

Unwrapping Ancient Egypt*. Christina Riggs. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 384 pp.

Reviewed by William Carruthers

Unwrapping Ancient Egypt is an original and powerful volume. Until now, critical histories of Egyptology have mostly been written by non-Egyptologists.[†] In her book, Christina Riggs has altered this status quo, illustrating that the writing of such histories by scholars involved with the field can have a serious impact on what sort of work the field does. Informed by her experiences as an Egyptological practitioner, in addition to her work in museology and her reading of a variety of anthropological literature, Riggs provides a (very) critical history of Egyptology and related curatorial practices. The result is a book that not only wears its erudition lightly, but also challenges the legitimacy and apparent exceptionality of what it is that Egyptologists do. Opening Egyptology's "black box," Riggs makes a major contribution to understanding what that box might contain, in addition to how this understanding might change our perceptions of "ancient Egypt" and scholarly practices related to it.

Riggs makes this contribution over six chapters, a preface and an afterword. The titles of some of these chapters ("Desecration," "Revelation," "Secrecy," "Sanctity") hint at the overriding critical themes of the book, which at its most basic focuses on how Egyptologists and associated curators have dealt with ancient practices of wrapping in Egypt: in the case of examples related to the preparation of dead bodies with linen cloth ("mummification," bluntly speaking), but also in the case of other instances such as wrapping practices related to statuary. Moreover, Riggs considers the materiality and ancient meanings of these practices, using this discussion to throw her account of the modern disciplinary and museological work related to them into perspective.

And that is perhaps the crux of the volume. Due to the way in which Egyptological and related museum practices have developed, Riggs makes the "Revelation" that Egyptologists and museum professionals continue to consider not only wrapping, but also—by implication—many other ancient practices from Egypt, in terms of the ways in which Egyptology became formalized as a science in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sometimes this scientific practice seems to occur as an uncritical continuation of ingrained practices: in the case of the by-now-standard removal of linen wrapping from ancient bodies at excavation sites and in museums, for instance. At other times this practice has been close to—if not entirely—willful, an attempt to deny that academic and "esoteric" understandings of ancient Egypt have any relationship with one another, despite a scholarly formation history that suggests that they do (for "esoteric," read theosophical, Freemason, Afrocentric, among others). For example, in this light, Riggs discusses Egyptological attempts to deny that ancient practices of "Secrecy" existed in Egypt.

She also claims that something close to "Desecration" has been the result of such boundary work. Riggs demonstrates that ancient meanings surrounding wrapping practices have been lost in the move to constitute ancient bodies and artifacts as (exceptionally) scientific objects

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† Colla (2007) and Reid (2002) are the two most well-known examples (although written from very different critical perspectives); cf. Carruthers (2015) for a volume that brings together viewpoints from Egyptologists and others.

and disassociate them from other—non-Egyptological, non-museological—claims to their control. Indeed, somewhat ironically, Riggs spends much of *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt* demonstrating that this process of control, riven with issues relating to power and knowledge, has itself concealed ancient practices of power and knowledge connected to wrapping. The quest for a certain type of knowledge has obscured, not revealed, despite countless exhibitions relating to “forensic” investigations of ancient Egyptian bodies promising anything but.

Riggs also asks what would happen if this situation were to be reversed. For example, turning to the bodies with which ancient Egyptian wrapping practices are particularly connected, Riggs asks what would happen if Egyptologists and curators were to treat them in the same way that practitioners in other fields now treat the bodies that their disciplines had also once claimed for science. This reflective and inclusive process in place, what other narratives relating to these bodies might be revealed, whether ancient or modern? In *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt*, Riggs starts to answer such questions. But the foundational nature of this reinterpretation also means that she is well-placed to conclude her volume by suggesting that this process can only continue if “museums and academics...[start] disrupting the scientism that has come to dominate displays and press coverage of mummification in recent decades...by grappling with the materiality of collections throughout their life cycles” (225). Riggs suggests, then, that there is a lot more work to do before her questions are answered. It is a suggestion well made.

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Editor’s note: The author of this review was acknowledged by name in the book under review.

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