PERSONAL PIETY: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

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Abstract. In a history of religion, personal piety in ancient Egypt has been argued to demarcate the first time that individuals turn directly to the gods outside institutionalised temple religion. The phenomenon is intricately linked in Egyptology to the aftermath of the Amarna period and the community of Deir el-Medineh. The alleged discovery of the individual in religion, the rise of 'monotheism' and the above average literacy among the skilled craftsmen at Deir el-Medineh make personal piety a prism for exploring issues of broader interest beyond Egyptology. Departing from previous debates, I argue that personal piety is the response to increasing exclusion of people from access to temples, a process whose origins long predate the Amarna period. Contrary to current interpretation, I believe that personal piety does not reflect an intimate relationship between people and the gods but rather the loss of this intimacy.

The recently edited volume *Persönliche Frömmigkeit. Funktion und Bedeutung individueller Gotteskontakte im interdisziplinären Dialog* has assembled a series of views on personal piety from within Egyptology and other disciplines of the ancient and the European medieval world.[1] In the opening chapter, B. Lange outlines four approaches to the topic from the perspective of religious studies: the philosophy of religion that defines personal piety as religion beyond systemised theology and the institutionalised church; the phenomenology of religion that contrasts elite spirituality with folk culture; the psychology of religion that recognises personal piety as a suppressed source of mental strength; and the history of religion.[2] For the latter, Lang argues that Egyptology has developed the greatest interest in personal piety, and ancient Egypt probably does provide the earliest and most coherent evidence bearing on the question, pre-dating other areas of the Near East and Israel.[3] The potential contribution of Egyptology to a broader history of religion and a reviving interest in personal

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[1] FRIESE *et al.*, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit*. Egyptological contributions in the volume are written by M. Luiselli on terminology, Becker on experience and DuQuesne on Amarna religion.

[2] LANG, in FRIESE *et al.*, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit*, 19-36.

[3] ALBERTZ, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion*; HUTTER, HUTTER-BRAUNSAR (eds.), *Offizielle Religion*; COHEN, *Religion Compass* 1/3, 329-40.

piety over the past ten years within Egyptology makes it worthwhile revisiting a topic with an otherwise well-established research history.[4]

It has recently been suggested that earlier evidence be considered for a discussion of personal piety, including inscriptions of the late Middle Kingdom and even First Intermediate Period and late Old Kingdom.[5] One can, of course, debate whether the phrases used and the attitudes expressed in these texts match certain definitions of personal piety and whether they are true forerunners of a phenomenon that would flourish only later. But the more pressing question that the inclusion of earlier material raises is why and under which historical circumstances something we call personal piety emerged.

What has remained largely unchanged in the discussion is the almost exclusive focus on textual and visual material. When I try to offer an archaeological response in this paper, I do not intend to compile a list of objects or buildings that somehow reflect personal piety. Rather, if personal piety is understood as a specific form of human-divine interaction, I am interested in the long-term development of this relationship. With written and visual evidence, its history can be traced back in time only as far as the first text with relevant phrases appears, perhaps the biography of Ankhtifi of Moalla around 2100 BC. But the human-divine relationship has a much longer prehistory. In the late Fourth millennium BC, it takes archaeological shape in the form of local shrines. The shrines were the religious nuclei of communities that clustered around new institutions of display during the late state formation period. The archaeological record shows that they transformed into large temples over time and became major interfaces between local communities, central government and the gods. I suggest that this development provides a relevant and more consistent context for an interpretation of personal piety, rooted in social history rather than social, religious or individual crisis which, among other things, have been proposed for an explanation.

I follow the definition of personal piety offered by Jan Assmann.[6] Assmann argues that the phrase *dd NN m jb=f* 'who places god NN in his heart', or 'Gottesbeherzigung', defines personal piety best and that it is most typical of, although not restricted to, letters and prayers post-dating the Amarna period. This narrow definition has the advantage of using native terminology and articulating something historically specific, requiring explanation. Other definitions of the term, closer to notions of religious practice, folk culture, or domestic religion, focus more on practices and beliefs that do not change over time, or

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[4] Recent contributions, in addition to those quoted in nn. 1 and 5, include ALTENMÜLLER, in HARTENSTEIN, RÖSEL (eds.), *JHWH und die Götter der Völker*, 17-58; GABER, *LingAeg* 16, 65-72.

[5] BACKES, *BSEG* 24, 5-9; BAINES, in MAGEE, BOURRIAU, QUIRKE (eds.), *Sitting beside Lepsius*, 1-22; ESPINEL, *JEA* 91, 55-70; LUISELLI, *Die Suche nach Gottesnähe*.

[6] ASSMANN, *Ägypten: Eine Sinngeschichte*, 259-77; ASSMANN, *Ma'at*, 252-60; ASSMANN, in *L'impero ramesside*, 17-43.

at least look as if they did not, thus downplay the novel character of personal piety.[7] I will return to this point later.

SOCIETY VERSUS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

M. Luiselli and L. Weiss have recently summarised the extant Egyptological research literature.[8] I will restrict my comments to a few additional observations, mainly on the conceptual framework of the debate.

The term first appears in Egyptology in pre-WW I literature. A. Erman uses the term for a discussion of New Kingdom prayers from the Theban necropolis whose individualistic tone, he says, has 'etwas für altorientalische Verhältnisse Modernes'.[9] His student J. H. Breasted describes Ramesside religious sentiment as personal piety, referring to Erman.[10] Neither Erman nor Breasted define the term, nor do they explain why they have chosen it among other possible options. H.-J. Greschat argues that 'piety' had a negative connotation in the 1910s, at least in Catholic German theology.[11] Whether Erman and Breasted understood the term in this way is doubtful. In a different context, Breasted, for example, speaks of the 'admirable piety' with which Seti I restored the monuments of his ancestors.[12] Here, the notion of piety comes closer to devotion and commitment rather than individual faith or simple sentimentality.

In 1916, B. Gunn published a short article entitled 'The religion of the poor in ancient Egypt'. Influenced perhaps by personal experience during WW I, he argues that 'the religion of the poor' focusses on help in situations of hardship. Personal piety would surface in the record only due to the higher writing skills of the Deir el-Medineh artisans in a period of 'loosening of many traditions'. He sympathises with personal piety against 'the power of a reactionary established church at the time of the later Ramessids' (p. 94). Gunn praises the 'Hebraic' humbleness speaking through Ramesside prayers as opposed to the 'Hellenic' self-complacency of Egyptian official religion. He admires the originality of Akhenaten's monotheism and speculates that personal piety was inspired by Syrian immigrants. Gunn's article foreshadows the direction of later discussions on several levels: the attempts at defining a relevant corpus of texts,

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[7] A good overview of different approaches and terminology is offered by LUISELLI, in WENDRICH (ed.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*.

[8] LUISELLI, *Suche nach Gottesnähe*; WEISS, in NEUNERT, GABLER, VERBOVSEK (eds.), *Sozialisationen*, 187-205; WEISS, *Religious practice*, 1-11.

[9] ERMAN, *Denksteine aus der thebanischen Gräberstadt*, 1087.

[10] BREASTED, *Development of Religion and Thought*, 344-70.

[11] GRESCHAT, in MÜLLER, KRAUSE (eds.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 11, 671-4.

[12] BREASTED, *History of Egypt*, 414.

the social dimension of display and the appreciation of personal piety as being entrenched in Judaeo-Christian experience.

A push towards assembling a core corpus came from the metric analysis of 'Literarische Zeugnisse der persönlichen Frömmigkeit' by G. Fecht.[13] Although Fecht dismisses the pretentious use of big words, his is the only book at the time using 'personal piety' in the title, so much did he feel it would help Egyptologists recognise the coherence of a corpus, which one might well subsume under alternative headings, such as model letters or simply Ramesside school texts, as Fecht does in the subtitle of the book. G. Posener published a series of ostraca with individual prayers,[14] perhaps school texts again,[15] dating to the pre-Amarna period.[16] The title of his article 'La piété personnelle avant l'âge amarnien' reflects the degree to which the Amarna period, and New Kingdom religious development more generally, is seen as pivotal for thinking about personal piety.

Personal piety has repeatedly been a topic in German Egyptology after WW II. In his 'Heraufkunft des transzendenten Gottes', S. Morenz shaped the questions that guided subsequent research, centred on the rise of monotheism and human-divine interaction.[17] Luiselli presents E. Otto's 'Gott und Mensch' as an ancestor of this tradition. Indeed, the title of his book, contemporaneously published with Morenz' popular book of the same title, embodies the direction of the German tradition.[18] Personal piety is interpreted here as expressing an intimate relationship between a benign god and a human individual. H. Brunner, again providing a list of relevant sources, introduces the term 'Gottesnähe' (closeness to god) in two articles published in the Lexikon der Ägyptologie.[19] In his phenomenological 'Theologie und Frömmigkeit', J. Assmann argues that temple cult, myth and prayer are the three major dimensions in which 'Gottenähe' was established in ancient Egypt.[20] He defines the Ramesside period as the peak of 'Gottesnähe' and break-through of a fourth dimension preparing the ground for Christian religion.[21]

Personal piety in the sense of Morenz, Otto, Brunner and Assmann ultimately aligns Egyptian religion with a teleological trajectory culminating in European Christianity. Their understanding of the term is rooted in German

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[13] FECHT, Literarische Zeugnisse zur 'Persönlichen Frömmigkeit'.
[14] POSENER, RdE 27, 195-210.
[15] BAINES, FROOD, in COLLIER, SNAPE (eds.), Ramesside Studies, 5-6.
[16] For another potential Eighteenth Dynasty example of personal piety, see KUCHAREK, GM 176, 77-80.
[17] MORENZ, Heraufkunft.
[18] OTTO, Gott und Mensch; MORENZ, Gott und Mensch im alten Ägypten.
[19] BRUNNER, in LÄ II, 817-9; BRUNNER, in LÄ IV, 951-63.
[20] ASSMANN, Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit.
[21] KOCH, in SCHIPPER (ed.), Ägyptologie als Wissenschaft, 130.

Protestantism,[22] more specifically protestant individualism.[23] Morenz, for example, argues that 'Gott wurde zur Festung des Menschen' in the New Kingdom.[24] The wording strongly alludes to the famous hymn 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott' composed by Martin Luther during the Reformation. Assmann describes Morenz as a protestant interested more in the nature of god than in ritual and practice.[25] Assmann defines the idea of Protestantism as an inner experience and source of individual responsibility, autonomy and resistance to ritual, tradition, the Church and the state.[26] Seen in this context, 'Gottesnähe' –and here I would disagree that the term has 'no particular connotations'[27]– does not simply describe an historical phenomenon, but is embedded in a semantic package that brings the individual in opposition to the state, temple religion and tradition. This might explain why Assmann sees personal piety as undermining political integration in the later New Kingdom and as the end of a traditional solidarity in Egypt based on reciprocity (Ma'at) now replaced by loyalty to a deity.[28]

Within a social approach to personal piety, religion is seen as a framework of human-human rather than human-divine interaction. It is today agreed that the Ramesside votive stelae, considered manifestations of the poor by Gunn, rather belong to better-off officials.[29] J. Baines has substantiated Gunn's observation that personal piety results from changes in decorum by which is meant the framework of what is socially felt appropriate for display in specific contexts.[30] He argues that the confines of decorum gradually broadened during the

[22] MOHN, in VERBOVSEK, BACKES, JONES (eds.), *Methodik und Didaktik*, 725-38.

[23] MAYER, *Evangelische Theologie* 24/5, 237-72; JUNGE, *GGA* 245/3-4, 154 calls Assmann's position one of a radical protestant. JOHANNSEN, in BECKER, BOLSCHO, LEHMANN (eds.), *Religion und Bildung*, 46 uses the term 'protestant individualism' to describe Assmann's position quoted below in n. 25.

[24] MORENZ, *Heraufkunft*, 39-40.

[25] ASSMANN, in SCHIPPER (ed.), *Ägyptologie als Wissenschaft*, 101.

[26] ASSMANN, in VON VIETINGHOFF (ed.), *Protestantismus im 21. Jahrhundert*, 39-64. The uplifting tone of the German wording is difficult to translate into English, so I quote here a longer passage taken from pages 39-40: "*Protestantismus in diesem allgemeineren Sinne möchte ich bestimmen als das Streben nach Vergeistigung und Verinnerlichung, als das Insistieren auf Unmittelbarkeit und Individualität. Vergeistigung protestiert gegen materielle Aufwendungen in Form von Riten und Ritualen, ästhetischen Inszenierungen, Prachtentfaltung und Opferbetrieb, Verinnerlichung protestiert gegen Werkgerechtigkeit, Gesetzesgehorsam, äußere Symbolik, Repräsentation, Hierarchie usw. Das Insistieren auf Unmittelbarkeit und, damit verbunden, auf Individualität im Sinne autonomer Entscheidung und persönlicher Verantwortung richtet sich gegen den Anspruch vermittelnder Instanzen wie Kirche und Staat, die Beziehung zwischen Mensch und Gott stellvertretend auf repräsentativ für alle zu organisieren und ihnen eine Form zu geben, in die sich der Einzelne vertrauensvoll einfügen soll. Es richtet sich auch gegen Kollektivierung und Konformitätsdruck, gegen die Unterwerfung der eignen Meinung und Entscheidung unter die communis opinio, die Tradition und öffentliche Meinung*".

[27] LUISELLI, in WENDRICH (ed.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*.

[28] ASSMANN, *Ägypten: Eine Sinngeschichte*, 311; ASSMANN, *Ma'at*, 252-60.

[29] EXELL, *Soldiers, sailors and sandalmakers*.

[30] BAINES, *JEA* 73, 79-98.

second millennium to include material rooted in the domain of oral traditions. The latter would encompass individual prayers as well as narrative literature and a certain range of funerary imagery. More recently, J. Baines and E. Frood have claimed that the sentiments underpinning Ramesside prayers existed long before iconographic models were introduced in the Amarna period facilitating their display.[31]

D. Kessler and his students F. Adrom and E.-E. Morgan call for a stronger consideration of the institutionalised nature of personal piety.[32] Rightly, I believe, they argue that personal piety is neither the breakthrough of individual religiosity, nor does it undermine the state. L. Weiss embeds religious practice at Deir el-Medineh in a theoretically informed model based on Bourdieu's concept of practice and habitus.[33] The focus of these approaches on temple cult and practice is core to the archaeological argument below, but the synchronic design of their discussion helps less with explaining the origin of personal piety, which is the aim of this paper.

ORIGINS OF PERSONAL PIETY

There are a number of explanations for the origins of personal piety ranging from psychological to historical models. The following review focuses only on the problematic aspects of the arguments to show what might be gained from the archaeological discussion.

M. Becker assumes that personal piety was a response to personal crisis.[34] However, one would assume that people had personal crises also prior to the New Kingdom. The psychological model alone, although relevant for exploring individual experience, suffers from a lack of historical context.

S. Bickel and S. Quirke draw on the specific political situation of the New Kingdom. Both derive their argument from the observation that the majority of relevant texts stem from Deir el-Medineh and were addressed to Amun. Bickel suggests that the rise of Amun during the New Kingdom accounts for the emergence of personal piety.[35] Quirke proposes that the physical absence of the king from Thebes in the Ramesside period prompted the Thebans to turn to their local gods for help rather than to the king.[36] Bickel and Quirke offer an

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[31] BAINES, FROOD, in COLLIER, SNAPE (eds.), *Ramesside Studies*, 7.

[32] KESSLER, *SAK* 25, 161-88; KESSLER, *SAK* 27, 173-221; ADROM, *SAK* 33, 1-28; MORGAN, *SAK* 34, 333-52.

[33] WEISS, in NEUNERT, GABLER, VERBOVSEK (eds.), *Sozialisationen*; WEISS, L., *Religious practice*, 11-9.

[34] BECKER, in FRIESE *et al.* (eds.), *Persönliche Frömmigkeit*, 63-74.

[35] BICKEL, *BIFAO* 102, 66.

[36] QUIRKE, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, 138.

explanation of why personal piety 'happened' at Thebes, but not why the phenomenon emerged at all. One could argue, for example, that the king was absent from many Old Kingdom towns, too, and that Ra has been the dominating god in this period without personal piety arising.

Assmann and Baines develop their argument from a long-term perspective closer to the approach of this paper. Assmann suggests that the Amarna period has fostered the loss of confidence in kingship, loyalty to which would dominate the rhetoric of officials in the Middle Kingdom.[37] However, although elite self-presentation does shift towards religious phraseology in the Ramesside period, the kings of this period were still successful warlords, and kingship remained the core of the core elite and a source of distinction among high officials.

Baines sees the change of decorum as a relevant motor for personal piety to be able to surface in the record. However, decorum describes changes of patterns in the evidence in the first place rather than explaining them, as has already been remarked by Baines.[38] It also implies that religious behaviour and belief has not changed over time, only the way in which it is articulated. Yet, if religion had remained static, there would not have been a need for society to change the way it communicated it.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

Archaeological approaches to Egyptian religion take a stronger interest in practices, spaces and people than in belief systems. Most studies concentrate on the New Kingdom, the period usually referred to in discussions of 'the Egyptian temple'. They include discussions of the Theban cultic landscape,[39] domestic religious practice,[40] and votive practices in temples and local shrines.[41]

Kemp has offered a broader diachronic outline of the institutional setting of Egyptian religion, based on the archaeological evidence.[42] He shows that local shrines, originally community initiatives, were increasingly patronised by kingship and later became the administrative pillars of Egyptian economy. The discussion below develops this argument into two directions, one focusing on the repercussions of temple development for local communities, the other on questions of geography and scale.

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[37] ASSMANN, in L'impero ramesside, 17-43.

[38] BAINES, in GUNDLACH, RAEDLER, Selbstverständnis und Realität, 154-5.

[39] SADEK, Popular Religion in Egypt.

[40] STEVENS, Private Religion at Amarna; LESKO, in BODEL, OLYAN (eds.), Household and Family Religion in Antiquity, 197-209.

[41] PINCH, Votive Offerings to Hathor; WARAKSA, Female Figurines; MORGAN, Untersuchungen zu den Ohrenstelen; DuQUESNE, The Salakhana Trove.

[42] KEMP, CAJ 5/1, 25-54; KEMP, Anatomy of a Civilization, 111-35.

Socially speaking, temple development is a history of exclusion. When king-ship penetrated into local temples, the local population was gradually pushed out towards the periphery of whatever happened behind closed doors within the temples. The spatial distribution of votive offerings is a good archaeological indicator of this process. In Third millennium shrines, such as at Elephantine, Tell Ibrahim Awad and Tell el-Farkha, votive figurines were found embedded in temple walls, spread within the layers of the forecourt, carefully deposited in small cachettes and vases in or near the temple building and placed under corners and pivot stones, where they served as local foundation deposits.[43] In contrast, in the New Kingdom, votive objects were deposited outside the enclo-sure walls of large temples. Although the votive objects were usually found in secondary archaeological contexts, models of temple walls with ears depicted on their outside (Fig. 1) are a good indicator of their primary deposition.[44]

Fig. 1 – Ear stela in form of a temple enclosure wall, purchased by Petrie, h: 17.7cm. UC 14543. Courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

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[43] BUSSMANN, *Provinztempel Ägyptens*.
[44] PINCH, *Votive offerings to Hathor*, 248-53 with broader discussion on pages 323-60.

Counter-temples, erected by the state along the outside walls of larger temples for popular worship, speak a similar language.[45] They satisfy the religious needs of the locals who –and this is the actual *raison d'être* of the counter temples– were excluded from temple cult. Typical of central regimes, the Egyptian state of the New Kingdom deprived people of a certain right, here: of access to the temples, monopolised it and then resold it either for cash or as a carefully controlled generosity. Royal support of common religious practice should, therefore, not be conflated with an appreciation of popular needs. Rather, the building of counter-temples would have been unnecessary, had the state not restricted access to the temples.

Not surprisingly, temple processions started flourishing during the New Kingdom.[46] Now that people had less access to their temples, festivals outside the temple building became ever more important for people to interact with the divine world. There is good evidence of locally organised processions already in the Third millennium, for example at Elephantine and El Kab.[47] What differs in the New Kingdom is the social setting. New Kingdom processions, those we know from inscriptions, are controlled by central elites and provided an arena for social display of high-ranking officials. Scope and scale of processions have changed from local to superregional events, in which the role of locals has declined to mere supernumeraries.

How accessible then were the temples of the Third millennium? That textual evidence of this period is lacking for an answer might already show that accessibility was not 'an issue', although it might also be due to a lack of literary genres that would allow relevant thoughts to surface. Within the archaeological record, one could debate whether doors and enclosure walls functioned as markers of control. However, they alone do not say much. Enclosure walls may be massive constructions, but still be open to whoever wanted in. Equally, for whom a door opens is not a question of archaeology, but of social agreement. For this reason, it will be difficult ever to know in absolute terms who exactly entered which parts of the shrines and who had to stay out.

The number of votive figurines offered per year in the temples of Elephantine and Tell Ibrahim Awad is extremely low if the excavated record represents the total, or almost so, of a period of one thousand years.[48] Offering a votive figurine may well have been a practice restricted to the upper echelons of village and town communities, the eldest and least poor, whereas those who did

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[45] GUGLIELMI, in GUNDLACH, ROCHHOLZ (eds.), *Ägyptische Tempel*, 55-68.

[46] ASSMANN, in ASSMANN, SUNDERMEIER (eds.), *Das Fest und das Heilige*, 105-22; KUCHAREK, in MYLONOPOULOS, ROEDER (eds.), *Archäologie und Ritual*, 53-64.

[47] SEIDLMAYER, *AA* 2006/1, 223-35; VANDEKERCKHOVE, MÜLLER-WOLLERMANN, *Die Felsinschriften des Wadi Hilâl*.

[48] BUSSMANN, *Provinztempel*, 343-51. Add VAN HAARLEM, *Temple Deposits at Tell Ibrahim Awad*.

not generate financial surplus used simple natural pebbles instead. In other words, already by this time, the mechanisms of control and display were in place. Votive practice, temple cult and processions were a context for acting out rank and other social roles already in the Third millennium, yet on a local scale.

Scale is key to understand the difference between Third millennium shrines and later temples. In comparison to New Kingdom state-run temples, standard Third millennium shrines are small, made of mud brick, show no or a weak connection to kingship, do not feature prominently in royal sources, lack big enclosure walls and are crowded with votive figurines. Due to local diversity and different micro-histories,[49] each of these observations can be contested in individual cases and may not fully confirm the relative accessibility of local shrines in this period. However, the overall transformation of temple religion from the Old to the New Kingdom is undisputable. The enormous size of many New Kingdom temples, huge enclosure walls, the deliberately built counter-temples, the vesting of temple cult with royal theology and the location of popular interaction with the deities outside the temple building proper reveal a striking change towards exclusion of local communities.

Scale also applies to an appreciation of the geographical distribution pattern of sources for personal piety. According to Luiselli, the evidence dating to before the New Kingdom comes from biographical inscriptions of a few First Intermediate Period nomarchs, late Middle Kingdom letters from Lahun and stelae set up in or near the temples of Abydos and Karnak, two important inter-regional sanctuaries already by this time.[50] The distribution of the New Kingdom evidence is far more blatant. Apart from a few texts scattered throughout the country, the evidence clusters overwhelmingly around Thebes, to an extent that one could call personal piety almost a Theban exception.

Seen in isolation, the sources of personal piety simply follow the distribution patterns of major written sources of their time and the geographical bias could be argued to result from the lack of preservation of similar written corpora at other sites. Writing is probably overrepresented in the community of Deir el-Medineh. Disproportionately often, the workmen may have captured ideas in writing that circulated in oral form and were practiced elsewhere. These arguments are relevant, but not new.

Alternatively, one can take the distribution of sources in time and space seriously and test it against some expectations. One could argue, for example, that the Lahun papyri and Middle Kingdom stelae are the same type of media used for communicating personal piety in Deir el-Medineh, but there are only a few references to personal piety in them. There are also abundant sources of New

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[49] BUSSMANN, in RAUE, SEIDLMAYER, SPEISER (eds.), *The First Cataract of the Nile*, 21-34.
[50] LUISELLI, *Die Suche nach Gottesnähe*, 144-9.

Kingdom private inscriptions outside Thebes, but few that one would subsume under personal piety.

Thebes is not only home of the most literate community of the New Kingdom, but also of the grandest temple. Nowhere was access to the temple god as closely monitored as here, nowhere were temple festivals more famous, nowhere temple staff more numerous and hierarchically organised.[51] Socially, the encounter with the divine in the form of a statue, particularly of Amun and Ptah, perhaps also other Theban deities, such as Khonsu,[52] was 'an issue'. It meant participation in an exclusive world. By this time, and especially at Thebes, access to the local gods had long become controversial. Letters, prayers, biographies and stelae, *i.e.* the type of sources most typical of personal piety, do not simply describe reality, even if ancient agents may claim that this was exactly what they were doing. Rather, as argued further below, they articulate what is desirable, problematic and difficult to get, namely the close relationship of the 'author' with the gods. If access to the divine had been self-evident and temple business less exclusive, people would not have felt the need, or perhaps the relevance, to invest resources in stating their close relationship to the gods.

The case of Thebes raises the question of ubiquity and local differences. In fact, not all temples were as exclusive as those of Thebes. The Eighteenth Dynasty shrine at Mirgissa is different.[53] Hathor was worshiped in a subsidiary chapel attached to the main stone-lined sanctuary dedicated to the deified Senwosret III. The humble setting of the architecture and finds conveys a message similar to Elephantine in the Third millennium. Gebel Zeit is a slightly earlier example of a shrine that lacks royal patronage altogether.[54] Other New Kingdom temples, such as at Badari, are built of mud bricks and stone. Socially, they resemble most Middle Kingdom temples which were integrated with central administration but operated under the auspices of local elites.[55] The comparison reveals the different local settings of temples in the New Kingdom. The evidence of personal piety concentrates on Ramesside Thebes not simply because the community at Deir el-Medineh was exceptionally literate, but because of their exclusion from and the prestige of the god Amun.

[51] EICHLER, *Die Verwaltung des 'Hauses des Amun'*; HARING, in FITZENREITER (ed.), *Das Heilige und die Ware*, 165-70.

[52] JACQUET-GORDON, *The Temple of Khonsu*.

[53] KARLIN, in VERCOUTTER (ed.), *Mirgissa*, vol. I, 307-62 ; PINCH, *Votive Offerings to Hathor*, 41-48; KEMP, *CAJ* 5/1, 27-9.

[54] PINCH, *Votive offerings to Hathor*, 71-7.

[55] KEMP, *CAJ* 5/1, 38-46; WILLEMS, *Les textes des sarcophages et la démocratie*, 5-65.

MATERIALISING EXCLUSION

Personal piety, or 'Gottesbeherzigung', is traditionally seen as expressing a particularly close relationship of individuals with their personal deity. To quote two famous examples, Za-Mut-Kiki bequeaths the goddess Mut, a deity he himself has chosen to worship, his entire property, and Neferabu (BM EA 589) 'who has placed Amun in his heart' warns others to swear falsely to Ptah because Ptah penalised him with blindness for this offence. This rhetoric is alien to biographies of the Old and, with a few exceptions perhaps, the Middle Kingdom, both taking greater interest in modelling the relationship of the 'author' with the distant king.

I have proposed above that personal piety does not show closeness to, but rather the separation from the gods. It materialises the compensation for the loss of access to the divine. The gods of the Old Kingdom –more precisely the local gods, not those surrounding royal ideology[56]– are not distant. They were approachable and their shrines visible, not hidden behind large enclosure walls. Hierarchies were in place locally, but religious community life was not yet patronised by central elites. The scene had changed dramatically by the time of Za-Mut-Kiki and Neferabu, particularly at Thebes. Communion with the gods was now far more controlled and mediated by representatives of central government.

M. Fitzenreiter also interprets personal piety as a result of the loss of access to the divine previously negotiated within local communities.[57] According to Fitzenreiter, personal piety is restricted to a few individuals and ultimately peripheral to Egyptian religion. His position is overall in line with the model proposed here, but his understanding of social exclusion differs. Fitzenreiter sees personal piety as a socially exclusive outlier of Egyptian religion, an elite anomaly, whereas in the discussion above social exclusion refers to the long-term process of decreasing accessibility to temple cult.

On the level of theory, my argument rests on the assumption that changes in communication, visual, written or other, do not mirror the self-evident but respond to something that the participants of a communication feel has become exciting, problematic or in need of comment. The anthropologist of art H. Belting argues that human societies represent the dead as a compensation of loss.[58] He quotes the painter P. Klee who claimed that art was not an imitation of reality but would represent something that did not exist.[59] Similarly, manifestations of personal piety in Egypt objectify loss and the non-existent, namely intimacy with the divine.

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[56] SEIDLMAYER, in SPENCER (ed.), *Aspects of early Egypt*, 115-9.
[57] FITZENREITER, *GM* 202, 47.
[58] BELTING, *Bild-Anthropologie*, 143-88.
[59] *Op. cit.*, 28.

The argument as such is not new in Egyptology and has been developed in other thematic contexts. S. Seidlmayer argues, for example, that the outer, visible walls of New Kingdom temples were used for the display of royal coronation and battle scenes because these themes were contested in this specific historical period, different from temple ritual depicted in the inner parts of the temple.[60] Similarly, the rise of a literary discourse in the Middle Kingdom has been interpreted as a response to the loss of trust in the gods, of justice or of social order during the 'chaotic' First Intermediate Period.[61] Here, however, the argument is based on the absence of earlier evidence.[62] The lack of a correspondent corpus has led to the assumption that the Old Kingdom was a harmonious and well-integrated Golden Age. However, the integration of the political core with its social hinterland was weak until late in the Third millennium, and the explanation of certain values and themes in writing became more relevant only, when the core elite touched base more widely with the rest of society.[63]

The situation is different for temple cult. There is rich evidence for a history of temple cult predating written evidence of the Middle and New Kingdoms. Layer by layer, the stratigraphy of temples such as at Elephantine, Tell Ibrahim Awad, Medamud, Abydos and Hierakonpolis, tell the story of successive monumentalisation and exclusion of the local populace, starting in the late Fourth millennium BC. At Thebes, the centre of personal piety, the architecture of the temple building dates back only into the Middle Kingdom, perhaps a bit earlier, but there is no reason to believe that the pattern differed here from elsewhere.[64]

Social exclusion from temple cult certainly is not the only reason for the emergence of personal piety in the New Kingdom. One could argue, for example, that the monumental sun temples of the Fifth Dynasty should have prompted similar responses to exclusion as New Kingdom temples did. However, the phraseology of personal piety is rooted in elite self-representation of the Middle Kingdom.[65] Thus, the development of genre matters, as do the political and theological circumstances of the New Kingdom. But when paired with thoughts on social exclusion, existing arguments about personal piety align better and, I believe, can be developed in a more consistent framework of long-term social change.

The explanations proposed by Bickel and Quirke are still relevant, when the direction of their argument is slightly changed. Personal piety at Thebes is due to the rise of Amun in the sense that he is further and further separated from

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[60] SEIDLMAYER, in SEIDLMAYER, PETERS (eds.), *Mediengesellschaft Antike*, 102.

[61] OTTO, *Der Vorwurf an Gott*; LOPRIENO, in GNIRS (ed.), *Reading the Eloquent Peasant*, 183-98; ASSMANN, *Ma'at*, 54-7.

[62] GNIRS, in LOPRIENO (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 191-241.

[63] BUSSMANN, *AI* 17, 79-93.

[64] BUSSMANN, *Provinztempel*, 69-73; HIRSCH, *Kultpolitik und Tempelbauprogramme*.

[65] ASSMANN, *Ma'at*, 252-60; ASSMANN, *Ägypten: Eine Sinngeschichte*, 267-77.

people, thus more and more difficult to access. With the help of stelae, letters, and biographies, people start bridging the gap that has opened between them and Amun and other deities. It is a reaction to absence, as Quirke claims, namely absence of deities from the sphere of what people may have understood is within their private reach.

Personal piety is not the only corollary of exclusion, and it is important to see it, if tentatively, in the context of other developments. One is the scarcity of remains of domestic religion in the Old Kingdom. It contrasts with the relative abundance of ancestor busts, mud figurines, amulets and related objects found in settlements of the New Kingdom, particularly the Ramesside period.[66] The chronological difference may be a question of preservation and archaeological recording techniques rather than indicating historical change. Alternatively, if the preserved pattern is representative of changing distribution patterns, exclusion from the temple may account for an increase or shift of small-scale religious practices towards the domestic sphere, a trend visible perhaps already in the pyramid towns of the Middle Kingdom.[67]

Similarly, the private chapels of Deir el-Medineh, Amarna and Deir el-Ballas can be interpreted as materialising the need for a new spiritual environment, previously satisfied in a temple context.[68] They probably served banquets commemorating household ancestors, and I do not suggest that they served a form of private temple cult. However, exclusion from temple cult may have prompted a differentiation of religious practices, increasingly articulated at household level, including in the private chapels of the richer inhabitants. The remote location of Deir el-Medineh and the workmen settlement of Amarna, coupled with the lack of space within them, might have contributed to the specific form this development took at these sites.[69]

Be this as it may, the private chapels bring the discussion back to the relevance of the Amarna period for personal piety. For both Assmann and Baines, Amarna religion was a prime mover towards personal piety, either because it fostered the loss of confidence in kingship or because it prompted the creation of new models for display. A third explanation arises from the history of exclusion. Atenism, the new visual language of Akhenaten, is the peak of exclusion. The distribution of Aten iconography within the community of Amarna is fairly consistently, although not mechanically, linked to rank.[70] Standing architecture, such as rock tombs, garden chapels, altars and door framings of houses speak a clear language in this respect, whereas the bedrock of religious practice is not

[66] GIDDY, *The survey of Memphis,* vol. II, 13-52; STEVENS, *Private religion*; KEITH, *Anthropoid Busts*.
[67] SZPAKOWSKA, *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt,* 122-49.
[68] BOMANN, *The Private Chapel in Ancient Egypt.*
[69] WEATHERHEAD, KEMP, *The Main Chapel at the Amarna Workmen's Village,* 407-10.
[70] Critically discussed by STEVENS, *Private Religion,* 306-11.

affected. The private chapels of the workmen village and the more recently found coffins in the cemetery of the ordinary population at Amarna do not include Aten iconography, although these are object types that one could expect to be decorated accordingly.[71] To put it bluntly, Akhenaten did not care about developing a culture for the masses. He produced for an elitist circle and had no interest in religion beyond the confines of the cult-and-court context. How and to what extent people started appropriating Atenism and integrating it with existing practice and belief is, of course, a different matter, but none that the makers of Atenism had built into their ideology.

Whether or not Akhenaten's courtiers liked the agenda of Atenism, which socially degraded almost everyone outside the royal family to a biological organism, is difficult to say, but they certainly enjoyed the privilege of surrounding themselves with the exclusive royal iconography. The Amarna period was a true catalyst of personal piety, not because people were forced into an inner exile, but because of the highly exclusive nature of Amarna theology. The latter has a long prehistory, not only on the level of modelling the role of the sun god, but also in view of a constantly growing exclusion of people from access to the gods.

CONCLUSION

The approach to personal piety adopted above was originally inspired by an analysis of votive figurines found in Third millennium provincial shrines.[72] People and deities enjoyed a fairly intimate 'company of images' in this period, to resume the title of the conference in London. In the Second millennium, the range of votive images remains rather similar, as does the activity as such of offering votive objects. What has changed dramatically, at least in major state-run temples, is the company. In the New Kingdom, votive objects were deposited outside temple walls. This is where a climate emerged in which people sought new ways of connecting to the gods in speech and visual display, and this is also the context of personal piety in Egypt.

Traditional models of personal piety are based on texts and images in the first place. They depart from the break that the Amarna period seems to demarcate in the history of human-divine interaction in ancient Egypt. Ramesside Egypt is presented as a collective response to the shock of Amarna and interpreted as a pious era, in which people imagined themselves standing before their god individually without kings or priests mediating. It is further argued

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[71] KEMP, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, 254-63; KEMP *et al.*, *Antiquity* 87/335, 64-78.
[72] BUSSMANN, *Provinztempel*.

that personal piety alienated people from temple religion and kingship, which ultimately fostered the break-down of the state at the end of the New Kingdom.

This paper suggests that long-term social change, institutional history and considerations of scale provide an alternative baseline for a discussion of personal piety. The archaeological response goes beyond accumulating material evidence of religious practice. Rather, it embeds a new form of visual and written communication in broader transformations from the Third to the Second millennium. The core argument is underpinned by the assumption that communication, written, visual or material, does not describe reality, but responds to something contested or controversial.

Personal piety is a result of the gradual exclusion of people from access to the temples. This long-term process originates in the Third millennium and accelerates in the Second. The Amarna period sits squarely in this development. It is not the root, but a catalyst of personal piety, a symptom of it more than its cause.

Exclusion from temple cult is to be understood in relative terms. Already in the Third millennium, some people might have had better access to religious knowledge and privileges than others. Similarly, in Ramesside Egypt, people were not generally excluded from temple cult. However, socially and theologically control of the divine was tied to central authority in Ramesside temples. The major difference between the Old Kingdom and Ramesside Egypt, therefore, is the scale and the quality of exclusion. The further the gods were removed from common experience and the more access to the temples was monitored by the state, the more desirable intimacy with the gods became and the more people felt a need to comment on it. Personal piety does not reflect intimacy with the gods, or 'Gottesnähe', but the loss of this intimacy.

Different from religious practice, which is a ubiquitous feature in the archaeology of New Kingdom Egypt, 'Gottesbeherzigung' is a jargon employed predominantly at Deir el-Medineh. The high-ranking craftsmen of this community used the formula *dd NN m jb=f* and related phrases to model their relationship with Amun, Ptah and a few other Theban gods whose cult was controlled by central authority. The localised nature of the formula suggests that personal piety happened where exclusion from temple cult was most extreme and where intimacy with the gods was most difficult to get, at Thebes.

Archaeologists and historians can say little about the feelings of somebody who has placed Amun in his heart'. Perhaps similar sentiments existed in earlier periods and at places other than Deir el-Medineh. But this is not the point. What matters is that (some) people suddenly started to showcase their piety. If their closeness to the gods was so self-evident there would be no reason for them to be explicit about it. Personal piety objectifies a problem that in previous periods did not exist to the same degree, namely participation of local communities in temple cult. This affected specifically the upper echelons of these communities who were deprived of their rights to control cultic activities and who had the

means to express themselves in images and writing. Whereas the sources suggest that people moved closer to the gods, the contrary was the case.

Finally, as Baines and Assmann have amply demonstrated, personal piety is embedded in the changing templates of elite self-presentation. During the Third and Second millennia, these shift more and more towards religious models for the same reasons that personal piety emerged, *i.e.* because access to the gods has become problematic, desirable and hence prestigious. One might wish to celebrate personal piety as the birth of the 'individual' in a global history of religion, but the terminology demands a deeper inquiry into its theoretical foundations.[73] 'Individual' implies 'society', and the terms easily construct a conflict between the two. However, this is a misleading framework for discussing Ramesside religion. Personal piety, socially and geographically a restricted phenomenon, did not undermine social institutions. Kingship and temple religion continued existing for another millennium in Egypt.

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[73] INGOLD *et al.*, in INGOLD (ed.), *Key debates*, esp. 60-6.

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