



Review

PERFORMING DEATH: SOCIAL ANALYSES OF FUNERARY TRADITIONS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN

Nicola Lanieri, ed.
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Performing Death: *Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* focuses on approaches to understanding the social significance and societal meaning of ancient funerary practices. The fifteen essays in this volume resulted from papers presented at the Second Annual University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminar, February 17–18, 2006. The conference was designed to create a dialogue among various scholars: anthropologists, art historians, philologists, and archaeologists. Case studies of specific ancient sites and more theoretical articles are included. The chronological and cultural range is broad, from third-millennium Spain to the Roman Republic. An introduction by editor Nicola Lanieri frames the discussion. She focuses on the importance of investigations of funerary ritual for our understanding of the societal needs of the living. She emphasizes that these rituals function as a mark of separation between the living and the dead, help in constructing social identity, and are a communal effort which helps strengthen dominant ideologies.

The essays in this volume are grouped according to the conference session topics. “Session One: *A Powerful Death: Exercising Authority through the Enactment of Funerary Rituals*” focuses on the relationship between funerary ritual and power. The one essay which deals specifically with Egypt is part of this group. In “Sacrifice for the State: First Dynasty Royal Funerals and the Rites at Macramallah’s Rectangle,” Ellen Morris discusses the use of funerary ritual as a method of reinforcing the newly established ideology of pharaonic rule. She points to the tension inherent in early Egypt between the increasing emphasis on the divinity of pharaoh and the fact that pharaohs have mortal human bodies—while the state needs stability, the occupant of its highest office cannot physically occupy the throne forever. She points to the large-scale retainer sacrifice at burials at both Abydos and Macramallah’s Rectangle (Wadi Abusir) as reinforcing the ruler’s power. At Macramallah the sacrificed retainers are

arranged in groups ordered according to social standing and possibly, Morris notes, also according to the formal arrangement that would have been taken in life at royal ceremonies.

“Session Two: *Memorializing the Ancestors: Death as a Form of Cultural and Social Transmission*” focuses on funerary ritual as a method of reinforcing societal values and also as a type of ceremony that may be transmitted between cultures. The majority of essays in this section concentrate on Sumer and later Mesopotamia. John Pollini’s essay on the wax ancestor mask tradition in Rome shows how this form of commemoration can be used as a method of transmitting ideals and as a marker of class distinction. Cross-cultural transmission is suggested between Anatolia and Greece in Ian Rutherford’s article “Achilles and the Sallis Wastais Ritual: Performing Death in Greece and Anatolia.”

“Session Three: *Archaeology of Funerary Rituals: A Theoretical Approach*” contains two essays which, like Lanieri’s introduction, wrestle with the big questions of how to recover and analyze funerary rituals and how to apply the resultant information to further our understanding of ancient societies. John Robb, in “Burial Treatment as Transformations of Bodily Ideology,” argues for a realization of the multiplicity of burial practices within any given society and the relationship of funerary practices to the concept of biography: how a life is supposed to be lived or not lived in a given society. James Brown discusses the history of approaches to funerary analysis in his contribution, “Mortuary Practices for the Third Millennium: 1966–2006.” The book concludes with a discussion among many of the participants about the connections between memory, politics, and funerary ritual.

The book operates on two levels that do not quite mesh. Much can be learned about individual societies from the case studies. The theoretical essays and discussions are valuable for anyone studying ancient societies, and pose provocative questions about

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our own assumptions regarding death and mortuary practices. For example, several discussants point out the need to understand that, for many societies, the dead are a presence for the living to reckon with. However, because of the broad chronological and geographical range of the contributions, it is hard to make connec-

tions between ancient societies on more than a broadly theoretical level. Those interested in Egypt can certainly benefit from Morris's article and the theoretical discussions, but the book is not designed to address specific cultural connections between Egypt and other parts of the ancient world and does not offer any.
