

BOOK REVIEW

Unwrapping Ancient Egypt. The Shroud, the Secret and the Sacred. By CHRISTINA RIGGS. London. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. Pp. xii+319. Paperback, \$42.95. ISBN 978-0857855077.

Unwrapping Ancient Egypt posits two questions that have not been satisfactorily addressed in Egyptological studies: why certain Egyptian corpses and objects were wrapped in linen, and why their wrappings have been systematically sidelined in modern times. Through analysis of historical contexts and insights from anthropological, sociological, and material culture studies, Christina Riggs offers a compelling response to these questions: the wrapping/unwrapping process, she argues, is an encounter between two disparate conceptions of the sacred; that of ancient Egypt, which emphasizes concealment and seclusion as a means of accessing the divine, and that of the modern university and museum, where visibility and publicity are the means of generating and revealing knowledge. Riggs, however, surpasses her avowed thesis. In six magisterial chapters, she shows that Egyptian antiquities are implicated in a colonial and now post-colonial discourse of power, and that mummies remain central to western constructions of Selfhood and Otherness.

Chapter 1 (“Desecration”) lays out the scope of the book: from the eighteenth century to the present, mummification has been explained by western academics as an act of preserving the dead and maintaining a likeness to the living. Riggs disputes this rationalization, as it contradicts the evidence for the Egyptian perceptions of mummies. On her way to the ancient material, she takes her reader through the earliest excavations and unwrappings of mummies in Ottoman Egypt.

Chapter 2, (“Revelation”) chronicles how the study of mummies developed concurrently to the British and French colonial project throughout the nineteenth century. Riggs navigates the troubled waters of the “Race of the Ancient Egyptians” controversy to show *why* the question occurred in the first place: the unwrapping and ‘autopsies’ of Egyptian corpses by archaeologists, excavation sponsors, and colonial bureaucrats, offered a corporeal template for discourse on contemporary preoccupations with ethnicity, race, gender, disease, and cultural heritage.

The European scrutiny of Egyptian cadavers is contrasted to the intentions behind their ceremonial wrapping in chapter 3 (“Mummification”). Archaeological and artistic evidence illustrates that the wrapping of the dead resembles wrapping treatments of sacred objects such as temple statues. Through mummification, Riggs infers, the deceased was made to share the material qualities of divine forms. Yet this ancient belief is so alien to a Judeo-Christian mindset, she concludes, that it has blocked the western apprehension of mummies as anything more than well-preserved corpses.

Chapter 4 (“Linen”) examines this fabric as the physical, religious, and social catalyst of mummification. The value of linen was both material and symbolical, as its exchange contributed to the organization of gender, household, and social relations. Moreover, Egyptians imbued linen with the power of the gods to restore and renew themselves through the wrapping of their images. For Riggs, acknowledging this reality casts mummification in a comparable light: textile and body comprised a unity, effecting a godlike regeneration of the dead. This chapter brings home her central thesis that the sacralizing purpose of the wrapping is lost when linen is seen out of its historical context.

The link between linen and concealment is expanded in chapter 5 (“Secrecy”). Riggs draws upon sociological theories on secrecy as a means of exerting power to show that signaling possession of secrets in ancient Egypt (e.g. in tomb inscriptions) aided the construction of religious and political hierarchies. In modern times, however, denying or minimizing secrecy as a component of Egyptian society has been a strategy for distinguishing professionalized Egyptology from popular, Afrocentric, or esoteric (Rosicrucian, Masonic) interests in Egypt. The different ways in which Egypt is studied and imagined therefore reflect the objectives of diverse groups in academia and beyond.

The final chapter (“Sanctity”) examines historical and contemporary museological practices regarding the curation of mummies. Here, Riggs relies on her experience as a museum professional to illustrate the contradictions that emerge from institutional efforts to convey ‘respect’ for the Egyptian dead and simultaneously justify the research and display of their bodies. Meanwhile, new technologies (e.g. CT scan, radiography) enable the West to penetrate even deeper into mummies and to claim them still as its material property and cultural legacy.

The above hopefully gives a sense of Riggs’ conceptual apparatus, her historical grounding, and the questions she raises about the responsibilities of the present to the past. Undoubtedly she establishes new ways of assessing the Egyptian

evidence, but in the process she also offers valuable insights on diverse and seemingly unrelated topics: Ottoman and modern Egypt, Orientalist paintings, the origins of racism, the American Civil War, the slippage between ‘archaeological’ and ‘artistic’ objects, British parliamentary procedures, medical technologies, and contemporary sculpture, to name a few. Riggs unveils unexpected links between these (and more) subjects, making *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt* an exercise in causation no less than a critique of Egyptology as a discipline.

The book is richly illustrated by archival photographs (tomb paintings, wrapped and unwrapped mummies of humans and animals, inscriptions, statues, canopic jars, stelae, etc.), plates of Egyptological treatises, diagrams, drawings, museum record cards, magazine covers, and more. I found especially conclusive the resemblance between wrapped sacred images and wrapped mummies (e.g. 131, 136), and the visual contrast between the wrapped and unwrapped versions of the same artifact (e.g. 9, 11, 107).

While Riggs’ primary audience is academic (the last hundred pages comprise of endnotes, bibliography, and index), there is much that will appeal to public audiences: a lively and often lyric style, personal anecdotes and communications, cringe-worthy details from the journals of nineteenth century Egyptologists, and, of course, mummy pictures. From a ‘public’ perspective, her most memorable contribution (to this reviewer at least) is that she challenges readers to reexamine their assumptions about the materiality of the human body and the culturally determined notions of its sacredness; to ancient Egyptians the unwrapping and autopsies of mummies would be sacrilege, but their ritualistic excerebrations, eviscerations, defleshings, and stuffings of their dead seem equally ghoulish. Consequently, the epistemic, aesthetic, and ethic fissures between Egyptian antiquity and western modernity so well identified by Riggs provide her intended corrective to heady claims on Egypt as ‘our’ heritage, and the Eurocentric superiority underlying such claims.

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