

A Comparison of Burial Cultures Between Ancient Egypt and Ancient Rome

Shiyun Yang

*Adcote School Shanghai, Shanghai, China
irisysy1234@163.com*

Abstract. As representatives of ancient Mediterranean civilizations, burial cultures of Ancient Egypt and Ancient Rome profoundly reflect their respective social structures, core beliefs, and mainstream views, serving as important carriers for understanding different civilizations' perspectives on life and death. This article takes the funerary cultures of ancient Egypt and ancient Rome as the research subjects, conducting a comparative analysis from five dimensions: funeral space and social stratification, the symbolic meaning of material carriers, burial rituals and religious culture, funerary management and social participation, and core concepts of life and death. It reveals the differences in the funeral cultures of the two and explores the underlying reasons. Through comparative analysis, case studies, and literature review methods, this research explains the shaping role of views on life and death under different backgrounds of civilizations on funeral culture, providing a new perspective for understanding the spiritual core and social structure of ancient Western civilization.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome, Burial Culture

1. Introduction

Funeral culture is an important component of social customs and is also one of the genes of social culture [1]. As representatives of ancient Mediterranean civilization, there are fundamentally different systems and values regarding funerary customs between ancient Egypt and ancient Rome. For Egyptians, burial was a means to achieve immortality, and all burial goods were intended to serve this purpose [2]. Moreover, in ancient Rome, people placed more emphasis on the social impact of funerals and reflected the continuity of family lineage through epitaphs [3]. The differences between the two in terms of funeral concepts and practices provide important clues for exploring the spiritual core of ancient civilizations. Despite the extensive research on funerary cultures in ancient Rome and ancient Egypt, there still exists a gap in the study of the differences between the two.

This study focuses on the funeral culture of ancient Egypt and ancient Rome. Using a literature review and comparative analysis, it systematically examines relevant research findings. The research aims to compare and analyze the relationship between funerary space and social stratification, the symbolic meaning of material carriers, funeral rituals and religious culture, burial management and social participation, as well as core views on life and death, thereby revealing the cultural differences and profound logic between these two civilizations.

2. Literature review

Funeral culture, as an important reflection of the spiritual life and institutional structure of ancient society, has always been the focus of research in history, archaeology, and religious studies. As the two major civilizational systems in the Mediterranean, ancient Egypt and ancient Rome have significant differences in their funeral customs, but also certain inherent connections and attracting numerous scholars to explore from different perspectives.

In terms of ancient Egypt, Assmann systematically elaborated on the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians regarding death and immortality, pointing out that funerary practices are a manifestation of the idea of “the immortality of the soul” [2]. Through the study of multiple burial tombs, Miniaci provides an archaeological perspective on the burial practices of non-elite classes, complementing the limitations of traditional research that focuses on royalty and nobility [4].

As for ancient Rome, Toynbee comprehensively examined the evolution and social functions of Roman burial customs, emphasizing its role as a vehicle for social identity and family continuity [5]. Retief and Cilliers reviewed the methods and procedures the ancient Romans used to handle corpses, analyzing the apparent contradictions in the Romans’ attitudes towards the deceased [3].

Although existing research has achieved rich insights, it is still limited to single civilizations or specific themes, lacking a systematic cross-civilization comparison. For example, while Waldner and Spickermann address the concepts of individuality and the afterlife during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, their research timeframe and geographical scope differ from this paper [6]. Wen focuses on the depiction of family members in reliefs and murals, exploring the status and role of relatives in funerary offerings, but does not extend to a comparative civilizational level [7].

Therefore, this article attempts to systematically compare the funeral cultures of ancient Egypt and ancient Rome from four dimensions: funeral space, material carriers, funeral rituals, and management systems, based on existing research. The aim is to reveal the profound logic of their cultural differences, to address the shortcomings of comparative perspectives in current research, and to provide new academic pathways for understanding the diversity and commonality of ancient Mediterranean civilizations.

3. A multidimensional comparison of the funeral cultures of ancient Egypt and ancient Rome

3.1. Funeral space and social stratification

The distribution of burial spaces in ancient Egypt and ancient Rome reflects the social hierarchy of that time.

Ancient Egypt structured burial spaces with “sacredness” at its core. The ancient Egyptians believed that after a person died, they should be buried in a splendid and eternal tomb, which served as a visible symbol [8]. These ideals were usually only achievable by the royal and noble classes, which was why royal and noble tombs were regarded as “eternal residences”. Such cemeteries were mostly located in “restricted locations”, chosen at the edge of the desert or in rock-hewn valleys (such as the Valley of the Kings, the Giza Plateau, etc.) [8]. During the Third Intermediate Period, underground tombs were located in the central temple courtyards, reinforcing their separation from the mundane world through geographical isolation [8]. Around each tomb that symbolized the status of the privileged, there were smaller affiliated burial chambers. For example, in the rock-cut tomb complex, the highest standard tombs were usually built at the top of the hillside. At the same time, small subsidiary burial chambers were arranged below the foothills [8]. The tombs of ordinary people were simpler, and some may have lacked formal burial altogether. Archaeologists have

discovered remains exposed and discarded in storage boxes at the Tell el-Daba site in the Egyptian Delta. This indicates that it was difficult for the lower social strata or marginalized groups to receive basic burial. Moreover, studies indicated that in ancient Egyptian religious beliefs, the fate of a person after death was not determined by the luxury of their burial, but was somewhat related to their moral conduct during life. This indirectly proved that the phenomenon of ordinary people's graves being modest was rationalized by religion [8].

In ancient Rome, burial spaces were guided by “functionality”, and stratification was achieved through legal enforcement and social customs, with clear regional divisions. For instance, the Twelve Tables stipulated that remains, except for those of notable individuals and their descendants honored posthumously, or special cases like the Vestal Virgins, should ultimately be placed outside the city walls, regardless of whether cremation or burial was chosen [5]. In addition, the wealthy would purchase burial plots in *locus religiosus* (sacred sites) adjacent to the main roads leading to Rome. Depending on the financial capacity of the buyers, tombs, decorative features, vaults, and monuments of various scales would also be constructed in the area [9]. Since the time of Augustus, people began to build *columbaria* (cinerary urn storage places) here for the use of poorer people and members of burial societies [3]. As for the next level of the poor (beggars, vagrants, criminals, etc.), they would be buried in the area outside the Esquiline gate (one of the areas covered by *locus publicus*) [3]. And due to long-term exposure to death and corpses, funeral workers faced rejection and disdain from the public, which forced them to live outside the city walls, gradually forming a spatial occupational isolation in the Libitina forest outside the Esquiline gate [3].

3.2. The symbolic significance of material carriers

There are significant differences in the material carriers of funerary culture between ancient Egypt and ancient Rome, with different focuses.

The large structures and symbolic representations in ancient Egypt, which pursued the concept of eternity, primarily used durable materials as their core medium. Taking the pyramid as an example, it represents the primarily developed product in the above-ground architecture of ancient Egyptian tombs, having undergone a development process from the step pyramid to the standard pyramid [10]. The Giza pyramid complex is grand in scale, with the most magnificent being the Great Pyramid of Khufu, built from approximately 2.3 million stone blocks averaging over 2 tons in weight, originally standing over 145 meters tall [10]. Furthermore, the design of the pyramid utilized precise geometric structures. At sunset on the summer solstice, from a specific location, the sun sets behind the head of the Sphinx, between the pyramids of Khufu and Khafre, creating an image similar to Akhet. This term not only refers to the “Place of Glory at Sunset” but is also the formal name of the Khufu Pyramid [10]. Murals (e.g., the Book of Heaven and the Book of Earth), burial goods (e.g., golden masks), and inscriptions on sarcophagi like the Book of the Dead have been found in royal and noble tombs. The spells on the golden masks and the depiction of the judgment ritual in the Book of the Dead reflect the ancient Egyptians' belief in religion, hoping that the deceased could attain eternal life through the judgment of Osiris [3,11]. Even in commoner burials (such as those on Dra Abu el-Naga hill), there are various burial goods, including pottery and other daily necessities, reflecting the ancient Egyptian belief in the 'necessities of the afterlife' [4].

The material carriers of ancient Rome placed greater emphasis on “identity performance” while also demonstrating diverse practicality. The reliefs on sarcophagi were used to showcase social status and moral values [6]. Taking the relief from the tomb of Iulia Velva in Roman Britain as an example, it displayed detailed family scenes, reflecting the importance of family in Roman society, while also hinting at the higher social status of the deceased [6]. Urns (*ollae*) and tombstones (*stelae*)

were also engraved with names, occupations, and family relationships, becoming the “material records” of social networks. For example, a Roman individual named Socrates wrote an epitaph for his “respectable mother” Gavia Chrysis [12]. Additionally, most of the burial items in ancient Rome were highly practical. The placement of commonly used sarcophagi in burials was adapted to different spaces, allowing for an increase in quantity to boost capacity [5].

3.3. Funerary rituals and religious culture

The different religious cultures of ancient Rome and ancient Egypt led to the differences in their funerary customs.

Firstly, the funerary rituals of ancient Egypt centered around the concept of “preparation for eternal life”, emphasizing the integrity of the rituals and the assurance of the afterlife. For example, the “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony, led by priests, used specific tools and incantations to enable the deceased to breathe, eat, drink, and speak in the afterlife [2]. These funeral ceremonies were usually held in closed cemeteries, limited to relatives and priests, emphasizing the “private communication with the deceased” [2]. Also, apart from making regular donations to the tomb, the relatives of the deceased also offered food to the grave, forming a continuous “grave worship tradition” that maintains the connection between the soul and the present world [2].

The funerary rituals of ancient Rome focused on “purifying the living” and “social integration”, with greater emphasis on the continuity of social relationships in the present world. After the death of a member of the community, their relatives would gather around the dying person, calling out their name (conclamatio), kissing the body, placing flowers around the funeral bier, and decorating the family door with cypress during the formal mourning period to commemorate the deceased [12]. Additionally, during the funeral procession of the nobility (pompa), dancers and musicians (mimi) would portray the deceased, and the descendants or close relatives of the deceased would deliver a eulogy (laudatio funebris) in the square (Forum) [9]. After the mourning period, the ancient Romans would hold funeral games (ludi) [9]. The funeral ceremony process was transformed from private mourning into a public political spectacle.

3.4. Burial management and social participation

The burial management in ancient Egypt was monopolized by the royal family and the priestly class, forming a highly centralized and sacred system. In contrast, ancient Rome regulated it through family dominance, community participation, and national legislation, creating a more socialized and flexible management model.

The funerary management of ancient Egypt was characterized by the “monopoly of royal power and priesthood”. Royal tombs were directly overseen by the pharaoh, and utilizing national resources for construction, such as the royal pyramids built during the Third and Fourth Dynasties [2]. The priests held the core interpretative authority, and the rituals and activities during the funeral process (such as the “opening ceremony” and others) were performed by the priests, reinforcing religious authority [2]. The funerals of ordinary people lacked complex burial facilities, which suggests that the burials of ordinary people were primarily handled by families, without external assistance (such as from temples, etc.) [2].

The funeral management of ancient Rome exhibited the characteristic of “multi-faceted collaboration.” The state regulated burial locations and ceremonial limits through laws, such as the Twelve Tables, which explicitly prohibited excessive mourning [9]. The funeral associations (collegia funeraticia) spontaneously established by the people continued to exist among

brotherhoods and impoverished groups to arrange dignified burials for the deceased [9]. Public health department employed funeral practitioners to handle street corpses, reflecting the 'pragmatic governance' of funerals in ancient Rome [3]. With the cooperation of multiple different social sectors, funerals in ancient Rome formed a hybrid model based on family autonomy and mutual assistance among communities, regulated by the state.

4. The deep shaping of funeral culture by differences in views on life and death

The differences in funerary customs between ancient Rome and ancient Egypt are not merely coincidental cultural choices, but rather stem from the differing understandings of "death" in the two civilizations.

4.1. Exploration of core beliefs and views on life and death

4.1.1. Ancient Egypt: death is the continuation and sublimation of life

The ancient Egyptian concept of life and death is centered around “eternal recurrence”, where death is seen as a “transition” from this world to the afterlife rather than an end.

Ancient Egyptians believed that people possessed “ka” (vital energy) and “ba” (soul double), and after death, one needed to ensure the soul would reunite and achieve immortality in the afterlife through mummification, provision of burial goods, and ceremonial blessings [3]. The “Book of the Dead” and other funerary texts served as core texts in tombs, with their spells and illustrations designed to assist the deceased in passing through the judgment of the afterlife, reflecting a pragmatic belief in “actively planning for the next life” [11]. This reflects the ancient Egyptians’ idea of the “immortality of the soul” and the importance of “preparing for the afterlife”.

“The belief in universal equality in the afterlife” is another important characteristic of ancient Egyptian funeral culture. Even commoners would use the Book of the Dead and place various burial goods in their graves, expressing their expectation for the “reproduction of earthly life in the afterlife”, which also reflects the idea that death is not a privilege, but a new stage of human life [11].

4.1.2. Ancient Rome: death is the extension and culmination of the order of the present world

The view of life and death in ancient Rome placed more emphasis on the “continuation of social relationships in the present world,” Death was seen as a part of the natural cycle, its meaning dependent on the practical needs of family, class, and the state.

Compared to ancient Egypt, the ancient Romans’ attitude towards funerals reflected a strong sense of pragmatism. The Romans exhibited a clear utilitarianism towards deceased children (especially infants) and slaves, who were considered “lives without established social utility”. The deaths of most young children did not receive formal recognition, as they had not yet fulfilled core family functions such as continuing the family name, inheriting property, or supporting the elderly [12]. Slaves belonged to the lowest class of Roman society and had no legal or social “individuality”. Therefore, their burials were mostly collective, lacking personal identifiers that reflected their “instrumental status” [5,12].

Moreover, the burial rituals of ancient Rome were also a “mirror” of social class. Generals who died on the battlefield would be commemorated for their military achievements through a ceremony known as decursio (a ritual cavalry procession to honor the deceased) [5]. The tombs of merchants would highlight wealth (e.g., pottery, glassware, metalware.). Criminals, suicides, and those with a

poor reputation were deprived of the right to a normal burial and excluded from family cemeteries [3]. These burial customs reflect the ancient Romans' realistic understanding that "death cannot be separated from the social rules of the secular world".

4.2. The social function of funeral culture

Funeral rituals are not only the external manifestation of faith, but also the "implicit system" that maintains the social structure, consolidates power, and affirms identity in both two civilizations.

Ancient Egypt reinforced royal authority and social classes differentiation through funerals, with the complex burial system serving as the core mechanism for maintaining social order. The royal family monopolized the resources for large tombs, such as the massive investment of labor and materials required to build the pyramids [2]. At the same time, Pharaoh reinforced his role as a mediator between the gods and humans through burial rituals, binding royal power with divine authority, and using divine authority to make the people accept the social hierarchy [8]. Additionally, the hierarchical differences between commoners and nobles were superficially emphasized as "moral equality" through the so-called "judgment of the dead" ritual, which in reality transforms the differences in worldly status into moral distinctions based on "whether one can pass God's judgment". This implied that the impoverished in this life lose their privileges in the afterlife due to their inability to practice morality, thereby rationalizing social inequalities in the present world [3].

Unlike ancient Egypt, ancient Rome used funerals to reinforce family networks and social boundaries, and funeral practices served the "reproduction of worldly relationships." The family burial site (*loca religiosa*) served as a physical and spiritual "family fortress", reinforcing members' sense of belonging through regular rituals (e.g., family gatherings during the *Parentalia* festival) [3]. Public cemeteries may have divisions, for example, slaves and freed slaves tend to be buried within their respective *familia* (family), and various social identifiers (e.g., profession, family affiliation) can also be found in the inscriptions on the tombstones [13]. This funeral custom clearly delineates social classes, making the "death scene" the "ultimate endorsement" of one's status in the present world.

5. Conclusion

This research explores the funerary culture of ancient Egypt and ancient Rome. The research finds that although both demonstrated civilizations a significant emphasis on death in form terms, there are notable differences in the underlying cultural logic, social functions, and spiritual core. The ancient Egyptians viewed death as a "sacred transition from the present world to the afterlife," rather than the end of life. Their burial customs, such as the construction of pyramids, the making of mummies, and the use of the Book of the Dead, all served to ensure the completeness of the deceased's afterlife. In contrast, the ancient Romans saw death as a "continuation of social relationships in this world", with the core function of funerals being to maintain family bonds and social hierarchies. State legislation, family autonomy, and community organizations collectively participated in funerary management, reflecting the practicality and legal spirit of ancient Roman society.

The differences between the two funeral cultures are rooted in their respective religious beliefs, social structures, and core views on life and death. Such cultural divergences not only reflect the unique spiritual characteristics of the two ancient Mediterranean civilizations but also provide profound insights into the religious beliefs and social values of distinct civilizations.

This study has certain limitations, such as failing to fully examine the internal differences across different periods and regions, as well as insufficient discussion on marginalized groups and economic factors. Future research could integrate archaeological artifacts and technological methods to conduct more detailed diachronic and interdisciplinary comparisons, in order to deepen the understanding of the factors driving the evolution of ancient funerary culture.

References

- [1] Zhang, W. (2015). Cultural differences between Chinese and Western societies from the perspective of funeral customs. *Journal of Shandong Agricultural Engineering University*, 32(2), 78-80.
- [2] Assmann, J. (2011). *Death and salvation in ancient Egypt*. Cornell University Press.
- [3] Retief, F. P., & Cilliers, L. (2006). Burial customs and the pollution of death in ancient Rome: procedures and paradoxes. *Acta theologica*, 26(2), 128-146.
- [4] Miniaci, G. (2019). Multiple burials in ancient societies: theory and methods from Egyptian archaeology. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 29(2), 287-307.
- [5] Toynbee, J. M. (1996). *Death and burial in the Roman world*. JHU Press.
- [6] Waldner, K., Gordon, R., & Spickermann, W. (2016). *Burial rituals, Ideas of Afterlife, and the Individual in the Hellenistic World and the roman Empire*. Franz Steiner Verlag.
- [7] Wen, J. (2023). Family funeral offering system in the Old Kingdom of Egypt. *Yindu Journal*, 44(04), 72-82. <https://doi.org/10.16140/j.cnki.ydxk.2023.04.013>
- [8] Baines, J., & Lacovara, P. (2002). Burial and the dead in ancient Egyptian society: respect, formalism, neglect. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 2(1), 5-36.
- [9] Heller, J. L. (1932). Burial customs of the Romans. *The Classical Weekly*, 193-197
- [10] Ruggles, C. L. (2015). Monuments of the Giza Plateau. In *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy* (pp. 1519-1530). Springer, New York, NY.
- [11] Yan, H. (2021). Text, image and ritual: "Books of the afterlife" in ancient Egyptian temples. *Ancient Civilizations*, 15(01), 11-24, 156. <https://doi.org/10.16758/j.cnki.1004-9371.2021.01.002>
- [12] Rawson, B. (2003). 'The Roman Family' in Recent Research: State of the Question. *Biblical Interpretation*, 11(2), 119-138.
- [13] Borg, B. (2013). *Crisis and ambition: tombs and burial customs in third-century CE Rome*. Oxford University Press, USA.