II

Identity and Personhood

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Archaeology and Identity

This chapter seeks to understand in what sense Egyptians considered themselves individuals, how they defined themselves as part of a group, and in what way they projected their identity through their material culture. Defining ourselves as individual unique beings seems to be a typically modern Western concept of identity, while members of ancient societies probably more explicitly comprehended themselves and were defined as part of a group, or groups. At the same time there are indications that in ancient Egypt persons were considered individuals, and understood themselves as such. The concept of personhood, both during life on earth and in the afterlife, was individual, as can be surmised from the fact that for a few generations after their demise the deceased were considered as distinct human beings, known and addressed by name. A person’s identity is more than individual traits; it is context-dependent and socially defined through interaction with others, ranging from family relations, a shared history, geographical location, age, gender, profession, ethnicity, to character, health, wealth, and social status. Identity can be embraced, internalized, or forced upon a person or group by external factors (Casella and Fowler 2005; Díaz-Andreu Garcia and Lucy 2005; Insoll 2007; Jones 1997; Robb 2007; Sofaer 2007; Stein 2005; Thomas 1996).

Information on the identity of people in ancient Egypt is not simply accessible, but has to be pieced together from erratically surviving material markers represented in domestic or monumental architecture, decorated tombs, archaeological excavations, scraps of texts, and purposefully composed temple walls. To tease out concepts of identity and personhood from these traces is a difficult task, and we should be well aware that our interpretation likely reflects our own concerns, rather than those of ancient society and individuals. Yet, there are certainly many reasons to attempt a definition and description of the various ways in which persons in ancient Egypt would have defined themselves and others, stood in the world, negotiated social relations, and coped with changing circumstances. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how to define aspects of identity in the
material record. These are the material codes for which the persons who interact
are on the lookout: are we dealing with a woman or a man; child, adult, or elderly
person; belonging to a specific family, rank, or profession; hailing from a particu-
lar place? Many of these aspects are perceived through subtle indicators, as part
of clothing, food ways, or speech. An important, but problematic issue is regional
differences, difficult to demonstrate or define, but their existence can be con-
cluded from the occurrence of several distinct dialects known in Coptic, the latest
phase of the ancient Egyptian language, which was written with Greek characters
and therefore enables us to understand differences in vocalization and pronuncia-

When we speak about identity and personhood in the context of ancient Egypt,
we should take into account that the concept of person included a supernatural
identity, linked to religious concepts and closely associated with notions of
the afterlife. This supernatural identity is a symbolic construction and as much
the result of social interaction, ongoing communication, and negotiation with the
living and the dead as “personal” or “social” identity (Fowler 2004). Identity
before or after the moment of death is thus actively constituted and does not exist
outside human communication in the broadest sense, shaped by the interaction
of members within a group, or with outsiders. A person is inevitably part of mul-
tiple groups, some constituted explicitly, others tacitly considered inherent.

In a volume on historical archaeology, such as this, textual sources are of course
taken into consideration. Because they are part of the material culture, their context
should be part of the analysis through questions concerning the author, audience,
purpose, and occasion, but explicitly also the material, and the archaeological
context in which they were found, reflective of where they were functioning, dis-
carded, or lost. Most of the textual sources which give information on personhood
belong to the funerary realm. Apart from textual and archaeological information
this chapter is also grounded in ethnoarchaeological records, to compare present-
day or recent historical aspects of identity, material signifiers, and cultural concepts
with ancient Egyptian ones, in order to broaden our perspective, which is inevitably
limited by our direct or learnt experience. The concept of what identifies a person
varies in different realms, both in the world of the living and in the afterlife. In a
society with a rich history of reinventing tradition, changing ideas about society
and the individual are presented in familiar traditional terms. This complicates
efforts to comprehend how people understood and identified themselves and each
other in different periods. Since most of the written sources represent a small layer
of literate Egyptians, the results of our analysis are inherently biased.

What our sources clearly show us is that identity is of consequence from the
individual to the state level. The characterization, manipulation, and management
of individual and group identity are an integral part of Pharaonic rule. Kings
demonstrably reinvent their links to the past and their geographical and social
embedding in the present as part of a process of legitimation (see also Richards,
and Schneider, this volume). The New Kingdom is a particularly good period to
focus a study of aspects of person and identity, because of a relative wealth of
source material available in comparison to earlier periods. We will, however, also
take other eras into account. Dealing with such a wealth of material requires some
organization. This complex topic, which intertwines personal, religious, and social
concepts, will be considered in three sections, addressing briefly the historical context of the New Kingdom, personal identity and personhood, and material markers of socially negotiated identity.

The New Kingdom Setting: Rulers and Subjects

The golden period of Egyptian history, the New Kingdom (c. 1539–1075) shows interesting shifts in regional emphasis, related to the places of origin of the rulers of the 18th–20th Dynasties. The early 18th-Dynasty rulers claimed victory over the Hyksos, who were characterized as foreign enemies. Thanks to efficient New Kingdom propaganda, Egyptologists have long defined the Hyksos rule as a period of foreign occupation and decline, summarized in the designation “Second Intermediate Period” (Brewer and Teeter 2007:44–46). A more balanced view, based on the careful interpretation of the archaeological remains at Avaris, at one time the Hyksos capital, proposes a gradual growth of influence of first northern, then southern Levantine groups in the Eastern Delta (Bietak 1996, and Schneider, this volume). The conflict between the “Egyptians” and the Hyksos was in fact mostly a conflict between a local Theban faction and the rulers of the Delta, whose sphere of influence included the ancient capital Memphis. During the Middle Kingdom the capital had been moved to Itj-Tawy in Middle Egypt, so Memphis, even if in control of the rulers from the north, did not represent a conquered capital. Thebes, however, was caught in the middle between the powerful Kingdom of Kerma in the south and the northern Hyksos rulers, two powers that were in contact and maintained diplomatic relations, threatening their Theban opponents.

The pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty, directly related to the Theban house of Seqenenre, Ahmose, and Kamose, conquered the Delta and expanded their influence into the Levant. Military campaigns by pharaohs such as Thutmoses I, III, Amenhotep II, and Thutmoses IV resulted in a powerful and wealthy country, united under one ruler. Queen Hatshepsut, daughter of Thutmoses I, wife of her brother Thutmoses II, and ruler for her young cousin Thutmoses III, expanded her economic base by commissioning exploratory expeditions to the land of Punt. These obtained expensive and prestigious commodities such as gold, leopard skins, ivory, ebony, and incense as well as incense trees. In this time of peace, fulminations against the Hyksos were particularly virulent, as part of Hatshepsut’s campaign to legitimize her rule as female pharaoh. Thus aspects of identity such as gender, age, and ethnicity were part of a historical definition of what it meant to be “Egyptian” and “King of Egypt.”

Part of the legitimation was a close link between the royal house and the priesthood of the god Amun in Thebes. Expansions of the Karnak temple complex, including economically supportive endowments of land, were donated by the king to the priesthood. It has been surmised that the increasing economic and political power of the Amun priesthood was one of the reasons that Amenhotep III initiated religious changes, focusing on the identification between the person of the king and several gods in Egypt, such as the sun disk Aten, the Memphite god Ptah, and the sun god Ra (Johnson 1999). His son and successor Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten is often considered as the world’s first monotheist (see, e.g., Freud 1939
and the inventory by Assmann 1997). This is an unsophisticated description that in the light of a detailed study of the available evidence cannot be upheld. Akhenaten’s actions were at least partly political, and directed primarily towards the destruction of the name of the god Amun, while some of the other gods of the pantheon were actively venerated, as illustrated by the names of his younger daughters Nefertneferure and Setepenre, which feature the sun god Ra (or Re). A more apt characterization of the theological changes in this period is Assmann’s “cognitive revolution” (Assmann 2001b:201–208).

The 18th-Dynasty pharaohs maintained diplomatic contacts with the powers in the Near East, such as Mittanni, the Kassites, and the Hittites, through gift exchange and royal marriages. Even though knowledge and appreciation of what was “foreign” increased dramatically as a result, the ideological depiction of foreigners is traditionally xenophobic. The tomb of Tutankhamun contains many depictions of bound foreigners, representing the three traditional enemies of Egypt, the Asiatics, the Libyans, and the Nubians, or the “9 bows,” symbolizing all possible foreigners, depicted on the sandals or foot stool of the pharaoh to be ceremonially trodden upon. The tomb, however, also contained several examples of precious foreign garments, witnessing in the same space a regard for foreign contacts and diplomatic gift exchange (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1999). Tutankhaten, under influence of the high officials Aye and Horemheb, embarked on a restoration of the name and veneration of Amun (which included his own name change). After a brief rule by Aye, the royal succession was taken over by Horemheb, who probably changed his name from Paatenemheb, reflecting an identity change from an elite group venerating the Aten to one worshipping the traditional gods, such as Horus. Horemheb was Tutankhamun’s general, who dismantled the temples of Akhenaten in Karnak, and inscribed his name over that of Tutankhamun.

Horemheb’s vizier, or prime minister, was called Ramesses, and he was the father of the first king of the 19th Dynasty, Sety I. Hailing from the town of Avaris in the Delta, Sety was named after the god Seth, venerated in a temple built by the Hyksos. Seth, in the Heliopolitan tradition the brother and murderer of Osiris, is known as an evil god, but this image is mostly based on much later Greco-Roman sources. The Deltaic Seth was a syncretized form of the Egyptian deity and the Syro-Palestinian god Baal-Reshef (Te Velde 1977). The Eastern Delta, even after the “expulsion” of the Hyksos, continued to be an amalgam of different cultural influences. The grandson of Sety I, Ramesses the Great (Ramesses II), represents the quintessence of “Egyptianness,” and yet he moved his capital from Memphis to Pi-Ramesse in the Eastern Delta, just a few kilometers northwest from Avaris. He was succeeded by his son Merenptah, who dismantled the memorial temple of the great king Amenhotep III to build his own monument. A time of dynastic struggle followed and Merenptah was succeeded briefly by Sety II, and his son Siptah, and a sole rule of Sety’s widow Twosre after Siptah’s death. The role of an official of Syrian descent has raised Egyptological interest: the official Irsu/Bay is depicted in an exceptional position for a commoner, and a foreigner at that, standing behind Siptah’s throne. Bay was executed in the fifth year of Siptah’s rule (Grandet 2000), and although the exact reason is unknown, it is likely that he had ongoing contacts with Ugarit, and was considered a traitor. The country descended in a period of civil strife, and the pharaohs of the 20th Dynasty were not related to the Ramessides,
even though the second king of the dynasty named himself Ramesses III, and styled himself and his building projects after Ramesses II. After his rule there were eight successors who named themselves Ramesses (IV–XI). In the definition of dynasties by the priest Manetho in the third century BCE, the determining factor is not as much the direct family relation between pharaohs, but their regional origin. In a country which exists mainly of a 1000-km-long narrow strip of land, with even the broadening Nile Delta divided by north–south-running river branches, which effectively divided it into a number of parallel strips, and several outlying oases, the country consisted of a number of quite isolated areas. This partitioning of the land, especially apparent in the time of the inundation, related to regional differences which must have been obvious and perhaps resulted in an island mentality that was relevant in Egypt’s understanding of the diversity of its population, the strong emphasis on unification and order being a logical compensation.

The monumental inscriptions that relate the fate of the kings, and give us indications of their allegiances, wars, and religious ties, hardly provide information on the population of Egypt in this period. There are, however, a number of excavations that have gained us unsurpassed insights into the daily life of other social layers. The city of Amarna, founded by Akhenaten in his fifth year of rule, was abandoned after approximately thirty years, when Tutankhamun came to the throne. Settlement archaeology concentrating on New Kingdom houses, neighborhoods, villages, and towns is rare, but the excavations at Amarna and a workmen’s village located approximately 5km into the desert give an exceptional insight in what on one level must have been a unique town, built in one grand effort around a ceremonial route, but on another level also was thoroughly traditional (Kemp 2006:284–297). The workmen’s village was built in two phases as a walled settlement with standard size houses. Deir el-Medina, the village which housed the workmen and artists who carved out and decorated the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings on the west bank in Thebes, was in use before and after the Amarna settlement. From the early 18th Dynasty we have several tombs, excavated in the rock around the settlement, which was huddled on the floor of the wadi. The village was reoccupied after the Amarna period. At that time, the inhabitants tried to dig a large well to improve the supply of water, which had to be carried in on donkey back. The result was an enormous hole in the ground, which never yielded a drop of water, but was used as a convenient garbage dump. The inhabitants of Deir el-Medina, which had a percentage of literacy that topped the average by far, threw away their daily notes, practice pieces, laundry lists, which were all written on limestone flakes. Even if Deir el-Medina cannot be considered an average village, its function and location are very specific, and the texts on these ostraca provide a unique insight into daily business and concerns, including information which can be used to tease out aspects of identity (McDowell 1999).

**Individuality and Personhood**

In our society the one aspect that signifies a person is the name, as means of identification, as opposite of anonymity, which is, very generally speaking, a negative state, associated with loneliness, and being rendered a powerless non-person.
The name conveniently unifies the multiple identities that a person has in different contexts (Bourdieu 2000). The meaning of the name is secondary to the fact that one has a name and is mentioned or referred to by it. In the Western world the first name identifies the person, while the family name (or names of father and grandfather) positions that person in time and space (Bourdieu 2000:302). Thus the family name might express the ethnic background of the father’s side of a family (Müller, Sanchez, Yoo), while the first name usually expresses the child’s gender, and personal relations or opinions of the parents. In Egypt before and during the Second World War the first name “Hitler” was given to boys in order to express the parents’ protest against the British occupation of the country, and it is not an uncommon name among men in their sixties.

Name giving establishes that a person exists, and this was true also in ancient Egypt (Meyer-Dietrich 2006:185). In pre-industrial Egypt this was done on the seventh day after birth with a ritual in which several candles inscribed with different names were lit, and the name on the longest burning candle was given to the child (see also Blackwell 1927:80–81). In the Pharaonic period, name giving seems to have been done at birth, but it is unknown whether a ritual of name giving was performed to assign an identity, similar to the way baptism does in a Christian tradition (Ziff 1960:102–104). The only clearly identifiable moment of name giving was that of the coronation of a pharaoh. The multiple names of the king indicated different aspects of the self, including ritual and official aspects (Quirke 1990:9–27). Ancient Egyptian name giving was clearly important, however. A child would get a name at birth, the ren a’aa, or great name, but there was limited variety in these names and in order to avoid confusion at some point a person could get a surname, the ren nefer, literally the “good” name (Vernus 1986). Through Egyptian history, the father’s name was often added, as is customary today in Egypt and the Arab countries, and for the Middle Kingdom it has been attested that the grandfather’s name could be added. Girls and young boys could be specified by adding the mother’s name (Valbelle 1993). This is concurrent with the visual arts, where, especially in the Old Kingdom period, young boys, identifiable by clearly depicted male sexual organs, were given a dark yellow skin tone, which classified them as perhaps still belonging to the female gender realm. Examples are, for instance, the family statue of the dwarf Seneb from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (acc.no. JE 51280), or the Pseudo-group statue of Penmeru in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (acc. no. 12.1484), both dated to the 5th Dynasty. Gender ambiguity for young children could have been a stage in engendering children (Sofaer 1997), or perhaps it was a means of protection. It had that function, for instance, in premodern rural Egypt, where young boys were dressed as girls to ward off the evil eye.

The meaning of names was part of positioning a child in a social network. From the Deir el-Medina ostraca, which allow the reconstruction of genealogies, it is clear that certain birth names were favored in particular families. Foreign names re-occurred as well, and would often skip generations, linking a foreign-named grandfather and grandson, while the son/father would have an Egyptian name (Ward 1994:63).

It seems that the central government was not concerned with individuals at state level. There was no official documentation of births, marriages, divorces, or
deaths. Lists of names are only found for very practical reasons, for instance in the work rosters of Deir el-Medina, in juridical archives to identify buyers and sellers, contractants, or plaintiff and opposite party (Valbelle 1993). Death, in fact, seems to have been a highly individualized occurrence, which concerned the deceased and the family, but not the state.

The name was the identifying element of a person, both before and after death. Representations of persons, ubiquitous in funerary art, do not attempt to portray the individual. Reliefs, paintings, and statues were identified by inscribing the name of the main characters in the scene, such as the deceased and his or her relatives. This is apparent from the early Dynastic period onwards, where, for instance on the Narmer Palette, the name of the king crowns the scene, while the sandal bearer and a priest are indicated by their titles. In Old Kingdom art in which the smaller tombs are provided with stelae for the tomb owner and immediate family, the only names that occur are those of the direct linear family and the gods. Identifying the person whose name is depicted in the large tombs of the officials in Saqqara is enabled by a clear focus on a few persons, depicted much larger than the subsidiary figures, and in proscribed locations in the tomb, near the false door and the offering table. Usurpation of statuary and coffins could be effectuated by simply deleting the old and inscribing the new name, as is amply demonstrated by examples from especially the 21st Dynasty.

Yet there were attempts to produce real likenesses, parallel to the modern concept of a portrait, in which the face is the most identifying part of the body. Most of the evidence dates to the Old Kingdom, for instance the multiple statues of the owner deposited in some of the Giza and Saqqara tombs which occasionally depict different life phases (Robins 1997:76); the occurrence of “reserve heads,” which have idiosyncratic features (Aldred 1980:67–70); and textual references to an “image according to life” being commissioned (Bolshakov 1997:234–260).

The importance of the written name is greater after death than in life. The name ensures that the correct person benefits from the provisions in the tomb. The tomb and much of its inventory are identified by name, inscribed on the objects, on funerary cones, and on sealings. But the name also poses a potential threat in a world where magic is a reality. In Egyptian mythology, Isis, through devious tricks, gains knowledge of the name of Ra, and thus gains power over the ancient god. And in the myth she states “a man lives when one recites in his name” (Mc Dowell 1999:118–120). Similarly, a damnatio memoriae, a systematic destruction of the name, not only affects a person’s memory, but also destroys the individual and the “self” reborn in the afterlife.

In our secularized society, it is difficult to assess how important the ancient Egyptian religious concepts would have been in a person’s life and understanding of self (see Kemp 1995). Nevertheless, it is almost inevitable to conclude that the complex of religion, magic, and medicine had a direct, personal corporal reality. A definition of “self” was closely linked to mostly post-mortem aspects: apart from the body and the name, a person also consisted of a _ka_, _ba_, shadow, _akh_, and heart (Assmann 2001a; Loprieno 2003). There have been many attempts to define these aspects of ancient Egyptian personhood. Only a thorough analysis can take into account the gradual changes over time, characterized by developments in thought, regional differences, misunderstandings, and reinterpretations. For the brief
outline here, most information is taken from the funerary literature (Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead, the Underworld Books), which gives an implicit outline of the constitution of the self, even though this term in itself is problematic.

The *ka* is often called the “double,” because in royal iconography it is created at the same time as the living body, as illustrated by temple reliefs of the divine birth of the king, where the king is followed by a figure with the same appearance, sometimes wearing the hieroglyph for *ka* on its head (Bolshakov 1997). It seems, however, to have a meaning which is closer to “life force,” or vital energy, associated through word play with the term for bull, as symbol of ultimate masculine fertility, and the term for sustenance. Commoners are not represented with a second figure, because the depiction in the tomb represents the *ka*, although it could perhaps be maintained that the occurrence of several statues of the deceased in the Old Kingdom tombs of Giza points to the embodiment of the vital force streaming through generations. After death the *ka* is the active self, and part of a network of interactions which unites the generations (Meyer-Dietrich 2006:228). This emphasis on forebears, and the placement of the person in a social network that spans generations, is certainly still of great importance during the New Kingdom. In addition to the so-called *akh-iker-n-Ra* stelae found at Deir el-Medina, and addressed to specific ancestors, nameless and quite featureless human busts have been found, which have been speculated to address ancestors in general. Interestingly, the term *ka* disappears in Demotic, and is replaced by the word *ren*, “name” (Möller 1912:36).

Perhaps the interpretation of the *ka* as “double” is partly inspired by a comparison with the premodern notion of *kareen*/*kareena*. Winifred Blackman, one of the first women to have a formal academic training in ethnography, published an ethnography of Egyptian farmers in *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (1927). In her final chapter she draws many parallels between ancient and modern Egypt in which she sees similarities between the *ka* and the notion in rural Egyptian communities of a “double.” The *kareen(a)* is part of personhood, it is born at the same time as a person, it gets married to the spouse’s *kareen(a)*, and dies when a person dies. It has an effect on daily life, especially when the double is jealous. It is tantalizing to see the *kareen(a)* as a “survival” of the ancient Egyptian *ka*, but that would be a fallacy. Studying phenomena without reference to the context in which they are embedded leads to supercilious and often simply wrong assumptions and interpretations. Similarly the role of the shadow in early twentieth-century Egypt is important, as is the name of a person. In the Luxor region among the lower class it is very common to have nicknames, which are very different from the “official” name. As seen in Chapter 5, such analogies are tantalizing, but problematic. The context and meaning of the phenomena change, not only between the present and the past, but also during the entire span of Egypt’s long history.

In the funerary literature of the Middle Kingdom, the body is in an afterlife state, where death is a period of transition. Terms used, such as *djet*, *hau*, and *khjat*, all indicate the dead body as a corpse. In an excellent analysis of the Middle Kingdom coffin of Senebi, Erika Meyer-Dietrich (2006) proposes that these are different stages, in which the bodily fluids transform post-mortem into the semen of the god Osiris, the life-bringing force. Thus decomposition and transition result
in rebirth, and reconstitute the person as self. An important part of the body is the heart, the seat of intelligence and courage, the organ that is weighed against the goddess of truth Maat in the judgment of the dead. It is eaten by the “devourer” Ammut, part lion, part crocodile, part hippopotamus, when the heart is too heavy. In the mumification process the heart is treated separately, and in most periods of Egyptian history it is placed back in the body, rather than in extra-corporal containers, such as canopic jars.

The term *ba* is often translated as “soul,” which invokes unsuitable Christian associations, such as an opposition of body and soul. The *ba* is a manifestation of the power of gods, and of the divine king. From the Middle Kingdom onwards the *ba* is part of the living King, while the royal deceased forebears are also *bas* (Żabkar 1975). To non-royal persons the *ba* is considered the free-ranging aspect of the body after death, which has all bodily functions and is, from the New Kingdom onwards, depicted as a bird with a human head. In the Coffin Texts, the *ba* occurs in combination either with the body, the shadow, or sun shade (*shut*) or with the “appearance” or “form” (*iru*). The latter denotes a phase of the reconstitution of the self, while the *ba* and the shadow are the fundamental parts in the development of the *akh* (Meyer-Dietrich 2006). While the body rests in the tomb, the *ba* moves about and unites with the shadow, the visible aspect during the day, depending on the sunlight. We find the same close connection in the eleventh hour of the Amduat (the visualized texts of that-what-is-in-the-Underworld, painted on the tomb walls of the early 18th-Dynasty kings). Here the destruction of the enemies of the sun god Ra is depicted as fire or poison pits in which the bodies, the *bas*, and the shadows are destroyed (Hornung 1999). Textual evidence thus mostly refers to the *bas* of commoners in the afterlife, but there are indications that not only the king was considered to have a *ba* during life. As with many religious phenomena, the Middle and New Kingdom periods saw an expansion of funerary rituals of royal origin that became available to an increasingly broader group of persons.

*Akh* is the term for the privileged deceased, freed from the bonds of the mumified body, and allowed to follow the sun god Ra. It is the self after reconstitution and rebirth, enabled by the rituals of embalmment and mumification. The New Kingdom texts of the *akh-iker-en-Ra* stelae specify that “becoming an *akh*” is the work of the lector-priest, reciting the proper texts, and the embalmer. The good wishes for the deceased are that he may be *akh*, well equipped (*aperu*), and venerable (*shepses*) (Demaree 1983:204). Being well equipped meant owning a tomb with the proper furniture. Although these provisions seem to focus on the individual, the ritual and magical concepts and language were focused on male sexuality, which had to be mediated to be effective for the female deceased (Cooney 2008). Great care was given to provisioning the dead, partly to protect the living from revenge of recently deceased family members, who were known by name. There are several examples of so-called letters to the dead, which plead the good care that the surviving relatives have taken of the deceased (Grieshammer 1975), but tombs were also redistributed. After one or two generations the care-takers of the tomb, be they family, or priests paid for their services, would have died. At that time the individual became part of the more generic forebears, a pool of ancestors not known by name. The living no longer had a personal relation to
these deceased, no living memories, because they were generations away. The role of the forebears should not be considered in the sense of lineage, but as real entities, or spirits, that might intervene on behalf of, or against, an individual. There are a few examples of forebears who retained their names and had reached a special status in a community. They would reach a state of divinity, but in a sense these are approachable, accessible gods who understand the living and can mediate. Examples are Imhotep, in Memphis (3rd Dynasty, deified during the New Kingdom), Heqaib, or Pepinakht, in Elephantine (6th Dynasty, deified during the Middle Kingdom), Izi (6th Dynasty, deified during the Middle Kingdom), and Amenhotep son of Hapu (18th dynasty, deified in the Ptolemaic period).

Social Interaction and Identity Markers in Material Culture

Because identity is socially constituted, participation in different groups may result in multiple forms of identity, which, as outlined above, are in a sense united by the personal identification of the name. The term identity has been used for different social phenomena, ranging from specifically and contextually defined roles. These can be listed as opposites or complementary aspects, such as man, woman; father, daughter; employee, employer; blue- or white-collar worker; teacher, student; the sick or the healthy; or as belonging to a group, sometimes ruled by overarching principles such as social status, nationality, and ethnicity. Identity is, however, more than a context-dependent social role. Ultimately it is defined by inclusion or exclusion, belonging or not, the human order of self and other, of signifier and signified (see Thomas 1996:41). Whether formulated as determined by ethnicity, gender, age, profession, social status, or a combination of these, the difference between a social role and social identity can be summarized as temporally versus permanently engrained individual–group relations. This does not exclude multiple identities, but limits these to long-term relations in well-established social contexts.

In spite of the difficulty of trying to understand a mode of communication that is implicit, context-dependent, and often visual, without knowing the signal, the sender or receiver, there are a number of aspects that upon scrutiny give us valuable information. These are evidence for food, dress, domestic architecture, personal belongings in a domestic setting or as part of a tomb inventory, as well as daily and burial customs. Even though it seems relevant to determine whether we are discussing identity as a feature of self-representation or as a definition by others, in practice it is a combination of both. Signifiers are both material and immaterial. Examples of the latter are, for instance, speech and accent and the way one carries oneself. There are some indications of immaterial signifiers in ancient Egypt, mostly accessible through oblique references in textual sources, either as sociolects, speech determined by gender, status, profession, and age, or dialects (Osing 1975). For instance in P. Anastasi 28, 1, a miscommunication is compared to the lack of understanding between inhabitants of the Delta and of Yebu, Elephantine, in the far south (Fischer-Elfert 1986:238).

The subconscious, or tacitly adhered to, classifications of society and individual are best defined through a study of the material culture. Only very few of such
detailed studies have been done so far (Meskell 1999, 2002, 2004, 2005; Smith 2003), but this approach is a promising field for further exploration of the topic. The material signifiers can be found in an archaeological context, but that does not make them easily accessible, or comprehensible. As Meskell (1999) concluded, even with the exceptionally good preservation of Egyptian archaeological materials, much still eludes us.

Perhaps the most important material correlate of communicating identity is the body itself. In archaeology the body is evidence of the existence of a person, and by studying the body, particulars such as sex, age, and health can be extrapolated in relation to the archaeological context (Bard 1988). Children have long have been “invisible” in the archaeological record (Lucy 2005) and it has been argued that one of the reasons is the relative small number of children’s burials found (Sofaer 1997). In Egypt, child burials and other evidence for children are available, but still the group which is most involved in enculturation, and hence the forming of group identity, is studied rarely (Baxter 2008). The living body is the major identifier of age, an aspect that is often augmented in the living with signifiers such as special tasks, clothing, hair style, or other material signifiers, while the corpse still retains important characteristics and, at least in the higher classes, even gains more of these as part of the burial equipment. A body without a name is, however, not identifiable as a person. Inscribing the name is central in the ancient Egyptian understanding of personhood, and the material culture is geared to this: many of the objects, especially the ones prepared specifically for the grave, have the name of the deceased inscribed; statues have space reserved for the name inscription, for instance on the back pillars, which form the strongest and best-protected part of the object; and tomb reliefs reserve ample space for inscribing the name. The religious identity of a person is closely connected to the name as identifier, and the \textit{ka}, \textit{ba}, the heart, the \textit{iru}, the shadow, and the \textit{akh} are represented mostly by imagery and texts, and in case of the \textit{ka} also by statuary. These are quite deliberate representations of aspects of the person.

The notion that food is closely related to identity “is strongly supported by the claim that sentiments of belonging via food do not only include the act of classification and consumption, but also the preparation, the organization, the taboos, the company, the location, the pleasure, the time, the language, the symbols, the representation, the form the meaning and the art of eating and drinking” (Scholliers 2001:7). In the ancient Egyptian context a study of the depicted contents of offering tables would represent an idealized and standardized food provision for the gods of Egypt, but by proxy also for its inhabitants, while the occurrence of food restrictions, or the naming of populations after food habits, signifies the opposite. We have to be careful to employ the word taboo where the ancient Egyptian language uses \textit{but}, which means “disgust, abomination” and is linked to notions of purity and impurity (Frandsen 1986). From the Late Period there are textual sources which explicitly forbade the use of certain foodstuffs, such as fish, pork, or beans. This was limited to certain regions, and therefore may have been important as a definition of (a part of) a group living within those specific areas. On the other hand the same foodstuffs are known to have been staple foods in other periods and regions, so adherence to these regulations may have been limited to a certain portion of the society (Gamer-Wallert 1970). When the 25th-Dynasty...
king Piye (c. 750–715) conquered the Delta, he was only prepared to meet with one of the local rulers, stating that the others “could not enter the palace because they were uncircumcised and were eaters of fish, which is an abomination (but) to the palace” (translation Lichtheim 1980:80).

In Roman sources inhabitants of the southern Red Sea region were named after what at least in Roman eyes were their specific dietary peculiarities: fish eaters, ostrich eaters, dog eaters, elephant eaters, locusts eaters, and meat eaters (Strabo 16.4.8–13). This is likely a very warped classification of encountered peoples, and a pejorative indication similar to the term Eskimo, from Alqonquian esquimantsic, “people who eat their meat raw,” as an insulting term for the Inuit (Mintz 2003:24). A detailed study of food remains, either zooarchaeological, archaeobotanical, or through residue analysis of pottery, may provide us with certain trends of the actual use of foodstuffs (Barnard and Eerkens 2007; Cappers 2006; O’Day et al. 2004), and can prevent us from considering populations by only the most obvious or visible aspects of their culture (Edwards 2003). Apart from the food remains themselves there are other material remains closely related to food preparation, serving, and consumption which have served as a signifier (Schärer 1998; Smith 2003). An example is archaeological basketry remains from Middle Egypt and Nubia. Basketry found in the Amarna workmen’s village and dating to the New Kingdom period (around 1350 BCE) consisted of flat, undecorated coiled containers made of palm leaf. They were well made, but quite coarse, and most likely used to serve food. The Nubian basketry, excavated in Qasr Ibrim, and dating to a much later period (6th century CE), was made of the same materials, but much finer. More importantly, the Qasr Ibrim baskets were decorated on the outside with colored winders, or patterned stitching. These baskets were used not as containers, but as covers, to protect the contents of cups, or food served on trays. From the decoration and shape it is clear that there was a clear regional difference in ideas of food serving and presentation (Wendrich 1999). In this case, the distinction denotes a spatial difference, traceable over a long period. To simply call this an ethnic difference disregards the growing notion that ethnicity, similar to other forms of identity, is not determined and static, but equally negotiated in social and political settings (Jones 1997).

The study of identity has been separated in the study of ethnicity (Schneider, this volume), gender (Wilfong, this volume), class (Grajetzki, this volume), and age, and is an ongoing process that results in different expressions, depending on the circumstances and the context. The material items which are considered signifiers and are part of self-definition come to the fore when an attempt is made by members of the group to create a common representation, often in times of duress. After the building of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, which flooded most of Lower Nubia, several Nubian villages created a space where guests can be received, decorated following traditional concepts. Stimulated by the loss of their village and the distress of the forced resettlement, the villages have created a central place of memory. A similar procedure of self-definition through material culture took place among the Ababda nomads in the southern reaches of the Egyptian Eastern Desert. A sharp increase of tourism and an influx of developers, hotel giants, and tour operators led to the creation of a cultural heritage center (Wendrich 2008).

Some of the objects, such as the *djabana*, a globular coffee maker with a wide
distribution throughout Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Southern Egypt, have grown into very explicit cultural markers, an ethnic symbol of nomadic groups along the Red Sea coast (Figures 11.1 and 11.2).

For the past we often are forced to concentrate on the funerary context, partly because of a bias in the number of cemeteries that have been excavated in comparison to the dearth of settlement archaeology, but also because death requires a definite establishment of identity. This is apparent through the entire depth of Egyptian history (Meskell 1999; Riggs 2005; Wengrow 2006). Explicit presentation of the self in ancient Egypt occurs mostly in textual or visual sources, in many different contexts and for various audiences and purposes. Self-definition was, however, in many cases a luxury. An identity could be forced upon a person by others, and result in the eyes of the “self” in a misrepresentation. On the other hand, enforced stereotypes were sometimes appropriated and re-instituted as part of the “self.” In the archaeological record explicit self-representation is very

Figure 11.1  *Djabana* is the term for a hospitality ceremony among several groups where guests are invited to drink three or seven small cups of strong, sweet, ginger-flavored coffee, made from freshly roasted beans crushed and steeped in a globular coffee pot with the same name. Photo: The author.
limited. To a certain extent biographies, inscribed in the tomb of high-status officials, can be considered as such. Only certain persons were entitled to use a biographical description, and even then their self-representation was determined by social circumscription. Autobiographies were written as early as the 4th Dynasty, and developed from a simple summing up of rank and titles. They record important functions held during a lifetime, rather than a detailed linear “life history,” a “coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events” (Bourdieu 2000:300). The biographies are quite standardized careful compositions, and their purpose was in the first place to convince the reader, members of the family, or priests that the tomb owner was worthy of offerings (imakh). Many of the biographies highlight personal relations with the pharaoh, as the main sign of worthiness.

Visual representations, in the form of paintings, reliefs, or statuary, were perhaps another form of self-representation (Stevens 2007), albeit for purposes of sustaining the deceased in the afterlife. Tomb scenes which bridge social signifiers for the dead and the living are the depictions of offering bearers, known from the Old Kingdom onwards. These scenes, which seem to represent the ceremony of carrying the furniture and burial equipment into the tomb, were considered

**Figure 11.2** The djabana has become a cultural marker for the Beja, a conglomeration of several nomadic groups from the mountainous region along the Red Sea in Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Monument on a street crossing in Suakin, Sudan. Barnard 2007:Fig. 3. Used with permission.
indispensable in Old Kingdom decorated tombs (Walsem 2005:53), and continued throughout the New Kingdom period (Barthelmess 1992). Although clearly an important part of the burial ritual, this type of funerary scene is rarely discussed. It usually occurs near the transportation of the deceased in the coffin on a sledge or carried by bearers on a bier. Settgast (1963) discusses whether all the funerary scenes represent actual performed rituals, or are part of the recitation of remembered and honored traditions, expressed in words rather than deeds. The burial procession is, however, one of the activities that actually did take place. In several scenes the offering bearers are named as sons of the deceased (Barthelmess 1992:71–73). Carrying the carefully prepared and expensive tomb equipment into the tomb would have been a display of wealth and standing and the only time in which the expenditure for the afterlife would be part of an extensive public display in the world of the living. It is perhaps comparable to the display of the trousseau of lower- and middle-class newly weds in present-day Egypt, where the car with the bride and groom is followed by open-bed pick-up trucks with the bedroom furniture, fridge, and television. There are other indications that status played an important part in the burial cortège both for the deceased and for close relatives and colleagues. In high-status burials those who carry the bier are often mentioned by name (e.g. Reeves 1990:72–73). We can speculate that high officials probably fought to be literally in the picture as the one to carry the mummified remains of Pharaoh.

In the manner in which persons, landscape, nature, and objects were depicted, we can perhaps consider changes in style as a reflection of individual agency, of either the producer or the patron who ordered the work. This has been maintained most vocally in relation to Amarna art (e.g. Freed 1999) and Akhenaten’s alleged personal intervention, but this then would have been the politically or religiously motivated decision of a small circle only. As outlined above, ancient Egyptian visual representation focused on different aspects than the modern gaze would seek in portraiture.

If we look for the expression of identity in material culture outside the funerary realm, we have to look at settlement archaeology. Domestic architecture communicated identity through the size, amenities, and layout of the dwellings. If we compare Kerma dwellings with the roughly contemporary settlement of Lahun, then the difference is inescapable. The Kerma houses have been constructed from thin mudbrick walls and organic materials: tree trunks and branches, and palm leaf matting. All that remains today are post holes in a marked circular pattern, with wavy wall lines indicating the boundaries of individual compounds (Bonnet 1990, 2004). This forms a stark contrast with the orthogonal layout of several of the settlements to the north, for instance the one at Kahun (Petrie et al. 1891; Quirke 2005). From the few extant examples of settlements dated to different periods – Old Kingdom Giza and Balat; Middle Kingdom Kahun and Karnak, as well as the internal structures of the Nubian forts; New Kingdom Amarna, and to a lesser extent Deir el-Medina – the orthogonal layout clearly is the preferred building style. The rounded Kerma features denote a very different concept, even though Kerma and Egypt were in close contact.

If we concentrate on the New Kingdom period, then we can make an interesting comparison of house styles of two settlements of the same period and the same
region, but purportedly inhabited by different classes. The suburbs of the main city at Amarna and the workmen’s village (also known as the “Eastern Village”) display a marked difference (Kemp 2006; Kemp and Garfi 1993). The layout of the suburbs is characterized by walled compounds, surrounded by smaller housing units, taken to indicate patron–client relations (see Lehner, this volume), while the workmen’s village is a walled orthogonally planned settlement in which all house are the same size. For the visitors or inhabitants of Amarna, the occurrence of granaries in the main city house compounds pointed unequivocally at wealth, because they represented land ownership, which required storage of the harvest yield. The number of features a house displayed, such as the number of rooms, use of columns, and bed platforms, were concurrent with the social position of the owner (Tietze 1985, 1986). A comparison of the Amarna main city houses with those from the workmen’s village shows that apart from these features, the size of the house, and the space around the dwelling, other aspects communicated a difference that reached beyond wealth or status. In contrast to the standardized New Kingdom temples, in which all gates to the subsequent, more restricted areas lie in a straight line on the axis of the temple, closed off by wooden doors, the entrances of the large Amarna main city estates never lead directly into the main part of the house. One enters the house along a rising path that forms a zig-zag. This seems to be a preferred pattern of Egyptian housing, deeply engrained in domestic architecture of different periods and apparently independent of the size of the house. The modest houses of the Middle Kingdom town of Lahun, for instance, are built along the same principle, even though at first view this does not seem obvious, because there is much variation in building plan. This makes the Amarna workmen’s village, where the front rooms open directly onto the street, and the door to the main room is positioned in a straight line behind the entrance, seemingly an anomaly. Pivot holes show that wooden doors would have closed off the house from the street, but the windowless front rooms, in many of which evidence for weaving has been found, would need to get their light from the open door. The entrances of the houses at Deir el-Medina have a comparative layout and in addition many of the front rooms contain a feature which has been characterized as a house shrine or, perhaps, a birthing bed (Meskell 2002). In our perspective both associated activities, worship or breastfeeding, require a private space. The issue of house entrances provokes questions of the right to, or need for, privacy in the domestic sphere. Explicit self-reflection is needed to correct for cultural biases, to avoid, for instance, the interpretation of fourteenth-century BCE culture being railroaded by twenty-first-century prudery or sensibilities.

In detailed comparisons we can begin to tease out aspects of material culture that are used as subconscious markers. It might even be possible to discern at what point, or under which circumstances, individuals or groups purposefully advertise themselves as a group, and what the communal factor is that creates or defines a sense of belonging or exclusion. In order to enable a fuller interpretation of issues of identity we can summarize the examples given above in a program of research: a multivariate analysis of a complex multitude of factors is the foundation to decipher elements of identity. By studying the body, adornment and clothing, food ways, architectural styles, and find assemblages, we can define how particular concepts of personhood and identity relate to social factors such as class, rank,
age, social status, profession, gender, and ethnicity, as well as “personal” properties such as intelligence, strength, appearance, and health. Our most important task is, however, to address not only how statements of identity were made, but also what individuals or groups were communicating by adhering to particular patterns, or deviating from these.

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