

Article

Osirian *Materia Sacra*: A Glance from Corn-Mummies

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Abstract: Corn mummies, i.e., miniature pseudo-mummies, made of a mixture of sand and cereal grains, with Osirian iconography, can provide a useful perspective from which to look at the complex nature of Osiris and his cult. Despite having been a well-researched subject at least since the 1980s, they still deserve attention. This study re-examines the known contexts, anticipates the dating of the earliest known artefacts, and analyses their relationship with other categories of related objects, such as the so-called “Osiris beds” and “Osiris bricks”. Although all these artefacts are linked to the rites of Khoiak and share a common conceptual background, the author proposes to distinguish between a cultic tradition and a funerary one. Corn mummies fit into the former strand, as images of the dead god embalmed, prefiguring his rebirth through the sprouting grain. Their main meaning seems to be related to the idea of the rebirth of nature and vegetation rather than to the hope in resurrection. In contrast, “Osiris beds” were aimed to revive an *individualized* Osiris, i.e., the deceased.

Keywords: Egyptian religion; Osiris; corn-mummies; sprouted grain; Khoiak rites; Osiris beds; Osiris bricks

1. Introduction

In his impressive bird’s eye survey of Osiris concepts and worship over four millennia, Mark Smith recalls how elusive and intangible such an object of enquiry is (Smith 2017).¹ Too many threads weave together into the figure of the god, even in its earliest certain evidence; many others are merely some Egyptologist’s backward projection of much later concepts. An original form is as yet impossible to bring into focus god of the dead, ancient god of agriculture and vegetation, and prototype of the dead king are just a few of the main theories that have informed the debate in the history of Osirian studies. To complicate matters, these aspects are already intertwined in Egyptian thought—and since ancient times—so that it is still impossible to judge whether and which constitutes the original element.

The predominant philological approach that until around the 1970s characterised our understanding of ancient Egypt does not help; an impressive number of texts—funerary inscriptions, Books of the Dead, rituals on papyrus scrolls or on the walls of temples and tombs—weighs indeed like a heavy burden on our view and keeps in the shade the matter that substantiated those cults, especially the non-funerary aspects. The awareness acquired by Egyptologists over the last fifty years of this limitation, as well as of the elitist nature of the circles in which such texts were produced and circulated, has led to the integration of textual data with archaeological sources as far as possible.

Artefacts such as the so-called corn-mummies (*Osiris végétants*, *Kornmumien*, *Pseudo-mummies*)² appear to be a particularly suitable object of investigation to provide a useful and different perspective from which to look at the complex nature of Osiris and his cult information on this class of objects come from different sources, both textual and archaeological, including the importance of landscape and environment in the context of the find, and, despite having been a well-researched subject at least since the 1980s (notably Raven 1982; Centrone 2009), some points still deserve attention and can be looked at with new eyes.



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Corn-mummies are miniature pseudo-mummies, about 35–50 cm long, made of a mixture of sand (or earth or clay, sometimes mixed together) and cereal grains, mostly barley, more rarely emmer or both (Rey-Bellet 2017, 2019; Fritz 2006; Picchi 2007, 2009; Kłosowska 1997; Wasylikowa and Jankun 1997). They were shaped in anthropoid mummy-form moulds and then wrapped in linen bandages. Other elements usually were added to the shaped figurine, such as hands, divine beards, royal insignia in wax or metals. Judging from the evidence in museums and the cases whose archaeological context is known and was described by their discoverers, corn-mummies were often—though not always—laid in miniature coffins, mostly falcon-headed, a clear reference to Sokar, who was closely related to Osiris (Figures 1a,b and 2).

They were very widely distributed in ancient Egypt, although details of the provenance known archaeologically or deducible from inscriptions are scant: Meidum (Centrone 2009, pp. 36–41); Fayum (Fritz 2006); Oxyrhynchos (Mascort 2018); El-Sheikh Fadl (in front of the latter on the opposite bank of the Nile, probably near ancient Cynopolis: Centrone 2009, pp. 42–46); Tehne (Centrone 2009, pp. 8–35), the area of Tuna el-Gebel (Centrone 2009, pp. 46–57); and Wady Qurud on the west bank at Thebes (Centrone 2009, pp. 81–91). Stratigraphic evidence is lacking even for these sites, so the dating of corn-mummies is attributed on solely stylistic and epigraphic grounds, mostly to the Late and Ptolemaic Period, with few specimens tentatively dated to the Third Intermediate Period (Centrone 2009, nos. 1, 3, 9, 63).

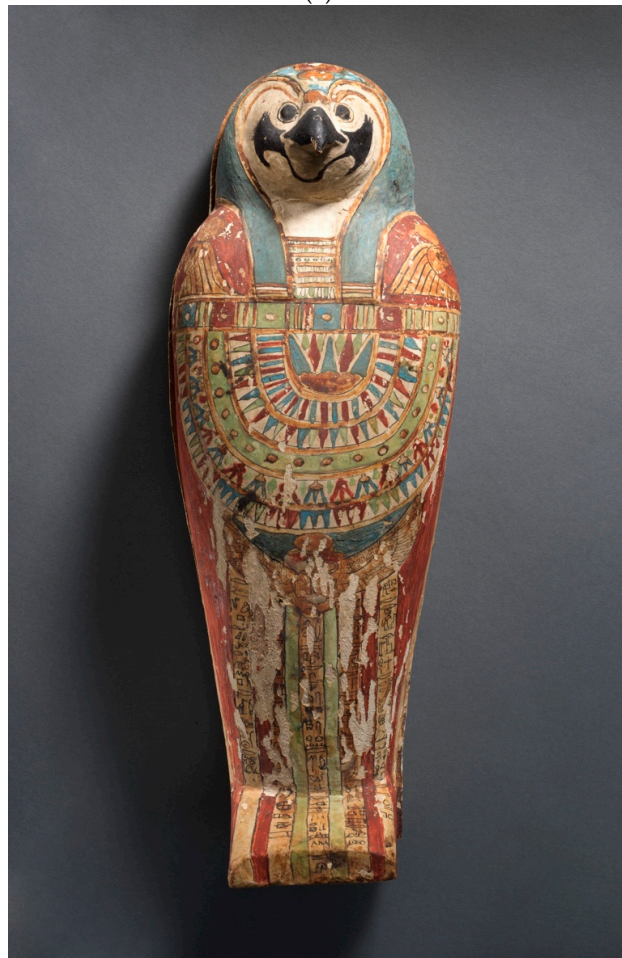
The history of their studies, summarised by Maarten Raven in his magisterial study of 1982 (Raven 1982), shows that there was often considerable misunderstanding about the nature of such artefacts, especially when they began to attract attention. However, the iconography, ornaments and insignia leave no doubt as to the Osirian identity of these figurines. Moreover, the texts, when available, explicitly mention the god Osiris or Sokar-Osiris and in some cases Osiris with Ra-Harachtî (Centrone 2009, pp. 98–107, 110–12). An important turning point for the interpretation of such texts was the recognition in the early twentieth century (Murray 1904, pp. 28–29; Wiedemann 1903, pp. 111–23) of a connection between them and the texts of the so-called Mysteries of Osiris in the chapels on the roof of the temple of Dendera (Porter and Moss [1939] 1991, VI, 97 nos. 47–48, 46, 49–52; Cauville 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d; Chassinat 1966–1968). These texts describe an annual ritual performed during the month of Khoiak in honour of Osiris, prescribing the fabrication of a corn-mummy, its watering up to germination and, finally, its burial. Once again, however, this extraordinary text attracted all the scholars' attention at the expense of its less conspicuous archaeological counterparts.

It was necessary to wait for Maarten Raven's important study to relocate corn-mummies within the framework of Osirian theology and the symbolism of sprouting corn (Raven 1982).

In 2009, the book by Maria Costanza Centrone provided the first systematic catalogue and study of the specimens known up to that time (Centrone 2009). The ninety-one corn-mummies she published according to their provenance, with descriptions of their archaeological background (where known) or data about their acquisition, explained why, although many museums and collections around the world have specimens of corn-mummies, the archaeological context of just a few of them is known. Centrone's study broadened the possible hypotheses on the provenance and dating of the known figurines and their coffins by comparing the known data with an analysis of their iconographic and stylistic features. A few other specimens were published in further studies (Fritz 2006; Picchi 2007, 2009; Rey-Bellet 2017; Novoa 2018; Enany 2018; Erroux-Morfin 2020; Abdelrahman and Eissa 2022).



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. Above (a): falcon-headed coffin with corn-mummy. Below (b): lid of the coffin. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2018.628a–c. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

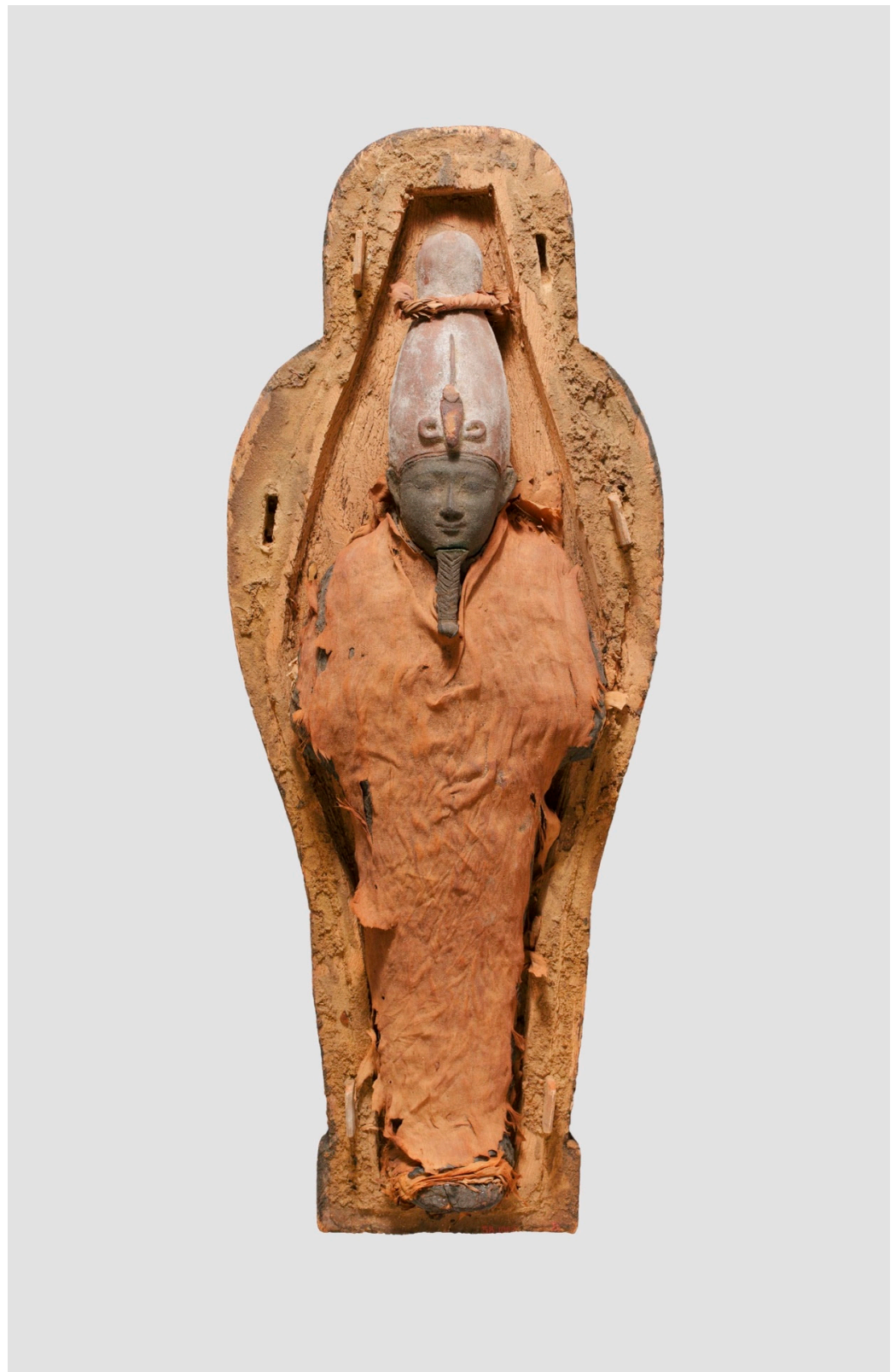


Figure 2. Corn-mummy inside the coffin, with Osiris crown and wax mask. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 58.106. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

2. Corn-Mummies as Cultic Objects

Some important points must be emphasized for the understanding of these artefacts and their meaning. The first significant piece of information is that they are not funerary

but cultic objects,³ produced and used as part of cult and ritual acts for the god Osiris. Most studies on corn-mummies place these artefacts within the religious funerary sphere, without adequately considering the following data:

- a. They lack inscriptions in favour of a deceased beneficiary; when the inscriptions name the recipient of the act of worship, it is always and only the god, Osiris or Sokar-Osiris, in some cases Ra (Centrone 2009, pp. 98–107).⁴
- b. Turning to archaeological information, none of the corn-mummy specimens whose context is known come from private human burials. Most archaeological evidence points to pits exclusively reserved for the burial of a corn-mummy. In many cases, their origin is unknown, in some cases data are ambiguous, but in no case is there a definite record of corn-mummies associated with human burials. The term “tomb”, often used for describing corn-mummy burials, is undoubtedly a source of confusion. In almost all of the cases in which diggers provided a report or a description, it refers to pits exclusively reserved for the mimic burial of a corn-mummy, its sarcophagus and/or coffin if available and, sometimes, other relevant objects. Below I have given a list of the known contexts (Figure 3).

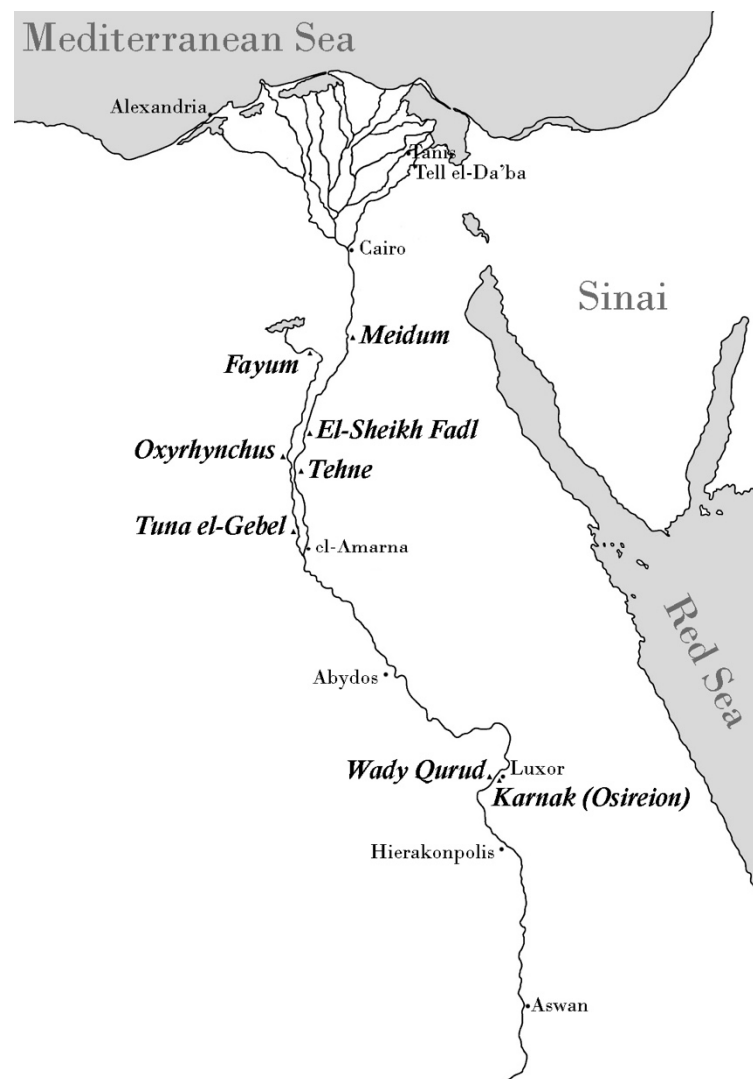


Figure 3. Map with the names of the sites with necropolises of corn-mummies (in bold, with a triangle, those cited in the article).

2.1. El-Sheikh Fadl

At El-Sheikh Fadl, Grenfell and Hunt discovered numerous burials of corn mummies during a survey of the necropolis of Cynopolis. The site was occupied in the northern part by tombs of the late New Kingdom, in the central portion by “a long row of large dog-mummy tombs”, which had been plundered some twenty-five years before, and, in the southern part, by Early Ptolemaic tombs and rows of rock tombs they judged to be probably of the Persian Period. According to their description, in the southern portion “round the west side of the high flat-topped hill at the extreme south-east corner of the range [of the rock-tombs mentioned above] were numerous burials of Osiris figures. These were made of grain wrapped in cloth and roughly shaped like an Osiris, placed inside a bricked-up recess at the side of the tomb, sometimes in small pottery coffins, sometimes in wooden coffins in the form of a hawk-mummy, sometimes without any coffins at all” (Grenfell and Hunt 1903). Marcelle Werbrouk explored the site in 1924, finding a more disturbed situation. It is unclear whether she worked in the same area as the one described by Grenfell and Hunt. She reported that her workers found small cavities in which sarcophagi with “momies d’Osiris” and mummified dogs were “presque mêlées” (Werbrouk 1925, p. 34). Finally, the more recent archaeological investigations of the University of Vienne *Middle Egypt Project*, directed by Ch. Köhler, found a heavily plundered large cemetery of Graeco-Roman age on the site, where small individual niches in the rock might originally house individual dog burials but, most of the time, the canid bones they discovered were mixed with human bones and bones of other animals (Rouvière 2017, p. 125).

2.2. Oxyrhynchos

In recent years, archaeological investigations by the Spanish–Egyptian mission at Oxyrhynchos brought to light the Osireion, the subterranean temple dedicated to Osiris and its catacombs (Mascort 2018). The latter contained a series of niches into the walls for the burial of the Osiris statuettes moulded each year during the Khoiak rites. The galleries had been pillaged before the Spanish–Egyptian research, but the archaeologists managed to find a complete statuette still laying in its niche, described as “moulée, faite d’un limon mélangé à du bitumen et des grains d’orges, et roulée dans de bandelettes de lin fin” (Amer 2010, p. 271). Many other deteriorated corn-mummies found on the site had different features and sizes, some were ithyphallic, many presented Osirian insignia, metal or even gilded masks, and their funerary equipment was composed of the four Sons of Horus, small votive tables, amulets and other items. Their dating is Ptolemaic, from Ptolemy IV onwards. Amer (2010, p. 273) states that the Osireion was probably already in use during the 26th Dynasty. The different features and sizes likely reflect burials from different periods. A corn-mummy was also found in the Saitic necropolis (Erroux-Morfin 2020). Unfortunately, I was not able to consult this work and find out whether it was in situ or if it came from later layers.

2.3. Tehne

At Tehne, 260 km south of Cairo, in 1903, Jouguet and Lefebvre discovered seventy to eighty shallow pits containing what they called “momies d’Osiris” (Lefebvre 1903, pp. 227–31, Pls. I–II). The pits were located in the wadi that runs north–south along the Arabian chain to the east, between the Christian necropolis to the north and the Graeco-Roman cemetery to the south. They were concentrated in a well-defined area that surrounded a large rock that had come off the mountain in ancient times. Each pit was about 60 cm deep and contained a sarcophagus 70–82 cm long, 25–30 cm wide, some made of stone, others made of clay. Most of them had been heavily damaged by the water of flash floods coming almost yearly from the Arabian chain and submerging the plain as far as the Nile. Twenty-eight sarcophagi, untouched by the floods, preserved a wooden falcon-headed coffin inside, containing a corn-mummy each. Jouguet and Lefebvre’s description makes clear that this was a special sacred area, with no connection with the two human necropolises located north and south of the place.

2.4. Thebes

Eloquent is the evidence coming from the site of Wadi Qurud (Wadi Qubbanet/Qabbanat/Gabbanat El-Qurud), the so-called Valley of the Monkeys, on the west bank at Thebes. The name comes from a necropolis of baboons located there, but the association between corn-mummies and sacred animals, which recurs also at Sheikh El-Fadl, is probably deceptive; the monkey tombs occupied the area centuries later, in the Ptolemaic-Roman Period (Kessler 1989, pp. 208, 221; Lilyquist 2003, p. 14; Saragoza 2009, p. 57), while the corn-mummies were buried there earlier, as mentioned below. Unfortunately, information on the area and its findings has never been submitted to any systematic archaeological investigation, being at best the result of “a series of sondages rather than a stratigraphic exploration that revealed chronological relationships between structures and objects” (Lilyquist 2003, p. 4). Nevertheless, it is possible to state that here, like in Tehne, corn-mummy burials were not connected with human tombs; the only one present in the wadi is the tomb of three foreign wives of Tuthmosis III, found by villagers in 1916 and published by Christine Lilyquist as “Wady Qurud’s Tomb 1”, but no corn-mummies were ever reported among the finds of this tomb (Lilyquist 2003).

The earliest description available of the site is that of John Gardner Wilkinson, who visited the place in the 1930s (Wilkinson 1835, p. 79):

Eight thousand feet north-north-west of Medeenet Haboo is the Gabbanet el Qerood, or “Apes burial-ground”, so called from the mummies found in the ravines of the torrents in its vicinity. Among other unusual figures carefully interred here are small idols in form of mummies, with the emblem of the god of generation. Their total length does not exceed two feet, and an exterior coat of coarse composition which forms the body, surmounted by a human head and mitred bonnet of wax, conceals their singular but simple contents of barley.

In the footnote, he adds that all the barley had sprouted in the corn-mummy he had. Wilkinson clearly refers to ithyphallic figures⁵ “carefully interred” but, apparently, directly into the ground, with no associated structures or even coffins.

No tomb or coffin is mentioned by the naturalists Louis Lortet and Claude Gaillard either, in the description of a corn-mummy they found in the Wadi, at first believed to be a small, mummified ape, later acknowledged as a mistake (Lortet and Gaillard 1905–1909, vol. II, pp. 239–48; vol. IV, p. 209). They gave a detailed account and an excellent photograph of the remarkable find (their Figure 117), describing also four packets that represented, as is now clear, the four stylized Sons of Horus, buried in the same pit. In reporting their finds in the Wadi, they also mentioned six green wax masks they had found during their excavations, buried at a shallow depth and only later attributed by the two scholars to Osiris statuettes (Lortet and Gaillard 1905–1909, vol. III, pp. 75–78).

Howard Carter surveyed the area from October 1916 to January 1917, labelling the wadi (“Wâdy el Gâbbanat el Qurûd”) as “D” in his map (Carter 1917, pp. 109–10; pl. XIX). The photograph in Christine Lilyquist’s volume on the site clearly shows the landscape and the location of Carter’s pits (Lilyquist 2003, Figure 10). The British archaeologist believed that the south-west wadis had been chosen as cemeteries of the Eighteenth Dynasty royal families. In his report on the exploration of the wadi, he also noted (Carter 1917, p. 110):⁶

Another peculiar feature of the place is that under the larger boulders covering the valley-bed mimic burials are found, containing Shawabtis- or magical figures in faience, wood or stone, these being placed in model coffins of pottery and similar materials. There are also viscera wrapped in linen in mummy form, with head and head-dress, arms and hands, exquisitely wrought in bronze. For such deposits the natives have ransacked the valley from end to end, and the shops in Luxor have reaped a large harvest thence during the last five or six years. Three fine specimens are now in the Highclere Castle collection, dating from the Eighteenth Dynasty to late Ramesside time.

Very likely, the “viscera wrapped in linen in mummy form” were not *viscera* but corn-mummies, as Raven suggested (Raven 1982, p. 19 and note 151). Raven also questioned whether the bronze mounts of the “viscera” were really made of metal and were not instead wax masks. Unfortunately, the linen packages containing the alleged “viscera”, acquired by the Cleveland Museum and by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and attributable to the heads, wigs, arms and hands, and “exquisitely wrought in bronze”, described by Carter, were not preserved, and only the bronze mounts were kept (Berman 1999, p. 382; Lilyquist 2003, p. 6). Berman was convinced that “there is no reason to doubt what he [i.e., Carter] saw and examined in situ (and presumably held in his hands), despite Raven’s assertion”. It is indeed difficult to assume that Carter may have mistaken wax for bronze, although it does not seem as certain that he could not be mistaken about the content of the packages, hardened by a thick layer of bitumen or resin which concealed the inside. Raven’s hypothesis, that they were corn-mummies, seems much more credible⁷.

2.5. Karnak

A case in point are the finds in the so-called “Tomb of Osiris” at Karnak. The north-east sector of Karnak, in the area known as “Osireion”, has provided an extraordinary amount of mummified Osiris figurines with white crowns, the size and iconography of which were very similar to those of the corn-mummies described so far, composed of a very thin plaster shell, with traces of painted decorations, containing pure, finely sifted sand moulded with resin or other organic binders. They had been deposited, at least since the end of the New Kingdom, in several superimposed layers of brick-vaulted niche-burials, and later in catacombs (Leclère 2003, 2010). Their archaeological context and cultic nature are clear, as are their similarities with corn-mummies. However, barley or other cereal is apparently missing from the sand and resin mixture, a fact that explains why French archaeologists have never labelled them as corn-mummies, preferring the more generic definition of “figurines osiriennes” or “simulacre osiriennes”. Leclère remarked, however, that “l’absence d’orge dans les figurines de Karnak n’est finalement pas parlante: de même que l’emballage végétal détecté, les graines, si elles étaient présentes, ont pu disparaître totalement. Il est donc bien difficile de rattacher les figurines de Karnak à telle ou telle tradition” (Leclère 2003, p. 302). As for the other differences listed by Leclère as characteristics of corn-mummies absent at Karnak (ithyphallic iconography and Graeco-Roman dating), they are not actually discriminating; not all corn-mummies are in fact ithyphallic, and, as for the dating, the earliest corn-mummies are at least contemporary with the first Osiris figurines at Karnak and probably even more ancient than them (see below).

2.6. Other Sites Connected to Corn-Mummies

Archaeological information is lacking about the finds said to come from Meydum and from the Tuna el-Gebel area; provenance from the former site is provided so far only by inscriptions on the back pillar of coffin lids of corn-mummies in various museums, addressing Sokar-Osiris as “lord of sHt”, a toponym identified as lying in the area of Meidum (Centrone 2009, p. 36; Kurth 1998). As for Tuna el-Gebel, no site has yet been identified in the area, and the provenance is given on the grounds of the repeated statements concerning a high number of corn-mummies in wooden coffins with very similar features, which arrived on the art market in 1949 from illegal excavations (Leclant 1950, p. 491; Raven 1982, n. 219; von Lieven 2000–2001).

Giza is given as the place of origin of some parts of Ptolemaic wooden coffins of corn-mummies published in 2022 and held in the storeroom of the Haram Museum (Abdelrahman and Eissa 2022), but, although the authors explicitly mention Osirian corn-mummies in the title of their article (but do not deal with the figurines themselves), the information provided is contradictory and rather suggests objects similar to the terracotta ithyphallic Sokar-Osiris statuettes published in 2006 by Martina Minas-Nerpel (Minas 2006). She had compared them to similar finds whose archaeological context was known, such as those found by the Supreme Council of Antiquities in the Giza Plateau, 2 km

south of the Pyramids in the 1990s, buried in niches cut into the rock and laid in wooden coffins with names of the reigning Ptolemaic king (Ptolemy VI), Sokar-Osiris and the dynastic ancestors. It is clear from her words that these figurines have nothing to do with corn-mummies, both in terms of material (terracotta instead of cereals mixed with clay or sand) and iconographic peculiarities. The two parts of the coffins of Sokar-Osiris figurines published by Ali Abdelrahman and Maher Eissa seem to come from the same place as the figurines described by Martina Minas; many features coincide, above all the inscriptions on the coffins, their Ptolemaic dating, as well as the general features of the site and its discovery. The two authors, who also know and quote Minas' article, explicitly draw on Amal Samuel's unpublished PhD dissertation in Arabic. Her dissertation included five coffins from the site on the Giza plateau with their pseudo-mummies; she also mentioned stone vessels, four clay balls (representing the Four Sons of Horus), amulets and a scarab found within the burials (Abdelrahman and Eissa 2022, p. 11).⁸ Lacking first-hand data and not having had the opportunity to consult Amal Samuel's PhD dissertation, it is difficult to say whether the finds on the Giza plateau site consisted of terracotta Sokar-Osiris figurines or corn-mummies, or whether both types were found on the site.

3. Dating of Corn Mummies

The Third Intermediate Period is the earliest date proposed so far for the chronological distribution of this category of religious artefacts; it concerns some specimens from Tehne, which Maria Costanza Centrone dated to this period based on stylistic arguments (Centrone 2009, nos. 1, 3, 9, 63). Carter, in his published report in 1917, gave no dating for the "viscera" and the other finds from the mimic burials he found at Thebes, except for the three pieces in Carnarvon's collection at Highclere Castle that he dated "from the Eighteenth Dynasty to late Ramesside time".⁹ His archaeological experience prevented him from working out a precise date on finds from an area so ravaged by the looting of antiquity-seekers such as Wadi Qurud. However, it can be deduced from his manuscripts that his fine knowledge of Egyptian material made him extend the New Kingdom dating to the votive objects found under the boulders of the Wadi. In his manuscript description of the discovery of the tomb of the three princesses in Wadi Qurud, kept in the Metropolitan Museum, he said (Lilyquist 2003, doc. 29):

During the years 1913 and 1914 the Arabs found that the famous valley known as GABBÂNAT EL QIRÛD contained numerous votive offerings hidden under the larger boulders that cover the bed of the valley. From this source came much valuable material in the form of faience, bronze, and stone votive figures of fine Egyptian late New Empire art, which are now distributed throughout the principal museums of the world.¹⁰

Such an early dating of his finds at Thebes does not seem to have attracted the attention of the scholars who dealt with corn-mummies later on. Raven did not discuss it and preferred to hold on to the Late or Ptolemaic Periods.¹¹ Centrone in turn dated the Theban specimens to the Late or early Ptolemaic Period, mostly based on the stylistic features of their wax masks (Centrone 2009, p. 91). However, Caroline Williams had remarked that the elaborately curled wig of the bronze heads attached to the packages of "viscera" from Thebes (acquired in Egypt by the Cleveland Museum in 1913) recalled the style of works of art "from the close of the XVIIIth Dynasty" and gave the same dating to the wax masks, probably from the same source (Ransom Williams 1918, pp. 175–76). Lawrence Berman, though believing that they belonged to true packages of "viscera", agreed with her and with Carter's dating in his 1999 catalogue of the museum and dated the bronze masks to the New Kingdom; he highlighted their post-Amarna features and compared Cleveland's pieces with similar bronze fittings in New York, dating to the 19th Dynasty (Berman 1999, p. 382; Lilyquist 2003, p. 6).

These stylistic remarks are not contradicted and indeed find support in the archaeological context of the Wadi and its side branches. The frequentation of the site in the 18th Dynasty is attested by the royal funerary projects involving the wadis named A, C and D by

Carter. Later, small royal and private funerary figurines were deposited in the south-west wadi beds, dating to the Ramesside period. Leaving aside the so-called “viscera”, many other figures described by Carter as coming from “mimic burials” (“Shawabties or magical figures in faience, wood or stone”¹²), that reached the art market in those years, appear to have a 19–20th Dynasty dating. Some wood royal funerary figures dating to the Ramesside period or earlier come from the side bays and nearby wadis (Lilyquist 2003, pp. 4–6). Lilyquist quoted F. Pumpenmeier’s personal communication that there might be some correspondence between the Wady Qurud and the earlier New Kingdom “Hekareshu Hill” at Abydos, where votive pottery and private funerary figures were deposited to suggest that the place was an entrance to a sacred area of the necropolis (Lilyquist 2003, p. 6).

All this leads us to reconsider and anticipate, at least for the Theban site, the dating of the practice of cultic pseudo-mummies to the New Kingdom.

This new dating is in line with the evidence of the New Kingdom so-called “Osiris beds”, a class of related material that has also been linked to the rites of Khoiak (Raven 1982, pp. 12–14; Tooley 1996, pp. 176–77). These objects, attested only in funerary contexts, are much rarer than corn-mummies and relevant to members of the royal family and a few privileged high-ranking figures of the 18th Dynasty. “Osiris beds” in wood and matting were found in the tombs of Maiherpre (KV 36), Amenhotep II (KV 35), Yuya and Thuya (KV 46), Tutankhamun (KV 62), and Horemheb (KV 57). The earlier ones are made of linen, reeds or matting resting on a wood lattice frame; a silhouette of Osiris in profile is drawn on the linen cover. This image was filled with a mixture of soil and germinated seed plants. Tutankhamun and Horemheb’s examples are wooden cases in the form of a profile silhouette of Osiris, lined with linen and filled with soil and germinated seed plants.

To these must be added the specimen found during the French-Tuscan expedition in 1829 and brought by Ippolito Rosellini to Florence, now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale (inv. no. 2195). It was mentioned by Angela Tooley in her article on the so-called “Osiris bricks”, rich of information far beyond its topic, but it was still unprovenanced at the time and in it she saw “a Late Period successor to the New Kingdom Osiris beds” (Tooley 1996, p. 177) (Figure 4). However, in a study presented in 2015, I was able to show that the object was part of the funerary equipment in the tomb of Tamutneferet and her husband Ipuuy, shared by Champollion and Rosellini, dating to the early 19th Dynasty (Betrò 2020, pp. 286–87 and Figure 4). The piece disproves Raven’s scepticism about the existence of private Osiris beds, previously only conceivable thanks to the inscriptions and vignettes in TT 50 of Neferhotep (Porter and Moss 1960, I, pp. 312–15; Bénédite 1894; Hari 1985; Willems 2003, pp. 433–34). At the same time, it fits with the evolutionary trend observed by Tooley, with it being closer to the “beds” of the late 18th Dynasty but smaller, as befits medium-high figures. The container made of carved wood portrays the profile silhouette of Osiris within a black painted trapezoidal box, with perforations for drainage and an ink outline of Osiris in the underside (Figure 5a). It contained germinated grain, as described by Rosellini in his 1829 list of the objects he was sending to the Grand Duke, now in Prague (Betrò 2013, pp. 43–58):

Cassetta di legno tinta di nero. Racchiude un astuccio in forma di Osiride, ripieno di grano germinato. (RAT L. II, f42r)



Figure 4. Osiris brick. Turin, Museo Egizio, Provv 3685. Photo courtesy of Museo Egizio, Torino.



(a)



(b)

Figure 5. Above (a): Osiris bed from a private tomb. Museo Archeologico Nazionale Firenze 2195. Photo courtesy of MAN Firenze. Below (b): germinating bed of Osiris. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 20.2.30. Photo from Wikipedia Commons.

The sprouted grain (“grano germinato”) filling the box was mentioned also by one of the painters of the expedition, Nestor L’Hôte, in a letter to his parents dated 18 March 1829, where he described an intact tomb they had entered on March 13th and its contents (Harlé and Lefebvre 1993, letter no. 12, 256–57; Betrò 2020, pp. 282–83):

(. . .) aux pieds de l’une des momies une petite caisse contenant une espèce de statue creusée en forme d’auge, dans laquelle on avait mis du blé, qui avait germé et jeté de longues pousses.

The two descriptions by Rosellini and Nestor L’Hôte, contemporary to the opening of the funerary chamber, clarify that the “ungerminated grains of corn and barley” (Tooley 1996, p. 177) in the Florence specimen were not original. The open-work support—or the drainage holes in the post-Amarna specimens—indicate that the seeds were watered and allowed to germinate directly inside the containers, certainly before depositing them in the tombs. Jan Assmann and Harco Willems had pointed out how the role of the “Osiris beds” can be connected to the so-called “gardens” of the Theban tombs and to the rituals associated with the festival of Khoiak (Assmann 1984, p. 284 ff.; 1991, p. 493; Willems 2003).¹³ “Beds” and “gardens” reproduce both the Hsp, the basin prescribed for the manufacture of the Osiris simulacres mentioned in the texts of the Khoiak rituals (Chassinat 1966–1968, see Index s.v. Khenti Amentit (Jardin du); Cauville 1997d, pp. 396–97; Herbin and Leitz 2022, p. 517, s.v. Hsp). Willems in particular drew attention to their archaeological precursors in the lumps of mud and soil with cereal grains and roots found at the entrance of various Theban tombs since the early 12th Dynasty TT 366, the tomb of Djari.¹⁴ A royal precedent had been discovered by William Flinders Petrie at the entrance to the pyramid of Sesostris II at Lahun, consisting in the contents of four to five vessels with soil and grain (Raven 1982, p. 10; Michels 2013, p. 165). In 2017, the discovery of a small funerary garden (3.0 × 2.2 m) by the Spanish mission at Dra Abu el-Naga, dating to the early 12th Dynasty, provided a new, very well-documented and archaeologically contextualised parallel to Djari’s funerary garden (Galán and Garcia 2019).

Unless all the owners of the “Osiris beds” preserved so far had died during the festival of Khoiak, it seems unlikely that these objects had been prepared on that occasion. The “Osiris bed” in the tomb most likely represented the symbolic “portable” counterpart of the funerary garden, made available to an apparently very small and privileged group of deceased people inside the tomb. The new element of their funerary equipment allowed them to virtually take part in the Osiris Khoiak rituals, while the task of activating and renewing their participation in the cosmic Osirian cycle was entrusted to the family and to the social sphere through the enactment of the annual liturgies in publicly accessible spaces.¹⁵

Ultimately, the purpose of the “Osiris beds” and funerary gardens was to revive the *individualized* Osiris N, i.e., the deceased, albeit still within the general process of cosmic regeneration and cyclic renewal of nature, that the god Osiris conveyed and rituals promoted. An evolutionary line can be identified from the “Osiris beds” to the miniature pseudo-mummies inserted in the Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statuettes in the Late Period (Raven 1978–1979; 1982, p. 17). The latter are considered by Raven to be precursors of the corn-mummies (which he dated to a later period); the eight specimens he mentioned showed fragmentary evidence of cloth and grains and he himself had widely pointed to the connection between the Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statues and the so-called Dendera mystery text (Raven 1978–1979, 1982) (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Statue of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris containing in its casket remains of grains in a piece of cloth. Turin, Museo Egizio 2462. Photo courtesy of Museo Egizio, Torino.

A few objects allow us to trace the steps between the “beds” and the miniature pseudo-mummies in the cavities of the Late Period Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statuettes: the papyrus-sheath of the priest Bakmut, from the Bab el-Gasus Cache (Daressy 1902, p. 160), whose inscription labels it as a *xnty-Imttt* the name of the Khoiak sand and grain Osiris figurine in the Graeco-Roman texts (Chassinat 1966–1968, pp. 49–50; Raven 1982, p. 16); and the small mummiform figurine made of silt, resin, barley and oats, found between the thighs of the mummy of Nespanetjeru, dated to 940–900 BC (Berlin no. 927: Raven 1982, p. 16; Aston 2009, p. 377; Seeber 1980, p. 745, note 6). They certainly illustrate the growing embedding of the so-called Osirian mysteries into the private funerary sphere. Aston also lists other clay figurines he considers corn-mummies, although he does not say whether they contained barley or other cereals.

On the non-funerary level, the tradition unfolds continuously and shows alongside corn-mummies other categories of religious artefacts, such as terracotta (Raven 1998; Minas 2006) or unfired mud Osiris figurines without grain (Effland and Effland 2019), and the so-called “Osiris bricks”—pottery moulds with a recessed image of the god (Tooley 1996). Clay mummiform figurines of Osiris in mimic burials have been found at Giza (Minas 2006, pp. 212–13), in the sanctuary of Osiris in the tomb of Djer at Abydos (Effland and Effland 2019), and in Wadi Qurud (Tooley 1996, pp. 173, 176; Berman 1999, pp. 385–87). Angela Tooley suggested that pottery Osiris bricks too were made annually during the Festival of Khoiak, filled with soil and grains and then ritually buried (Figure 5b). Some examples still had their contents intact, which shows that the figures were not turned out. Their size (average length 25 cm) is smaller than that of corn-mummies or similar figurines. Although arguably also rooted in the Theban tradition, and attested since at least the first half the 1st millennium BC,¹⁶ they outline a further, parallel, but different tradition.

Corn-mummies, Osiris figurines and Osiris bricks represent one of the final stages of the Khoiak rituals described in various texts. The differences in iconography, style and technology (both in material and manufacturing techniques) reflect not only the evolution over time but also the different regional and intra-regional traditions. These variations concern material evidence as well as texts; as Joachim Quack pointed out, heterogeneous traditions contributed to the redaction handed down in Dendera, which was the result of different writers and distinct ritual practices (Quack 1998). Slightly different traditions concerning the ritual acts performed during the Khoiak festival are also attested in other religious compositions, such as Papyrus Salt 825 (Derchain 1965), Papyrus Louvre N 3176 (Barguet 1962; Carrier 2020), and Papyrus Jumilhac (Vandier 1961). The materiality of the religious traditions and written texts is thus perfectly reflected in the different traditions that the various corn-mummy manufacturing types and burial practices seem to testify to.

4. The Symbolism of Corn Mummies’ Burial Places and Materiality

The connection with the Khoiak ritual texts suggests that corn-mummies were carried in procession and buried during rituals performed once a year. All the areas in which figurines were buried were places endowed with sacredness (Centrone 2006); those found in the niches and catacombs annexed to a temple complex, such as at Karnak or Oxyrhynchos, were clearly the product of official ritual acts by priests. In other cases, one may wonder whether at least some of them were not manifestations of individual religiosity, commissioned or crafted by individual devotees and buried by themselves in sacred areas.

The choice of harsh, barren land, unsuitable for the growth of vegetation, such as the wild desert wadis where they were often found, was a perfect metaphor for death, which nevertheless contains the germ of life; this was symbolically expressed by the sprouted corn seeds mixed with the figurines’ soil, which the life-giving power of the god sets in motion. The symbolism was even more effective where the arid desert areas were periodically flooded by occasional torrential rains; this was the case for Tehne and Wadi Qurud. Water—the activating principle of the life process—is also linked to the essence of Osiris. Its rarity in desert environments, as well as the prodigious violence of those occasional atmospheric events and the immediate results they entailed (in terms of regrowth of the vegetation),

acted as dramatic factors that may have dictated the choice of those landscapes and wadis for the ritual enactment. The lack of coffins of the Wadi Qurud corn-mummies may not be accidental in this context, and the Theban religious tradition might have deliberately and symbolically staged those Osirian practices in landscapes such as that of the Wadi. Lortet and Raven also noted this aspect (Lortet and Gaillard 1905–1909, vol. IV, p. 209; Raven 1982, p. 20). Centrone correctly objected that the layer of linen and bitumen that wrapped the corn mummies constituted an insurmountable barrier for the barley seeds inside to be soaked in moisture and, more importantly, to germinate and pierce that layer with their sprouts (Centrone 2009, p. 90). An apparent argument against her remarks is that nonetheless some corn-mummies exhibited some clearly visible germinated barley stalks (see also Wilkinson 1835, p. 79, cited above). The answer lies in the analyses carried out on corn mummies, such as those made in the Geneva laboratories that showed that separately germinated barley stalks were purposely inserted into the moulded form (Rey-Bellet 2017).

These scientific results clarify the importance of sprouting-corn in the manufacture of the corn-mummy; the idea of germinating grain seeds was such an essential component, which, although not possible from a practical point of view, had to be “suggested”. It is possible that, starting from the original idea of cereal seeds in the moulded mixture, which, when watered and sprouted, would have recreated the verdant image of the god who overcomes and defeats death, the manufacture of corn-mummies had progressively developed techniques to produce stronger and more durable but less permeable figurines. The insertion of barley/grain stalks would at this point have circumvented the problem, ensuring that the symbolism of the figurine was respected.

The materiality of corn-mummies is itself a metaphor of one of the most important features of Osiris, his being the image of the everlasting power of nature to reproduce itself in a continuous rhythm of life-death-life again. Their combination of cereals and sand brings together some constituent elements of the Egyptian universe, both in the real and symbolic sphere. The mummiform Osiris shape acts as a figure and synthesis of the two elements. Previous scholars have commented extensively on these aspects and on Osiris’ relationship with sprouting grain and corn-mummies (Frazer 1911, vol. VI, Part IV, pp. 97–107;¹⁷ Bonnet 1952, pp. 517–18; Chassinat 1966–1968, p. 50; Raven 1978–1979, p. 287; 1982, pp. 10–12, 31–32; Centrone 2009, pp. 140–59; Quack 2007), basically agreeing that the latter are a symbol of the god’s rejuvenation. Having quickly and correctly dismissed the hypotheses that saw Osiris as an ancient fertility god, modern interpretations seem to swing between two slightly different views, as exemplified by Maarten Raven’s and Costanza Centrone’s conclusions in their respective studies; the former emphasises corn-mummies as a symbol of the resurrection of the god and, through this, of hope for the rebirth of mortals (Raven 1982, pp. 32–33), the latter sees them rather as a tool for the preservation of the cosmic cycle of death/rebirth (Centrone 2009, p. 219; but see also Raven 1997, p. 11).

The overwhelming influence played by Gwin Griffiths’ work since its appearance in considering Osiris primarily a god of the dead (Griffiths 1980) has certainly weighed on our concept of Osiris and on the interpretation of corn-mummies as well, overshadowing their connection with the god as a principle of the imperishable cyclicity of natural and cosmic phenomena. I fear, however, that the rejection of older theories that saw Osiris as a god of grain and fertility might end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Although Osiris was not a god of grain or fertility, his relationship with cereals (and, on a larger scale, with vegetation) cannot be obliterated. The inscriptions on the sarcophagus of the 26th Dynasty princess Ankhnesneferibra (London, British Museum EA 32) provide important evidence of the emphasis on the link between grain and Osiris; they hail the god as creator of the barley which gods, mankind, and cattle feed on (Wagner 2016, pp. 337–45; III, col. 18–39). The same texts state that “Barley sprouted from Osiris’ limbs when Thoth placed it in the embalming hall (pr-nfr)” (Wagner 2016, p. 350, III, col. 65–67). Here, the link between the life-giving and reviving power of germinating grain and the temple liturgy of the Khoiak ritual is explicit (Wagner 2016, pp. 321–28), but, even in its adaptation to the individual human funerary sphere, the emphasis is less on the resurrection of the deceased than on

Ankhneseferibra's assimilation to Osiris as a giver of life and as the principle of cyclical renewal.

This takes on greater significance when we consider the cultic nature of corn-mummies I pointed out above.

5. Conclusions

To summarise, corn-mummies are not funerary but cultic objects, connected to the cult of Osiris as the cosmic principle of regeneration, representing the eternal cycle of life's rebirth from death. Their role in rituals is described in the Khoiak ritual texts at Dendera. The archaeological contexts, where available, make it clear that they are never associated with individual human burials but deposited independently and individually in a pit, usually, but not always, in decorated and inscribed coffins. The rare, small pseudo-mummies, sometimes containing barley and wheat, placed in the cavity of the Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statues at the final stage of their evolution (Raven 1978–1979, pp. 271–72, 287; 1982, p. 17) and part of the burial equipment, are more of a Late Period evolution of the funerary "Osiris beds" than actual corn-mummies.

Shape, materiality, accessories and texts on the coffins make it clear that corn-mummies are images of the dead god embalmed, prefiguring his rebirth, with the latter represented by the grain, either germinated or potentially susceptible to sprout. Their main meaning seems thus to be related to the idea of the rebirth of nature and vegetation rather than to the hope of resurrection. Indeed, any connection with a human beneficiary (i.e., deceased) is missing, only the god is ever mentioned. This does not mean that the two aspects were not felt by the Egyptians as part of a single reality. The same conceptual background is shared by corn-mummies as well as Osiris-beds, funerary gardens, Osiris bricks and other kind of Osiris figurines. However, as I highlighted above, the ancient Egyptians distinguished the different aspects and contexts; despite the interpenetration between funerary rituals and Osirian rites, "les deux univers ne se confondent pas" (Coulon 2010, p. 5).

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Notes

- ¹ Smith chose to "limit" the scope of his investigation by focussing on one aspect in particular, the relationship between Osiris and the deceased, a still formidable task indeed.
- ² A discussion of the terminology of these artefacts is in (Centrone 2009, p. 2). Since I consider the materiality of these objects fundamental to their understanding, I agree with her in retaining the term "corn-mummies" rather than the too generic "pseudo-mummies" or the French "Osiris végétants", also used to designate the so-called "Osiris beds".
- ³ Fritz (2006, p. 105) proposed a distinction between the funerary use of corn-mummies ("Kornmumie") from the cultic one ("Kornosiris"). In her view, however, all the specimens up to the end of the Late Period were part of burial equipment and thus evidence of their funerary use, while a cultic use did not develop until the Graeco-Roman age, with the celebration of actual Osiris mysteries. My opinion, stated below, is different.
- ⁴ The short texts were usually inscribed on the coffins of the corn-mummies. To get a quantitative idea of their presence, in the 96 items in the catalogue compiled by M. C. Centrone, about 70 corn-mummies were placed in coffins and 34 of these were inscribed.
- ⁵ "With the emblem of the god of generation". All the Theban specimens identified by Costanza Centrone in various museums are ithyphallic as well, with the exception of Durham, Oriental Museum, North 97, whose phallus is missing, and the corn-mummy originally in Cleveland Museum of Art inv. no. 426.14, deaccessioned in 1968, "presumably ithyphallic" too, according to (Raven 1982, p. 19).
- ⁶ See also (Lilyquist 2003, 31, document 4, and 46, Figure 18), which reproduces Howard Carter's field notes in MMA Dept. of Egyptian Art.
- ⁷ Berman also objected that the bronze mounts would have been too small for corn-mummies; however, he did not believe they were parts of composite shabtis. One may wonder whether they might belong to other elements of the corn-mummy burial sets, such as the Sons of Horus, or whether smaller—private?—corn-mummies were also buried in the Wadi.

- 8 For the frequent association of these objects with corn-mummy burials, see [Centrone \(2009; 2006, pp. 134–37\)](#).
- 9 See above my quotation of [Carter \(1917\)](#).
- 10 The manuscript dates from before April 1921.
- 11 [Raven \(1982, p. 21\)](#): “All we have at our disposal is stylistic evidence. Thus, the facial types of the wax masks seem to indicate dates in the Late or Ptolemaic periods. A further chronological delimitation is impossible”.
- 12 See Note 9.
- 13 The subject of funerary gardens was first treated by D. Eigner in his study on the architecture of Theban Saitic tombs ([Eigner 1984](#)). Following his study, the gardens in the tomb courts were designated as ‘Osirisbeete’ and, shortly afterwards, the term was extended to the Theban tombs of the New Kingdom ([Kampp 1996, p. 77](#)).
- 14 They probably were placed outside or at the entrance of the tombs; based on the available evidence, their position inside the tomb cannot be accurately identified. See the discussion in ([Michels 2013](#)), who also included the 2010 finds by the German Archaeological Institute Cairo in the necropolis of Dra’ Abu el-Naga in Western Thebes, dating to the Second Intermediate Period.
- 15 It is interesting that the known “Osiris beds” were found in tombs in the Valley of the Kings, which had no such structures as funerary gardens. Nothing is known about the location and features of the tomb of Tamutneferet and Ipuy in which the ‘bed’ now in Florence was found.
- 16 A scientific dating by thermoluminescence was obtained for a specimen in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (1991.18). Though with a considerable level of uncertainty, i.e., c. 909 BC to AD 91, the true age seems however to be close to the upper end of the date range ([Tooley 1996, p. 178](#)).
- 17 On Frazer and the many insights his work has offered to the anthropological debate, the bibliography is endless. I mention here ([Ackerman 1987, 1991, 2015](#)) as indispensable contributions to the study of the scholar’s scientific personality and the evolution of his work, and two recent Italian volumes ([Dei 2021; Dimpflmeyer 2023](#)).

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