

The Household Religion in Ancient Egypt: problems and constraints

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Of all facets that compose Egyptian Religion, there is one – the Household Religion – to which, for several reasons, has not been given the proper attention by the historiography. Interestingly, if Religion is one of the most studied domains of Ancient Egypt civilization¹, what we first noticed when we started to study the Household Religion is the almost complete absence of works of synthesis or reference on the subject². According to Ritner, the Household Religion is a subject that is not only absent, but also apparently avoided and ignored³ because the issue is not addressed in the great works of reference on the religious domain of Ancient Egypt civilization, or, being so, only in a notoriously brief⁴ way.

¹ Cf. Derchain, P., “La Religion égyptienne” in *Histoire des Religions* I, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, Paris, 1970, p. 63.

² There are only four studies specifically devoted to the Household Religion: Friedman, F., “Aspects of domestic life and religion” in L. H. Lesko (ed.), *Pharaoh's workers. The villagers of Deir el Medina*, Ithaca – London, 1994, pp. 82–97; Lesko, B. K., “Household and domestic religion in Ancient Egypt” in J. Bodel, S. Olyan (eds.), *Household Religion in Antiquity* (The Ancient World: comparative histories), Malden – Oxford – Victoria, 1994, pp. 197–209; Ritner, R., “Household Religion in J. Bodel; S. Olyan (eds.), *Household Religion in Antiquity* (The Ancient World: comparative histories), Malden – Oxford – Victoria, 1994, pp. 171–196; Stevens, A., “Domestic Religious Practices.” in J. Dielman; W. Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA – Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles, 2009, pp. 1-31. (<http://escholarship.org/oc/item/7s076628w>). The first one focuses only on Deir el-Medina. Moreover, the existing studies often engage in specific locations or just in one type of practice.

³ The author states that «the term ‘household Religion’ is conspicuously absent from the field of Egyptology.» Cf. Ritner, *art. cit.*, p. 171.

⁴ Generally, the Household Religion is analyzed only as a facet of the Personal Piety. Cf. *ibidem*.

The purpose of this paper is to try to understand which problems and constraints better explain or justify this situation. These relate, in one hand, with the issue of the available sources, and, in the other hand, with the very definition of Household Religion.

In his daily life, the Egyptian believer had the possibility to engage in various forms of worship, which allowed him to contact with the divine and thus respond to his religious devotion. These practices include the participation in the festivities of the religious calendar, whether public festivals or divine processions, the votive offerings in the great temples or small chapels, and even the procedures related to the funerary cult. To this long list we must add the Household Religion, namely, the proceedings of religious nature which took place at home.

Therefore, we noticed the existence of a group of religious practices that, with greater or lesser proximity to the Official Cult, were accessible to the believer. However, when we delve specifically about one of them, in this case the Household Religion, it is necessary to clarify the relationship they had with each other. More precisely, it is essential to define the criteria underlying this classification.

It is in this context that we identify the first uncertainties. When we look at the four works referred earlier in this paper, we clearly recognize this issue. For Stevens and Friedman, the Household Religion is, simply, a group of religious actions that were put into practice within the family home⁵. However, both Ritner and Lesko consider this perspective reductive, because they understand that the Household Religion includes all religious practices to which the believer had access in his daily life.⁶

The authors' opinions are divided in two different classifications: one that sees the Household Religion as a specific practice, and other that sees it as a set of different practices.

These disagreements of criteria will surely constraint the approach to be made on this issue. Before we seek a possible solution for this

⁵ Cf. Stevens, *art. cit.*, p. 1; Friedman, *art. cit.*, p. 96.

⁶ Cf. Ritner, *art. cit.*, p.186; Lesko, *art. cit.*, p. 197, 200.

matter, we should introduce another question, of terminological nature, that can help us to choose the best path to follow.

For some authors, speaking about Household Religion is like speaking about Private, Practical, Popular or Personal Religion⁷. Regardless of what is meant by each of these expressions in particular⁸, it's clear that they have a broad range of meanings, and therefore it is perfectly acceptable to use them to designate all the referred practices. Nevertheless, does the expression Household Religion allow this same coverage or, on the contrary, does it reduce undoubtedly the scope of action and calls for a concrete analysis of its specificities?

As a matter of fact, these practices have more similarities than differences. They share the motivations, in some cases the typology of procedures, and even some deities⁹. The essential difference is the space where they occur. However, each one has characteristics that allows them to be analyzed by it self. So, why wouldn't we do it with the Household Religion?

We believe that, if it is possible to look at the religious practices of the Egyptian man as a whole and consider them in this way, it is also necessary to look at each one of them in particular. In this manner, it is possible to obtain a detailed and deep knowledge about each one of them, thus recognizing them for their intrinsic value. If we understand the Household Religion as a group of practices and not as a specific practice with its own proceedings¹⁰ that took place in a defined place – the house – could it be misrepresented and even, once again, relegated to second place?

⁷ Cf. Ritner, *art. cit.*, pp. 172, 186; Lesko, *art. cit.*, p. 200.

⁸ Luiselli gives us a brief clarification about the scope of these expressions: Luiselli, M., "Personal piety (Modern Theories related to)." in J. Dielman; W. Wendrich (ed.), *UCLA-Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles, 2008, pp. 4, 5.

⁹ In the case of the Household Religion, beyond the worship of major deities of the Egyptian pantheon, the preference lies on the so-called domestic gods. These gods had no temples or priests and their place of worship were the private homes. Cf. David, R., *The Pyramid Builders of Ancient Egypt. A Modern Investigation of Pharaoh's Workforce*, London – New York, 1986, p. 81.

¹⁰ We consider as proceedings pertaining to the Household Religion the worship of the domestic gods, the ancestor's worship, magic, the names and also other types of uses which, although less directly, had underlying religious sentiments, such as infant burials or the interpretation of dreams.

We consider that, to give to the Household Religion its due relevance and to ensure that its understanding is as complete as possible, it is preferable to see it only as a set of religious proceedings that took place in the household context. Although, one should not ignore its relationship with the other practices that surround it.

The second constraint to the study of the Household Religion is related to the available sources because, despite their variety, they have characteristics that hinder their analysis. We will begin by identifying the material available and then we will characterize the problems associated with them.

For the study of Household Religion, textual and material sources¹¹ are available. In the first group we have everyday texts, *e.g.* letters that refer to religious procedures conducted at home; medical and magical spells that clarify the concerns that motivate these practices; offering formulae and dedicatory texts and also other kind of written sources that, even indirectly, can provide some data on the subject, such as the calendars of lucky and unlucky days and transactional documents.

The vestiges of material culture can be grouped into three different sets: cultic facilities, objects and decorations. The cultic facilities allow us to build an idea about the domestic ritual space. In several houses, from different places and periods, it was possible to identify altars, niches, wall recesses with worship formulas and also portable equipment such as offering tables.

Concerning the objects, there were found samples of different typologies, apparently related to the cult, such as stelae, statuettes, anthropoid-busts, ceramic figurines, both human and deities, ostraca with images, various wands and amulets.

The decorations, painted or carved, in walls or lintels, illustrate scenes of devotion to a particular deity or deities. At first sight, we are confronted with a plethora of sources which seems to lead us directly to the understanding of the Household Religion. Nevertheless, there is a

¹¹ Stevens offers a complete characterization of the available sources. Cf. Stevens, *art. cit.*, pp. 1-9.

number of barriers that need to be circumvented in order to obtain the most consistent image possible.

First of all, we can say that we have a range of sources of fragmentary, scattered and indirect nature¹². And, although quite varied, the existing sources are in a very small number if compared with those accessible to the study of Official Religion.¹³

Regarding its diachrony, the sources are unevenly distributed across time with an obvious prevalence for those dating from the New Kingdom or later periods. This fact complicates the possibility of a deeper knowledge of this religious practice in more remote periods.¹⁴

At this point we can add the problem of the spatial location. The available material comes mainly from two locations in particular: Deir el-Medina and Tell el-Amarna¹⁵. This fact suggests that these places are the only ones where it is possible to obtain a deeper characterization of this religious phenomenon. These settlements, crucial to the study of the Household Religion, are not, however, the only ones from where come the available sources. So, despite its higher contribute, it is possible to go beyond them both in geographic and temporal terms¹⁶. For example, Lahun, a settlement from the Middle Kingdom, may be considered a key site for the study of the Household Religion before the New Kingdom. This site provides several types of objects that help to characterize the domestic religious environment experienced daily by believers in that town.¹⁷

Space and time are two major difficulties for the construction of a complete image about the Household Religion in Ancient Egypt. However, this dating and location applies to most sources, but not to all of them. Beyond Deir el-Medina and Tell el-Amarna, there are at least more eighteen places where was located material associated with

¹² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 1.

¹³ According to Ritner the predominance of the sources related to the Official Cult justifies the preference to his study over the Household Religion. Cf. Ritner, *art.cit.*, p. 172.

¹⁴ Stevens, *art. cit.*, pp. 1-3.

¹⁵ Cf. Ritner, *art.cit.*, p. 172; Stevens, *art. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Cf. Ritner, *art.cit.*, p. 172.

¹⁷ Cf. Stevens, *art. cit.*, p. 3; David, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-137.

this religious practice. Nine of them being dated from periods previous to the New Kingdom.¹⁸

Circumvented these difficulties, yet others arise, this time related to the proper interpretation of the sources and the identification of its context of origin.

The material sources to which we resort to study this religious practice are found in domestic context, that is, in the houses that the Egyptian archaeology has been studying over the years. Nevertheless, not always the provenance or the origin context of a given material is one hundred percent safely determined¹⁹. And this question can lead one to assume that an object is connected to the Household Religion when it is actually related to other forms of worship. In other words, we can assign to a source a function that isn't really its own²⁰. This confusion can go further because we may consider that an object has religious purposes when it might be merely decorative or even only a toy.²¹

Renfrew and Bahn speak of this difficulty in categorizing the sources within the religious archeology:

«One problem that archaeologists face is that these belief systems are not always given expression in material culture. And when they are – in what one might term 'archaeology of cult' defined as the

¹⁸ According to Stevens the places where were identified sources related to the Household Religion are: Abydos (Early Dynastic Period – Old Kingdom – First Intermediate Period); Lahun (Middle Kingdom); Qasr el-Sagha (Middle Kingdom); Buhen (Middle Kingdom – New Kingdom); Lisht (Middle Kingdom – Second Intermediate Period – New Kingdom – Third Intermediate Period); Tell el-Dabaa (Middle Kingdom – Second Intermediate Period); Askut (Middle Kingdom – New Kingdom); South Abydos (Middle Kingdom – New Kingdom); Deir el-Ballas (Second Intermediate Period – New Kingdom); Sesebi (New Kingdom); Tell el-Amarna (New Kingdom); Amara West (New Kingdom); Deir el-Medina (New Kingdom); Medinet Habu (New Kingdom – Third Intermediate Period); Kom Medinet Ghurab (New Kingdom); Kom Rabia, (New Kingdom – Third Intermediate Period); El-Ashmunein (Third Intermediate Period); Luxor (Late Period); Tell el-Muqdam (Late Period) e Karanis (Third Century CE). Cf. Stevens, *art.cit.*, pp. 12–20.

¹⁹ In Qasr el-Sagha, for example, were identified objects (stelae) in domestic context, which the archaeologist believes may not be originally from the houses but from a nearby cemetery. Cf. Sliwa, J., "Die Siedlung des Mittleren Reiches bei Qasr el-Sagha. Grabungsbericht 1987 und 1988", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Abteilung Kairo* 48 (1992), p. 185.

²⁰ Cf. Ritner, *art. cit.*, p. 172.

²¹ Stevens, *art. cit.*, p. 3.

system of patterned actions in response to religious beliefs – there is the problem that such actions are not always clearly separated from other actions of everyday life: cult can be embedded within everyday functional activity, and thus difficult to distinguish from it archaeologically.»²²

There is an illustrative example of this problem: the *box bed* or *lit clos*. In the first division of some houses of el-Medina were identified these architectural structures that raise serious doubts about its functionality. Some scholars believe that they were altars where was provided cult to the domestic deities; others, however, without denying them a religious binding, think that they were an area closely connected to the feminine world, especially associated to the delivery and subsequent woman's purification period.²³

The interpretation of the sources raises serious difficulties because we cannot truly assess the contribution of a particular object or structure without knowing exactly its aim in the context (space and time) where it belonged.

One possibility to circumvent this issue is by comparison. We can try to use sources whose purpose has already been identified to classify similar material. In the case of the *box bed*, for example, it is possible to use identical structures found in Amarna, whose purpose was defined thanks to the presence of cultic objects on site. It was noticed that those structures were cult places so, that may serve to prove the theory that ascribes the same aim to the *box bed* in el-Medina.

Having already identified the main constraints of the available sources for the study of the Household Religion, we turn to analyze a particular issue, one that Ritner considers to be the major reason for the absence of this theme in the bibliography – the absence of a thorough knowledge about the domestic architecture.²⁴

²² Renfrew, C.; Bahn, P., *Archaeology. Theories, methods and practice*, London, 1996, p. 388.

²³ Friedman, *art.cit.*, pp. 97-111; Lesko, *art. cit.*, pp. 205-206; Meskell, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

²⁴ Ritner states: «The reasons for this absence are not hard to discover and become apparent when one consults the necessarily brief entries on 'house' in some reference works.» Ritner, *art. cit.*, p. 171.

Ritner considers that the study of the domestic architecture has been clearly neglected in favor of the study of temples, tombs and palaces²⁵. This fact conditions the knowledge that is possible to have, not only of the houses but also of the space that the cult occupied in them.

This preference is not only be due to a clear contrast between the greatness and monumentality of some buildings and the simplicity and triviality of others. To this reality also contributes the fact that we are dealing with constructions that, besides of being made of perishable materials, were subjected to various levels of occupation and are currently in a high state of degradation, due to the utilization of the materials undertaken by the indigenous communities.

However, if after the work of H. Rieke, *Der grundriss des Amarna – Wohnhouses* (1932), the subject was relegated to second plan, the truth is that one can say that the topic has gained new life and currently has become again a target for study by the bibliography. “In recent years the study of urbanism in Egypt has been brought more and more to the center of attention.”²⁶ Thereby, it becomes increasingly easy to have access to details about the domestic architecture in Ancient Egypt. And so, it’s possible to try to overcome this impediment.

Here, once again, the settlements in evidence are el-Medina and Amarna, certainly due to the relevance of their contribution: «Despite the growth of settlement archaeology in Egyptology over the last thirty years, the site of el-Amarna (...) is still regarded as providing the best opportunity for understanding the social and economical dynamics of the Egyptian city.»²⁷

This analysis of the available sources for the study of the Household Religion makes us realize that we stand before a group of material that

²⁵ Ritner, *art.cit.*, p. 171. Arnold strengthens this idea: «Domestic architecture was for a long time neglected by Egyptology in favor of monumental and religious architecture»: Arnold, F., “A Study of Egyptian Domestic Buildings” *Varia Aegyptiaca* 5 (1989), p. 123.

²⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, p.75.

²⁷ Shaw, I., “Egyptian patterns of urbanism. A comparison of three new kingdom settlement sites” in C. J. Eyre (ed.) *Proceeding of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists, Cambridge, 3 – 9 September 1995* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 82), Leuven, 1998, p. 1049.

presents several issues that need to be resolved so that their contribution may be potentiated. Nevertheless, despite the fragmentary, scattered and indirect nature of sources, despite the severe limitations in terms of provenance and dating, despite the difficulties of interpretation and although there still is much work to do in the domestic archaeology field, it seems possible to provide an overview of the religious practices in domestic context.

Namely, the problems and constraints that are related with the Household Religion might be really frightening when we intend to undertake a thorough analysis of this religious practice; however, they are not truly deterrent to its implementation. If we see the Household Religion as a practice *per se*, that is, if we limit its proceedings to those which took place within the home, we reduce the scope of action and only by doing so the path is already simpler and facilitated. Then, regarding the sources, it is really necessary to always remember the constraints associated with them, but without letting they become more vigorous than the contribution they can give.

Thus, we know that it will be easier to characterize the Household Religion in the New Kingdom and in later periods and, moreover, understand some of its dynamic in prior periods if we resort to places like Lahun, for example. This settlement dates from the Middle Kingdom and contradicts the idea of the almost exclusive provenience from el-Medina and Amarna.

Concerning the interpretation of sources, if it is imperative not to make a misleading analysis, it is also necessary to be bold, and to search for landmarks in the plethora of the available material to infer conclusions that are as reliable as possible. In other words, we should not discourage and give up before uncertainty, but rather seek similarities that allow us to create concrete hypotheses. The available material is diverse; the specific bibliography is poor but the works dedicated to related issues is immense; the excavation reports are an essential tool; and the capacity to look beyond the uncertainties becomes an essential requirement. Thus, we consider that the available features allow us to try to overcome the difficulties, so that in the future

we get a clearer picture of this religious practice. This is a task that we intend to pursue.

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