

The meaning of dates on mummy labels: seasonal mortality and mortuary practice in Roman Egypt

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Mummy labels give the name of the deceased and often the names of his or her parents and certain grandparents. Sometimes these documents also include further details such as age at death, occupation, and geographical location.¹ More rarely, in about 1 in 20 of the known Greek texts, the labels record a date, giving either day and month or merely the month with or without reference to a specific year.² The meaning of these dates is not normally specified and must therefore have been considered self-evident by the authors of these texts. With an eye on comparative evidence from tombstone inscriptions, modern interpreters have usually taken such dates to refer to the day or month of death of the mummified individual.³ I will argue that this interpretation is unlikely to be correct; that unspecified chronological references on mummy labels generally record an event that occurred at some time after death; and that this event was the formal completion of mummification some 70 days later.

In the absence of evidence from within or outside the pertinent texts that could be used to test this or any other interpretation, we depend on indirect means of investigation. A comparison of the seasonal distribution of the dates given on mummy labels with the seasonal distribution of dates of death furnished by funerary epitaphs from the same region, i.e., Middle and Upper Egypt,⁴ enables us to address the question of whether the former also refer to death. Greek tombstone inscriptions from Egypt south of the Delta from Cairo into the Thebaid document a fairly clear-cut pattern of mortality variation by season.⁵ Its underlying causes need not concern us here.⁶ These data, most of which have been drawn from late-antique Christian texts, can be supplemented by evidence from Coptic epitaphs from the same part of Egypt, dating mostly from the 8th and 9th c., which reveal a comparable distribution of deaths (fig.

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- 1 On mummy labels, see J. Quaegebeur, "Mummy labels: an orientation," in E. Boswinkel and P. W. Pestman, *Textes grecques, démotiques et bilingues* (P.L.Bat. 19) (Leiden 1978) 232-59.
 - 2 127 out of 2195 mummy labels assembled by B. Boyaval, *Corpus des étiquettes de momies grecques* (Lille 1976) contain references to months.
 - 3 E.g., B. Boyaval, "Remarques à propos des indications d'âges des étiquettes des momies," *ZPE* 18 (1975) 62 (but cf. 62 n.29), 68 n.36; id., "La mortalité saisonnière dans l'Égypte gréco-romaine," in J. Vercoutter (ed.), *Livre de centenaire, 1880-1980, de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire* (Cairo 1981) 282 (unfortunately accepted at face value by W. Scheidel, *Measuring sex, age and death in the Roman empire: explorations in ancient demography* (JRA Suppl. 21, 1996) 153-55; cf. also B. D. Shaw, "Seasons of death: aspects of mortality in imperial Rome," *JRS* 86 [1996] 121-23); Quaegebeur (supra n.1) 236, 238; D. Montserrat, "Death and funerals in the Roman Fayum," in M. L. Bierbrier (ed.), *Portraits and masks: burial customs in Roman Egypt* (London 1997) 38. See likewise M. Thieme and P. W. Pestman, "Inscribed cloths from mummies," *P.L.Bat.* 19, 132 n.8, on dates in inscriptions of mummy cloths, and C. Schmidt, "Ein altchristliches Mumienetikett nebst Bemerkungen über das Begräbniswesen der Kopten," *ZÄS* 32 (1894) 62, on the date on a Coptic mummy label.
 - 4 On the provenance of mummy labels, see Quaegebeur (supra n.1) 243-44. Most of them cannot be firmly placed, but the northernmost specimens known to me come from Memphis (e.g., *SB* VI 9022). The seasonal distribution of the recorded dates makes it unlikely that many of the mummy labels of unknown origin come from the Delta: see my forthcoming work mentioned at the end of this article.
 - 5 Sources: G. Lefebvre, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques chrétiennes d'Égypte* (Cairo 1907) and *SB* I-X (298 dates) as listed by Boyaval, "Mortalité" (supra n.3) 283 (Middle and Upper Egypt north of Aswan); Lefebvre nos. 66, 67, 68, 70; *SB* I 724, III 6227, 6229-30, 6235, XIV 12147; *I. Fayum* I 59; III 198, 216; *SEG* XXXVIII 1689; XLII 1531, 1600.
 - 6 For a discussion, see my forthcoming work referred to at the end.