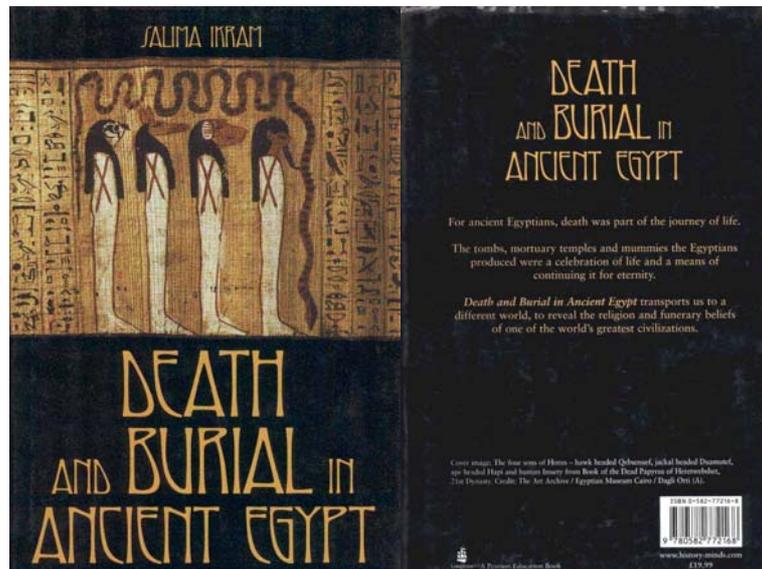


Ikram, S. 2003. *Death and burial in ancient Egypt*. – London/Harlow, Pearson Education Limited

Book review by E.H.C. van Rooij



To write a book on death and burial in ancient Egypt and keep it interesting *and* below nine hundred pages... talking about a major challenge! Salima Ikram proves beyond doubt that it can be done.

In about two hundred pages, manageable even for busy people. She covers every thinkable topic related to funerary ancient Egypt: from beliefs in the afterlife, tomb building, -decoration and -contents, techniques of mummification (humans and animals) to funerals and mortuary cults, which is a huge amount of the ancient Egyptian culture as we know it today but, as the author remarks in the introduction, this is by no means an indication of the Egyptian's obsession with death. On the contrary, they valued life so much that they went to great lengths as to make it last forever. Salima Ikram makes an effort to point that out throughout the book, by explaining tangible remains in the light of people's beliefs, customs and desires.

Except maybe for the first chapter, dealing with history, readers will find it easy to read through this book. The chapters are well-organised and paragraphs are never too long. The information is presented in a compact and clear way, without unnecessary elaboration but nevertheless with many examples and links to different theories. Salima Ikram succeeds in putting together an extensive overview of present scientific knowledge in Egyptology in an accessible manner. No scientific notes distract from reading the text, but readers who are interested in more underlying scientific details are referred to publications added in a chapter "Further Reading".

There is no danger of getting stranded in mouldy texts or endless sentences. The book is written in a smooth style, with a touch of humour and in a way that fits our modern way of speaking or thinking. Such as her descriptions of deities, Osiris as 'the prototype mummy' and Anubis 'as a super-canid, combining the most salient attributes of several types of canids'. The author peppers her book with anecdotes provided they are illustrative, such as that of the mummy of a high ranking priestess that was accompanied by a small one which was taken for her illegitimate baby. Until a hundred years later "this slur on her virtue was removed when X-rays showed that the baby was actually a monkey" (p. 79).

Ancient culture is made especially recognisable by parallels to our modern society (p. 26): "This obsession with one's name is common to all people worldwide; one has only to look at graffiti from anywhere in the world to see people's need to leave some evidence of themselves behind by leaving what they consider was the essential manifestation of themselves: their name." Briefly she touches on the modern belief of curses that haunt us from the ancient past, such as the alleged curse of Tutanchamun (p. 194): "Perhaps more tellingly, Douglas Derry, who dismembered the mummy and might be held to be especially accursed, died three decades after Howard Carter at the age of 87!"

A few critical notes can be made, however. Although the book is illustrated with many (black and white) photographs, many of them are of poor quality (out of focus). Their only function of course is to exemplify parts of the text, but they are dissonant with the otherwise good production quality. But then, this book is hardly meant for the 'coffee-table' so the lack of professional photo's can be overcome. Some paragraphs could use a few extra illustrations, such as the one on amulets and symbols. Things might become somewhat abstract without visual support.

Although the book is remarkably close to completeness on topics of death and burial, there are some aspects which deserve more attention considering the title: death in a more demographic sense. For instance, how old was the average Egyptian when he died? What did people die of back then? What proportion does the amount of discovered funerary remains bear to the total of the Egyptian society? And what about those common peasant people of Egypt; what is known (or not) about their beliefs and funerary practice? Anyway, the author may be excused because she attempted to give the reader merely an insight in the surviving material culture.

Considering the book's wide scope, scientific reliability and comprehensible text, it is very well-suited for anyone wishing to learn more about ancient Egypt in a limited time. It provides a good overview for both lay-people and students of archaeology. A glossary, index and chronology add to its usability.

Ikram, S. 2003. *Death and burial in ancient Egypt*. – London/Harlow, Pearson Education Limited. 241 pp. ISBN 0 582 77216 8. Price £19.99 (hardback).