelled in Ancient Egyptian pictorial as well as textual media? How are bodies read, imagined and reconstructed by Egyptologists?

2. How *distinct from* modern bodies are/were *different* bodies (in respect to age, gender, social and ethnic origin, status and occupation) in Ancient Egypt?
3. How could bodies transform and be *transformed*, from *subject* to *object* and *media* or in any other possible direction?
4. Were *bodily contours/boundaries fixed* and anchored in the corporeal or were they *volatile* and open to re-configurations through the use of *extrasomatic* materials such as materials and objects (e.g., prosthetics)?
5. How did bodies oscillate between materiality and immateriality? How does this challenge all current theoretical and methodological apparatus?

We invite contributors (advanced PhD-students, Post-Docs, and professionals) studying Ancient Egyptian bodies and working on texts, iconography, bioarchaeology and material culture to join us in discussing any of these main questions or to propose other problems based on their work. We strongly encourage contributions dealing with body modifications, body adornment and decoration, bodily experience, health, ability and disability, gender, sexuality, body remains and representations.

Abstract submission

Abstracts (ca. 300 words) in German or English should be sent to bodies.conference.2022@gmail.com by the 15th November 2021. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by the 19th November 2021. Feel free to use the above contact email for questions regarding the conference.

Format

The conference has a 2 ½ days format with 13 slots (25 minutes oral presentations with 20 minutes discussion each). Sessions are scheduled in presence, but speakers will also have the opportunity to present their papers remotely via Zoom. An application for funding from the Thyssen Foundation is in process.

References (selection)

von Lieven, A. 2011. „Where there is dirt there is system“. Zur Ambiguität der Bewertung von körperlichen Ausscheidungen in der ägyptischen Kultur. *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 40: 287-300.

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