AJA ONLINE PUBLICATIONS: BOOK REVIEW

The Cost of Death: The Social and Economic Value of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Art in the Ramesside Period

By Kathlyn M. Cooney (Egyptologische Uitgaven 22). Pp. xv + 509, CD-ROM 1. Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, Leiden 2007. €56. ISBN 978-90-6258-222-8 (paper).

Cooney's *The Cost of Death* sets out to establish the social and economic value of funerary artifacts (particularly coffins) and how such notions of value were arrived at during Ramesside-period Egypt (1295–1069 B.C.E.). The funerary artifacts are located at the center of a network of drivers—ideological, social, and economic—that are said to determine the quality and form of the finished artifact. Analysis of the context for their creation provides information about the individuals involved in their production and use, as well as their wider social context.

The book, based on Cooney's 2004 doctoral dissertation for Johns Hopkins University, draws primarily on data from Deir el-Medina, the settlement of the New Kingdom royal tomb builders. It is divided into eight chapters and three catalogues (textual evidence, prices, and visual evidence). Following a discussion of the aim of the book, the methodology Cooney employs, the Egyptian economic system, and the funerary objects in the catalogues, chapters 2–5 analyze the textual evidence for production of the objects. The analysis encompasses prices as well as a number of practical aspects, such as the possible values of different types of decoration, the organization of object production, the amount of private work a craftsman might have produced and how much he might have earned for it, and the place of private-sector work within the official organization of labor on the royal tomb. Chapter 6 introduces and discusses the second data set—the coffin and coffin fragments—with detailed descriptions of the different types, supported by color plates both at the back of the book and on a CD-ROM.

Cooney identifies the limitations of traditional approaches to funerary material, which suppress social and economic aspects in favor of religious belief. Her social approach can be placed within the context of recent reevaluations of data from ancient Egypt, and, more particularly, from Deir el-Medina. Egyptology is a notoriously conservative and insular discipline, only recently engaging with theoretical approaches in an effort spearheaded by Meskell's work, which also deals with data from Deir el-Medina (e.g., *Archaeologies of Social Life* [Oxford 1999]). Her approach, though criticized, opened up avenues of cross-disciplinary analysis that have often proved fruitful. This work is one such example. In addition, Cooney critiques the use of art historical criteria for assessing the quality of a coffin or associated artifact, where subjective notions of quality, be they ancient or modern, remain unexamined.

Central to Cooney's evaluation of the material is the concept of value, which she explores both as an aesthetic quality—necessarily subjective—and as something that can be economically measured. Within this discussion, Cooney assesses and critiques Janssen's masterwork on the economics of Deir el-Medina (*Commodity Prices from the Ramessid Period: An Economic Study of the Village of Necropolis Workmen at Thebes* [Leiden 1975]), demonstrating that no scholarship, no matter how well established and respected, is exempt from reappraisal. The complexity of disentangling what we (and the ancient Egyptians) mean by

114.1 (January 2010)
American Journal of Archaeology Book Review

value sustains a lengthy discussion of ancient economics, aesthetics, and social need. As Cooney states, "Value is not the same thing as quality" (258). Cooney uses the model of functional materialism—which she defines as the drive to expend economic surplus on objects that embody both ritual and prestige purposes (260)—to describe the cultural mechanisms at work in the funerary industry of Ramesside Egypt. She comes to a number of important conclusions that demonstrate the benefit of applying theoretical methodologies. For example, the quality of a given piece should be regarded as the result of a decision-making process based on social variables such as age, gender, and personal worth, rather than as a slavish imitation of elite styles (231), with people negotiating the purchase of artifacts that displayed what they considered to be significant and that they could afford (256). Choices might differ according to the social milieu of an individual. For example, the Deir el-Medina craftsmen emphasized their skills in carving and painting, whereas other groups placed more emphasis on, or valued more highly, expensive materials such as gilding.

Cooney's object-centered approach also throws light on Egyptian funerary rituals. Funerary artifacts form one of the few ritual assemblages that have contextual data (supplied by the tombs, with their architecture and ornamentation, and the decoration and inscriptions on the objects within). However, Cooney argues that an analysis that foregrounds the social context for the creation of funerary objects can provide much richer and more accurate information on rituals. For example, her close examination of the decoration of the coffins and sarcophagi suggests which parts would have been viewed the most and therefore were the most highly decorated—areas such as the face on an anthropoid coffin (the focus of the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony) or the ends of a wooden sarcophagus (visible for longer when in procession). Cooney notes the difference between the funerary artifacts depicted in Ramesside tombs—which must represent the ideal funeral—and actual ritual artifacts, which were far more flexible and reflective of individual choice and of social and economic conditions.

Cooney is careful to establish the limitations of her data set in terms of time periods covered, accidents of preservation, the often poor records of early excavations, the biases of collectors, and the lack of overlap between the textual and artifactual data sets. In addition, she stresses that the data set reflects burials that relate to a small percentage of Egyptian society and cannot be regarded as in any way representative, something that earlier scholars have tended to ignore. Although the acknowledgement of limitations is laudable in any assessment of ancient material culture, this emphasis becomes somewhat repetitive and even encompasses descriptions of central artifacts, such as the Saqqara cache of *ʾIw-rwḏ.f* or the use of varnish to create the yellow color on some coffins. Because this is a book drawn from a dissertation, detailed workings are provided, which accounts for some of the repetition and length. Cooney's use of statistical analysis to measure subjective concepts such as quality might also be open to criticism; so, too, might her drawing of broad conclusions from data sets that cannot be representative—but this is all the data there is, and Cooney has adopted a methodology that produces some fascinating insights.

The Cost of Death is a welcome addition to studies of the ancient Egyptian economy and society as a whole and Deir el-Medina in particular. It presents a nuanced and careful reading of funerary material that serves to illuminate aspects of ancient Egyptian society that have previously only been open to speculation, and it demonstrates just how beneficial the application of theoretical models to existing data can be.

KAREN EXELL

THE MANCHESTER MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER
MANCHESTER M13 9PL
UNITED KINGDOM
KAREN.EXELL@MANCHESTER.AC.UK