



DID THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS OFFER FUNERAL PACKAGES?

While the tomb of Tutankhamun might show the world the glories of the burial of a king - mummified and interred in elaborately decorated coffins and roomy tombs packed with grave goods - fascinating details of the day-to-day life of undertakers in Ancient Egypt are being discovered at another archaeological site - including evidence of package pricing not dissimilar to those on offer from today's funeral sector and a range of services from care of the deceased and burials to the ongoing maintenance of the souls of dead Egyptians.

▲ The funerary complex of Djoser and Step Pyramid in Saqqara Necropolis, Cairo City, Egypt

In July 2018, archaeologists unearthed an ancient “funeral home” deep beneath the sands of Saqqara in the Egyptian desert - a sprawling city of the dead (necropolis), 20 miles south of Cairo.

The 7 x 1.5 kilometre site at Saqqara features numerous pyramids, including the world-famous Step Pyramid of Djoser, the Pyramid of Unas and Pyramid of Sekhemket, as well as deep underground Persian Tombs, including the Tomb of Mereruka. In all, it is believed that seventeen Egyptian kings built pyramids at Saqqara, and high officials added private funeral monuments to the necropolis during the entire pharaonic period. It remained an important complex for non-royal burials and cult ceremonies for more than 3,000 years, well into Ptolemaic and Roman times.

It is believed that the name Saqqara may be derived from the ancient Egyptian funerary deity, Sokar - although it is also believed that local tribes may have contributed to the site’s name too.

In the two years since its discovery, the tombs at Saqqara have yielded a treasure trove of information about the day-to-day business of death in ancient Egypt, from mummification workshops to evidence suggesting that the ancient Egyptians offered funeral packages to suit different budgets.

Egyptologist Ramadan Hussein, who has been working at the site since 2016, explains. “The evidence we uncovered shows the embalmers had very good business sense and were very smart about providing alternatives.

“If you couldn’t afford a deluxe burial mask crafted with gold and silver, you might be offered the “white plaster and gold foil” deal instead. Or, if you did not have the resources for a jar of lustrous Egyptian alabaster to store your vital organs - you might have been offered a painted clay one instead.”

Ramadan Hussein and his team have focused their work on deep shafts that had been overlooked by earlier Egyptologists, who were more focused on burials from older periods in Egyptian history. While examining an area last explored in the late 1800s, they discovered a 40-foot shaft carved into the bedrock leading to a high-ceilinged chamber. The room had a raised, table-like area and shallow

▲ Ruins of the Funerary complex of Djoser



channels cut into the bedrock along the base of one wall. In one corner, a barrel-sized bowl was filled with charcoal, ash, and dark sand.

This suggested to Hussein that the chamber had been a mummification workshop, complete with an industrial-strength incense burner, drainage channels to funnel blood and a natural ventilation system. Each vessel that Hussein and his team recovered from the site has the name of the substance it held, and the days of the 70-day long embalming procedure it used, inscribed into it.

It is already known that Ancient Egyptian society included an entire class of priests dedicated to caring for the spirits of the dead. Their job description included maintaining tombs and praying for their departed owners, with people bringing weekly

offerings to the dead in the belief that it would keep them alive. There is even evidence, elsewhere in Egypt of legal contracts that these priests signed with the families of the dead.

The discoveries at Saqqara have helped to provide new detail of how these contracts might have worked in practice. Just a few steps from the mummification workshop at Saqqara - completely overlooked by previous archaeologists - a second shaft leading to a complex of six tombs was discovered in 2018.

Inside those half-dozen tombs were more than 50 mummies. At the bottom of the shaft - almost 100 feet beneath the surface, where spaces were more expensive because of their proximity to the underworld - the burials were especially elaborate and expensive. They included a woman laid to rest inside a limestone sarcophagus weighing seven and a half tons. In a nearby chamber was a woman whose face was covered with a mask made of silver and gold. However, the complex also held middle-class or working-class Egyptians interred in simple wooden coffins, or just wrapped in linen and placed in sand pits.

Discoveries like those of Hussein and his team at Saqqara are shedding new light on how ancient undertakers built their funerary businesses - and how they adapted their services to the needs and resources of each layer of Ancient Egyptian society.

The Tomb of Mereruka ▼

