

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MUMMIES

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You can look under “Recommended Readings” for something that I found while scanning the international media this morning [0002a.(BBC 3.4.2021) Egypt mummies to pass through Cairo in ancient rulers’ parade]. To it I have added a framing, supporting background [0002b.Additional information on mummies and mummification], mostly copy-pasted from Wikipedia, though I have slightly edited and corrected it here and there.

Why should all this be interesting? First, at its simplest, because it is history, and all history is fascinating, and I too happen to be a historian, and I have gone through the British Museum’s incredible collection of Egyptian mummies more than once, pondering both the past and what Jack Goody has called “the theft of history.”

Second, because it highlights the incredible variety of human culture over the ages. This is a theme that we address in SPS 101: how, because humans are “underprogrammed animals,” as Ernest Gellner puts it, within certain material-technical constraints that establish “the limits of the possible” in a major epoch, you can still get many different “solutions” to a common “problem.” (Michael Cook, in his *A Brief History of the Human Race*, has a useful section on the Ancient Egyptian culture of death and the afterlife.)

Third, because in both these readings you can find insights into research methods — how careful, comprehensive and rigorous modern scientists and scholars are; the precision, the exactitude they try to bring into their work, involving constant questioning, falsification, and re-verification — which is something that we should bear in mind as we keep posing and re-posing questions of “how do we know?”

Fourth, because especially the BBC news item has to do with how the present uses the past — the tasks that the dead are put to by the living.

