



Figure 1. Tomb of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni with his marble cenotaph in the foreground. From James Rattray, *Scenery, Inhabitants, and Costumes of Afghaunistan* (1848). © All rights reserved. The British Library Board. License Number NEWYOR22.

Presentation, (re)animation, and the enchantments of technology

FINBARR BARRY FLOOD

As a commentator who stands outside both of the fields represented in this volume, I am compelled to offer etic analyses of phenomena that may appear rather differently seen from an emic perspective. Nevertheless, the ambiguities, contradictions, and tensions between absence and presence, concealment and display, collective and singular memory, and so forth, raised by the papers in this volume in relation to the form, decoration, and nature of the sarcophagus are themes that resonate strongly across many fields of anthropology and art history.

A cross-cultural approach to the armature or furniture of death invariably makes one think about the subject in relation to one's own field. I would, therefore, like to begin with a brief reflection on the state of sarcophagus studies in the field of Islamic art history. The first thing to say is that there is some uncertainty as to whether any sarcophagus has been published from the medieval Islamic world—that is, from the period before the Mongol invasions of the mid-thirteenth century. The vast majority of Muslim burials that would have merited the provision of a sarcophagus were those associated with monumental tombs, which appear to have become common only in the ninth or tenth centuries, a century or two after the rise of Islam. These monumental spaces took the dialectics of absence and presence well beyond anything witnessed in Roman or Chinese tombs and sarcophagi, for they were almost always bipartite, consisting of a lower crypt in which the body was entombed and an upper chamber provided with a virtual grave in the form of a cenotaph in plastered brick, marble, or wood, which was frequently the subject of visitation and often, despite the proscriptions of the *'ulamā'* or religious scholars, of veneration. These cenotaphs survive in considerable numbers, and were richly decorated, usually with geometric or vegetal ornament, and sometimes with epigraphic or visual references to illumination and light (most obviously by the repetition of lamp motifs), evoking a prayer frequently inscribed on tombstones, "may God illumine his face"—that is, the face of the incumbent on the day of Resurrection, by contrast with the blackened faces of those bound for hell.

However, outside of an occasional mention for their historical inscriptions, or in the context of studies on ornament, there is a remarkable dearth of serious

analysis of Islamic cenotaphs or sarcophagi in modern scholarship, which has apparently taken them for granted; published architectural drawings of funerary architecture generally omit the crypt, for example.¹ A brief survey of bibliographic sources suggests that the few published articles on the topic exemplify, quite literally, the "great man" model of history, for they concern in chronological order the marble cenotaph of Mahmud of Ghazni in Afghanistan (d. 1030), the most celebrated scion of a dynasty that dominated the eastern Islamic world in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (fig. 1); the wooden sarcophagus or cenotaph apparently made for al-Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, or at least for his head when it was re-interred in Cairo in the twelfth century; the cenotaph of Salah al-Din (d. 1193), celebrated counter-Crusader and liberator of Jerusalem from the Crusaders, in Damascus; the cenotaph of Timur or Tamurlane (d. 1405) in Samarkand; and the wooden cenotaph of Shah Isma'il I, the founder of the Safavid dynasty that ruled Iran during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries at the dynastic shrine of Ardabil in northern Iran.² This lack of attention to the cenotaph/sarcophagus is remarkable in light of the fact that the tomb is a canonical topic in the study of Islamic art. One can only conclude that even with the rich variety of materials at their disposal, Islamic art historians have tended to throw the baby out in their eagerness to analyze the bath, ignoring the intrinsic and concentric relationships of architecture, grave, and body that are a consistent theme in all of the papers in the present volume, and to which I will return shortly.

However, I am fully aware that my comments on the papers in this volume were intended not as musings on the peculiarities of my own field, but to address the

1. For a rare exception, see the drawings in D. Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of Architecture and Its Culture* (London, 2007).

2. J. Sauvaget, "Le cénotaphe de Saladin," *Revue des Arts Asiatique* (1930): 168–175; J. Sourdel-Thomine, "A propos du cénotaphe de Mahmud a Ghazna (Afghanistan)," in *Essays in Honor of Katharina Otto-Dorn*, ed. A. Daneshvari (Malibu, 1981), pp. 127–135; C. Williams, "The Quranic Inscriptions on the tabut of al-Husayn," *Islamic Art* 2 (1987): 3–13; R. Hillenbrand, "The Sarcophagus of Shah Ismā'il at Ardabil," in *Society and Culture in the Early Modern Middle East: Studies on Iran in the Safavid Period*, ed. A. J. Newman (Leiden, 2003), pp. 165–192.

larger intellectual and methodological issues in the two fields that the papers published here represent. To this end, I have identified a series of themes that struck me as common to most of the papers, or their approaches, or both, even if these are not necessarily the most evident or the most important to the authors.

My first concern is with a question that seems fundamental to any endeavor to approach material objects separated by geography that *a priori* have only two common aspects: their connection with death, a universal certainty; and their relationship to the human body. As Jaś Elsner notes, the latter relationship necessarily determines the form of the sarcophagus in practices of inhumation, with resulting tensions between opportunities for ornament and narrative depiction and the limitations that the box form imposes on the development of both. This raises questions of commensuration. How, in practice, might we develop a common language to analyze and discuss the spectacular sarcophagi—of stone and wood, carved, lacquered, and painted—that provide the subject of, if not the excuse for, our own common dialogues? At its most basic level this question of commensuration is manifest in the terminology of description, the problem of the translatability (or not) of the specialized vocabularies of death and burial, and the rituals surrounding both. In terms of the essays comprising this volume, the problem is reflected in the general tendency to avoid the “comparative observations and interpretations” mentioned in the description of the conference from which they derive. I should emphasize that this is not a criticism, but an attempt to highlight a conundrum: However desirable the goal, given the practical limitations on any comparative approach (and in a volume that necessarily deals with death it seems appropriate to emphasize here the finitude of scholarly time), how does one actually implement it in practice?

Taking the papers as a whole, this question of commensuration resolves itself to some extent at the level of methodology. There is, for example, a very heavy emphasis on iconographic analysis, and a frequent appeal to texts to explain beliefs regarding death and its rituals that might have informed the context and appearance of the sarcophagi discussed, even if in some cases these textual narratives had been so deeply internalized that they have been naturalized. The value of iconographic analysis is driven home by many of the papers. For example, in different ways, two papers—those of Paul Zanker and Janet Huskinson—demonstrate how “conventional” imagery rooted in common myths that endured through time could be inflected

by deeply personal and synchronic meanings. Both papers highlight one of a number of homologies that operate in and around the sarcophagus. In Paul Zanker’s case, this concerns the homology between once-living mortal couples (one of whom might still be living) and Selene and Endymion or Dionysus and Ariadne. This is a homology established both through context and the potential inclusion of portraits, which figure the homologous relationship between sleep and death, both morphologically and metaphorically. Among the papers that highlight the value of iconographic analysis I might also mention Richard Neer’s gripping gender-bending narrative, in which he demonstrates how apparently feminine imagery might be relevant to the burial of a male with heroic aspirations.

However, for all its undoubted strengths, iconographic analysis represents but one tool in the burgeoning toolbox of contemporary art history. Other approaches may have illuminated other aspects of the subject, most obviously the dialectic between absence and presence that is central to the sarcophagus, which imitates through its form the thing that it conceals by containment. If, as Louis Marin argued, the grave covers and suppresses the dead, keeping the abject body in place, the sarcophagus often presents and performs its absence, rendering that absence visible in certain carefully staged ways.³ This ambiguous and ambivalent function is enhanced in both China and Rome by ornament, carved or painted, which in the case of portraiture highlights the uncanniness of mimesis—preserving the dead in effigy astride or atop the casket that contains and constrains the putrefying prototype. Given the centrality of these themes, I was surprised to find both fields apparently immune to the “iconic turn” (or even “ontological turn”) in contemporary art history, a shift in emphasis and interest from aesthetics, form, and meaning to the more performative realms of affect and efficacy, being and presence. A corollary of this shift is a move away from questions of representation toward phenomena of mediation and presentation, a move that the sarcophagus and its role in a dialectics of occlusion and revelation would seem particularly well suited to engaging. Whether one locates the beginning of this trend (by no means confined to art history) in Hans Belting’s magnum opus *Bild und Kult* (1990), or elsewhere, its most recent manifestations have been in the work of Horst Bredekamp, Georges Didi-Huberman, Hans Ulrich

3. L. Marin, *On Representation*, trans. C. Porter (Stanford, 2001), pp. 276–277.

Gumbrecht, and (rhetorically, at least) in that of W. J. T. Mitchell, whose 2004 book *What Do Pictures Want?* might offer interesting ways of considering the dialectic of absence and presence in relation to the operation of the decorated sarcophagus.⁴

In its anthropological incarnation the push for presence that characterizes the iconic turn might also be able to address the problem of commensuration that I mentioned earlier by providing a common framework of analysis. I am thinking here of Alfred Gell and his inspiring, frustrating, maddening, exciting, and immensely useful posthumous publication *Art and Agency* (1998), which offers a model for the cross-cultural analysis of crafted artifacts that attempts to escape some of the more obvious traps associated with universalizing particular Euro-American epistemologies and ontologies. While one might oscillate between being awed and appalled by the ambition of Gell's endeavor, there is no doubt that the resulting provocation is often productive. In his anthropology of crafted artifacts, Gell does not deal explicitly with the material culture of death. Nevertheless, Gell's ascription of social agency to artifacts and his exploration of the ability of art objects to effect mediations as "social agents" in certain circumstances seems relevant to a type of object that foregrounds in dramatic fashion a tension between absence and presence, a tension that to some extent reiterates disjunctions between presentational and representational modalities of the image, a theme to which I will return.

Gell's concern with concentricity, with what he calls enchainment, as the active principle in the effective abduction of agency in relation to specific classes of crafted artifacts—among the examples he uses is a particular Hindu wooden icon in which a life-substance is placed—recalls a quality that is invoked again and again in almost all of the papers, whether in relation to the nesting of sarcophagi or the concatenated series of swaddled body-container-tomb, or Jaś Elsner's idea

4. H. Belting, *Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich, 1990); H. U. Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, 2004); W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, 2004); G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, 2009); H. Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin, 2010). For convenient overviews of these developments, see C. Maar and H. Burda, *Iconic Turn: Die Neue Macht der Bilder* (Köln, 2005); R. Maniura, and R. Shepherd, *Presence: The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects* (Burlington, Vt., 2006); K. Moxey, "Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7 (2008): 131–146.

of recession through representation.⁵ This idea of concentricity or seriality is emblemized in Wu Hung's paper by the striking image of the self shedding its mortal shell like a cicada, illustrating what Gell would describe as the onion-like nature of the social agent, an appropriate metaphor for a structure at whose heart lies a dusty absence.⁶ In light of the common appropriation of domestic architectural forms for sarcophagi and tombs in both China and Rome, one might extend the series to see the soul or self in its corporeal shell in the home as homologous to the body in its sarcophagus in its tomb. The issue of concentricity is also addressed in Verity Platt's paper and is central to Richard Neer's paper on the Canakkale sarcophagus, for the homology between the incumbent of the sarcophagus and Akhilleus that Neer demonstrates is dependent upon a concatenated sequence of concentric signs—tumulus, sarcophagus/urn, body/ashes—what he calls "container-signs" whose homologous values are enacted through representation. The idea brings us close to Gell's notion of containment and concentricity as intrinsic facets of the efficacy—social and otherwise—of artifacts and images.

One might ask, however, about the intended audience for this complex series, buried as the sarcophagus was within its tumulus, a question tied to the nature of beliefs concerning the afterlife. Indeed, the issue of visibility and intended audience for the ornamentation of the sarcophagi is raised by many of the papers. While the vast majority of carvings and paintings occur on the exterior, I was very struck by those (admittedly few) instances from both the Roman world and China in which it was the interior surface of the sarcophagus that was decorated. Although Jaś Elsner, working within the Mediterranean context, assumes that the ornament deployed on the exterior of Greek, Roman, and Etruscan sarcophagi was there for the sake of the living, the ornament of the Chinese sarcophagi suggests that other potential audiences and viewers were at stake, and not always those who might be well disposed towards the incumbent of the tomb. The phenomenon raised for me the question of what, if anything, the dead are assumed to be doing in the tomb, and what company, if any, they are imagined to keep? Here there was a marked difference between the papers on Rome and China: While the Romanists have much to say on the form and iconography of the sarcophagus and several

5. A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 137–153.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140.

papers—notably that of Edmund Thomas—offer us in-depth reconstructions of its historical and topographic context, as an outsider there appears to be a remarkable dearth of interest in, or discussion of, Graeco-Roman beliefs regarding death and the afterlife. Afterlife and soul seem to have vanished along with the inconvenient corpse, which may have been the elephant in the room of the conference from which this volume stems, although Paul Zanker's insistence on the multivalence of Roman funerary imagery does address this obliquely. By contrast, the papers on China explore the aspirations and beliefs that informed their subjects in great (and, it has to be said, not always consistent) details. But let's leave this apparent divergence of approach, or at least emphasis, aside for the moment to remain with the question of ornaments and audiences.

In his paper, Wu Hung notes that depictions of apertures on Han sarcophagi are often framed by dense geometric and zoomorphic patterns, suggesting a desire to control and restrict the mobility that their presence implies. Perhaps the most remarkable example of the phenomenon is the lacquer sarcophagus of Zeng Hou Yi from Hubei, datable to around 433 B.C. As Alain Thote's paper explains, the outer coffin, which is provided with an aperture on its north-facing short side, is decorated with geometric interlace patterns derived from bronzes. On the inner coffin, images of doors and a window at the foot of the coffin are surrounded by guardian figures and dense tangles of intersecting, interlaced, and overlapping snakes and other creatures, which reach an impenetrable crescendo on the exterior of the headboard, where birds, snakes, and deities do battle (see figs. 3 and 4 in Thote's article).

Reading Alain Thote's description of these images as swarming over the exterior surfaces of the coffin so as to make them impermeable or impenetrable, I was immediately reminded of Gell's characterization of ornament (in his case the dense, complex geometric ornament found on New Guinean lime containers) as a kind of human fly-paper, a mind-trap that draws the viewer in and impales him or her "on its bristling hooks and spines."⁷ Gell offers us a model for understanding how this cognitive stickiness (the phrase is his) operates, brilliantly adapting anthropologies of the gift formulated by ethnographic work in the Polynesian societies with whose material culture he was familiar to the interpretation of ornament. Invoking the dynamic inequilibrium on which gift economies depend, the

deferral of the debt and hence the necessarily diachronic nature of all gift economies, Gell explains that although they impale our gaze, complex designs resist any resolution of the visual conundrums that they offer:

The essence of exchange, as a binding social force, is the delay, or lag, between transactions which, if the exchange relation is to endure, should never result in perfect reciprocation, but always in some renewed, residual, imbalance. So it is with patterns; they slow perception down, or even halt it, so that the decorated object is never fully possessed at all, but is always in the process of becoming possessed.⁸

This frustration of, or resistance to, desire, the deferral of resolution that constitutes the tackiness of complex ornaments, is, of course, a common characteristic of apotropaic ornaments whether in the late antique Mediterranean, China, or the Islamic world, ornaments that deploy what Gell elsewhere dubs the "technology of enchantment" defensively.⁹ Here again I wondered if the technology of enchantment deployed on the sarcophagi discussed in this volume had not worked its magic a little too well, causing us to collude in the dematerialization of some of the nastier and more unappetizing realities associated with the sanitizing container.

The anticipation of and inoculation against active agents of decay, such as snakes, that Alain Thote discusses (a paradoxical endeavor given the body-eating associations of the term "sarcophagus," at least in the Roman world), and the attempt to deny them access to certain areas of the tomb, are only facets of what is clearly a much larger tension between mobility and stasis that was another common theme in many of the papers. At the macro level this tension manifests itself in the pull between rootedness—the creation of a domestic space for the dead, what Zheng Yan refers to as the "mansionization" of Han tombs, or the creation of an underground "happy home" in Wu Hung's words—and heavenward ascent, themes addressed by both Eugene Wang and Lillian Tseng. The theory of the twin souls, *hun* and *po*, the one ascendant, the other tomb-bound, obviously goes some way towards resolving this apparent tension, a tension that Eugene Wang also resolves by seeing heaven in the tomb, which he would see as "an alchemical lab" intended to reconstitute the breaths scattered by death through condensation

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

9. A. Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, ed. J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford, 1995), pp. 40–63.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 80.



Figure 2. American ambrotype, ca. 1860. Interior. Private collection.
Photo: author.

and sublimation. However, there appeared to be an ambiguous relationship between this interpretation of the sarcophagus as a kind of heaven on earth and its role as the site of a journey or transition, a role underlined by the presence of door motifs on some sarcophagi, East and West.

Mobility *within* the tomb at least is implied by the presence of windows and doors in and around the sarcophagus, whether as actual apertures or depictions of them. The question of permeability that follows from the presence of these apertures also arises in Jaś Elsner's survey of the Mediterranean material, on some of which a half-open door appears, sometimes with a figure passing through it, suggesting (or enabling) a crossing. According to his interpretation, the imagery on Mediterranean sarcophagi "works under the regime of representation" to affirm, deny, or sublimate the realities instantiated by the corpses that they contain. If, however, the windows depicted on sarcophagi of the Early Warring States or Han periods were intended to facilitate the limited mobility of the *po*, the dense earthbound spirit that remains with the body in the tomb, then here at least, the model of re-presentation may not in fact be that useful. We may instead need to think of presentation, the image of the window not just as the signifier or even sign of a window (its own signified), but also as a functional window, whether or not it is actually pierced through the coffin. In other words, the notion of mimesis that has historically underwritten Euro-American concepts of representation may not be that useful for understanding what is happening here, despite the

apparent relationship to the quotidian built environment. The same point might be made of the snakes and other creatures on Zeng Hou Yi's coffin, which, by the principle of *similia similibus curantur*, were evidently intended to function not as *representations* of protective beasts, but as protective beasts. The collapse (or irrelevance) of a distinction between signifier and signified central to modern Euro-American semiotics is again implicit in Alain Thote's insistence that the way in which cloud motifs break their frames on one of the four concentric coffins of the second century B.C.E. from Mawangtway reflects "the idea that they had a real existence, that they were clouds."

At first glance, this notion of the image as what might be termed presentation rather than re-presentation appears to stand at a far remove from the image in the era of its own mechanical reproducibility. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind the indexical nature of pre-digital photography, the authority that it claimed through a chain that originated in the presence of the represented subject. More than that, we should remember that the first photographic processes produced mnemonic artifacts that were, like their subjects, singular, fragile, irreplaceable, and necessarily entombed in protective caskets whose plush velour interiors and flower-embossed exteriors provided more than a passing echo of the sarcophagus (figs. 2, 3). The analogy is sometimes reinforced by the entombment of synecdochic fragments (usually locks of hair) of the depicted subject within the casket, reinforcing the indexicality of the photographic medium in a manner that attempted to stabilize the



Figure 3. American ambrotype, ca. 1860. Exterior. Private collection. Photo: author.

contingent meaning of the photographic image.¹⁰ With their perpetuation through representation, and indeed mechanical replication, the flowers ever fresh upon the exterior of the photographic frame or case return us to the petrified garlands strewn around the dead in some of the sarcophagi discussed in this volume, bringing to mind André Bazin's radical claim that the origin of all plastic arts should be located in the "mummy complex," the desire to embalm and preserve the dead.¹¹ The claim is made in Bazin's well-known 1958 essay on the genealogy and ontology of photography ("the most important event in the history of the plastic arts"), in which he invokes as ancestral to the photographic image both the death mask, and the funerary arts of pharaonic Egypt, that other great culture with a well-elaborated funerary cult to which the sarcophagus was central.

The Egyptian funerary practices and rituals that Bazin invokes are in fact intimately connected to the historiography of both photography and cinema, most obviously through the figure of the mummy and its concatenated entombments as a bulwark against loss, or the provision of more durable doubles for the fragile

10. G. Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Princeton, 2004), pp. 65–76. I am aware of the heated debate over claims for the indexical status of photography, but am ignoring it here, because it is not directly relevant to my subject. For divergent views, see *Photography Theory*, ed. J. Elkins (New York, 2006).

11. A. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 4–5.

body (what Bazin refers to as "the preservation of life by a representation of life"). Figurations of both photography and cinema invoke a Manichaean dialectic of light and dark, enlightenment and obscurity, in which modern technology not only fixed but also reanimated the Egyptian past. Effected through the medium of light, this resurrection is metaphorized in the ability to animate the still image that is fundamental to cinematic technology, in its ability to allow the dead to live on cinematically long after their demise, in the electrical revivification of the mummy in countless horror movies, and even in the tomb-like architectural ambience of cinema itself.¹²

If the trope of the mummy is central to metaphors of animation and revivification, the figure of the hieroglyph is equally relevant. Some of the earliest experiments with chemical imaging processes concerned the photographic reinscription of the hieroglyph, while Dominique François Arago's speech announcing the "birth" of photography to the French Chamber of Deputies in 1839 specifically invoked its ability to fix and perpetuate the vanishing hieroglyphic traces of the pharaonic past.¹³ In addition, it was the hieroglyph that emblemized the "technological uncanny" of cinema, its ability to occasion an eerie slippage between presentational and representational modes of the image, apparently undermining the ontological boundaries between animate and inanimate, image and being, signifier and signified intrinsic to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment epistemology and ontology.¹⁴ Writing in 1915, the American poet Vachel Lindsay noted the transformative properties of the new cinematic medium, in which "actors tend to become types and hieroglyphics and dolls," while "dolls and hieroglyphics and mechanisms tend to become human."¹⁵

Here again, the hieroglyphs inscribed on Egyptian funerary chambers and sarcophagi are relevant in ways that remain unacknowledged in the historiography of cinema and photography, for the ontology of the

12. A. Lant, "The Curse of the Pharaoh, or How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania," *October* 59 (1992): 86–112.

13. D. F. Arago, "Report of the Commission of the Chamber of Deputies on the Daguerreotype, July 3, 1839," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. A. Trachtenberg (New Haven, 1980), pp. 15–25. As early as 1841, William Fox Talbot experimented with photographing hieroglyphic tablets, publishing a pamphlet entitled *The Talbotype Applied to Hieroglyphics* in 1846.

14. L. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London, 2009), pp. 33–66. I am grateful to Ann Reynolds for drawing my attention to Mulvey's work.

15. Quoted in B. Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006): 194–195.

hieroglyph made it particularly appropriate to allegorize an imaging technology whose proponents trumpeted its ability to capture, preserve, perpetuate, and even reanimate the image of the real. Especially in funerary contexts, hieroglyphs oscillated between two referential systems, on the one hand depicting recognizable classes of artifacts and creatures—cobras, crocodiles, humans, scorpions—and on the other, being component units of larger constellations of signs that functioned phonetically. Just as three-dimensional cult images were capable of ritual animation,¹⁶ so both the relief images of gods carved on temple walls and the two-dimensional pictograms comprising hieroglyphic texts could, under certain conditions, be brought to life, erasing the ontological boundaries between image and referent that is central to mimetic representation. In other words, the imagistic components of hieroglyphic inscriptions were understood not merely as representations, but as potential presences in their own right.

It was in relation to the dead that the tension between the two referential modes of hieroglyphs—as script and image, sign and potential being—came to the fore. In funerary contexts, the possibility that the anthropomorphic or zoomorphic hieroglyph might come to life posed a potential disturbance, nuisance, or threat to the incumbent of the tomb, whose afterlife existence was premised on preservation. Images of birds, humans, lions, snakes, scorpions, and even fishes (ritually polluting creatures) in funerary inscriptions (and, to a lesser extent, funerary papyri) were all of concern, apparently because, once animated within the space of the tomb, they might defile, menace, or mutilate the mummified corpse, the integrity of which was central to the aspiration for revivification. Some glyphs were considered to pose a greater potential threat to the corpse than others, the glyphs for “enemy” and “death” being considered especially problematic.¹⁷

In order to obviate the threat posed by animation, while preserving the semantic content of inscriptions, steps were taken to alter the offending glyphs in ways that prevented future animation without precluding

present legibility. Three modes of alteration were deployed to this end: erasure or suppression; mutilation (so that the depicted body was fragmented and thus rendered incapable of animation or vivification); or the substitution of the offending glyphs with more innocuous signs that had the same phonetic value, especially in the case of images of animals that represented the gods, where mutilation was apparently considered inappropriate.¹⁸ Alternatively, hieroglyphic images of the offending creatures could be pinned to the wall with images of knives, precluding the possibility not of animation, but of mobility, the ability of the animated image to descend from the wall and move freely around the tomb.¹⁹ This practice is especially noteworthy, since it highlights the dual status of the hieroglyphic image as an inanimate character—a sign that could be placed under erasure—and a potentially living being whose capacity for mobility could be curtailed by imagistic means. The nature and focus of these hieroglyphic alterations underwent palpable changes through the course of the third and second millennia B.C.E., and their precise meaning no doubt varied according to context, but the crucial point is that they are only comprehensible within a concept of the image that is not (or not only) representational, but also based on the potential for presence and, ultimately, animation.

All of this may seem far removed from the Han and Roman sarcophagi that form the subject of this volume. However, the hieroglyphs employed in Egyptian funerary and coffin texts might be seen as allegorizing the historiographic relationship between visual presentations premised on non-mimetic concepts of the image—among them the images of snakes capable of *performing* as snakes on Chinese sarcophagi—and the mechanized images of our own era, whose reception destabilizes the boundaries between presentation and representation. In this sense, the technological uncanny associated with the reception of mechanical imaging technologies might be seen as equally relevant to the technologies of enchantment deployed on some of the sarcophagi discussed in this volume. A broader contextual approach might in fact see the sarcophagus and its ornament as part of a technology of enchantment that functioned not just at the level of the container, but also at the level of an assemblage, to borrow a term from a recent provocative book by the political scientist Jane Bennett

16. J. Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. D. Lorton (Ithaca, 2001), pp. 41–43, 46.

17. P. Lacau, “Suppressions et modifications de signes dans les textes funéraires,” *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 51 (1913): 1–64, from where much of the above is summarized. See also B. Russo, “La vipère à cornes sans tête. Étude paléographique et considérations historiques,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 110 (2010). I am grateful to Ann Macy Roth for drawing the hieroglyphic material to my attention.

18. P. Wilson, *Hieroglyphs: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2005), p. 115.

19. R. K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago, 1997), pp. 163–165.

that argues for a radical relocation and rethinking of agency transcending the subject/object distinction of Enlightenment ontology. In Bennett's usage, which owes a clear debt to actor-network theory, an assemblage is a constellation of agents, forms, and materials whose effects are characterized by emergent properties, possessed of an agency and potency irreducible to the sum of its parts.²⁰ In the funerary context, the assemblage might include the living patron, de-animated body, the wooden sarcophagus, its carver or decorator, the lacquer, stone, wood, or painted medium, the objects in the tomb or sarcophagus, and so forth.

Taken in conjunction with the sarcophagi and tombs discussed in this volume, the Egyptian material raises the possibility that it is in funerary contexts that non-representational modalities of the image have been historically most prominent, a prominence not unrelated to the technological requirements of reanimation. One further indication that this may be so lies in the frequency with which the image of Prometheus fashioning man from clay and then animating him through the provision of a psyche appeared on both sarcophagi and tomb paintings from the eastern Mediterranean during the second and third centuries, that is, in precisely the period covered by the essays in this volume.²¹ It is surely not too far-fetched to see the evocation of the Prometheus myth in these funerary contexts as establishing an aspirational relationship between the animation of the raw material manipulated by Prometheus and the fate of the lifeless body whose entombment within the sarcophagus reflects the departure of its animating force. The implicit linkage between clay form and lifeless corpse exemplifies the "thoughts of latent animatedness" that, according to Ernst Jentsch's celebrated 1906 essay on the uncanny, are integral to the experience of a dead body.²²

Even if funerary art is particularly susceptible to the articulation and instantiation of concepts of animation, however, bringing a third, Egyptian, term into the dialogue between China and Rome serves as a reminder

of the cultural specificity of the codes governing perceptions of the image's capacity for animation, especially within the space of the sarcophagus or tomb. Hence, for example, images of snakes intrinsic to the technology of defense on certain Chinese sarcophagi posed particular problems in the earlier Egyptian context, threatening not to defend the corpse but to damage or devour it, thus precluding the reanimation of the dead. In one case, the animate image promised enduring protection; in the other, it threatened perpetual obliteration. In both cases, however, the technological enchantments associated with the sarcophagus assume a presentational future rather than a representational present for the image, invoking questions of temporality entirely appropriate to a box for a body.

20. J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, 2010), pp. 20–38.

21. A.-J. Festugière, "La mosaïque de Philippopolis et les sarcophages au Prométhée," *Revue des Arts* 5 (1957): 196–198; M.-H. Quet, "La mosaïque dit d'Aïôn de Shahba-Philippopolis, Philippe l'Arabe et la conception hellène de l'ordre du monde en Arabie à l'aube du christianisme," *Cahiers du Centre Gustave Glotz* 10 (1999): 283–284; G. W. Bowersock, *Mosaics as History: The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), p. 36.

22. E. Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)," trans. R. Sellars, *Angelaki* 2, no. 1 (1996): 15.