

# Egyptian Burial Practice in a Period of Transition: on embalming in Christian times\*

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In one of my favourite pages of Coptic Hagiography, Pistentios, the sixth century bishop of Qoptos,<sup>1</sup> has a fascinating conversation with a mummy. The setting of this episode is an Egyptian Pharaonic tomb where Pistentios has taken refuge during the Persian invasion of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> In this conversation the mummy is somewhat 'woken up' and reports to the saint about the world of the beyond and his sufferings for not being a Christian. Apart from being a quite exceptional necromantic scene and a vision of the punishments of Hell in Coptic literature, it is also a remarkable scene of contact of a seventh-century Christian with the material culture of a period that antedated him by at least four centuries. The description of the mummy and the episode itself may well be a fabulation, a construction of the author rather than a description of the 'real.' Nevertheless it provides us with a way of understanding how a seventh-century bishop might interpret the funerary traditions of a past material culture, from which he felt quite distant and estranged.

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<sup>1</sup> Pistentios (ca. 569-632 CE) was the bishop of Koptos from 599 to 632, and spent many years in the Theban Mountain or the mountain of Djeme. See J. van der Vliet, 'Pistentios de Coptos (569-632) moine, évêque et saint: Autour d'une nouvelle édition de ses archives', in M.-F. Boussac (ed.), *Autour de Coptos: Actes du colloque organisé au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon (17-18 mars 2000)*, (Topoi – Orient-occident Supplement, 3), Lyon: De Boccard, 2001, pp. 61-72. He is attested in various versions both in Coptic and Arabic of his life, for which see G. Gabra, *Untersuchungen zu den Texten über Pesyntheus: Bischof von Koptos (569-632)*, Bonn: R. Habelt, 1984. There are also plenty of documentary texts on papyri and ostraka that attest to his life and activity as a bishop.

<sup>2</sup> E. Amélineau, 'Un évêque de Keft au VIIe siècle', *Mémoires présentés à l'Institut égyptien* 2 (1889), pp. 261-423, esp. 401-3. Also, on this episode, see E. R. O'Connell, 'Transforming Monumental Landscapes in Late Antique Egypt', in Kristina Sessa (ed.), 'Holy Households: Domestic Space, Property, and Power', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15 (2007), pp. 239-274, esp. 260-261.

According to the text, the mummy was dressed in silk garments, beautifully wrapped in linen bandages. We should deduce that the deceased was probably a member of the Roman aristocracy. In his conversation with the bishop, the embalmed interlocutor explained that during his life he had been a pagan, native of Hermonthis (Thebes). His parents, Agricolaos<sup>3</sup> and Eustathia, were worshippers of Poseidon,<sup>4</sup> probably in the first centuries of Christianity in Egypt. The passage where the mummy is described is as follows (Amélineau 402-403):

ΑΝΓΙ ΔΕ ΗΝΙΚΥΝΩΜΑ ΔΗΖΟΡΧΟΥ ΕΧΕΝ ΝΟΥΕΡΗΟΥ ΔΠΙΜΔΟΥΟΟΘΕΝ  
ΕΜΔΨΩ ΕΡΕ ΠΙΜΑ ΕΡΕ ΝΙΟΩΜΑ ΜΜΟΔ ΕΔΟΙ ΜΦΤΗΤ ΝΟΥΜΑ ΕΔΥΣΕΛΟΩΔΙ  
ΕΜΔΨΩ. ΠΙΨΟΡΠ ΗΚΩΟ ΕΤΖΙΡΕΝ ΠΙΡΟ ΝΙΖΒΩΟ ΕΤΕΔΚΗΟ ΝΪΗΤΟΥ ΖΔΝ  
ΟΛΟΟΡΙΚΟΝ ΝΕ ΝΤΕ ΝΙΟΥΡΩΟΥ ΕΝΔΨΕ ΠΕΔΪΘΑΙ ΔΕ ΕΡΕ ΝΕΔΤΗΒ ΝΧΙΧ  
ΝΕΜ ΝΕΔΓΑΛΛΑΥΧ ΚΗΟ ΝΟΥΔΙ ΟΥΔΙ.

‘We took the mummies and piled them one upon another, and then the place was quite clear. The place where the bodies were was like a place that had been highly decorated, the first mummy, which was by the door, the garments in which it was bandaged were of the pure silk of kings, and it was very thick, and its fingers and toes were bandaged separately’.<sup>5</sup>

This episode represents what we today might call a moment of intercultural contact. But it took place in the seventh century, when Christianity was already well established, had set up some clear differences from the material culture that preceded it, and the pagan burial practice being encountered was both extinct and easy to identify. Some time earlier, and therefore closer to the period of transition from paganism into Christianity (and therefore, to contact between ‘living’ cultures), a saying of the Desert Fathers gives us another precious glimpse of how the first eremites dwelt with the past in the neighbourhood of mummies.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This name is not frequently attested in the papyri. It appears in the third and fourth centuries.

<sup>4</sup> Probably referring to Serapis, who replaced him as god of the sea.

<sup>5</sup> The translation into English is by Battiscomb Gunn, in B. Lewis and S. M. Burstein (eds.), *Land of Enchanters: Egyptian Short Stories from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, Princeton, 2001, pp. 106-107.

<sup>6</sup> We have plenty of examples of Desert Fathers who dwelt in tombs for years: e.g. Alexandra in Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* V 1-2; Philoromus in Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* XLV 2; Sissinius in Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* XLIX 1; Anthony in Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 8; Pachomius in *Bohairic Life* 12, specifically ‘tombs filled with dead bodies’.

Coll. Alph. Macarius 13, p. 268, 44-45 (= Coll. Syst. 7, 15):

Ἀνέβη ποτὲ ὁ ἀββᾶς Μακάριος ἀπὸ Σκήτεως εἰς Τερενοῦθιν· καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν κοιμηθῆναι. Ἦσαν δὲ ἐκεῖ **σκηνώματα Ἑλλήνων παλαιά**· καὶ λαβὼν ἓν, ὑπέθηκε τῇ ἑαυτοῦ κεφαλῇ, ὡς ἐμβρίμιον.

‘Once Abba Macarios went up from Scetis to Terenouthis, and he entered a sepulchre to sleep. There were **old mummies of pagans**. Taking one, he placed it under his head and used it as a pillow’.

In this last text one has the impression that the pagan mummy was already clearly distinctive and different from the way Christians were buried, the transformation had already started. In that period of transition, the first Christians still struggled not only for their survival, but also to create a distinctive material funerary identity, one that depended greatly on inheritances from their pagan and Jewish past, but combined these with their new beliefs. The distinctiveness of this Christian material culture is, from Pisentios’ point of view, already evident, but in previous centuries the differentiation was not so clear-cut.

In the first centuries of the Common Era, ancient burial practices, specifically the embalmment and burial rituals, were going through a process of transformation that had already started in Ptolemaic and Roman times if not before. Since that early there was a process of assimilation of new traits to the tradition which produced innovations in the funerary art of Roman Egypt<sup>7</sup> so the rise of Christianity in this particular field came as one more development in an ongoing and vital balance of old and new.

In a period of conversion we have to imagine families where some members had become Christians<sup>8</sup> while the elder still worshipped the pagan gods. These families were buried in a first moment in common graveyards. While the new beliefs will bring gradually distinctive elements to these burial practices,<sup>9</sup> in fact,

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<sup>7</sup> Ch. Riggs, *The Beautiful Burial in Roman Egypt: Art, Identity, and Funerary Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> 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/](http://www.mq.edu.au/research/centres_and_groups/ancient_cultures_research_centre/research/papyrology/pce/overview/) [last visited 23/07/2013].

<sup>9</sup> 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: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 163-184. On necropoleis, see M.S. Venit, *Monumental Tombs of Ancient Alexandria*, Cambridge:

the elements of the old religion will not disappear immediately. And this means that the elements will mix temporally within one archaeological space,<sup>10</sup> producing interesting products of what we today call religious coexistence.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.

As a visual example of this, I present a mummy label from the Louvre museum. Mummy labels are artefacts very closely related to Egyptian embalment and hence unexpected among Christians,<sup>13</sup> but their existence as part of Christian burial practice is less surprising in the scenario that I just described: Christians and pagans buried in the same graveyards into the fourth century and beyond. The 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE mummy label<sup>14</sup> presents on one side a simple text, referring to the dead person:

Τατεψενθαήσιος / μητρὸς Ρομπνάβρε / ἐβίωσεν ὡς ἐτῶν εἴκοσις.

‘Tatepsenthaesis whose mother is Rompnabre lived 20 years’.

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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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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).

<sup>12</sup> 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 and D. Lorton, *Gods and Men in Egypt: 3000 BCE to 395 CE*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004, pp. 333-337.

<sup>13</sup> On mummy labels in this period, see my recent article ‘Egyptian burial practices in Late Antiquity: the case of Christian mummy labels’, in J.P. Monferrer – S. Torallas Tovar (eds.), *Cultures in Contact. Transfer of Knowledge in the Mediterranean Context. Selected Papers*, (*Syro-Arabica*, 1), Córdoba: Oriens Academic, 2012, pp. 13-24.

<sup>14</sup> *T.Mom.Louvre* 807, *C.Étiq.Mom.* 1222, TM 55127.

The text is followed by a cross and a kappa (for 20, the age of the deceased).<sup>15</sup> But when the label is turned over, it features the portrait of a woman and eight lines of Demotic text on the other side. 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, contradicts the Christian interpretation. If the cross on the reverse is in fact a Christian cross, this is a conspicuous example of religious ambiguity.

We have very few literary sources illustrating this period of transition into Christianity and about how an early Christian burial developed.<sup>16</sup> References are scarce and often as concise as for example Athanasius' *Vita Ant.* 26.968.35: οἱ Αἰγύπτιοι τὰ τῶν τελευτώντων σπουδαίων σώματα, καὶ μάλιστα τῶν ἁγίων μαρτύρων, φιλοῦσι μὲν θάπτειν καὶ περιελίσσειν ὀθονίοις: 'It was the custom of the Egyptians to bury and wrap in linen shrouds the bodies of good men, and especially of the holy martyrs.'

The gradual attempt 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:<sup>17</sup>

91.7 καὶ εἰ μέλει ὑμῖν περὶ ἐμοῦ, καὶ μνημονεύετε ὡς περὶ πατρὸς, μὴ ἀφεῖτέ τινας τὸ σῶμά μου λαβεῖν εἰς Αἴγυπτον, μήπως ἐν τοῖς οἴκοις ἀπόθωνται· ... **Θάψατε** οὖν τὸ ἡμέτερον ὑμεῖς, καὶ ὑπὸ γῆν κρύψατε· καὶ ἔστω τὸ παρ' ἐμοῦ ῥῆμα φυλαττόμενον παρ' ὑμῖν, ὥστε μηδένα γινώσκειν τὸν τόπον, πλὴν ὑμῶν μόνων.

'If you care for me and remember me as a father, do not permit anyone to take my body to Egypt, lest they set it in the houses. Therefore, perform the rites for me

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<sup>15</sup> See image in M.F. Aubert and R. Cortopassi, *Portraits funéraires de l'Égypte romaine. Cartonnages, linceuls et bois*, Paris, 2008, pp. 84-85, n. 4.

<sup>16</sup> A concise description in J. Davies, *Death, Burial, and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*, Religion in the First Christian Centuries, New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 199.

<sup>17</sup> This seems to be due to 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. See also B. Borg, 'The Dead as Guest at Table? Continuity and Change in the Egyptian cult of the Dead', in M. Brierbier (ed.), *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt*, London, 1997, pp. 26-32; E. Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2009, p. 108.

yourselves and bury my body in the earth. And let my word be kept secret by you, so that no one knows the place but you alone’.

But if compared to Abraham of Hermonthis much later, in the seventh century,<sup>18</sup> one finds a change of attitude or rather a change of scene, when he instead asked to be buried according to the custom of the land:

βούλομαι καὶ κελεύω μετὰ τὴν ἐμὴν ἔξοδον τοῦ βίου **τὴν περιστολὴν** τοῦ ἐμοῦ σώματος καὶ τὰς ἀγίας μου προσφορὰς καὶ ἀγάπας καὶ τὰς τοῦ θανάτου ἐπισήμους ἡμέρας ἐκτελεσθῆναι προνοίᾳ σου **κατὰ τὸν ἐπιχώριον νόμον** καὶ κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν ὄψιν καὶ ὑπόλημψιν.

Testament 7: ‘I wish and order that, after my exit from this life, the wrapping of my body and my holy [eucharistic] offerings and meals [in my memory] and the designated days of my death [period] be fulfilled by your care according to the custom of the country, and according to my intention and plan’.

None of them gives any detail or description of the burial dispositions. What were the ‘traditional ways’ to which St. Anthony and Abraham had such different reactions, probably due to the fact that there had operated an evolution which had radically changed the habits? The traditional way in the early days of Christianity meant probably the pagan practices,<sup>19</sup> such as mummification,<sup>20</sup> so characteristic of the Egyptian religion, which were the only known way known to preserve corpses from decay. While in the seventh century, these traditions that Abraham speaks about have a completely different scenario, there was no risk of being put through a pagan ritual.

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<sup>18</sup> But it is not likely that the ‘wrapping’ meant full mummification in the seventh century. See L.S.B. MacCoull, ‘Apa Abraham: Testament of Apa Abraham, Bishop of Hermonthis, for the Monastery of St. Phoibammon near Thebes, Egypt’, J. Thomas, A. Constantinides Hero and G. Constable (eds.), *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders’ Typika and Testaments* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 35), Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000, pp. 51-58.

<sup>19</sup> It has to be considered too that the rejection of typically Egyptian burial practice is not exclusive of Christians. There are examples of this earlier by those who prefer typically Greek practice. See F. Dunand and R. Lichtenberg, ‘Pratiques et croyances funéraires en Egypte romaine’, *ANRW* II.18.5 (1995), pp. 3216-3315, esp. 3265.

<sup>20</sup> F. Dunand and 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,<sup>21</sup> mummification continued to be practiced in Egypt in Christian circles as late as 600 CE, although the traditional method went through some adaptation. As Françoise Dunand has explained, the process of transformation was progressive, inasmuch as bandaging, use of linen shrouds and use of everyday garments coexisted in the same period.<sup>22</sup> The mummification process gradually varied and changed.

Many bodies of Christians, especially the poorest, were probably dried naturally by the effect of the contact with hot sand, and that is why they do not present any trace of embalmment (like evisceration, or the use of specific chemicals), but in fact most mummies of Christians, though not eviscerated, had been purposefully treated with natron and salt.<sup>23</sup> An example are the bodies found in the Thebaid, close to the Monastery of Saint Marc, where bodies wearing their clothes showed between the garment and the skin traces of salt and vegetable remains.<sup>24</sup>

In this process, the techniques were not completely abandoned and substituted by new techniques, but progressively adapted to new needs. The interesting question here is who were the actors in this transformation. One possibility is that the traditional organisation of the funerary workers in Egypt was behind it, and the old techniques were not abandoned but they evolved, as the workers themselves converted to Christianity without abandoning their previous life and customs. This hypothesis has the support of two sources, one documentary and another one literary. Both have their problems and complexities, but I think it is safe to consider them enough testimony for this process.

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<sup>21</sup> Especially F. Dunand has conducted extensive research on mummies and necropoleis. I refer to various of her works throughout the article. 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 Dakhleh Oasis Project*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2004, pp. 167-82.

<sup>22</sup> F. Dunand, 'Pratiques et croyances funéraires en Egypte romaine', pp. 3271-3272.

<sup>23</sup> Let me mention the example of the well known mummy of the embroideress at Brussels Royal Museums. She was buried in several layers of garments, tunics and shrouds, but her body was completely desiccated in a process that cannot possibly have happened naturally under such an amount of garments, but was probably achieved before she was dressed for her final resting place (see F. Dunand, 'Between tradition and innovation', p. 173 and F. Dunand, 'Pratiques et croyances funéraires en Egypte romaine', p. 3272). The practice of preservation of the body did not definitively contradict some well-defined Christian beliefs, so especially in Egypt there was no need to reject a practice which was in concordance with their doctrine of resurrection.

<sup>24</sup> F. Dunand, 'Pratiques et croyances funéraires en Egypte romaine', p. 3272.

In a Christian letter<sup>25</sup> of Psenosiris,<sup>26</sup> a presbyter, to a colleague priest, Apollonius, he informs us of the transportation of a woman, by name Politiké, to Kysis in the Magna Oasis. Much has been said and written about this text since its first edition. According to one of the interpretations, under the persecution of Decius or Diocletian, this woman Politiké had been martyred, and the papyrus is in fact referring to the transportation of her body to the Oasis. Her son was expected to arrive and explain the sufferings that his mother had to endure. A different interpretation implies that Politiké is alive, and has been deported from Alexandria to the Oasis (an interpretation which counts on the support, among other things, of a legal disposition which considers the Oasis as a place of exile: *est quoddam genus quasi in insulam relegationis in provincia Aegyptio in Oasin relegare* (Dig. XLVIII 22.7). A different interpretation is that Politiké is not a name, but either referring to a ‘woman from the city’, i. e. Alexandria (unattested) or that ‘politiké’ corresponds to the more common πορνή, or ‘prostitute’.

But beyond the problem of Politiké being dead or alive, a prostitute or a Christian martyr, what is interesting in this letter, in fact, is the presence of a group of Christian νεκροτάφοι, among the ‘undertakers’ of Kysis, who apparently practised embalming of bodies according to traditional methods.<sup>27</sup> If the mummification interpretation is correct, we have the testimony of Christians belonging to a guild of undertakers, within which they formed a minority: τοῖς καλοῖς καὶ πιστοῖς ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν νεκροτάφων, ‘the good and faithful among the grave-diggers’. They seem to have been preferred by their Christian clients over the other members of the guild because they shared the same religion, and not because they practiced a different method of mummification.

<sup>25</sup> The language of this text is clearly Christian: See ll. 2-3 ἀγαπητῶ ἀδελφῶ ἐν κ(υρ)ίῳ, 4-6 ἀσπάζομαι καὶ τοὺς παρὰ σοὶ πάντας ἀ[δ]ελφούς ἐν θ(ε)ῶ. 12-14 τοῖς καλοῖς καὶ πιστοῖς ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν νεκροτάφων.

<sup>26</sup> P. Grenf. II 73, *Chr. Wilck.* 127, edited by A. Deissmann, *The Epistle of Psenosiris: an original document from the Diocletian Persecution (Papyrus 713 Brit.Mus)*, London: A. and C. Black, 1902.

<sup>27</sup> 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 and A.M. Nobbs, ‘P.Grenf. II 73. A Reconsideration’, in B. Kärmer, W. Luppe and H. Maehler (eds.), *Akten des 21. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses. Berlin 1995*, (Archiv für Papyrusforschung, Beiheft 3), Stuttgart: Teubner, 1997, pp. 613-630; M. Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto. Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli II-IV*, Firenze 1968, pp. 131-135; J. O’Callaghan, ‘P.Grenf. II 73 [III/IVp]’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 67 (1987), pp. 124-128; F. Dunand, ‘Les nécrotaphes de Kysis’, *Sociétés Urbaines en Égypte et au Sudan (CRIPEL 7)*, Lille, 1985, pp. 117-127.

There is one more example for the practice of embalment by Christians in a pagan environment. In the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, Kopres informs about Father Patermouthios (HM X). Still a pagan, head of brigands and apparently a νεκροτάφος (19. οὗτος ἀρχιληστής πρῶτον καὶ νεκροτάφος Ἑλλήνων), he once climbed up the roof of a cell of a virgin with the intention of pillaging, and he found himself caught there until the morning, and fell asleep. A revealing dream showed him the true road of virtue. The King said to him:

29-30 «Μὴ περὶ τοὺς τάφους ἔτι καὶ τῶν μικρῶν τούτων κλεμμάτων σπουδὴν ἔχων ἐπαγρύπνει. ἀλλ' εἰ βούλει μεταβαλεῖν τὸν τρόπον περὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν καὶ ἀγγελικὴν στρατείαν ἐπαναλαβεῖν, παρ' ἐμοῦ λήψη ταύτην τὴν ἐξουσίαν». ὁ δὲ ὡς ἀσμένως ὑπεδέξατο, ὑποδείκνυσιν αὐτῷ τάγμα μοναχῶν καὶ ἀρχεῖν αὐτῶν παρεκελεύετο.

'Stop keeping a watchful eye on the tombs, thinking only about these small thefts. If you want to pass from crime into virtue and undertake a military expedition with the angels, you will receive the power from me. He accepted gladly, and the king, showing him a company of monks, entrusted to him the command.'

Gascou<sup>28</sup> has reinterpreted the term *necrotaphos* in this text, translated generally as 'tomb-plunderer',<sup>29</sup> based on the Latin version by Rufinus, *sepulchrorum violator*. Gascou claims that the right interpretation is that of 'undertaker' or 'embalmer' and proves how many other sources connect the activity of the tomb supervisors and other offices related to the funerary activity with brigandage, and that probably the trade of funerary worker did not have a very good reputation in Egypt, thus the translation by Rufinus. Gascou's interpretation accommodates better with the last part of the story: once Patermouthios converted he continued to work as an undertaker. At some point later in life he took on a disciple, in an episode which has interesting information about burial practice:

59-65 ὁ δὲ εὐθὺς ἐνδύσας αὐτὸν λεβιτῶνα καὶ κουκούλιον τῇ κεφαλῇ περιθεις ἐπὶ τὴν ἄσκησιν προσεβίβαζεν τὴν μηλωτὴν αὐτῷ ἐπὶ τοὺς 60 ὥμους περιθέμενος καὶ λέντιον αὐτῷ περιζωσάμενος. καὶ δὴ εἴ πού τις τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἔτελευτα προσκαρτερῶν αὐτῷ ταῖς ἀγρυπνίαις καθάρως ἐκήδευσεν. ἰδὼν δὲ αὐτὸν ὁ μαθητὴς θαυμασίως τοὺς τεθνεῶτας κηδεύοντα εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν· «Εἰ κάμῃ θανόντα οὕτως

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<sup>28</sup> J. Gascou, 'La vie de Patermouthios moine et fossoyeur (Historia Monachorum X)', *Itinéraires d'Égypte. Mélanges offerts au père Maurice Martin*, Cairo: IFAO, 1992, pp. 107-114. Although we do not agree with their explanation, see J. Diethart and W. Voigt, 'Bedeutet NEKPOΤΑΦΟΣ in der Historia Monachorum In Aegypto wirklich auch Grabräuber?', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 104/2 (2012), pp. 629-633.

<sup>29</sup> See A.J. Festugière (ed.), *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, (Subsidia Hagiographica, 34), Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1961, and 53, Brussels, 1971, p. 68, 'violateur de tombes chez les païens'.

κηδεύσεις, διδάσκαλε;» ὁ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔφη· 65 «Οὕτως κηδεύσω σε, ἄχρις ἂν εἴπῃς· ἄρκεϊ'.

'After investing him with the sleeveless tunic, covering his head with the hood for asceticism, he added the goatskin cloak on his shoulders, and adjusted the linen belt around his waist. And if any of the Christians died, he devoted himself diligently in sleepless vigils to prepare the body for burial.<sup>30</sup> And when that disciple had observed in awe how he prepared the dead for burial, he said: 'I hope that when I am dead, master, you will prepare me like that'. 'I will indeed, my son, and I shall keep on clothing you until you say 'enough'.

And so it happened that the disciple died and Patermouthios fulfilled his promise.

65-70 μετ' οὐ πολὺ δὲ τοῦ χρόνου τέθνηκεν ὁ νεανίας καὶ ὁ λόγος εἰς ἔργον ἐγένετο. κηδεύσας γὰρ αὐτὸν εὐσεβῶς ἐρεῖ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐπὶ πάντων· «Καλῶς ἐκηδεύθης, ὦ τέκνον, ἢ ἔτι μικρὸν λείπεται;» φωνὴν δὲ ἀφῆκεν ὁ νεανίας εἰς ἐπήκοον πολλῶν· «Ἐχει καλῶς, ὦ πάτερ, τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν ἐπλήρωσας.

'Not long after this the young man died and this promise was fulfilled. For having prepared his body piously he said in the presence of all those there: 'Is this sufficient for your burial, my son, or should we add some more?' Everybody then heard the voice of the dead boy, saying: 'Enough, father. You have fulfilled your promise'.

While the Greek text provides a simple description of the episode, the Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia adds interesting details to the scene: the boy utters the reply to his master, 'even though his face was covered and his jaw had been tied up', *obvelata jam facie, vultuque constricto*. It is a debated question whether the translation by Rufinus was entirely free and the divergences between the Greek version and the Latin translations are due to his additions, or his translation depends on a different Greek text.<sup>31</sup> Until this question is settled, it is very risky to interpret that the Latin text reflects real Egyptian burial practices. This reference to the covering of the face and the tying up of the jaw, as much as the reference to the use of garments (see verb *induere* in the Latin version) can be additions by Rufinus, who came from a different funerary culture than the Egyptian one he claims to be describing.

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<sup>30</sup> The Latin version has the verb *induere*, to dress. See below.

<sup>31</sup> On this see C.P. Bammel, 'Problems of the *Historia Monachorum*', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 47 (1996), pp. 92-104, esp. 99-103. See previously A.J. Festugiere, 'Le probleme litteraire de l'*Historia Monachorum*', *Hermes* 83 (1955), pp. 257-284, who thinks of a different Greek Vorlage for Rufinus translation. For the Latin critical edition see E. Schulz-Flügel, *Tyrannius Rufinus. Historia Monachorum sive de Vita Sanctorum Patrum*, (Patristische Texte und Studien, 34), Berlin - New York: De Gruyter, 1990.

Although the description of the burial preparation of the bodies may not be reliable, in any case this text, together with the papyrus of the *necrotaphoi* from Kysis, belongs to that period of transition which was mentioned above and it provides a beautiful example of a converted pagan grave digger who continues to practise his trade. The *necrotaphoi* from Kysis and Patermouthios had learnt their trade from pagan embalmers, and these are techniques very difficult to change or adapt to the new beliefs.

### Conclusion

The transformation of burial practice did not mean the sudden disappearance of pagan elements, but a gradual adaptation and balance of the old and the new. In fact, the excavations in necropoleis in Egypt prove that pagan elements survived as late as the seventh century (mostly as ornamental elements). The flower offerings, the pots and jars for the funerary banquet, the iconographic motives in sarcophagi, cartonnages, amulets, ushebti, continue to be used well into the Christian period in Egypt.

The practice of 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. Bodies were no longer eviscerated and new methods of desiccation substituted the millenary tradition of embalment, shrouds and garments substituted the often extremely careful wrapping. But as we have seen, the trade among the Christians is a continuation of the traditional methods of the Egyptians.

In this environment, the Christians adopted and adapted an existing and very strong funerary tradition. That the agents of the technical transformation were themselves heirs of the traditional system, converted pagans who had learnt the techniques from their ancestors, both the papyrus from Kysis and the story of Patermouthios suggest. But still the Christians considered it important to have their own funerary tradition. Most saints' lives do not give specific instructions or information about what treatment the corpse received. Saint Mary of Egypt was buried only in her cloak, as many other saints, in an attempt at distinguishing their burials as extremely austere and virtuous. The texts mention very often the 'preparation' of the body for burial, but without any details.

But we should probably surmise that it was in fact very important to define the ritual. We can mention here the rules about funerals in the first set of monastic rules that we have: those of Pachomius of Tabennesi,<sup>32</sup> originally pagan him-

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<sup>32</sup> Praecepta 127-129 (PL XXIII 80); Bohairic Life 27 (A. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 1, Kalamazoo, 1980, pp. 50-51, has the description of a burial).

self, who established at the beginning of the fourth century an order of monasteries. In his rules, although giving no specific instructions about the preparation of the body, he defines the ritual, the psalms and hymns sung, the prayers for the dead, etc. And I will conclude with a last example, not precisely from Egypt. In his *Life of Macrina*, Gregory of Nyssa<sup>33</sup> dedicates an important section at the end of the text to the detailed description of the funerary dispositions of the saint. This can be interpreted as the setting of an example in the fourth century of how Christian funerals were supposed to be performed. While the treatment of the body for burial was given less importance, with the preparation itself taking just a few days or hours, as compared to a complicated process which took more than a month in ancient times, the prayer and ritual took on special relevance and differentiated the Christian burial from the previous practices.

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<sup>33</sup> P. Maraval, *Vie de Sainte Macrine par Grégoire de Nysse. Introduction, texte critique, traduction, notes et index*, (Sources chrétiennes, 178), Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1971, 982C-1000B.