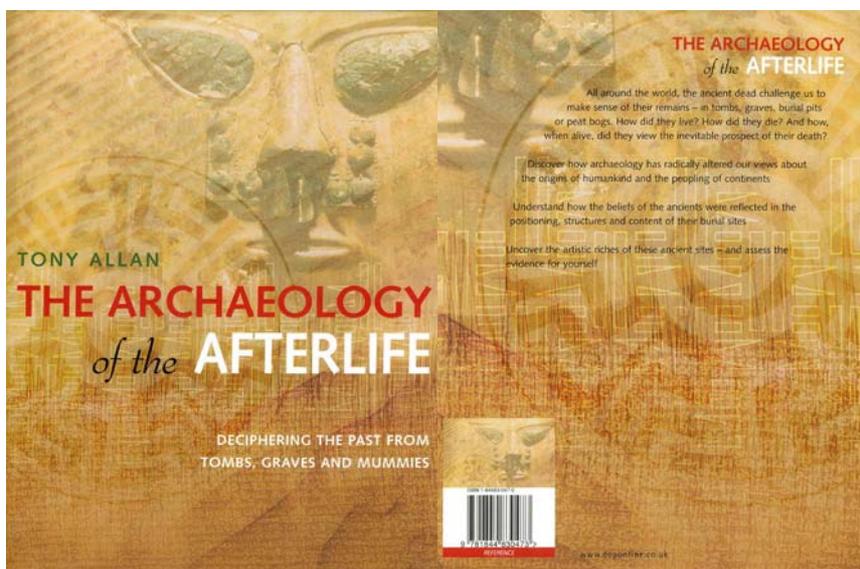


Allan, T. 2004. The archaeology of the afterlife. Deciphering the past from tombs, graves and mummies. – London, Duncan Baird

Book review by S. Ikram



‘The Archaeology of the Afterlife’ is a lavishly illustrated book that ambitiously attempts to cover funerary beliefs and practices in several cultures worldwide, all the way from the Americas around the globe to Japan, all within the space of 149 pages. The book is divided into five chapters, followed by a guide to further reading and an index.

The first chapter is on Africa, primarily focusing on ancient Egypt. This chapter, after a brief excursion on early humans (which does not really refer to their burial customs, but to human evolution), segues into an introduction to the Egyptian way of death. It very superficially covers mummification, tombs, and funerary beliefs, before focusing on ‘case studies’. The first of these is the Deir el-Bahari cache, followed by Valley of the Kings Tomb 55, and ending predictably with the tomb of Tutankhamun. None of these sections are impressive, and, presumably, due to the brevity of the text, there are notable omissions, such as the total number of days required for mummification, the misleading description of shabtis and tomb decoration. Other mistakes are more substantial: the date for the decipherment of hieroglyphics is 1822, not 1824, DNA research on mummies is inconclusive, the brain is not put into a canopic jar, and the Opening-of-the-Mouth ceremony was generally not conducted with an *ankh*, but with an adze or a *khepesh*, the Antiquities Service had not been set up just to stop the illicit trade in artefacts. This is just from page 14 to 20. After the section on Egypt there is a brief section on Nubia, which focuses on sacrificial burials with no explanation as to why these might have occurred. Another short section follows on West African empires and the mummies of the Canary islands. Although some of the grave goods are described in the former section, no description of the tombs or any analysis of burial customs appears. The portion on mummification in the Canaries is more thorough.

Part two concerns the Americas. As with the previous chapter it starts with prehistory and Clovis points, without much regard for funerary practices. Then it continues with the Chinchorro mummies. Although the basic mummification technique is explained, the tombs and burial customs are, for the most part, not, leaving the reader with an incomplete idea of what they did and why. The chapter continues with Peruvian mummy-bundles. Once again the tombs are left out and the fates of the body explored, to some extent. This is also the case with the Teotihuacan burials, although to a lesser extent. The section on the Lords of Sipan is more complete, and the following section on Palenque, although providing basic information, is a little terse. The section on Chichen Itza has tantalizing references to the Wall of Skulls, but again, perhaps due to a limit on space, the reader is left as if reading newspaper headlines, with an insufficient story. The chapter concludes with Inca mountain sacrifices.

The next chapter deals with Western Europe. For a change, in the section on early civilizations/groups, there is a discussion on burial practice. This is followed by a section on the Alpine Iceman. Unfortunately, after posing the question ‘Who was the Iceman?’ the author does not really address the question adequately, providing information only on his possible age and his last meal. This is followed by a section on Megalithic tombs, most often found in Brittany and the UK, as well as in other parts of Europe. The Beaker culture, the Mound people, and Bog bodies all form part of the Northern European offerings. This is followed by the Etruscan necropoleis and Pompeii and Herculaneum. The section on these last two sites does not offer much on funerary customs or

burials, but rather on the fact that people were 'captured' in their death throes. The chapter then moves back to the more northern European countries with ship burials and the Qilakisoq corpses of Greenland.

Chapter four focuses on the Near East and Greece, starting with the skulls of Jericho, moving on to Ur, and then leaping away to Dilmun (Bahrain). The chapter then continues with 'Death in Crete', with a very limited amount of information on death on that island provided. It then goes on to Schliemann's discoveries in Mycenae, although the discussion on Troy seems to be misplaced. The Macedonians are the next subject for discussion followed by a presentation of the funerary complex at Nimrud Dag, with a very inadequate description of the site.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on East Asia and the Pacific. As with the other chapters, the book progresses chronologically starting with a discussion on early humans here. Interesting, but rather irrelevant to the purported focus of the monograph. The chapter continues with the Tarim basin burials, shifting to the Pazyrk nomads of Scythian fame, then returning to China's imperial tombs with their terracotta armies. The chapter goes on to the keyhole tombs of Japan which not only describe the tombs contents, but also architectural features. The book concludes with a curious section on Easter Island that fails to focus on death, although it provides a basic introduction to the material culture.

All in all, one wonders who the audience of this book is. If written as a basic introduction for junior or high school students (ages 13-18) it is an acceptable introduction to some ideas concerning funerary culture. The book's title does not seem to reflect its content. It is rather simplistic, and in many cases inadequate as it mentions bodies and grave goods, and frequently ignores tombs and the belief system that went together with death. Granted, this reviewer's expertise is limited to ancient Egypt, although I have more than a nodding acquaintance with the Near East and mummification technologies throughout the world, which makes extensive commentary on all but one of the chapters less than specialised. However, given the mistakes found in that one section, what might lurk in the others? The focus on the melodramatic is also unfortunate, and feeds into the 'weirdness' of other cultures without attempting to explain different belief systems and the rituals that accompany them. All in all, this is a book whose audience is unclear to the reviewer, as are the volume's aims.

Allan, T. 2004. *The archaeology of the afterlife. Deciphering the past from tombs, graves and mummies.* – London, Duncan Baird. 149 pp. ISBN 1-84483-047-0. Price £16.99 (hardback).