

Death Rituals Reveal Much About Ancient Life

LiveScience Staff

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Cultures around the world and through time have had wildly varying ways of dealing with the dead. And since death weighs so heavy on a culture and is ultimately so mysterious, records of these practices, or "deathways," are often more abundant than other ancient cultural accounts and provide illuminating windows into other cultures.

"Deathways illuminate religious meaning and the social life of cultures about which we may know little else," says Erik Seeman, Ph.D., associate professor of history at the University at Buffalo and author of the forthcoming "Death in the New World."

Cremation, grave cairns, funeral mounds, mummification, air burial, and belief in life after death are just some of the practices which, though sacred to one culture, often seem odd or even terrifying to another, Seeman says. The Greeks, for example, were fascinated with the historian Herodotus' description of the ancient Issedonians chopping up their dead into a mixed grill and devouring them in a communal barbeque, something entirely contrary to the Greeks' treatment of their own dead.

"Much of my research looks at how deathways marked cultural self-definition and the definition of 'other' in the New World," Seeman said.

"Christianity, Judaism and the many polytheistic religions of American Indians and Sub-Saharan Africans focused on explaining to believers the meaning of death and the afterlife," Seeman explained. "Because of this, when individuals met strangers they were interested in the others' deathways. What remains are far more descriptions of mortuary rituals than of such cultural practices as food preparation or music."

Just think of the trove of information about Ancient Egypt revealed in the tombs of King Tut and others.

Understanding of deathways was put to manipulative ends, too, by both sides in colonial encounters. Seeman said missionaries used it to gain native converts, for instance, while some Indians used European fear of post-mortem mutilation to incite horror through scalping.

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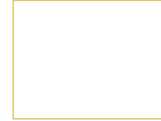
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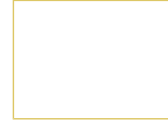
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