

Victual, Ritual, or both? A review of Food Offerings by Selima Ikram of the Funerary Assemblage of Isetemkheb. Julia Jones 2007994 26-01-2023.

Selima Ikram, a professor of sociology, Egyptology, and anthropology (Ikram, 2023), examines “twenty-one victual mummies” from part of “the Twenty-first Dynasty burial of Isetemkheb, the wife of Pinudjem II. Tomb 320 found at Deir el-Bahari was excavated in 1881,” and its contents are “now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Ikram uses x-rays to minimise disruption and damage to the victual mummies and enables reasonable images to be taken of what was inside the linen wrappings.

“In ancient Egypt, the family and friends of the deceased were responsible for providing “food offerings” which were given via the deceased’s tomb from the predynastic times onward. Ikram informs us that in the New Kingdom “victual mummies” “became a new type of food offering” with at least two purposes. The first was to feed and provide nourishment for the deceased’s ka, (a type of soul or energy of the deceased), and the second was as a symbolic role. Merriam Webster’s dictionary describes victual as “a fifteenth-century word” for “usable food,” “fit for people,” “providing nourishment” or “a way of living” (Webster, 2023). The ‘dry natron with a possibly higher salt content than what was used in elite burials, the young “wrapped calves head” and “spiral knotting” on the binding around the “loosely woven linen” encasing the various parts of animals and bird mummies mentioned were “all placed in baskets” “made of reeds” or “papyrus. “These demonstrate amongst other things, ancient Egyptian butchery, culinary, craft, artistic and scientific skills. Also showing the care, preparation and ritualistic actions being carried out in the wrapping and tying of the mummies with such methodical and attentive procedures, as well as their status and beliefs.

Ikram points out the uniqueness of the offerings in the tomb such as the abnormally young age of the calf, normally found in the eighteenth Dynasty to have been “between fourteen and twenty-eight months” old. With a missing liver, and no oils used, Salima Ikram expresses that the “incorporation of the head amongst the offerings was also unusual” but then states that they are a common feature on offering tables throughout the ancient Egyptian periods. The bull’s tail was a statement piece of a king’s finery which demonstrated strength. Ikram suggests that as there was a bull's tail present in the tomb, Isetemkheb might have had an underlined royal iconography. The lungs and windpipes in the tomb that were usually used in soups were perhaps a symbolic representation of the Nile Valley and the Delta, or the united rulership of the country as well as a food offering. Ikram declares that she cannot be sure “if the victual offerings were intended to go beyond their primary function as food for the afterlife, serving a ritual purpose and underlining a royal command over a unified land,” however, the mummification and care seem to follow a

ritualistic pattern alongside evidence of ancient Egyptians displaying offering formulas to feed the deceased and all the components requiring energy to exist in the afterlife (Gardiner, 1927; Manley, 2012). I envisage it was also a display of status that determined the choice of birds and the cuts of meat from the young calf. Ikram informs us that “the entire calf was there other than its right foreleg,” and “the severing of this limb is depicted in Chapter one of the Book of the Dead.” Ikram implies that “perhaps this served to activate the funerary texts associated with the burial.” “The right foreleg” was “used when the ritual was performed and then burnt or given to the funerary priests.” “Traditionally an offering to the deceased, possibly at the tomb entrance” and “associated with the Opening of the Mouth ritual,” which was conducted to bring the deceased back to life.

Food offerings with choice cuts of meat, mummified birds and unusual practices alongside ritualistic ceremonies, images, and spells from the book of the dead, enabled the ancient Egyptians to believe they could not only recreate living animals in the next life but also recreate prepared meats for a wealthy, leisurely and best possible afterlife. With possible different meanings to each item individually or combined with the other tomb goods, spiritual and magical input, practical uses, or extravagance due to wealth, as well as lack of textual evidence, it can make it difficult to pinpoint one exact meaning, however, by re-evaluating and exploring the methods and thinking behind ancient Egyptian death and funerary practices with better technologies and image equipment such as the Computer Tomography scanners that are now being used we can gain a better understanding of ancient Egyptian rituals, belief systems, morals and preferences in ancient Egyptian life.

References

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