

Mummies

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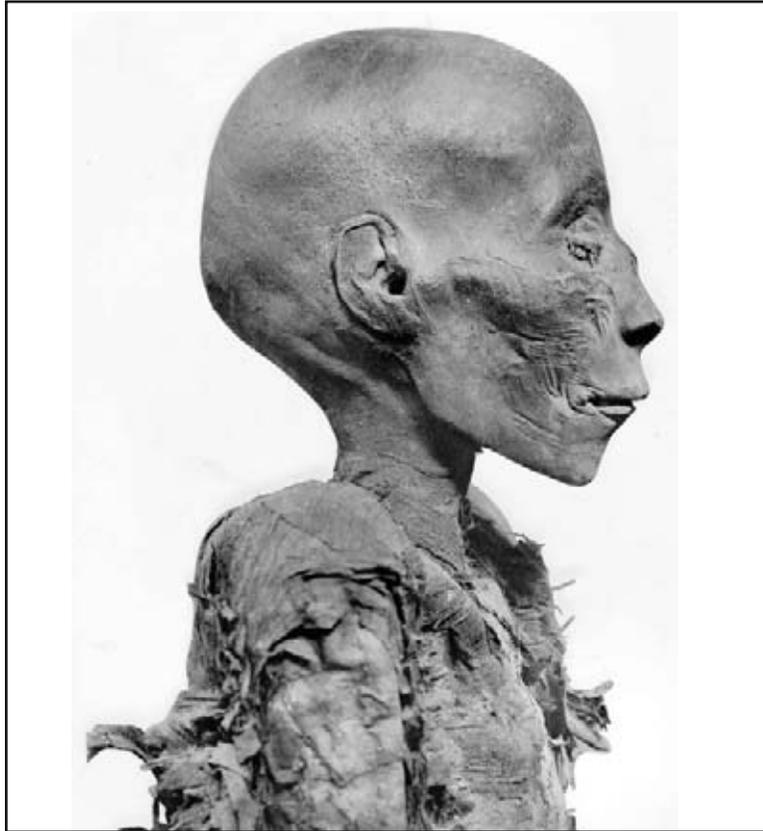
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Written by Lisa Ing

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Fountas & Pinnell	S
Reading Recovery	26
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
What Are Mummies?	5
Mummification	6
The Afterlife	12
The Burial	15
Tutankhamen's Tomb	17
Animal Mummies	19
Conclusion	20
Try This	22
Glossary	23



A cemetery

INTRODUCTION

In modern countries around the world, including Egypt, people are often buried in coffins after they die. Sometimes the body is **cremated**, and the ashes are either kept by loved ones or spread over an area that the person enjoyed, such as the ocean. But this is not the way it has always been. The ancient Egyptians turned their dead into mummies.

The ancient Egyptians are famous for making mummies. They **mummified** everyone from kings to pets by drying the bodies, rubbing them with spices, and wrapping them in strips of cloth. However, the Egyptians are not the only people that mummified their dead. There is evidence of mummification in many places around the world.

WHAT ARE MUMMIES?

A mummy is a preserved corpse. Normally, a dead body decays very quickly. Bacteria in the air start **decomposing** body cells immediately after death. If the body is left alone, scavengers and pests, like vultures and flies, devour the corpse. In a mummy, the decay process is **arrested**, and the dead body is preserved for thousands of years.

The first mummification occurred naturally, in areas that were too dry or cold for bacteria to grow. The body was preserved without human interference. Later on, people developed ways to preserve mummies artificially.



This early Egyptian burial is an example of natural mummification.



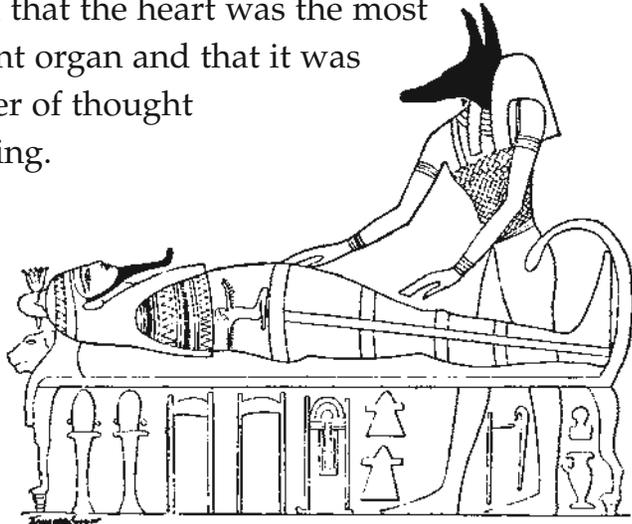
An early Egyptian coffin showing a decomposed corpse and no mummification

MUMMIFICATION

The first Egyptian mummies were buried in the hot desert sand. It was so dry that the bodies dried out almost immediately, preserving them from decay. These dried mummies looked a lot like beef jerky. Their flesh became tough and hard.

Unfortunately, unprotected bodies buried in the desert were often eaten by jackals, which love the taste of “human jerky.” Egyptians tried to protect their buried ancestors by covering the burial site with rocks. Wealthier Egyptians buried family members in painted coffins. But the coffins, which kept out the jackals, also kept out the hot sand, and the bodies inside decayed.

Resourceful Egyptians developed ways to preserve the bodies before burial. When someone died, the body was given to a team of **embalmers**. First, the embalmers laid the body face up on a six-foot-wide embalming table. Their first job was to remove all the soft organs that encouraged the growth of bacteria. They carefully pulled the brain out through the nose with an **embalming hook**, making sure not to deform the person's face. The brain was not very important to the ancient Egyptians. They believed that the heart was the most important organ and that it was the center of thought and feeling.



DO YOU KNOW?

The Egyptians believed that the first mummy was the god Osiris. He was murdered by his brother Set and cut into pieces. His wife, Isis, put him together with magic, and his jackal-headed nephew, Anubis, embalmed him. Osiris then became the god of the dead and the underworld.

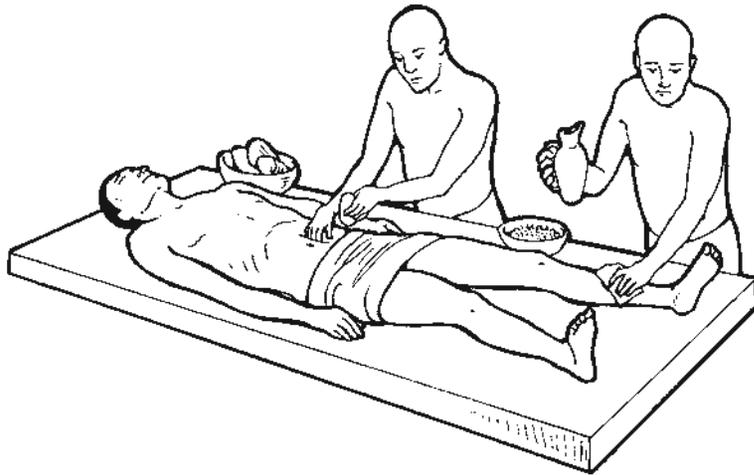
The chief embalmer cut an **incision** in the left side of the stomach. From this hole, the embalming team pulled out all the internal organs except the heart and placed them to the side. The stomach, liver, lungs, and intestines were preserved individually in special jars called **canopic jars**. These organs accompanied the body during burial but were not as important as the heart. The heart was preserved inside the body.

Embalmers washed the body, inside and out, with palm wine. The alcohol in wine killed bacteria. By this time, the body had probably begun to stink, a sign of decay. So the embalmers filled the body with bags of sweet-smelling spices mixed with **natron**, a special salt. Then they covered up the body and internal organs with more natron and left them alone for 40 days.



Canopic jars had decorative lids that represented minor gods who protected the contents of the jars.

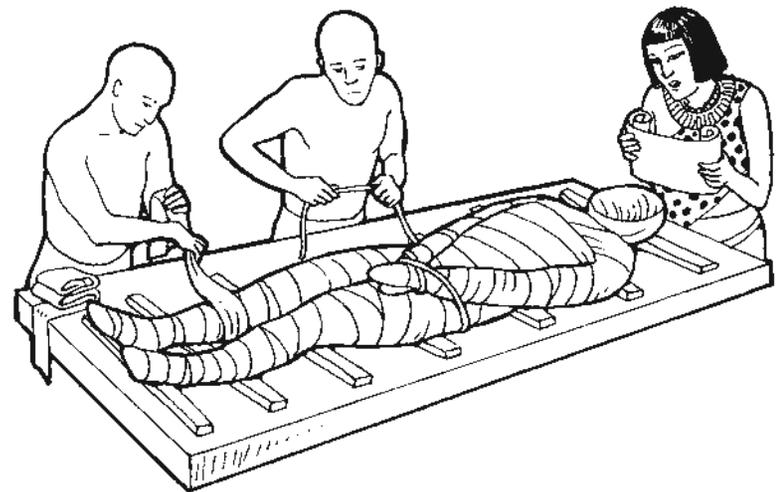
The whole mummification process took 70 days. Once the drying process had been completed, the embalmers removed the salt. The mummy became very light, since all the water—which made up over 65 percent of the body’s weight—had been removed. The embalmers filled the inside of a corpse with linen stuffing, producing a body that appeared strong and healthy instead of **shriveled**. Then they rubbed the corpse with more spices, mixed with wax and oil, to make it smell sweet. Next, a sticky **resin** made of tree sap was poured over the body. When the resin hardened, it formed a thin, protective shell around the body. This shell protected the mummy from bacteria and caused it to become darker in color.



The body is stuffed and then rubbed with spices and oils.

Embalmer often applied makeup to the mummy’s face to make it look more alive. They also placed jewelry on a rich person’s corpse before wrapping it up. The resin-soaked wrap consisted of linen bandages the length of a football field. The wrap helped to preserve the shape of the body.

The best linen was saved for the outermost layer of bandages. Cheap linen was used on the inside, where it couldn’t be seen. Magical charms and **talismans** meant to ensure the mummy’s safety in the realm of the dead were put between the layers of bandages. These talismans were carved out of precious stones. Talismans are small objects **instilled** with magical protections.



A priest reads spells as the mummy is wrapped. A papyrus scroll with spells from the *Book of the Dead* is put between the hands.

THE STEPS OF MUMMIFICATION

- 1 Place the body on a large table, facing up.
- 2 Remove internal organs through a cut in the abdomen.
- 3 Wash the body with palm wine.
- 4 Dry the body by covering it with piles of salt.
- 5 Remove the salt, and rub the body with sweet herbs.
- 6 Stuff the body with linen and bags of spices.
- 7 Cover the body with resin.
- 8 Apply makeup and jewelry.
- 9 Wrap the body in bandages.

After the body is wrapped in linen bandages, a cloth is wrapped around the entire body. On the cloth is painted a picture of the god Osiris.

DO YOU KNOW?

In the Middle Ages, doctors in Europe prescribed mummy powder, made from ground-up mummies. They thought that mummy dust would cure sick people, but it usually only made them sicker.



A page from the *Book of the Dead* from Thebes, Egypt, written around 1300 B.C.

THE AFTERLIFE

The ancient Egyptians believed that **immortality** depended on having a well-preserved body. They believed that a dead person split up at the moment of death into several parts: the **ba**, the **ka**, and the physical body. The **ka** was a person's ghostly identical twin. It lived inside the mummified heart and could not move from the tomb. The **ba**, which represented the personality and spirit of a person, was a human-headed bird that could fly around freely by day. The **ba** and the **ka** joined to form the **akh**, a person's soul.

According to ancient Egyptian belief, a dead person's soul traveled through the dangerous realm of the dead to a special palace of judgment, called Osiris's palace. Along the way, the soul dodged monstrous snakes and crocodiles while crossing huge rivers of fire. Osiris, the god of the dead, judged everyone by weighing their hearts on a scale. If a person's heart was heavy with sin, it was thrown to the hungry monster beneath the scales. That person would die permanently. But if the heart was lighter than a feather, then the dead person would live forever—or be immortal—in the world of Osiris.

When the Egyptians first began to make mummies, only very rich or important people were mummified. They believed that only pharaohs and nobles deserved an **afterlife**.



A painting of a soul being judged as worthy by Osiris.

However, as the embalming process became easier and the Egyptians became richer, more people were mummified. The Egyptians eventually believed that everyone deserved to have a chance at immortality.

Since the Egyptians believed that the afterlife was exactly like life, they buried mummies with their favorite objects and tools. Wealthy nobles were buried with gold and gems. Children were buried with their favorite toys. Everyone was buried with clay representations of food and drink, and with clay figurines called **shabtis**—servants who would work for them in the afterlife.



A collection of shabtis

THE BURIAL

Mummies were laid to rest in decorated coffins usually made of **papier-mâché** and beaten gold. Richer people were buried in a sarcophagus made of stone or a coffin of imported wood.



Pharaohs were buried in up to four gold-covered coffins nested inside each other.

The coffins were painted with a representation of the person's face so that the ba could find the right tomb when it returned at night.

Hieroglyphs, painted or chiseled onto the coffin, told the story of the person's life. These inscriptions also held spells to keep the dead person safe in the underworld.

Inner coffin of Shepenmehyt, from Qurna, Thebes, Egypt, around 600 B.C.

15



Superstitions were common in Egypt. Most people believed that mummies would curse anyone who disturbed their tomb and stole from the dead. But **tempted** by the treasures buried with the mummies, thieves broke into even the best-guarded tombs. They often tore the mummies apart, looking for the gold and gems under the bandages. They were willing to risk death and punishment for riches. Most tombs were robbed within a few years of their burials.

This mummy was damaged by thieves looking for souvenirs.

16



Archaeologist Howard Carter (left) examines the coffin of King Tutankhamen, which he discovered in 1922.

THE TOMB OF TUTANKHAMEN

The Pharaoh Tutankhamen, also called the Boy King, died when he was only 18. We know very little about his life or his rule in Egypt, but he is the most famous mummy in the world.

Tutankhamen's tomb was opened in 1923. Even though it had been robbed twice in ancient times, King Tut's tomb still held great treasures. The thieves had entered the second room, which was filled with Tut's gold chariots and statues. They stole about a sixth of the tomb's gold but were probably interrupted before they could finish. King Tut's mummy had not been touched.

King Tut was buried in a series of three coffins, one inside the other. The first two coffins were made of wood covered in bands of gold. But the innermost coffin was made of solid gold and covered with gems. Tut's beautiful burial mask was also made of pure gold. Heavy jeweled

bracelets encircled his wrists, and golden **amulets** and necklaces were draped around his neck.



Riches from the tomb of King Tutankhamen

DO YOU KNOW?

The Egyptians stopped making mummies around A.D. 400. By this time, most Egyptians had converted to Christianity. They no longer believed that the dead person needed to be mummified in order to experience eternal life.

ANIMAL MUMMIES

The ancient Egyptians mummified animals as well as people. Cats were especially sacred to the Egyptians. They represented Bast, the cat-headed goddess of happiness. Cats were kept as pets, and when one died, the whole family shaved their heads and eyebrows in mourning. Cat mummies were buried with their owners or at the temples of Bast.

Ancient Egyptians also mummified other animals sacred to the gods, such as crocodiles, ibises, and falcons. These animals were sent to the afterlife as offerings to the gods.

Mummy of a cat from Abydos, Upper Egypt, Roman Period, around 1st century A.D.



CONCLUSION

Natural mummies have been found around the world. They can be found in the cold, acidic water of a marsh in Denmark, in the frozen depths of an Alpine glacier, or in the hot sands of a desert.

The dead have been preserved as mummies by many different cultures, from Buddhist monks in Japan to tribesmen in Papua New Guinea. The Incas in Peru, half a world away from the ancient Egyptians, mummified their ancestors in much the same way as the Egyptians. While artificial and natural mummification vary in some ways, they are alike in one important way. All mummification results in the arrest of cell decay, which preserves the body for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.



The mummy of Ramses III, from the 1100s B.C., was discovered in 1871. It is now in the Cairo Museum.

We can learn much about ancient civilizations by studying mummies and the contents of their tombs. Scientists around the world study mummies in order to know more about how ancient people lived and died.



This mummy of a warrior and village chief is from Indonesia. It is blackened by smoke and is about 400 years old.

Where Mummies Have Been Found

AFRICA	ASIA	SOUTH AMERICA
Egypt	Japan (Honshu)	Peru
Nubia	China	
	Siberia	EUROPE
SOUTH PACIFIC	Indonesia	Alps (Italy/Austria)
Australia		Denmark
New Zealand	NORTH AMERICA	Southern Italy
Papua New Guinea	Northern Canada	Greenland
	Southwestern U.S.	
	Mexico	

TRY THIS

Make your own mummies!



- 1 Cut an apple into twelve wedges.
- 2 Put half the wedges skin-side down on a baking sheet.
- 3 Bake in an oven on low heat for an hour or until dry. Low heat is about 100° Celsius (260°F). You could also put the apple wedges in a warm, dry place in the sun for several days.
- 4 Remove the apple wedges after they have dried out.
- 5 Place them next to the six apple wedges that have not been dried.
- 6 Notice the differences between the two groups of wedges after several days inside at room temperature.

GLOSSARY

afterlife	the realm of life after death (p. 13)
akh	the soul and essence of a person, combining the personality and the ghostly form (p. 12)
amulets	a charm worn on the body for protection against injury or evil (p. 18)
arrested	stopped (p. 5)
ba	the human-headed bird made out of a person's personality after their death (p. 12)
canopic jars	the jars holding the mummy's internal organs (p. 8)
cremated	a funeral method involving burning the corpse to ash (p. 4)
decomposing	rotting; decaying; falling apart (p. 5)
embalmers	people who preserved corpses (p. 7)
embalming hook	an embalming tool used to remove the brains from mummies (p. 7)
hieroglyphs	ancient Egyptian picture writing, using symbols for syllables (p. 15)
immortality	living forever (p. 12)

incision	a deep cut (p. 8)
instilled	filled with (p. 10)
ka	the dead person's ghostly twin (p. 12)
mummified	having been made into a mummy (p. 4)
natron	a special salt used to dry mummies, similar to baking soda (p. 8)
papier-mâché	a cardboard-like material, formed out of wet paper pulp, then dried; used to make mummies' coffins (p. 15)
resin	a fragrant, sticky substance made from tree sap (p. 9)
sacred	holy; belonging to a deity or connected to a religion (p. 19)
shabtis	carved figurines that awoke as servants of the dead in the afterlife (p. 14)
shriveled	dried up and wrinkled (p. 9)
talismans	magical objects that held protective spells and prayers (p. 10)
tempted	strongly attracted, or driven by desire for something illegal and/or pleasurable (p. 16)