

Egyptian burial practices in Late Antiquity: the case of Christian mummy labels

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It is not easy to understand the development of early Christian practices, their inheritance from the pagan religion and the developments which ultimately defined their cult.¹ The texts that we have as sources for this task are generally difficult to contextualize or even assign to a practitioner of a particular religion, and archaeology has not been illuminating in this respect until very recently. In this paper, I will deal with the evidence we have for the evolution of funerary practice in Egypt,² including some evidence in the papyri³ but with a special focus on the early Christian use of mummy labels. Mummy labels are artefacts very

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¹ On Early Christianity in Egypt and the papyri, see H. I. Bell, 'Evidences of Christianity in Egypt during the Roman Period', *The Harvard Theological Review* 37, 3 (1944), pp. 185-208. An excellent project is Macquarie University's 'Papyri from the Rise of Christianity in Egypt', (http://www.mq.edu.au/research/centres_and_groups/ancient_cultures_research_centre/research/papyrology/pce/overview/).

² On funerary practices in late Antique Egypt, see F. Dunand, 'Between tradition and innovation: Egyptian funerary practices in late antiquity', in R. G. Bagnall (ed.), *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300-700*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 163-184. On necropoleis, see M.S. Venit, *Monumental Tombs of Ancient Alexandria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; T. K. Thomas, *Late Antique Egyptian Funerary Sculpture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000; W. Hauser, 'The Christian Necropolis in Khargeh Oasis', *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 27 (1932), pp. 38-50.

³ J. Davies, 'Christian burial', *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 191-200. M. J. Johnson, 'Pagan-Christian Burial Practices of the Fourth Century: Shared Tombs?', in *Christianity and Society The Social World of Early Christianity*, New York-London, 1999, pp. 385-407 (= *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5.1 (1997), pp. 37-59).

closely related to Egyptian funerary practice,⁴ and hence unexpected among Christians.⁵ But their existence is less surprising when we remember that Christians and pagans continued to be buried in the same graveyards into the 4th century and beyond, and that often the features of typically Christian burial are hard to identify. The beliefs and practices of the new converts appear to be something of an amalgam, with no sharp distinction between the pagan practices and those of the newly adopted religion.⁶

Given that early Christians sometimes continued to worship the ‘old’ gods together with the new one,⁷ we might expect that they would adapt more material aspects of religious cult, such as the practicalities of burial, to their new faith. Moreover pagan practices such as mummification,⁸ so characteristic of the Egyptian religion, were also the only known way to preserve corpses from decay.

⁴ J. Quaegebeur, ‘Mummy Labels: an orientation’, in E. Boswinkel,– P.W. Pestman (eds.), *Textes Grecs, démotiques et bilingues (P.Lugd.Bat. 19)*, Leiden, 1978, pp. 232-259. The mummy labels have received attention recently. See latest studies, Carolin Artl, *Deine Seele möge leben für immer und ewig. Die demotischen Mumienbilder im British Museum*, Leuven, 2011, and forthcoming S.P. Vleeming, *Demotic and Greek-Demotic Mummy Labels and Related Short Texts Gathered from Many Publications*. I am involved in a project with the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, for the creation of a mummy label database; see http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/08-09_MLD.pdf.

⁵ Nor Aramaeans, but there are in fact some which correspond to a mixed environment. See B. Porten, J. Gee, ‘Aramaic funerary practices in Egypt’, in J. L. Koosed (ed.), *The World of the Aramaeans. Studies in History and Archaeology in Honor of Paul-Eugene Dion*, London, 2001, vol. 2, pp. 270-307. W. Horbury and D. Noy, *Jewish inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, no. 133, p. 223. For Elephantine Jewish mummy labels (in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Demotic) see B. Porter and A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic documents from ancient Egypt: vol. 4, Ostraka and assorted inscriptions*, Winnona Lake, 1999, pp. 238 and 249-250; and for labels from Memphis (in Aramaic and Demotic), see G. Vittmann, *Ägypten und die Fremden im ersten vorchristlichen Jahrtausend*, «Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt» 97, Mainz: Philip von Zabern V., 2003, p. 145.

⁶ As explained already by P.D. Scott-Moncrieff, *Paganism and Christianity in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913, pp. 129-132. On practical aspects of embalming and burial in the Graeco-Roman period, see D. Devauchelle, ‘Notes sur l’administration funéraire égyptienne’, *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 87 (1987), pp. 141-160; D. Montserrat, ‘Death and funerals in Roman Fayum’, in M. L. Brierbier (ed.), *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt*, London, 1997, pp. 33-44.

⁷ See for example the Christian amulet SB III 6584, P.Oslo I 5 (4th-5th cent. CE), headed by the ΧΜΓ (‘Mary gave birth to Christ’), and which refers to gods in the plural.

⁸ F. Dunand – R. Lichtenberg, ‘The last mummies’, in *Mummies and Death in Egypt*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 123-130. A very useful survey is U. Horak, ‘Koptische Mumien. Der koptische Tote in Grabungsberichten, Funden und literarischen Nachrichten’, *Biblos* 44 (1995), pp. 39-71 and recently H. Förster, ‘Mumifizierung von Christen in Ägypten: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Anfrage’, *Journal of Coptic Studies* 10 (2008), pp. 167-182.

According to the latest archaeological research in Egyptian necropoleis,⁹ mummification continued to be practiced in Egypt in Christian circles as late as 600 CE. The traditional method went through some adaptations. It is not clear exactly what the process was, but it is known that blocks of natron were used in non-traditional ways, and that there is no trace of evisceration. The corpses were not bandaged, but they were wrapped in several shrouds. Sometimes layers of salt were placed under or between the shrouds, and the bodies were often dressed in their everyday clothes. The process of transformation into this new type of mummification was not abrupt, but it developed gradually in the course of the first centuries of Christianity.

The same can be said about other manifestations of funerary practice. In shared burial grounds, the tombs of pagans and Christians differed little from each other, and especially in the case of funerary offerings, some tombs present an amalgam of pagan and Christian beliefs.¹⁰ Here we may mention the offering of amulets, and lamps, or the use of the 'ankh', a symbol which was soon adapted as the sign of the cross by the Christians.

However, Christian authorities gradually attempted to distance themselves from pagan practices, and the debate on the resurrection of the body must have had some influence in dispositions for burial. Saint Anthony, for example, asked to be buried in an unmarked, secret grave, and not be carried to Egypt, lest he be buried in the traditional way.¹¹ As differences became more marked, Christians could even despise and dishonour pagan tombs.¹²

In any case, in this liminal period during the earliest stage of Christianity, burial, mummification and funerary offerings do not present a clear break with preceding practices. The material evidence we have is of complex interpretation.

⁹ See F. Dunand, 'Between tradition'. Gillian E. Bowen, 'Some Observations on Christian Burial Practices at Kellis', in G.E. Bowen and C.A. Hope (eds.), *The Oasis Papers III Proceedings of the Third Conference of the Dakleh Oasis Project*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2004, pp. 167-82.

¹⁰ Scott-Moncrieff, *Paganism and Christianity in Egypt*, pp. 119-120, F. Dunand, 'From Pagan funerary rituals to Christian customs: a manifest continuity', in F. Dunand, C. Zivie-Coche, D. Lorton, *Gods and Men in Egypt: 3000 BCE to 395 CE*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004, pp. 333-337.

¹¹ This seems to be the fact that he wanted to avoid the cult to the bodies that is attested in pagan practice. The mummies were often carried and preserved at home, for family worship. See H.-J. Drexhage, 'Einige Bemerkungen zum Mumientransport und den Bestattungskosten im römischen Ägypten', *Laverna* 5 (1994), pp. 167-175, esp. 170-171.

¹² This in spite of the prohibition of the destruction of tombs in Roman law. See Johnson, 'Pagan-Christian', 39-40. On this phenomenon, see E. R. O'Connell, 'Transforming Monumental Landscapes in Late Antique Egypt: Monastic Dwellings in Legal Documents from Western Thebes', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15:2 (2007), pp. 239-273.

We can take as an example a well-known text, the Psenosiris papyrus.¹³ It attests to a group of Christian νεκροτάφοι, among the ‘undertakers’ of Kysis, who apparently practiced embalming of bodies according to traditional methods, although the interpretation of the papyrus has been contested.¹⁴ The language of this text is clearly Christian¹⁵ and it basically contains the instructions for delivery of a mummy.¹⁶ What is interesting from this text, if the mummification interpretation is correct, is that here we have the testimony of Christians who practiced embalmment according to the traditional pagan method, and belonged to a guild of undertakers, within which they formed a minority. They seem to have been preferred by their Christians clients over the other members of the guild because they shared the same religion, and not because they practiced a different method of mummification.

The Christian use of mummy labels is to be understood in this transitional period as a residual practice, which gradually acquired Christian characteristics, as much as the mummification process also did, eventually become a distinct practice, ultimately disappearing. Mummy labels are often taken as evidence of the continuation of the tradition of mummification by Christians.¹⁷ But it is not easy to determine if a given mummy label is in fact Christian. Our task is therefore to identify features which can help classify mummy labels as Christian. These features can sometimes be fairly obvious, as with the use of the cross, but often enough they are not.

There are a number of mummy labels that have already been identified as Christian. B. Boyaval¹⁸ was the first to list five items as Christian mummy labels:

SB I 1190, *T.Berl.Möller* 116, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 104, TM 32078 (3rd-early 4th cent. CE): Ταῖσαι ἐβίωσεν εἴκοσσι ὀκτώ, / γίνονται (ἐτῶν) κη. εἰς τὴν λαμπρὰν ἀπήλθεν.¹⁹ “Taesis lived twenty eight years. It was 28 years. She went into the splendidous (land)”.

¹³ *P.Grenf.* II 72, *Chr.Wilck.* 127, edited by A. Deissmann, *The Epistle of Psenosiris: an original document from the Diocletian Persecution (Papyrus 713 Brit.Mus)*, London, 1902.

¹⁴ On the interpretations on this papyrus, see Adam Łukaszewicz, ‘Une momie en exil’, *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 28 (1998), pp. 85-95. S.R. Llewelyn-A.M. Nobbs, ‘P.Grenf. II 73. A Reconsideration’, in *Akten des 21. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses. Berlin 1995*, «Archiv für Papyrusforschung» Beiheft 3, Berlin, 1997, pp. 613-630.

¹⁵ See ll. 2-3 ἀγαπητῶ ἀδελφῶ ἐν κυρίῳ, 4-6 ἀσπάζομαι καὶ τοὺς παρὰ σοὶ πάντα ἀ[δ]ελφοὺς ἐν θεῷ, 12-14 τοῖς καλοῖς καὶ πιστοῖς ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν νεκροτάφων.

¹⁶ This appears in fact very often contained in mummy labels: see S.R. Llewelyn – R.A. Kearsley, ‘The sending of a private letter’, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 7 (1994), pp. 26-47, esp. 30-31.

¹⁷ G. Bowen, ‘Some observations’, p. 169.

¹⁸ B. Boyaval, ‘Notes sur quelques étiquettes de momie’, *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Oriental* 80 (1980), pp. 149-169, esp. 167-169. The project Papyri from the Rise of Christianity (Macquarie University) lists four of these.

SB I 3533, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 251, TM 32109 (3rd-early 4th cent. CE, Thebes): ἐβίωσεν ἔτη / Ὠρίω(ν). ἀμὴν. / ϣϣ. “Horion lived 96 years. Amen”.

SB XII 10814, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 1604, TM 32554 (4th cent. CE): Θατρὲ ἐβίωσ-/εν ἐτῶν οε/ † (drawing of a fish) †²⁰ “Thatre lived 75 years”.

T.Mom.Louvre 807, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 1222, TM 55127 (3rd-4th cent. CE): Τατεψενθαίσιος / μητρὸς Ρομπνάβρε / ἐβίωσεν ὡς ἐτῶν εἴκοσις. “Tatepsenthaesis whose mother is Rompnabre lived 20 years”. Followed by a cross and a kappa (for 20).²¹

T.Mom.Louvre 1115, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 1512, TM 80049 (2nd-3rd cent. CE? Panopolis?): Ἄρτεμιδώρας / Μικκάλου μητρὸς Πα-/νισκιάινης πρεσβ(υτέρως) / ἐκοιμήθη ἐν Κ(υρί)ῳ. “Artemidora daughter of Mikkalos, whose mother was Paniskiaina the elder, went to sleep in the Lord”.

He then adds in a footnote two more labels bearing crosses²² (although he wonders if the first one might be a forgery):

SB I 1201 *T.Berl.Möller* 94, TM 40166 (273 CE as proposed by TM): Κολλῶθις (unintelligible sign) / χαχινε κω()/ ἀπὸ Βοσώχεως / (cross?) / (ἔτους) κ, Μεσ(ορή) ιε. “Kollothis, ... from Bosochis, 20th year, Mesore 15”.

T.Berl.Möller 125, *IGChrEg* 687, TM 120473:²³ Ψενθήους Απολ-/λωνίου Πατή-/τος. “Pentheos son of Apollonios, son of Patsetos”.

He apparently does not consider Christian SB I 1205, *T.Berl.Möller* 120, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 113, TM 40170: Σατρίπις Ψενμα-/γῶτος, ἐν Ἀλεξαν-/δρεία ἀναπαυσά-

¹⁹ The editor, F. Krebs, ‘Griechische Mumienetikette aus Ägypten’, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 32 (1894), pp. 36-51, esp. 40, and C. Schmidt, ‘Ein altchristliches Mummienetikett nebst Bemerkungen über das Begräbniswesen der Kopten’, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 32 (1894), pp. 52-63, esp. p. 61, interpret εἰς τὴν λαμπρὰν χώραν as ‘in das strahlende (Land)’, which might as well be interpreted as a pagan expression.

²⁰ The *editio princeps*, J. C. Shelton, ‘Mummy Tags from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford’, *Chronique d’Égypte* 45 (1970), pp. 334-352, esp. 338, interprets the drawing between the two crosses as a ‘stylized fish’.

²¹ See image in Marie-France Aubert and Roberta Cortopassi, *Portraits funéraires de l’Égypte romaine. Cartonnages, linceuls et bois*, Paris, 2008, pp. 84-85, no. 4. It is a beautiful label featuring a portrait of a woman and eight lines of Demotic text on one side, and the Greek text on the other. The fact that the text is partly in Demotic and that the representation of the deceased is wearing a crown of roses, related to the cult of Osiris, to which the Demotic text refers, is against the Christian interpretation. If the cross on the reverse is in fact a Christian cross, this is a conspicuous example of religious ambiguity.

²² We may add for example *T.Mom.Louvre* 247 = SB I 3540, TM 29392 (2nd-3rd cent. CE, Thebes): ταφή Ἀμμω-/νοῦτος ἀπὸ κώμης / Τρικατάνεως / τοῦ Κοπίτου / νομοῦ / †, “Body of Ammonous, from the town of Trikatanis in the Koptite nome”.

²³ Full study and image of the label in C. Schmidt, ‘Ein altchristliches Mummienetikett’, and also in F. Krebs, ‘Griechische Mumienetikette aus Ägypten’.

/μενος, “Satripis, son of Psenmagos, he rested in Alexandria”, which contains, according to Krebs,²⁴ a Christian expression for the verb ‘to die’.²⁵ Froschauer²⁶ calls attention on yet one more mummy label, dated to the 3rd-4th cent. CE, which contains a Christian-like expression:

T.Mom.Louvre 1006, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 1404, TM 79941: Ἀτρῆς Νικαφόρος Βήσιος / τοῦ Παχούμιος Πχάταπε / ἐβίωσεν ἑτῶν ἕξ ἡμερῶν / ιθ {ε} αὐτὸν ἔχει θεοῦ τέκνον / (ἔτους) α Μεσορῆ ι. “Atres Nikephoros Besios, son of Pachoumis Pchatape, lived six years and 19 days, the son of God has him”.²⁷

More recently, other Christian labels have been published, such as *P.Eirene* 2 11, TM 78194²⁸ (7th-8th cent. CE (?) Koma, Herakleopolites): Recto: † Ἀπολλῶ / υἱὸς Μηνᾶ / Σικελή “Apollo, son of Menas Sikele /or the Sicilian (?)”²⁹; Verso: † Ἀπολλῶ / υἱὸς Μηνᾶ / ἀπὸ Κόμα “Apollo, son of Menas, from Koma”. Under line 1 of the recto there is an incised text: † ἀντρός Ἀπολλ(ῶ) / υἱὸς Μηνᾶ Σικελ(ή). The Christian feature of this label is the fact that it bears a sign of the cross. It is, moreover, quite late.

Another late example³⁰ is a wooden *tabula ansata* dated to the 5th-6th cent. CE: † ἐν εἰρήνῃ / τ(οῦ) ἐν ἀγ(ίοις) ἀναπ(αυ)σ(αμένου) / Ἰερεμίου ἐν μην(ὶ) / Θῶθ ιῆ ζ ἰν(δικτίωνος). “In peace. (Tomb) of Jeremiah, who is resting among the saints, in the month of Thoth, 18, 7th indiction”.

²⁴ F. Krebs, ‘Griechische Mumienetiketten aus Ägypten’, p. 45. See Schmidt ‘Ein altchristliches Mummienetikett’, p. 61.

²⁵ See also Harald Froschauer, ‘Tradition im koptischen Bestattungswesen. Ein christliche Mumientäfelchen aus den Beständen Tamerit in der Papyrussammlung der österreichischen Nationalbibliothek’, *Eirene* 40 (2004), pp. 91-100, esp. 98-100.

²⁶ Froschauer, ‘Tradition im koptischen Bestattungswesen’, p. 99

²⁷ Or, interpreting a mistake, “he has the son of God”. This is perhaps a rough reference to 1 John 5:12: ὁ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει τὴν ζωὴν: ὁ μὴ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ζωὴν οὐκ ἔχει, referring to eternal life.

²⁸ Froschauer, ‘Tradition im koptischen Bestattungswesen’. See F. Mitthof, ‘Urkundenreferat 2004 (2. Teil)’, *Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete* 52 (2006), pp. 83-122, esp. 86.

²⁹ The editor reconstructs <μητρός>. I agree with F. Mitthof, ‘Urkundenreferat 2004 (2. Teil)’, p. 86, that the word μητρός was never there, especially since there is no attestation of this as a female name at all. He suggests it is a second name of the father. I propose also the interpretation as an ethnonym, although not without doubts, since the form is not correct either.

³⁰ U. Horak, ‘Inschriften: 47. Mumienetikette’, in J. Henner, H. Förster, U. Horak (eds.), *Christliches mit Feder und Faden : Christliches in Texten, Textilien und Alltagsgegenständen aus Ägypten. Katalog zur Sonderausstellung im Papyruseum der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek aus Anlaß des 14. Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie*, Vienna, 1999, p. 57, no. 47.

The Coptic language must be taken as a relevant criterion in the identification of Christian texts, although of course, some prudence is called for. There are, for example, at least two Old Coptic texts which cannot be considered Christian labels.³¹ In any case, the number of mummy labels in Coptic is very low,³² since the mummy labels we can claim as Christian date to the very early period of Christianity, and the practice disappeared at roughly the same time that the Coptic script was standardized.³³

Among the few mummy labels in Coptic, there is *SB Kopt.* II 1065, TM 88089:³⁴ † ΠΑΠΠΟΥ-/ΤΕ ΝΑΠΑ / ΙΕΜΙΑΣ / ΦΑΡΜ Ζ. “Parnoute (son of) Apa Ie(re?)mias. Pharmouthi 7”. Another Coptic label, edited by Alain Delattre, dated to the 5th or 6th cent. CE: ΙΩ-/ΧΗΦ/ ΠΩΝ / ΠΠΑ-/ΠΑ ΕΙ-/ΟΔΚ, ‘Joseph, son of Papaisaak’, which has a slightly larger size than a mummy label.³⁵ Both feature very concise texts, which can be compared to that of contemporary funerary stelae.

An interesting piece from Strasbourg, edited by Lewis,³⁶ introduces a new element into the discussion: the size of the labels. It is a block of wood, with an irregular shape –it is triangular in the lower part-, it has two holes, one on each extreme, and is considerably larger than the mummy labels we have presented before (25.5 x 12.7 cm). It contains a Coptic text incised with thick letters:

† ΛΑΜΠ-/ΟΥ ΠΡΕΜ-/ΤΑΠΟΥΘΗΚΠ / ΚΑΛΑΦΑ-/ΤΗΣ ΠΤΑΔΙΤ-/ΤΟΜ ΠΜΟΔ ΖΝ / ΟΥ ΣΜΟΥΝ ΠΗ-/ΠΗΦ ΠΝΟΥΤΕ / ΔΡΙ ΟΥΝΔ ΝΜΜ-/ΔΔ ††††, “Lamos, from Abutig, caulker, died on the eighth of Epeiph. May God have mercy on him”.

We may compare this to a Greek one, *P.Haun.* II 44, TM 32380, an incised Christian piece of wood, dated to the 4th or 5th cent. CE, also large (10.3 x 24 cm). It has an ear under the text on the short side of the tabula, with a string hole, and

³¹ See G. Steindorff, ‘Zwei altkoptische Mumienetiketten’, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 28 (1890), pp. 49-53: These two bilingual (Greek-Old Coptic) labels present a very early stage of the writing, one of them even runs right to left (*SB* I 1250; *Short Texts* 2 885; TM 40213), and the other one features a very crude hand (*SB* I 1230; *Short Texts* 2 886; 40194).

³² Alain Delattre, ‘Une etiquette de momie copte de l’ancien Collection G.A. Michaelides’, *Chronique d’Égypte* 80 (2005), pp. 373-374, already collects the available data.

³³ *SB Kopt.* III 1690, TM 109974: was first edited as Coptic by A. Sayce, ‘Coptic and Early Christian Inscriptions in Upper Egypt’, *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 8 (1886), pp. 175-191, no. 6 in p. 188: ΣΕΝΨΕΝΟΣΙΡΙΣ / ΠΑΧΟΥΜΙΣ ΜΗΤΙΣ (?) / ΤΑΠΚΟΙΜΙΣ, but is in fact a Greek mummy label: Σενψενοςίρις / Παχούμις μητρός / Ταπκοίμις, published by Shelton, ‘Mummy tags’, p. 352 (*SB* XII 10838, TM 26706).

³⁴ C. Leemans, *Monuments égyptiens du Musée d’antiquités des Pays-Bas à Leide*, Leiden, 1840, p. 305, X 4; C. Schmidt, ‘Ein altchristliches Mumienetikett’, p. 62.

³⁵ Alain Delattre, ‘Une etiquette de momie’. The dimensions of this piece (16.5 cm x 3.8 cm) were published by the website of a gallery of antiquities. The label is now for sale.

³⁶ TM 92862, N. Lewis, ‘Mummy-tickets from Achmim-Panopolis’, *Mizraim* 2 (1936), pp. 70-2. Now in Montreal, McGill University MS NO Coptic 4.

a well known expression, which is very much extended in Imperial times and cannot be considered specifically Christian: “Be brave, nobody is immortal”.⁴¹ This expression is common in epitaphs, not only from Egypt, but also Cyprus and Syria. Its interpretation is, not surprisingly, controversial. The first to analyze it was M. Simon,⁴² who claimed it referred to the dangers that the departed had to face when travelling to the World of the Beyond and compared it to the initiation rites of the cult of Osiris.⁴³ The related expression, οὐδεις ἀθάνατος, refers to the ineluctable fact that we all have to die.⁴⁴

In general, there is some dissension about Simon’s interpretation especially in the relationship with the cult of Osiris. For example, in a convincing interpretation, R. Joly⁴⁵ has instead suggested that this is related to the mysteries of Eleusis. The most recent analysis, that of J. S. Park,⁴⁶ suggests that instead of seeing this as the promise of life after death, we should see it as a formula of consolation in view of the universality of death, with the example of IG II 3385 πάντων ἀνθρώπων νόμος ἐστὶ κοινὸς τὸ ἀποθανεῖν.⁴⁷ It is obvious that we cannot infer from such a short expression the belief in life after death or resurrection, but it is certainly reasonable to understand exhortations to have courage or be brave as expressions of condolence and comfort.

In spite of its ‘pagan’ origin, I would venture to propose that in the funerary context of late antique Egypt this expression became a favourite of Christian practice. Mummy labels do not feature the expression θάρσει or θάρρει,⁴⁸ which

⁴¹ J. S. Park, *Conceptions of Afterlife in Jewish inscriptions: with special reference to Pauline literature*, Tübingen, 2000, pp. 47-63.

⁴² M. Simon, ‘Θάρσει, οὐδεις ἀθάνατος’, *Revue d’Histoire des Religions* 113 (1936), pp. 188-206.

⁴³ He compares it to Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* 22: θαρρεῖτε, μύστα τοῦ θεοῦ σεσωσμένου, ἔσται γὰρ ἡμῖν ἐκ πόνων σωτηρία. “Be brave, initiated of the saved god, your salvation will lie in the sufferings”. He also claims that the promise of salvation and the Egyptian idea of *post mortem* sufferings are confirmed by the use of farewell expressions in Alexandrine epitaphs as εὐψύχει together with representations of Isis and Osiris. See Simon, ‘Θάρσει’, p. 203.

⁴⁴ M. Simon, Θάρσει, p. 196, even sees in contexts like IG XIV 1806 = IGUR II 743: εὐ-/ψύχει / Μίδων,/ οὐδεις· ἄ-/θάνατος/ καὶ· ὁ· Ἡ-/ρακλῆς / ἀπέθα-/νε, “Farewell, Midon, nobody is immortal, even Herakles died”, that the reference to a hero means that there is hope of resurrection or some kind of life after death.

⁴⁵ R. Joly, ‘L’exhortation du courage (θαρρεῖν) dans les mystères’, *Revue des Études Grecques* 68 (1955), pp. 164-170.

⁴⁶ Park, *Conceptions*, pp. 47-63.

⁴⁷ Taken from R. A. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs*, Urbana-Champaign, 1962, pp. 252-256, as also SEG VI 140.

⁴⁸ For this see the forthcoming article, by my colleague Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, “«Trust the God»: Tharsein in Ancient Greek Religion”, whom I thank for letting me read the unpublished manuscript and for his useful commentaries on this article.

appears instead in epitaphs and condolence letters.⁴⁹ But we do find variants of οὐδείς ἀθάνατος, ‘nobody is immortal’, preceded by an expression of comfort, μὴ λυπῆς, ‘do not be sad’, instead of the above mentioned ‘be brave’.⁵⁰ This expression appears almost exclusively in Christian epitaphs, and in a reduced number of mummy labels, in which we also find an addition ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, which might point to some kind of hope of life after death, especially in the expression ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τούτῳ, so frequent in funerary stelae.⁵¹

SB I 3514, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 231, TM 40311: Σενπαμ[ών]-/θης τε[...]/ ἐτῶν [...]/ μὴ λυπ[ῆς],/ οὐδείς ἀ[θάνα]-/τος ἐν κό[σμῳ]. “Senamonthes, [...] years. Do not be sad. Nobody is immortal in the world”.

SB I 3515, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 232, TM 40312: recto: Σενϋρι-/ς ἐβίω-/σεν ἐτ-/ῶν λς/ verso: μὴ λυπ-/ῆς οὐ-/δείς ἀθ-/ά<να>τος ἐ-/ν τῷ κ(όσμῳ). “Senyris lived 36 years. Do not be sad, nobody is immortal in the world”.

SB I 3992, *T.Berl. Möller* 82, TM 40407: Στράβων Καυερ ἀπὸ Τερκθ(.)/ μὴ λυπῆς, οὐδείς ἀθ-/άνατος. τῆς θ ἰνδ(ικτίωνος). “Strabo Cauer (?) from Terk(.).⁵² Do not be sad, nobody is immortal. Ninth indiction”.

SB I 5715, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 527, TM 40585: Σεναλυπία Πλήνιος Μέμνονος, ἐβίωσεν ἐτῶν νε. μὴ λυποῦ, οὐδείς γὰρ ἀθάνατος ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ. “Senalypia daughter of Plenios, son of Memnon, lived 55 years. Do not be sad, since nobody is immortal in the world”.

SB X 10483 (SB I 5751), *C.Étiq.Mom.* 532, TM 16767 (after 4th cent. CE): Καμεντεβώνχ / ἐβίωσεν ἐτῶν/ νε. μὴ λυποῦ, οὐδείς/ γὰρ ἀθάνατος ἐν τῷ / κόσμῳ. “Kamentebonch lived 55 years. Do not be sad, since nobody is immortal in the world”.

⁴⁹ J. Chapa, *Letters of condolence in Greek papyri*, Florence: Edizione Gonnelli, 1998. K.A. Worp, ‘Letters of Condolence in the Greek Papyri: Some Observations’, *Analecta Papyrologica* 7 (1995), pp. 149-154. I am very grateful to Juan Chapa for discussing personally the nature of these letters.

⁵⁰ The funerary inscription SB V 8695 (= SB III 6090), *C.Étiq.Mom.* 644, TM 40715 Σέμνη Μενάν-/δρου, χρηστή καὶ / ἄλυπε, χαῖρε, where the deceased is referred to as ἄλυπε, ‘free from pain and sorrow’, can help understand these expressions of comfort as addressed to the by-passers (who read the epitaphs) or the family of the deceased, and not to the deceased himself, who is free of sorrow.

⁵¹ The innumerable references to inscriptions carrying this expression are easily accessible through databases. Let one illustrative example suffice, that of *Thèbes à Syène* 238, TM 88861, from Aswan: μὴ ληπηθῆς Ἰακώβ, / οὐδείς γὰρ ἀθάνα-/τος ἐν τῷ βίῳ τού-/τῳ. ΧΜΓ. “Do not be sad, Jacob, since nobody is immortal in this life. Mary gave birth to Christ”.

⁵² Perhaps Τερκ(ύ)θ(εως). See Guy Wagner, Christian Leblanc, Guy Lecuyot, Anne-Marie Loyrette, ‘Documents grecs découverts dans la Vallée des Reines, I’, *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 90 (1990), pp. 365-380, esp. p. 377. They defend it is not a fake.

This expression also appears in condolence letters of probable Christian character:

P.Princ. II 102, ll. 10-15, Chapa, *Letters of Condolence* 10, TM 32798 (4th cent. CE): δι\ς/ δὲ τὸ/ ἀνθρώπινον φέρει. τοιγαροῦν/ ἀπόθου τὸ λυπηρὸν τοῦ ἀνθρω-πίνου πταίσματος καὶ ἀπόβλε-/ψον ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἀθά-/νατος εἰ μὴ ὁ υἱὸς θεοῦ, “Therefore, put away the grief of human fault and think that nobody among men is immortal, but only the son of God”.

SB XVIII 13946, ll. 14-15, *CPR VI* 81, Chapa, *Letters of Condolence* 8, TM 30997 (3rd-4th cent. CE Hermoupolis Magna?): οὐδεὶς γὰρ τῶν ἀπλῶς γεγνων-/μένων ἀθ[άν]ατος, “nobody of the simply born is immortal”.⁵³

The sign of the cross, the chrismon, and the adoption by Christians of the ankh-sign, meaning ‘life’ in Egyptian, is a clear marker of Christianity. Less evident, and perhaps contestable, is the use of the ear of corn as a sign of the eucharist, already pointed out by Scott-Moncrieff in mummy labels, among other funerary manifestations.⁵⁴ Examples of this are *T.Berl.Möller* 105 (*SB I* 1211, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 116, TM 40176), 121 (*SB I* 1182, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 96, TM 40152), 124 (*SB I* 1204, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 112, TM 40169) and *SB I* 3508 (*C.Étiq.Mom.* 225, TM 40305), although *T.Berl.Möller* 25 (*SB I* 1203, *Short Texts* 2 847, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 111, TM 50891) is a Demotic label and features a stylized ear of corn. Since the ear of corn also represents Osiris, it is difficult to disambiguate this symbol and assign it to Christian practice.

Conclusion

Mummy labels were distinctly Egyptian objects that briefly entered the world of early Christian burial practices, together with mummification and other related aspects of Egyptian funerary tradition. Mummification, as has recently been proven by the analysis of bodies recovered in excavations, was gradually transformed into a different technique, perhaps as a consequence of new ideas concerning the preservation of corpses, or due to the decline over time of ancient practices. Mummy labels served a very practical purpose in funerary custom, that of identification of the bodies. They survived and acquired typically Christian marks (such as the sign of the cross, and perhaps the ear of corn) as well as expressions of Christian character (such as ἐν Κ(υρί)ῳ, εἰς τὴν λαμπρὰν ἀπῆλθεν, and as I claim here, οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ). The Coptic language, too, serves as an identifying factor. The few Coptic labels we know of feature texts

⁵³ In the case of this last text, the Christian character is doubtful, according to Juan Chapa, with whom I agree.

⁵⁴ Scott-Moncrieff, *Paganism and Christianity in Egypt*, p. 126.

very close to those of funerary stelae, and appear in a format much larger than the traditional, suggesting that a shift in their purpose has taken place.