

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF KIDNEYS IN ANCIENT EGYPT
WITH THEIR POSSIBLE ROLE IN THE JUDGMENT OF THE DEAD

By

OLIVERA KRGOVIĆ

ABSTRACT: The fact that the ancient Egyptian embalmers left the kidneys *in situ* indicates their certain importance for the deceased in the afterlife. Kidneys were also given special importance in other ancient cultures, and being associated with the most secret and hidden emotions they were used as organs of testing.

The ancient Egyptians removed all of the internal organs during the embalming process except for the kidneys and the heart. The importance of the heart in Egypt is unquestionable, as it was the most important organ in the Judgment of the Dead. However, excavations indicate that, apart from the heart, the kidneys were also left in the mummies. This was mainly considered to be the case due to their retroperitoneal position¹, which, together with the surrounding fat tissue, made them very difficult to cut up, or simply because the ancient Egyptians were not even aware of their existence². Nevertheless, the purpose of this work is to show that the ancient Egyptians were actually aware of the kidneys, and that it was indeed the embalmers' intention to leave them *in situ*; to point out some of the possible reasons for this practice; as well as to demonstrate a similar significance of kidneys in other cultures.

When searching for possible explanations of why the ancient Egyptians left the kidneys *in situ* during the embalming process it would be relevant to look at other ancient cultures, as that might throw some light upon the physiological significance assigned to this viscus in antiquity. For instance, the Babylonians performed hepatoscopy and extended entrails prophecy to kidney divination, while the Assyrians regarded the kidneys as the seat of strength³. However, it is

¹ Aufderheide 2003: 236; Ikram, Dodson 1996: 7; Ghaliounhui 1973: 162.

² Andrews 1998: 20.

³ Park 1994: 126.