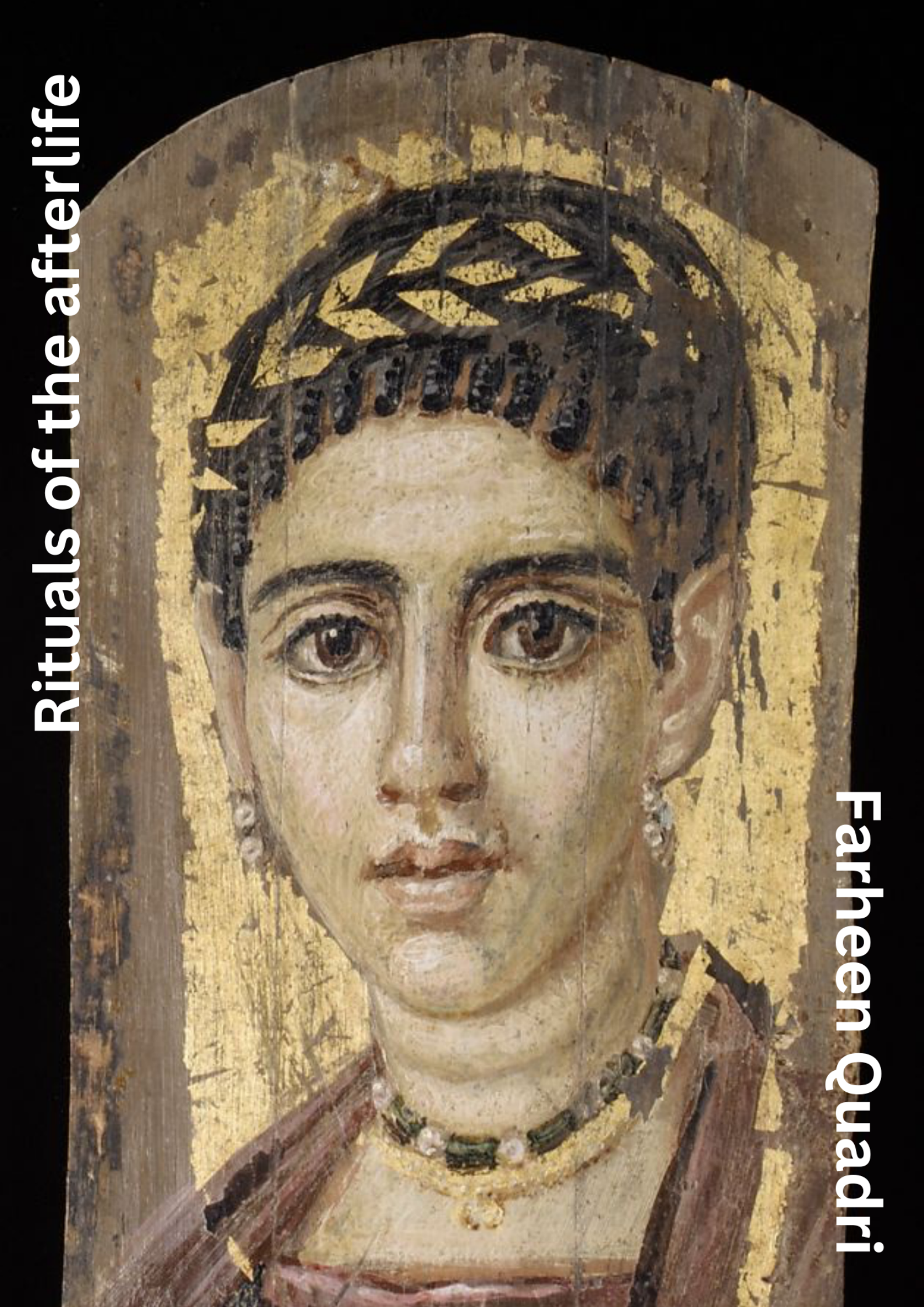
Rituals of the afterlife



Farheen Quadri

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, objectnr 09.181.7,
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Rituals of the Afterlife

A Cross-Religious Study of Death Practices

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Introduction

Death rituals exist in every society, but the specifics of it vary by culture and religion. These rituals not only reflect how societies cope with death but also how religion can become a tool to help make sense of abstract ideas such as death and afterlife. Thus, a nuanced understanding of funerary archaeology requires a deeper engagement with religious texts. Ancient Egyptians, for instance, believed in preparing the body through elaborate mummification procedures and placed grave goods in the tomb so that the soul could travel through the afterlife with ease (Baines & Lacovara, 2002). Conversely, Zoroastrians practice sky burials where the dead is placed on a raised tower called *dakhma*, where scavengers dispose the flesh. This is because they believe that burying or cremating the body, contaminates the sacred elements of earth and fire (Russell, 2024). Muslims follow yet another practice - burial. They wash the body, wrap it in a simple white shroud known as *kafan*, and bury it as soon as possible, emphasizing equality even in death (Petersen, 2013).

These examples explore how religion, a component of culture, shapes funerary practices. In anthropology, culture is defined as "…that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom…acquired by man as a member of society" by Edward Burnett Tylor in the first paragraph of his book, Primitive Culture, 1871 (Tylor, 1871/1958, p.1). Religion, as one of these cultural systems can also be defined through Tylor's (1871) own formulation from the same book - "belief in spiritual beings". Later anthropologists refined this understanding. Anthony F.C. Wallace (1966) described religion as "a set of beliefs and rituals concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and forces", in his book *Religion : An Anthropological View* (Wallace, 1966). Clifford Geertz, on the other hand, contested this view, calling religion symbolic - as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz, 1976). From this perspective, one can conclude that funerary rituals are cultural acts that manifest religious ideals through material symbols - whether it be the body, the material offerings, or the architecture itself.

These three religions were selected because they represent three different cosmological models - monotheistic [Islam], dualistic [Zoroastranism], and polytheistic [Ancient Egyptian] - that allows for a good comparison across theologies and ritual systems. Moreover, all three of these religions provide a rich textual quota and considerable archaeological records, making them ideal for this study.

Learning about death and its rituals helps us understand how people associate meaning to mortality. Comparative analysis of afterlife rituals can unveil human belief in concepts like an eternal soul and fears about the dead, across different civilisations (Prickett & Timmermans, 2022). By employing scientific evidence, we can explore how, sometimes, concepts in the religious texts are realised and applied by humans. In short, this research highlights the interplay between faith and practice at the moment of death.

While significant research has explored the interconnectedness of religion and archaeology, most studies tend to focus on a single tradition or region. What rains comparatively understudied is a cross-cultural analysis that places Zoroastrianism, Islam and Ancient Egyptian beliefs under the same lens. By comparing these three religious traditions, **the research aim of this study is to examine how the physical remains of a burial align with or diverge from the teaching of the religious texts across distinct cosmological frameworks.** Furthermore, my initial assumptions that this area was understudied were corrected through extensive research and review of existing scholarship. Thus, rather than addressing a lack of research, this thesis seeks to synthesise and gather existing studies about all three religions under a focused, comparative framework.

In order to understand the complexity of this topic, we must answer several questions. Mainly, :

- How do burial rituals and material culture reflect or diverge from death-related beliefs in sacred texts?
- How do cultural and religious beliefs shape human approaches to death?
- How have these burial practices evolved over time?

By answering these questions, I will not only present a comparative analysis but rather the inner practices of human beliefs and their impact on death and religion.

My thesis uses an interdisciplinary method of analysis, as mentioned before, by using archaeology and theology. First, I will conduct a textual analysis, using the religious texts of the respective religions - concepts of purity, afterlife, and death will be the main areas of study. Second, an archaeological analysis will be done, using existing research, albeit limited, on the types of funerary practices of the three religions. Published reports on burial sites and tomb excavations are of utmost importance here. Lastly, a brief cross reference will be done, by comparing the texts to the archaeology, followed by conclusion.

This thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 2 underlines the contextual framework while clarifying important definitions like ritual, culture, and religion in the context of death and surveying the historical background of mortuary practices. Chapter 3 reviews the religious literature on funerary beliefs and procedures within Islam, Zoroastrianism and Ancient Egypt. Chapter 4 draws on existing archaeological case studies of burial sites and artefacts. Chapter 5 synthesises these findings, and goes a step further by finding discrepancies in the rituals (if any) and considering factors that may have resulted in an evolution of the practice. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the research of this study by answering the research questions and reflecting on any possible implication it might leave for archaeology or anthropology.

This comprehensive approach will hopefully deepen our understanding of how different religions and cultures treat the mystery of death with ritual practice. It showcases the universal human emotion towards mortality as well as the methods to honour such emotions.

Context

In order to meaningfully examine the burial practices of any community, we must first understand the religious frameworks that shape those practices and the basic tenets which they rest upon. Across many doctrinal traditions, death is viewed as a transition or continuation of life in another realm of existence (Abramovitch, 2015, p. 871). This realisation influences the rituals, symbols, and material execution surrounding death. Thus, this chapter will begin with a concise introduction of the three religions central to my study - Islam, Zoroastrianism and Ancient Egyptian religion - highlighting core values and significance of death.

2.1 Introduction to religion and death

Islam, founded in 7th century Arabia, is a monotheistic religion that believes in complete submission to Allah [God]. Followers of Islam are called Muslims and their religious practices, lifestyle and ethical conduct are guided by the Holy Quran and the Hadith (Kounsar, 2016). At its core lies the concept of *Tawhid (the oneness of God)* which governs all other aspects of human life (Kounsar, 2016, p.95). This core principle frames human existence as a moral test of faith towards the divine creator.

In Islam, life is a test and death is a transition phase to the hereafter (Akhirah) (Saleh, 2008, pp. 101- 102). The Quran declares, “Every soul will taste death, and to Us you will be returned”, emphasizing accountability after death (Quran, 21:35). Islam provides a complete guide to funerary rites and rituals based on the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the juristic tradition, i.e. the Sharia Law (Funerals (Al-Janaa’iz) - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم), n.d.). The Islamic Sharia Law describes the manner of burial for Muslims : the body must be washed, shrouded, and buried facing Mecca, as soon as possible (Tritton, 1938; Gatrad, 1994). The simplicity in burial reflects the Quranic ideal of equality before God and humility even in death.

Zoroastrianism is an ancient Iranian faith based on the teachings of the Prophet Zoroaster [Zarathustra], preserved in their Holy book, Avesta. Its theology lies upon the cosmic dualism between Asha (truth, order, purity) and Druj (falsehood, chaos, impurity), which forms the base for both moral and ritual conduct (Boyce, 1979, p.8). The ideology

of this ancient faith relies on a constant struggle between good and evil : *Ahura Mazda* (the good creator) and *Angra Mainyu* (the evil spirit) (Hintze, 2017, p. 87). After death, each soul is judged immediately and a final cosmic do-over resets the world to divine perfection (Jackson, 1928). Because the corpse is viewed as a source of Druj, Orthodox Zoroastrianism forbids the practice of burial or cremation as it believes to corrupt the natural elements of earth, fire, and water in the body (Russell, 2024; Hintze, 2017, p.88). Instead, corpses are placed in open air *dakhmas* or "tower of silence", to be consumed by scavengers like vultures (Russell, 2024; Hintze, 2017, p. 86). This practice is common in Parsi communities of India and Iran as a way to give back and respect the natural order of nature. The Parsi tradition regards giving one's body to the birds as a way "to take less and give more to the world" and avoid contaminating the earth or fire (Gulzeb, 2024).

Ancient Egyptian religion [c. 3000 BCE–30 BCE] was polytheistic in nature and had complex beliefs in death. Its worldview is structured around the concept of Ma'at, - principle of truth, balance, and cosmic order along with the myth of Osiris, God of death and resurrection (Abbas, 2015; Jock & Kingsley, 2025). The concept of Ma'at is established in the 'weighing of the heart' ritual in order to analyse the morality of the soul and the Osirian myth wherein Osiris was killed, dismembered and resurrected functions as a narrative outline for the deceased (every individual is thought to be Osiris at death) (Jock & Kingsley, 2025). By the New Kingdom period [c. 1550 - 1070 BCE], these beliefs surrounding death and afterlife became highly systemised and quite elaborate. Egyptians believed that death was was not an end; rather a transition that required ritual guidance into the afterlife (Assmann, 2005, pp.152-153). To achieve this, one had to be mummified and preserved with grave goods and spells, useful in this transitional journey (Taylor, 1999, p.16). The Book of the Dead elaborates on the Osirian myth and becomes a companion consisting of spells, prayers, and instructions that guides the soul through the perilous underworld and into the luxurious afterlife (Warren, 2023; Depuydt & Hornung, 2000, p.13). Thus, for this purpose, pharaohs and other nobles build elaborate tombs like the Pyramids, filled with accessories for the journey to and within afterlife. Commoners, on the other hands, had smaller tomb goods, often blessed by priests to enhance the offering (Mark, 2017). Together, these practices aimed at establishing Ma'at, in not only the mortal but also the eternal life.

These theological fundamentals, hence, shape each religion's outlook on death. Islamic monotheism (Tawhid) links moral testing to accountability on Judgment day, leading to

simple burials. Zoroastrian cosmic duality (Asha vs Druj) enforces purity (as it views the corpse itself as polluting) and a future divine reset to the present world. Egyptian polytheism, grounded in Ma'at and the Osirian myth, emphasizes ritual order and magical guidance to reach the afterlife, so graves often held specific objects to ensure the soul's comfortable journey to eternity. Together, these core tenets and contrasting doctrines - *divine equality, cosmic purity, and ritual harmony* - reveal how each faith transforms the experience of death and will help analyse the funerary practices of the three religions.

2.2 History of burial goods

The presence or absence of burial goods, indicates social values and beliefs about the afterlife across civilisations. Grave goods were a status symbol and a guarantee that the deceased had everything they would need to live on after death in many ancient societies. For example, Egyptian tombs often contained items that were considered essential to the afterlife like personal belongings as well as food and drink for the soul. (Mark, 2017). Wealthy Egyptians were buried with gold-lacquered artefacts, beds, board games, and other seemingly important provisions - the Tomb of Tutankhamen is a well known example of the same (Mark, 2017). These items are crucial to archaeologists in order to understand the historical context and date the burial site. The Egyptian logic understood the afterlife as an extension of the worldly and hence believed in acquiring similar provisions for their second life. One inscription even talks about the soul being able to walk beside their favorite stream and sit under their favorite tree. (Mark, 2017).

By contrast, other religious traditions actively disregard burial goods on religious grounds. In Zoroastrian law, the corpse matter/body, also known as, *Nasu* was considered a source of *Druj* [lie/pollution], desecrating earth or fire, if the corpse was buried or burned (Russell, 2024). The Vendidad, a religious Zoroastrian text, instructs the destruction of any grave or tomb. Thus, instead of grave offerings, Zoroastrians practice active avoidance by entrusting priests to complete the open air tomb rituals (to prevent impurity) (Zykov, 2016). Islam similarly discourages building any lavish tombs. Islamic tradition emphasises humility and equality even in death. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is reported to have said not to plaster, build sitting areas or lavish tombs to display wealth on graves of the believer (Sunan Abi Dawud 3225 - Funerals (Kitab Al-Jana'iz) - كتاب الجنائز - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه و سلم), 2025). Many Islamic

scholars also encourage simple white shroud and a flat grave, prohibiting grave goods or any other such practices.

Hence, to understand how each religion enacted its funerary practices, it is useful to examine the earliest known material evidence associated with each tradition. While textual sources describe certain practices, archaeological evidence sometimes provides a different perspective, showcasing how communities interpreted and applied their religious beliefs in their daily and ritual lives. Below, I will outline the material culture associated with each of the three religious views, based on the earliest documented evidence.

The earliest material evidence related to funerary behaviour in Egypt dates back to the Paleolithic period where an early human burial was documented with a bifacial axe placed near the face, maybe suggesting a symbolic association between the deceased and material culture (Bard et al., 2001, p.43). As Egyptian society developed, by the Pre-dynastic period (during Naqada II), the separation of grave goods from the deceased became commonly widespread, marking a shift in mortuary customs and forming the basis of modern Egyptian tombs (Bard et al., 2001, p.188). These instances can be interpreted as the earliest manifestations of belief in a continued existence after death that established a foundation for the more elaborate funerary rituals of the New Kingdom period.

In contrast, while Zoroastrian theology prohibits burial of the corpse to avoid corruption of the natural elements, archaeological evidence shows material traces of funerary rituals emerging from the mid-1st millennium BCE onwards. In places such as Bactria, Sogdia, Gīlān, and Deylam, non-elite burials continued their practice of inhumations, often accompanied with grave goods like pots, small personal ornaments, and weapons (Grenet, 2024). There is also evidence from Western and Eastern Iran of the placing of a coin in the mouth or hand of the corpse, adopted from Greek practice. In Greek custom, the coin provided passage to the deceased across the river Styx (Grenet, 2024).

Islamic burials have also begun simple. Early 7th-8th century CE Muslim cemeteries show bodies in shrouds, with no grave goods, similar to the holy scriptures (Sabiq, n.d., Fiqh 4.35; Sahih Al-Bukhari 1265 - Funerals (Al-Janaa'iz) - كتاب الجنائز - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه و سلم), 2025, Hadith 26). However, in

recent archaeology research, we see that many medieval Muslim nomad groups did include personal items in the graves such as the Mongolian tribes from the Golden Horde (Shingiray, 2018).

The diversity of burial goods across religions reflect how local communities interpret religious traditions, translating universal doctrines into culturally specific expressions of belief. These deviations between text and practice show a dynamic relation between religious ideals and lived realities - a theme that will be explored in the upcoming chapters.

Theoretical Review

In this chapter, I will analyse the religious scriptures of the three religions - Islam, Zoroastrianism and Ancient Egyptian texts - respectively.

3.1 Quran

The Holy Quran addresses death and the Hereafter in the form of reminders, establishing the importance death has in the religion and in the life of a Muslim. Collected and written during the life of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), the Quran was completed and composed under Caliph Uthman (r.a) [c. 644 - 656 CE], the Quran and the Hadith together provide the foundation to Islamic burial and ritual (K. Farrin, 2020, p.127). For example, the Quran spotlights humanity's return to God, as believers say "Innā lillāhi wa-innā ilayhi rājiʿūn" ("Surely to Allah we belong and to Him we will return") after someone's death (Quran, 2:156). The Quran also informs about the concept of burial in the story of Cain and Abel - after Cain kills his brother, "Allah sent a crow… to show him how to hide the disgrace of his brother… [so that] he said: 'Woe to me! Could I not be like this crow and hide my brother's body?'" (Quran, 5:31). Although a narrative, this Quranic verse implies that the right thing to do after death is bury the corpse. In other verses, the moment of death is vividly and briefly described like in Surah 75, Verse 26-28 : "No! When the soul has reached the collar bones… and the dying one is certain that it is the time of separation" (Quran, 75:26-28). This underlines human mortality but does not provide concrete information about the rites after death. Therefore, the Quran provides theological context of death and the Hereafter rather than detailed procedures.

The detailed burial rites are preserved and passed down through the Sunnah (Prophetic Tradition). The Hadith collections are sayings and teachings of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), passed down and recorded through the companions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) (Rohman, 2025). The Hadith collections specify a clear, cut procedure : the body of the deceased is washed (ghusl) by pious relatives of the same gender, an odd number of times with water and unguents (often lotus or camphor), as to purify the body (Chapters Regarding Funerals - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم), 2025). For example, one hadith reports the Prophet supervising the washing of one of his daughters: "Wash her three or five times… with water and lote leaves, and put camphor… for the last washing. When finished… he gave his waist-wrapper… and said:

‘Shroud her with it’” (Chapters Regarding Funerals - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صـــلى الله عـــليه و ســـلم), 2025). After washing, the body is enshrouded (kafan) in simple white cloth, symbolizing purity and equality. Sahih Bukhari recounts that the Prophet (pbuh) instructed: “Wash him with water and sidr [lotus] and shroud him in two pieces of cloth, and neither perfume him nor cover his head, for he will be resurrected… saying ‘Labbaika’ [for Mecca]” (Chapters Regarding Funerals - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صـــلى الله عـــليه و ســـلم), 2025). This hadith shows respect for the dead (avoiding embellishment) and even links the burial to pilgrimage symbolism (“Labbaika”).

The community then offers the funerary prayers (Janazah) in congregation, and the dead is carried to its grave. The body is buried 6 feet deep in the earth, typically on its right side, facing the Qibla (Mecca). The Quran does not specifically mention this posture, but the Hadith and other scholarly traditions stress on this as a sign of unity and return to God. The Sharia law considers the washing, shrouding, funeral prayer and burial as a communal duty (Fard Kifayah). Islamic scholars believe that these practices underline the important spiritual themes mentioned in the Quran : rapid burial, humility before God, and the temporary nature of the human soul in this world. The use of a simple white cloth teaches of humility and equality even in death (the rich and poor are shrouded in the same white cloth), and the body’s purification symbolises the purification of the soul before meeting God.

However, interpretations of these practices vary. While the Qur’an is more solid in its message with no change in its text since the composition, the Hadiths are interpreted more fluidly (Rohman, 2025, p.93). Sunni traditions stress humility in burial, influencing unmarked graves, while Shia practices may use small headstones to aid recognition (Halevi, 2007). Thus, while the Qur’an and the Hadith provide a textual framework to Islamic funerary practices, the lived expressions of these practices remains dynamic.

3.2 Avesta and Vendidad

The Zoroastrian sacred texts, Avesta and Vendidad, inform humanity of the elaborate laws of purity governing death. Avesta, the sacred corpus of Zoroastrianism was not written and compiled at the same time, but due to the Avestan language being similar to that of the early Vedic texts, it is noted that the Avesta may have ranged from 1500 - 500 BCE,

similar to the Vedic texts (Hintze, 2015. p.34). Hence, the Vendidad being a section of the younger Avesta may have been compiled around 500 BCE.

Death in Zoroastrianism is not just the soul's departure from the world; it is also a possible source of Nasu (corpse impurity) that must be prevented. The Vendidad (Fargard 8) constantly mentions how the dead must be moved to a dakhma (tower of silence), away from water and fire. In Fargard 8, a question is posed : "If a dog or a man die under a hut… what shall the worshippers of Mazda do?". The reply to it by Ahura Mazda is, ""They shall search for a Dakhma, they shall look for a Dakhma all around… If they find it easier to remove the dead, they shall take out the dead… and shall perfume [the hut] with Urvāsna or other sweet plants" (AVESTA: VENDIDAD, Chapter 8: Funerals and Purification, Unlawful Sex, 1-3). To simply put, immediately after death, the corpse is to be carried out - preferably to an open area, and the dwelling of the dead is to be cleansed. This highlights the Zoroastrian emphasis on prevention of corruption of natural elements like fire, water and earth by corpse matter.

In the case of the absence of a Dakhma, due to any reason whatsoever, the Vendidad suggests a provisional burial under strict conditions. The text describes choosing "the cleanest and driest" spot away from fire, water, and people; digging a shallow grave ("half a foot deep if the earth be hard, half the height of a man if it be soft"); and covering the corpse with ashes, cow dung, or stones (AVESTA: VENDIDAD, Chapter 8: Funerals and Purification, Unlawful Sex, 8). Essentially, the body is left exposed: "they shall let the lifeless body lie there, for two nights, or three nights, or a month long, until the birds begin to fly, the plants to grow, the hidden floods to flow, and the wind to dry up the earth" (AVESTA: VENDIDAD, Chapter 8: Funerals and Purification, Unlawful Sex, 9). Hence, the body is left in the hands of nature (vultures, sun, wind, etc.) to be desiccated and consumed. Once the bones are completely stripped of flesh and licked clean of any fluids, they are ritually purified (paradhana) and finally laid to rest. By doing so, the corpse never contaminates the earth or fire, which reaffirms the Zoroastrian belief of the two elements being the sacred creation of Ahura Mazda.

Scholars note that these practices are symbolically related to Zoroastrian eschatology. One study observes that on the "fourth day" when the body is placed on the dakhma, the soul crosses the Chinvat Bridge to paradise (assuming the soul was judged worthy of it) simultaneously (Lerner, 2011, p.19). Another ritual called the *sagdid ("dog seeing")*,

appoints a dog to look at the corpse immediately after death. This is done because the dog's gaze is believed to drive away the evil spirit of decay (nasa) from the body (Lerner, 2011, pp.19-20). This pressures the need to purify by any means possible. The dog is considered to be a ritually clean animals and hence, is useful in neutralising the threat of contamination. All in all, Zoroastrian beliefs aim to isolate and ritually prevent the corpse's element defiling powers, reflecting the belief that death is a cosmic trial. The avoidance of the use of earth or fire enunciates deep respect for creation, whereas the time periods and purification rituals link the physical disposal of the body to the soul's passage in the afterlife.

3.3 Ancient Egyptian Funerary Texts (Pyramid, Coffin, Book of the Dead)

Ancient Egyptian burial practices are highly documented in ritual texts like the Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead. These served as magical guides for the journey of the departed in the afterlife. They are not "laws" per say but spells and hymns that are placed in tombs to ensure resurrection and protection. The earliest royal mortuary literature, the Pyramid Texts (Old Kingdom, c. 2400–2300 BCE), functioned mostly as magical formulas for the king's resurrection that were chanted over his corpse. For example, Utterance 573 proclaims: "Awake in peace, Ḥsmn[w]…, thou sleepest in the evening boat; thou wakest in the morning boat… Father of N., Rē‘, take N. with thee… The double doors of heaven shall be open for N." (Here "N." is the king's name.) (Alfred, 1952). By the Middle Kingdom, the Coffin Texts (c.2134-1782 BCE) made these spells available to a broader group of people. They were engraved on the coffins of nobles and consisted of thousands of prayers to protect the soul. Two major themes were introduced here : transformation and judgement. Several spells changed the dead into animals or deities like a falcon, lotus, etc. so that the soul could easily traverse the underworld (The Coffin Texts - World History Edu, 2025). Spell 573 in the Coffin Texts, conjoins the dead person with Osiris himself, ensuring divine rebirth. This served as a precursor to the "Negative Confession" mentioned in the Book of the Dead. Together, these textual layers reveal how Egyptian mortuary religion moved from royal technology for divine identification to broadly accessible ritualistic tradition.

In the New Kingdom, the Book of the Dead (c.1550-1070 BCE) solidified and expanded these fundamentals to any and all groups. Scholars created papyri with several of these spells, tailored specifically to the deceased. It is mentioned that "the spells were written

down to help the person… to pass safely through any difficult or dangerous situations in the afterlife." Notably, Spell 125 (Osiris and the Judgment of the Dead) features the iconic scene of Ani's heart being weighed and includes the *Negative Confession*: the dead person speaks a litany of "I have not…" statements (sins not committed) before the gods (Book of the Dead: Spells, 2022). This helps understand the Egyptian belief that moral purity was significant for resurrection. Other spells like Spell 72, instructs the soul on how to exit the tomb in the day and travel freely. The spells begin with titles noted in red ink, indicating its purpose. (For example, Spell 72's heading read Spell for going out in the day) (Book of the Dead: Spells, 2022).

Unlike the symbolic instructions of the funerary texts, the physical burial process - mummification - was carried out by professional embalmers and priests through a standard ritual procedure. Although it is not fully outlined in the Egyptian texts (only mentions of it like in Spell 154), the limited written material informs us that "Egyptian mummification consisted essentially of extracting the most perishable organs, drying the body using natron (a naturally occurring compound of sodium salts), anointing it with oils and resins, packing the cavities and 'beautifying the features." (Taylor, 2010, pp.85-86). Through this the goal was to preserve the body as a home for the soul, ensuring a successful transition to the afterlife.

Despite sharing a common idea about the fate of the soul, the three religious traditions view death through their own theological frameworks. Islamic texts stress more on moral accountability and the equality of creation under God, hence, the prescribed humble burial ritual. The absence of material goods further establish that only spiritual deeds accompany a person into the afterlife (Saleh, 2008). Zoroastrianism, on the other hand, focuses its framework around cosmic duality - purity vs. Pollution. Because of this notion, the ritual texts prescribe a non-pollution way of funerary ritual, i.e. dakhmas. This method not only aims at ritual sanctity but also aligns with environmental purity laws prescribed in the Vendidad. Egyptian beliefs, finally, focus on metaphysical continuity rather than pollution or judgement. Death is seen as an extension and transformation of the worldly life, and therefore, materiality is a core tenet of Egyptian mortuary belief.

Thus, these differences showcase how various conceptions about the body, soul, and morality can generate different ritual practices. These contrasts further exemplify how

theology and lived logic inter-connect to produce culturally significant interpretations of death and the afterlife.

Literature review

In this section, my aim is to outline the various archaeological case studies conducted that may or may not inform us of the burial descriptions mentioned in the religious texts for each of the three religions.

4.1 Islamic Burials

Archaeological studies of early Muslim burial grounds showcase a consistent pattern across several regions. Typical features of an Islamic burial are : the body is usually faced towards Mecca, enshrouded and void of any burial goods or containments [coffins, etc.] (Petersen, 2013, p.243). Excavation of Islamic burials is limited. This is because of the religious sentiments and beliefs attached to death (Petersen, 2013, p.241). However, while archaeological evidence for Islamic burial practices is limited, it is by no means absent. Most of the information we find are from the Early Islamic grave cultures like that of Tell Qarasaa in Damascus, Nimes in France and Northeast Spain.

One such examples comes from the neolithic site of Tell Qarassa that lies at the southern edge of Leja [a volcanic, basalt covered region] between the cities of Damascus and Bosra (Srigyan et al., 2022). The graves found at this Tell were different from other early Islamic burials as they were not located in a cemetery or near a permanent settlement. This probably meant that these graves belonged to a Bedouin [Nomadic] group, pilgrims or victims of a plague that *re-used* the site for burial (Srigyan et al., 2022). Two graves were found here and the individuals in these narrow graves were directly linked to the Umayyad era [661 - 750 CE] through radiocarbon dating. No artefacts or good that could point to the Umayyad period were found here (Srigyan et al., 2022). These individuals were buried quite close to each other - their bodies placed in a horizontal position, east to west, with the head at the west and facing southwards. The distribution of the skeleton suggests that the bodies was shrouded before burial. Age at death estimation suggests that individual syr005 was a 14-15 year old male and individual syr013 was a female of about 15–21 years at the time of death (Srigyan et al., 2022).

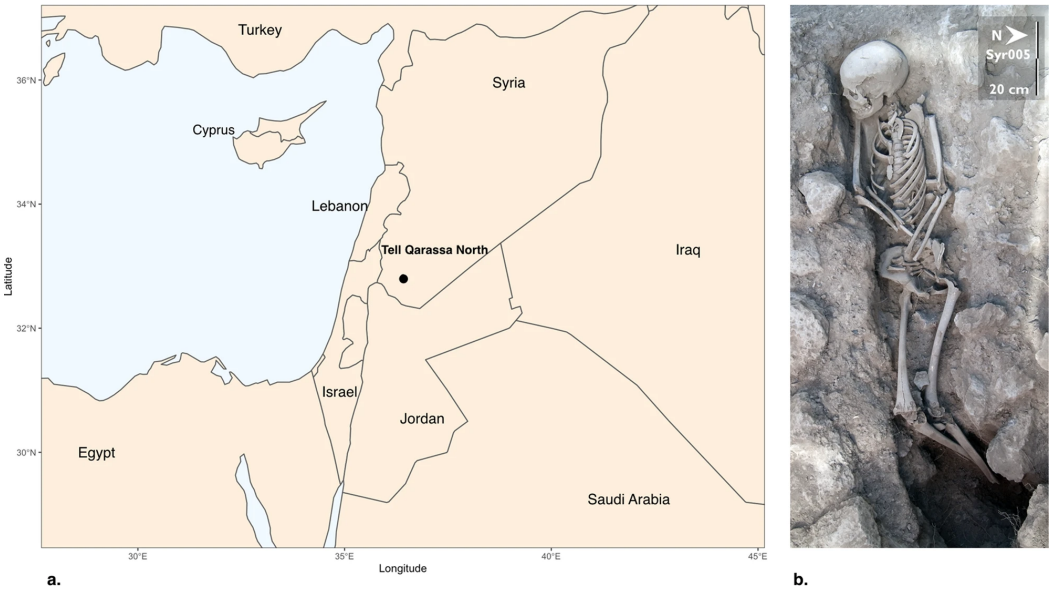

Fig 4.1 Site location and skeletal remains. a. Map of the Levant indication Tell Qarassa. b. Skeletal remains of syr005. (Srigyan et al., 2022, Figure 1)

Another example of an Early Islamic burial comes from Nimes, France where archaeologists discovered three graves, dating to the 8th century that represent the oldest Muslim burials in Europe. In 2006-2007, the French Preventative Archaeology Institute (INRAP) conducted excavations that revealed about 20 or so graves scattered across the western periphery of the medieval town of Nimes (Gleize et al., 2016). The 3 graves that were analysed in this study were SP7080 and SP7089 [2.5 meters apart] and SP9269 [situated 60 meters to the south]. According to its results, in each grave, the body was directly placed into the pit on its right side, facing southeast [Mecca] and may have been wrapped. In graves SP7080 and SP7089, the pit was dug in an L shape [Al Lahd] as compared to the original single trench pits [Al Shaqq] and closed off with slabs and stones (Gleize et al., 2016). Similar burial styles were also documented in Spain,

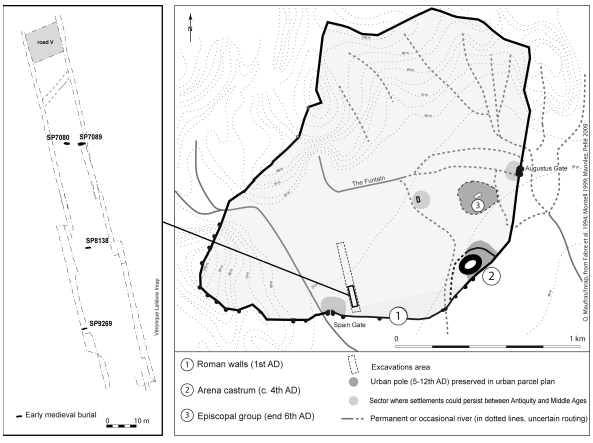

Fig 4.2 Map of Nimes showcasing the Muslim burials. (Gleize et al., 2016, Figure 2)

Portugal and Sicily - confirming that they are all Islamic burials (Gleize et al., 2016). Textual sources like the Moissac and Uzès chronicles corroborate a Muslim presence or journey in Nimes between 712 AD and 752 AD (Gleize et al., 2016). The genetic analysis of these human remains also allowed an opportunity to identify the ancestry of the individuals. It was noted that certain rare elements like the fusion of the the right pisiform bone and the hamate bone was only seen in people of African origin, hence, concluding that these individuals had North African ancestry (Gleize et al., 2016).

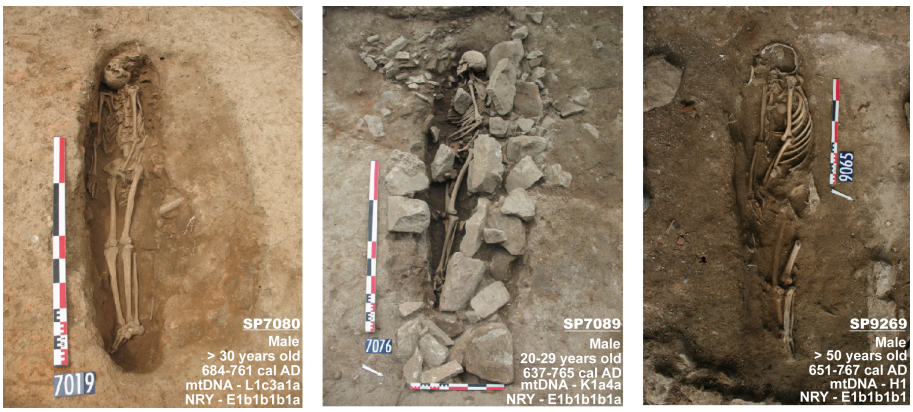

Fig 4.3 In situ photographs of the burials with a synthesis of age and sex of individuals. (Gleize et al., 2016, Figure 3)

Similarly, an archaeological site in Northeast Spain records the oldest Islamic burials in the country, dating back to the first 100 years of Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. The team uncovered 433 graves from a Muslim necropolis in the town of Tauste, in the Ebro valley, northwest of Zaragoza - dating between the 8th and 12th centuries (Metcalfe, 2020). The graves from this site date way back to the Umayyads in Spain [around 711 AD] and are believed to hold more than 4.500 individuals. Each grave was big enough to hold only one person, placed on their right side, facing towards Mecca. They were buried shrouded in white

Fig 4.4 Skull facing the right, showing evidence of wrapping. (Metcalfe, 2020)

cloth regardless of social structure and no burial goods were placed in the grave (Metcalfe, 2020). The cemetery was in continuous use for over 400 years and informs us of the extent of Islamic influence in the region.

Fig 4.5 Excavation focused on a single road in Tauste unearthing more than 433 burials. (Metcalfe, 2020)

It is also important to note that although a large concentration of Muslims come from the Near Eastern regions, less burial sites are excavated there, due to the religious beliefs and sentiments of Islam. According to Salman Almahari, [Chief of Heritage preservation at the Ministry of Culture and Antiquities, Bahrain], it is forbidden to touch the remains of those buried with Islamic faith (Plackett, 2016). However, the same does not apply to early muslim communities in Europe - most of the archaeological data found on Islamic burials, as noted, comes from countries like Spain and France. Timothy Insoll, a professor of African and Islamic Archaeology at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom, believes it is a lost opportunity but understands the religious sentiment it carries (Plackett, 2016). Although the sentiment is consistent among the entirety of the Islamic world, some countries are more lenient in the matter. In Jordan, although forbidden to dig up the graves, in the event that a burial is excavated unintentionally, the excavating team is allowed to study the find (Plackett, 2016). Peter Akkermans, Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at Leiden University who works in Jordan regularly, explains that this is an unpredictable situation and that the body must be reburied, usually in a couple of months (Plackett, 2016).

To summarize, archaeological case studies across the Islamic world – from the Levant to Europe – show a remarkably uniform burial style: bodies on the right side, head toward Mecca, wrapped in shroud, with no grave goods. The cemeteries themselves are often open-air fields (sometimes called a maqbara), and individual graves may be barely marked.

4.2 Parsi / Zoroastrian Burials

Zoroastrian funerary archaeology is quite complex due to the excarnation rites of community. We know that Zoroastrian texts prohibit the burial or cremation of the physical body and instead instruct the usage of dakhmas (tower of silence) wherein scavengers act as mediums to expose the skeleton. Archaeologically, this leads to no intact human remains. Excavations of Zoroastrian ritual sites usually only uncover urns or ossuaries that have been placed instead of a body. There is little archaeological evidence from Western Iran as compared to Eastern Iran due to the Soviet led excavations in Central Asia where bones were well preserved in ossuaries (Grenet, 2024). There is also evidence that even after the spread of Zoroastrianism, cremation was a popular practice among the nomads of Bactria and Sogdia and the population of Deylam and Gīlān up until the Seleucid / Parthian period (Grenet, 2024). Graves of this period were either simple or lined with stones, arranged in short catacombs like in Deylam and Gīlān or marked by mounded earth as in Bactria and Sogdia. The burial goods often included pots, ornaments, and weapons (Grenet, 2024). Nevertheless, it can be concluded that although the Zoroastrian texts hoped to provide an uniform burial method, archaeological findings from Sassanian Iran showcase several different types of burial rituals like dakhmas, coffin burials, jar burials, simple pit burial, etc. (Mousavinia et al., 2018).

Fig 4.6 Satellite image of Qaleh Iraj. (Mousavinia et al., 2018, p.31, Figure 1).

Given the fact that simple pit burials are outrightly prohibited by the religious texts, archaeological evidence indicates that this type of burial was the most frequent in Sassanian Iran (Mousavinia et al., 2018). One such burial is recorded in Qaleh Iraj. It is an area of about 190 hA, encircled by a huge wall,

making it the largest fortified archaeological site in the region (Mousavinia et al., 2018). The most important discovery of this site was the burial of an individual in a crouched position at a raised platform of the southeast gate. This platform is believed to be added after the first phase of construction, leading to the understanding that it was most probably used for burial purposes only (Mousavinia et al., 2018). There was also scattered ash on the platform, and an iron object like a scoop was also discovered (Mousavinia et al., 2018). The head of the corpse was placed on a tauf

Fig 4.7 SE gate and find site of burial. (Mousavinia et al., 2018, p.32, Figure 2).

structure, facing southwestward. The feet were lower than the head by 20 cm which indicates that the people who buried the body were aware of the structure and intentionally placed the corpse's head there (Mousavinia et al., 2018).

Fig 4.8 Corpse in a fetal position. (Mousavinia et al., 2018, p.33, Figure 4).

According to the researchers, the burial at Qaleh Iraj is comparable to other Sassanian period burials by the fact of the crouched position of the corpse but contrasts other simple pit burials because the individual was buried in an architectural space with a special ceremony. Burial of the dead in an architectural space was quite rare during the Sassanian time - the only other examples of this practice were found in Gyaur Kala and Qumis (Mousavinia et al., 2018). We also have evidence of certain burial goods found near the corpses like in Qumis. Here, they found a burial in a room, consisting of 140 human bones, remains of a textile indicating that the body was buried with clothes and a coin belonging to Hormizd IV (A.D. 579-590) (Mousavinia et al., 2018). The burials at Gyaur Kala comprised of two Sassanian burials placed between the walls of a castle and the

coins of Shahpur II, Bahram IV, or Kavadh were found next to the corpses. A deeper analysis found that the bodies were exposed to open air for a short period time before the second burial in the castle walls (Mousavinia et al., 2018). The burials at Qaleh Iraj and Gyaur Kala are both dated to the Sassanian period with the help of the coins found at the site. However, the primary difference between the burials is that at Qaleh Iraj, the body was buried with a special funerary rite (placing of the head on the tauf structure) and at Gyaur Kala, there is evidence of exposure of the bodies to open air.

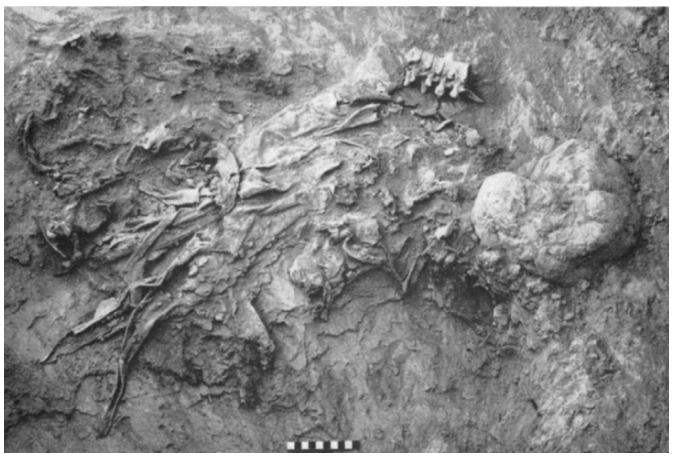

Fig 4.9 Sassanian burial in Qumis.
(Mousavinia et al., 2018, p.34, Figure 7).

While the burials at Qaleh Iraj showcase a contradiction in funerary ritual to the Parsi texts, the Dakhma of Turkabad in Ardakan, Yazd, Iran shed light on accurate burials as mentioned in the religious scriptures. Turkabad's dakhma was different than other towers; first because it was situated on a flat area surrounded by agriculture as opposed to it being on an elevated place, second because it was made with clay and layered material unlike other structures made with

Fig 4.10 Pre-excavation Turkabad Dakhma. ((Rahbar, 2024, p.60,
Figure 1).

crushed stone and plaster and lastly because the tower consisted of several rooms around a circular wall that may have served as ossuaries (Rahbar, 2024). It was recorded that the dakhma consisted of 30 rooms that served as individual trenches during the

Fig 4.11 Room 1. ((Rahbar, 2024, p.66, Figure 9).

Fig 4.12 Room 1 remains in soft soil. ((Rahbar, 2024, p.67, Figure 11).

excavation in 2016. In Room 1, the team excavated the remains of an adult skeleton and other bones that primarily belonged to children. The presence of foot fragments and the skeletal remains indicated that the bones were enshrouded before the burial in soft soil (Rahbar, 2024). The excavation of a series of rooms implied that the chief use of these rooms was not for burial but rather it functioned as studios for the people. This is because it was the first instance of a secondary burial taking place in the soil instead of an urn as scholars believe that even placing the bones of the dead in the soil went against the Zoroastrian law of contaminating earth (Rahbar, 2024).

Fig 4.13 Part of the central courtyard pavement plastered in front of rooms 6 & 7. ((Rahbar, 2024, p.81, Figure 30).

A challenge the team faced was to identify the area where the bodies were left to decompose. They found several skulls on the walls or near the roofline which confirmed the hypothesis that the bodies may have been placed on the roof for scavengers (Rahbar, 2024). However, the presence of a sloping surface constructed with stones and plaster, in the center of

the courtyard, near rooms 7 and 8 contradicted the hypothesis and affirmed that the bodies may have been placed here for scavenging.

Excavations of rooms 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 30 yielded almost the same results in terms of inclusions, form and functions with variability in the size of the rooms (Rahbar, 2024). All rooms had several layers of secondary burials with majority of the bones found belonging to children and even unborn infants. Grave “goods” primarily included fragments of the shroud the bones were wrapped in, a piece of leather (Room 2), pottery vessel with decorative lines (Room 3), bronze ring with a turquoise gem (Room 3), and a braided wig hair (Room 7). The results of the study yielded the conclusion that Turkabad’s dakhma should be regarded as the first and oldest of its kind that offered the corpses to the scavengers (Rahbar, 2024).

Here, two different kinds of burials appear in the archaeological record, traditionally associated with the Zoroastrian community - one that seems to contradict the texts and one that aligns more closely with them. However, it is difficult to establish whether these rituals were carried out by Zoroastrian practitioners or groups that were merely influenced by the regional customs. It can also be noted that the variability in these practices reflect not only religious commands, but also community responses to the environment, social structure and resource availability of its time. This will further be discussed in a later section of this thesis.

4.3 Ancient Egyptian Burials

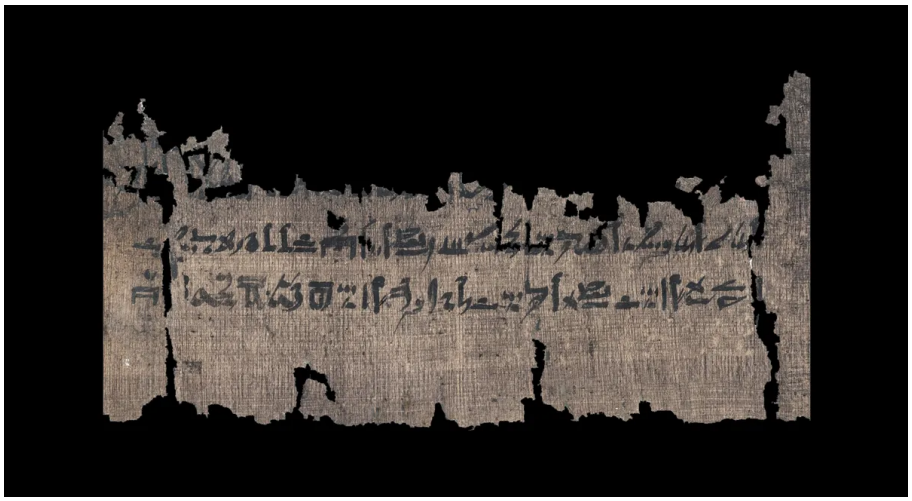

Fig 4.14 Section of the papyrus that deals with swellings of the skin. (Weisberger, 2021).

New Kingdom (c.1550-1070 BCE) burials, known for their rich archaeological excavations, complement and often challenge funerary texts. Royal and elite burials - especially the rock-cut tombs in the Theban Hills (Valley of the Kings and Queens) - were elaborate and filled with ritual materials. For example, Tutankhamun's death mask and nested coffins exemplify the lavish burials of the elites. Archaeological records from this period confirm that such tombs followed many textual ideals (fully mummified bodies with canopic jars, Book of the Dead iconography, goods for the afterlife, etc.). At the same time, studies note important modulations - orientations and decorations varied over time and by class. Koichiro Wada's survey shows that early 18th dynasty royal burials had mixed head orientations, while by the 20th dynasty, tombs adopted a clear east-west alignment (head to west, toward the setting sun) (WADA, 2008) This was because the Egyptians believed that the deceased had to face the rising sun for timely resurrection and thus, the head would be placed westward, while the face pointed towards the east (WADA, 2008). This suggests that the ancient Egyptians were accepting of the existence of alternative concepts and understandings, and may have been more fluid n their customs (WADA, 2008).

New Kingdom pharaohs and nobles generally had multi-chambered rock tombs with decorated burial chambers and richly furnished sarcophagi. An example of this is seen in Memphis's necropolis of Saqqara. Here the Step pyramid complex for Djoser initiated the Age of the Pyramids and the surrounding tombs housed high officials. Saqqara continuously uncovers several elite burials with an astonishing amount of riches. In a 2020 discovery in the Bubasteion area, a sealed shaft chamber filled with funerary goods was discovered (Marchant, 2021; Coooney, 2011). Archaeologists unearthed dozens of coffins - some of which were adorned with gilded, anthropoid and vividly painted embellishments. They were stacked one on top of each other on a limestone sarcophagi. The grave goods of this "mega tomb" consisted of a "Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statue with a golden face and plumed crown, gilded masks, a finely carved falcon and a painted scarab beetle" to say the least (Marchant, 2021; Coooney, 2011). In Late New Kingdom (Ramesside) tombs, coffins often bore detailed Book of the Dead texts or scenes and protective deities. It is found that in the late-18th/19th dynasty, elites valued monumental tombs and extravagant displays; however, by dynasty 20, many people were unable to purchase or commission such ostentatious structure, thus, relying on focusing their wealth on the mummy and the coffin itself (Coooney, 2011, p.5). These finds are proof of the elite nature of the Egyptians and how much care was invested in burial architecture

(like the multi-chambered shafts or the rock cut tombs) and the burial goods that accompanied the bodies in the afterlife.

Elite tombs would also include canopic jars and other ritualistic items. The removal and storage of internal organs has been well document in archaeology. By this period (New Kingdom), all organs except the heart were removed and placed in four canopic jars (thought to be protected by the sons of Horus), while the body was filled with natron to dehydrate the corpse (Zesch et al., 2024). Linen bandages were used to wrap the body, along with amulets, prayers written on the bandages and painted masks of deceased sometimes. The famous Fayum portraits are an example of this practice. Overall, CT scans and radiological studies indicate that elite burials have displayed a consistent mummification process - cleaning / washing the corpse, removal of organs, dehydration with natron, filling of body cavities, applying unguents and resin, wrapping of the body with linen and protective goods (Zesch et al., 2024).

Fig 4.15 Closely spaced grave pits at the Amarna North Tombs Cemetery . (Stevens & Dabbs, 2025).

On the other hand, non-elite Egyptians received simpler burials and were found adjacent to worker villages or housing complexes. For example the worker's cemetery at Amarna contained over 889 graves of ordinary people (Stevens & Dabbs, 2025). Most individuals were wrapped in simple linen and placed in simple pit graves. Grave goods founds at the cemeteries were rare and usually consisted of pottery vessels, simple amulets and beads and other personal items (Stevens & Dabbs, 2025). Analysis of the human remains founds here further confirmed that these individuals belonged to the working class as the bones exhibited signs of hard labor and stress. The luxurious goods that were 'given' to the rich were missing here and this specified the class distinction. This practice was also seen in late-period Saqqara where priests would sometimes opt for the burial of several unrelated individuals, like the sealed

shaft chamber in the Bubasteion area. This means that even well to do Egyptians who didn’t have as much power or influence would get shoved in one chamber.

To conclude, we understand that the records of Egyptian burials paint a vivid picture of the funerary rituals and class distinction attached to them. Elites were given maximum attention to detail, elaborate mummification procedures and graciously filled tombs. Commoners, by contrast, were housed in shallow pits with minimal rituals and grave goods.

Discussion

Understanding burial rituals requires examining how the scriptures relate death rituals and how these ideas are materialised by the people and evolved in practice over time. This chapter explores that interplay, highlighting both consistencies and contradiction within each faith.

5.1 Comparison of analyses and evolution over time

The funerary texts of each religion describe very different treatments of the dead. In Ancient Egypt, ritual texts like the Pyramid Texts and Book of the Dead contained spells and instructions for the soul to use in the afterlife (as we have already established). Accordingly, Egyptian burials included mummification, magic rituals, and grave goods to appropriately equip the deceased in a consistent manner. For example, tomb inscriptions and the spells on the linen that was used to wrap the body repeatedly referred to magical spells and offerings that were inscribed to protect the dead. Along with that, grave goods were central to Egyptian burials. This close match between the prescribed texts and the practice, which was a focus on eternal life, meant even commoners were able to partake in these practices, albeit not as extravagantly as the elite, in the later periods.

Over millennia, while core beliefs about death and the afterlife remained stable, access to funerary texts gradually expanded beyond just royalty to nobles and eventually common people. With this new advent, there was also a shift in style and tomb architecture - mastabas to pyramids to rock-cut tombs. In the modern age, with the introduction of the Abrahamic religions in Egypt, mortuary rituals are in tune with Islamic or Christian practices of burial. Thus, Egyptian mortuary culture reflects a long continuity in aligning ritual texts with its material culture, constantly emphasising the importance of death in an individual's life.

On the contrary, Zoroastrian scriptures (particularly the Vendidad) explicitly forbid cremation and soil burials. The element of earth and fire is believed to be sacred and the corpse is believed to be impure. Thus, the texts direct for the establishment of a *dakhma* (Tower of Silence) for the corpses to be decomposed by scavengers (primarily), wind and water. However, *extensive* excarnation practice can only be seen until the Achaemenid Empire. Herodotus, notes in the 5th century BCE, that the Magi ("characterised by

specific modes of behaviour different from all other men") performed secret ceremonies involving the excarnation of the dead before burial (Rollinger, 2024). This could possibly suggest that the exposure ritual was practiced during and possibly before the Achaemenid period. Over time, the strict textual practices were not followed uniformly. Post Achaemenid periods, the Sassanians in particular, show frequent evidence of simple pit burials like that at Qaleh Iraj, Qumis, and Gyaur Kala. The emergence of formal dakhmas around the 3rd-7th CE indicates that the late-Sassanians reverted back to the presribed method, giving it their own regional touch. This is evident by the ossuaries found at the Turkabad dakhma, where the human remains after excarnation were buried in *soft soil* after being wrapped in a shroud. They were also supplemented with grave goods ranging from pottery vessels to braided hair wigs.

Towers of silence can be found in Iran and India, where a majority of the Parsi community reside in Mumbai. The practice of excarnation and use of dakhmas was banned by the Iranian government in the 1970s due to environmental precautions. Mumbai, in contrast, has a good number of "usable" dakhmas. The problem in Mumbai arises due to the fact that there is a scarcity of vulture populations. This is because the vultures feed on dead livestock that were fed a drug called Diclofenac (Ramakrishnan, 2024). Parsi diaspora in India, thus chooses to electrically cremate their dead, in an attempt to keep with the religious teachings. An example of this was seen during the recent death of business tycoon, Ratan Tata whose family opted to complete his funerary rites through an electric crematorium (Worli Crematorium, Mumbai) (Joshi, 2024). CA. Jehangir Bisney, a trustee of the Parsi Zoroastrian Anjuman of Secunderabad and Hyderabad also confirms this by informing that "since we consider dead bodies to pollute the fire which we worship, they are taken to the electrical crematorium or cremated through biogas" (Ramakrishnan, 2024).

Therefore, Zoroastrian funerary traditions demonstrate more complexity and leniency over time due to tensions between religious laws and evolving practices based on environmental factors.

Islamic sacred texts - Qur'an and the Hadith - provide concise guidance on the happenings of death and the procedure that should be followed. Dignity of the deceased is emphasised which requires washing, shrouding, prompt burial in the earth facing Mecca, and modesty in grave markers. Unlike the previous religions, Islam focuses more

on the accountability and judgement of the soul in the hereafter than any provisions of the afterlife. Historically, from the limited burials we have studies, there is great consistency between the texts and the material evidence. From 7th to 12th century Europe and Levant, bodies have been found with their heads turned right - facing Mecca, no grave goods and the position / displacement of their bones proving that they were enshrouded before death. Similarly, the establishment of mausoleum and tomb structures on the graves of Mughal Kings are also an example of the deviation from Islamic texts (e.g. Taj Mahal, Humayun's tomb). Despite these variations, modern Islamic burials conform greatly to the religious scriptures.

The comparative analysis of these three religions demonstrates that the relationship between religious texts and its respective funerary practice is not static but rather negotiated by and within lived realities. In Ancient Egypt, the close relation between the texts and the lived practice suggests that the ritual system was embedded in state ideology. It functioned as a political and spiritual technology of kingship and slowly but gradually spread into the non-elite classes. Zoroastrian mortuary behaviour tells a different story. Its functional basis is tension between purity laws and environmental / regional conditions, showcasing how the sanctity of the natural elements (earth, fire, water, air) in maintained through local adaptations. Islam, while theologically solid on the emphasis of simplicity and equality in death, shows selective deviations from the texts when local prestige, nomadic traditions, and dynastic power come into play. Hence, it can be concluded that deviations and continuities in religious traditions are not only expressions of faith but also reflections of social hierarchy, environmental adaptations, and cultural understanding. Therefore, in such studies, the archaeological record functions not as passive evidence of belief, but as an active commentary on how communities live their lives and interpret scriptures in their daily ideals and contexts.

5.2 Interpretation of results

Religious texts serve as significant interpretive anchors in archaeological analysis of burials and burial practices. As societies change with time, these texts - compiled within specific socio-political, cultural and temporal contexts - offer information into the shifting frameworks of belief, ritual and identity of a community. Although the texts may not change, the way humans interpret them do. Through the texts, we can make more sense of complex emotions such as peace, guilt, accountability, and spiritual resolution

surrounding an abstract idea such as death. For example, Ancient Egyptians loved their worldly life so much that they wished to recreate in death as well. This can be seen through the architecture, artwork, and grave goods that are associate with Ancient Egyptian burial culture. By cross-referencing, textual sources with material evidence, we can trace changes in burial customs over time and space. Humans have a tendency to need structure and guidelines that inform individual and social behaviours and functions (Pincus, 2023). The religions referred to in this thesis, provide this framework through their texts. When the concept of morality comes in question, it is essentially dissociated from formal religious affiliation. However, at the same time, religion has a tendency to permeate within our moral system, providing the structure that we crave. Because religious texts are often reinterpreted and revised over time, any shift in their teachings or emphasis can lead to noticeable changes in how communities approach death and burial practices. Therefore, I believe that religious literature can be essential in creating a deeper understanding of funerary archaeology rather than just supplementing it.

Death, in itself, does not demand ritual; it is a fact of life. Human desire to make sense of this fact leads to the creation and adoption of preparation, activities and rituals that help living people come to terms with death. Religious texts offer a guideline on how to do that. In Islam and Zoroastrianism, death is believed to be a transitional phase and hence, afterlife is an assumed fact. The respective concepts of afterlife (Islam = heaven / hell (Saleh, 2008) and Zoroastrianism = cosmic renewal (Lerner, 2011)) in these religions are dependent on the kind of life a person has led on Earth. Since the quality of afterlife that a person receives is dependent on the quality of life led on earth, one's life is spent preparing for the event of death through actions that are morally acceptable in the respective religious' guidelines. In contrast, Ancient Egyptians approach afterlife as a privilege. At the time of death, one's heart is weighed against the feather of Ma'at and if found to be heavier, the soul is consumed by Ammit (a fearsome creature part lion, hippopotamus, and crocodile); afterlife is not granted at all and one ceases to exist entirely (Carelli, 2011). All three religions have a moral judgement for the soul but the key difference between the former two and the latter is in their approach regarding the continuation of existence of a soul. Through such religious customs, humans seek emotional resolution, spiritual assurance, and a sense of moral order in the face of mortality.

Humanity, as we know today, revolves around religion whether we believe it or not because our moral compass is guided by religious texts. To study a field such as funerary archaeology that relies heavily on religion and its guidelines, I believe we must make use of religious texts as sources that refine and deepen our understanding of human behaviour. It not only provides an insight into religion but also scientifically and archaeologically helps understand why humans behave the way they do. Therefore, religious texts do not hinder understanding, rather facilitate and broaden our horizons.

5.3 Common questions, contradictions, challenges and heritage today

When comparing texts and understanding religions on such a spiritual level, it is obvious that several questions arise as to the minute details of each tradition.

One major issue in Ancient Egyptian studies arises in the ethical treatment of the human remains. Archaeologists have wondered whether disturbing an intact mummy is even ethical to begin with. This argument has been popularly applied to burials like that of Tutankhamen where the Egyptian audience portrayed disapproval and anger over Carter's expedition. I believe this anger is totally justified. It is one thing to study human remains, it is another to desecrate them. Howard Carter's team not only disrespected Tutankhamun but also the religious sentiments attached to his burial. The numerous CT scans and X-rays of his *young* mummified body left it in shambles and constituted disrespect. Moreover, early egyptology was a mixture of colonial era appropriations and grave robbery. The spiritual dignity of the dead was destroyed and artefacts were kept as "learning objects". In such scenarios, it is the job of archaeologists to ensure maximum respect and honour in the way they proceed with their duties. Tutankhamun should have been accorded the honour and sentiment he deserved. Therefore, we do not just have a duty towards knowledge, we also have a duty to the people and communities that provide us that information. It is hard to balance both, but never impossible.

The glaring contradiction in Zoroastrianism is between the scriptures' strict purity laws and the material evidence found. Under the Sassanian law itself, this contradiction is immediately visible. It was a capital sin to bury bodies in this period, however, archaeologically most of the material evidence point to frequent simple pit burials. Scholars debate why these non conformist burials were even employed in the first place. Along with that, dakhmas were only introduced towards the 9th century. So, how exactly

were the dead treated in between centuries? In the modern era, a new issue arises. In India, the declining vulture population has prompted Parsi communities to turn to other methods of funerary practices. In such a case, how does one ensure, that they stay within the strict laws of the religion? Secondly, even if dakhmas are used, there is a notion of contamination of the environment therein. It becomes physically impossible to employ a practice that is both in line with the texts and the world. The choice of an electric cremation is a fairly good option, but then sentiments of the family play a role too. There are also challenges with the feasibility of electric cremations for the less fortunate. In such cases, the community should reach a general consensus among themselves and the priests, to reduce any hesitation or fear to do wrong. Electric cremations should also be made affordable by the government to ensure inclusion of all financial classes.

In Islamic traditions, we have two main conflicts. First is the idea of an orthodox ideal vs. lived practice. The Hadith stress upon the simplicity of burial customs and grave markers, but regional customs say a different story. The Golden Horde case is a specimen of one such custom : nomadic turkic-mongol populations adopted Islam at a political level but maintained their burial customs rooted in Mongolian traditions. Similarly, in many parts of the Muslim world, tombs of saints or righteous kings are honoured with the construction of tombs or marble mausoleums so that people could come pay their respects to these figures. Many scholars have branded this as sinful, however, as someone who is from India and follows Islam, these shrines or *dargahs* as we call it are places of hope and prayer rather than a “tomb” per say. Usually, in such places, tombs are not created on top of the grave but rather the place where the saint had passed away. The body is buried in a cemetery elsewhere, but the tomb remains as a symbol of the “being” of the saint. Hence, it serves as a beacon of purity rather than sin. Second, the archaeological gap is a problem. Because Muslims view the re-digging of burials as inauspicious, archaeologists working in Islamic contexts are often forbidden to touch or excavate cemeteries. This sentiment although understood, leaves a big gap in the knowledge of the respective time periods. There is little ancient DNA available for Islamic populations, hence, the genetic analysis of post 7th century Near Eastern skeletons are nearly nonexistent. Islamic genealogical studies, in the modern age, are thus, understudied and less represented. A question here can be asked as to if there is a way to excavate these cemeteries ethically?

In conclusion, we understand that all three religions exhibit changes over time and pose questions that can only be answered with a thorough study of the theological, anthropological and archaeological context.

Conclusion

The goal of my thesis was to bridge the gap between religious and archaeological studies in the context of funerary customs. I examined Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Ancient Egypt using this interdisciplinary approach, comparing each faith's religious texts and ideas on death and afterlife with tangible material evidence found in their respective burial sites. Below, I summarise the answers to the research questions posed in the beginning and suggest avenues of further study.

Islam : Islamic texts emphasise on a simple and swift burial, equal for all believers regardless of status. The Prophet's teachings call for washing the body and wrapping in a plain white cloth, with no grave goods. Archaeological evidence, though limited, from early Muslim burials support and follow this teaching. Graves are modest, oriented toward Mecca, and generally contain no personal possession. The goal being - *we have come to this world empty handed, and we leave as such*. However, when divergences do occur such as the construction of mausolea, they usually reflect cultural influences that were not prescribed in the texts. For example in Central Asia and South Asia, Islamic mortuary traditions absorbed local customs like grave markers, mausolea, tombs, etc. reflecting pre-Islamic customs or honorific rituals for ancestors (Hillenbrand, 1995). Thus, we can conclude that Islamic funerary practices have remained surprisingly stable over time. Islam's funerary archaeology closely mirrors the doctrinal teachings and demonstrates a faithful enactment of religious ideals.

Zoroastrianism : In Zoroastrian theology, purity of earth, fire and water is significant. Sacred texts forbade contaminating these elements with a corspe that was considered to be the producer of *nasu* (impurity), leading to the traditional practice of sky burials using dakhmas. Historical accounts and remaining towers of India and Iran confirm that the bodies were exposed to scavengers after death and then the bones were interred in a post excarnation ritual. Archaeological evidence (although limited due to the perishable nature of the remains) align with these teachings. At the same time, the divulgence in these practices relied on the environmental factors or other cultural customs introduced within the society. Like during the Sassanian Empire, bones were interred in soft soil instead of an urn - going wildly against the moral of the practice. Zoroastrians in the Indian diaspora have also conformed to other forms of practices (electrical cremation), more recently, due to the lack of scavengers in the region. The evolution of these

practices highlight changing beliefs and systems - as Zoroastrian political power decreased, the strict teachings of purity softened out of necessity.

Ancient Egypt : Egyptians envisioned death as a transition and continuation of their mortal life into a richer hereafter. The religious texts are full of spells and formulas that are meant to protect the soul, and the grave goods are meant to accompany the soul on their journey in the afterlife. Archaeological records from pharaonic burials confirm these practices. Rulers and elites usually had extravagant tombs and grave goods whereas common people had very little grave goods and spells. The overall picture states that the material culture tightly aligns with the religious narrative. Even over the 3000 year span of pharaonic history, mortuary rituals did evolve - tomb styles and goods changed with each dynasty and simpler coffins also became common for non-royals. However, even with this evolution, the changes followed the religious trends of the ancestors. This makes Ancient Egyptian religion unique among the three cases for the absolute consistency of its scriptures and material record.

For future research, I would like to propose several other directions that may be taken into consideration.

- **Extend the study to other religions and customs :** A comparative study could be used to include additional religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, indigenous beliefs, etc. to see a broader network of change (if any).
- **Employ ethical archaeological research in early Islamic cemeteries :** By proposing an ethical excavation plan to the archaeological committee of the subject nation, we may be able to deep dive into early Islamic burials, in hopes of filling in the gaps in our knowledge
- **Use of individual studies across regions :** To better understand a religion, I think an individualistic study across the entire world may result in better results, because the dataset will focus on only one mortuary practice.

I conclude that this research helped realise that burial rituals are meaningful expressions of religious perception, reflecting core values from the scriptures that are adapted to human reality. We understand that death is not the end but rather a beginning of another journey whose difficulty is based on our character in this world.

Abstract

This thesis hopes to bridge the gap between religious studies and archaeological evidence in the context of funerary customs. The study examines three religions - Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Ancient Egyptian with an interdisciplinary approach that compares the respective religious texts (Qur'an, Avesta and Vendidad, Egyptian Funerary texts) to the material culture found at the burial sites (grave alignments, grave goods, tomb architecture, etc). The analysis finds varying degrees of alignment between theology and practice across the three faiths. In Islam, funerary practices closely follow the religious teachings, indicating high consistency between belief and practice. On the other hand, Zoroastrian burial rites show significant divergence from religious doctrine due to environmental and social pressures. Orthodox texts prohibit contamination of earth, fire or water, but modern necessities have disrupted this practice. In Ancient Egypt, teachings and practice go hand in hand as elaborate tombs consistently include grave goods, inscriptions and mummification evidences that mirror Egyptian beliefs. Overall, the study shows that Ancient Egypt exemplified full integration of belief into burial material, Islam exhibiting great coherence between the holy texts and material evidence, and Zoroastrianism reflecting a gap that has been victim of surrounding disadvantages. This comparative study contributes to understanding how religious belief is expressed through material practices, highlighting the value of interdisciplinary analysis. It also suggests avenues for future research on death and intercultural exchange, further proving the importance of both textual and archeological evidence in the study of ritual and religion.

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