

Egyptian Funerary Practices

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1 Overview

Of all the things the Egyptians are well-known for in popular culture today, perhaps the most notable are mummies. The Egyptians are often depicted as being preoccupied with death, given how much has survived of their burial practices: substances used in embalming, texts for the assistance of the deceased, magnificent stone tombs, and their preserved remains themselves. But we prefer to take the view that what really preoccupied the Egyptians was *life*. The Egyptians loved life and the enjoyable experiences in it so much that they went to astounding lengths to ensure that it would continue, undiminished (and in fact enhanced), beyond the grave.

2 Mummies

The word “mummy” comes from the Persian word *mummiā*, which refers to “bitumen” or “pitch”, the thick black substance formed by reducing tar with heat, which occurs naturally in parts of the Middle East. For whatever reason, the Persians believed that *mummiā* was a fantastic medicine, healing wounds and broken bones in minutes.¹

When Persian travelers in Egypt in the Middle Ages saw mummies, they thought the bodies were dark in color because they were coated in *mummiā*. *Mummiā* was prized in Europe as a medicine by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and when the demand increased, eventually, bodies were dug up in Egypt and sold to European apothecaries. Flesh and bone started being mixed in with the resinous coatings, and eventually the term was applied to the bodies themselves.

2.1 How to Make a Mummy

The modern view of how mummification was performed when the art was at its peak is derived from writings by the Classical authors who visited Egypt, most notably Herodotus, and from actual examination of the bodies. An Egyptian “how-to” document is lacking. Mummification was undoubtedly, like most trades, learned through apprenticeship, and therefore documentation was less essential.

The first incision was made using a knife which Herodotus describes as being “of sharp Ethiopian stone”, probably obsidian. Diodorus Siculus adds that once this incision was made, everyone present would throw rocks and yell deprecations at the man who made the initial cut, who promptly ran away, because he had “caused injury” to the body. This initial incision varied in position, but usually it was on the left side of the abdomen, either down the side, or along Poupart’s ligament, that is, the line from the hip to the groin.

The innards were then removed, and several major internal organs were given special treatment, as we shall discuss in the next section. The heart was then usually wrapped in linen, after being washed in wine and perfume, and reinserted into the chest cavity so that it could fulfill its magical role in assisting the deceased to enter the afterlife, as we shall examine later.

¹Brier, Bob. *Egyptian Mummies: Unraveling the Secrets of an Ancient Art*. Quill Books, 1994, p. 149.

The brain was considered unimportant by the Egyptians, and was usually discarded! The process for removing it is a matter of some debate, but it began with the insertion of a thin chisel up the nose to break the ethmoid bone at the top of the nasal passages. Then, either a hook was inserted to remove the brain piece by piece, or a thin wire was inserted and rotated around, causing the gelatin-like cerebral tissue to break up and liquify, so it could be extracted simply by tilting the head in the right direction to cause the brain to flow out the nose.

Having had its most moisture-laden tissues removed, the body was placed in a dry bath of *natron* for a period of seventy days. Natron is a naturally occurring mixture of sodium chloride (table salt), sodium carbonate, and sodium bicarbonate which was plentiful in Egypt and is very absorbent. After the seventy days, the natron had thoroughly dessicated the body, leaving it very dry and stiff, but very much lighter and vastly less susceptible to decay.

In the later New Kingdom, embalmers experimented with more cosmetic treatments of the body, with varying degrees of success: artificial eyes made of stone were placed in the eye sockets to replace the real eyes, shriveled up by the dessication process; and packing materials such as sawdust, linen, and even lichens were inserted under the skin to try to give the body a more “fleshy” appearance. The last few bodies in the DB320 Royal Mummies Cache are particularly fine examples of these techniques, though there were some failures: Queen Henttawy’s face was badly damaged by overpacking of her cheeks.

The procedure described here is what Herodotus calls “the most perfect” one; it is the procedure that was used for mummification of the wealthy. Poorer Egyptians, he says, received similar treatment, in proportion to what their families could afford: he says that cedar oil (a strong aromatic oil) was injected into the body through the anus and kept there while the body was packed in natron for the seventy days; then the oil was drained, and the effect of the oil was to break down the innards such that they drained along with the oil! And the poorest Egyptians of all, says Herodotus, simply had the intestines cleaned out by means of an enema and then were put in natron for seventy days.

2.2 Canopic Containers

We have seen that, in the most elaborate form of mummification, the internal organs were removed through an abdominal incision. Four of these—the liver, lungs, stomach, and intestines—received special treatment.

Each of these four organs was associated with one of the four sons of Horus, and with one of four goddesses who were assigned to protect them. Each son of Horus was depicted as a mummified god, with the head of a different species:

ORGAN	SON OF HORUS	HIS HEAD	GODDESS
Liver	Imsety	Human	Isis
Lungs	Hapi	Baboon	Nephthys
Stomach	Duamutef	Jackal	Neith
Intestines	Qebhsenuf	Falcon	Selket

The organs were washed with aromatic substances, wine and spices, and were treated in natron. Then they were wrapped in linen and placed in containers called *Canopic jars*. This name comes from the name of Canopus, who in Greek myth was the pilot of Menelaus’s ship when he went to retrieve Helen from the Trojans. Some of the ancient writers claimed that Canopus was deified, and was worshipped in the form of a jar with a human head, so early Egyptologists called these jars—which had lids in either the shape of the heads of the respective sons of Horus, or in the form of portrait heads of the deceased—“Canopic”, and the name stuck. The jars themselves were often placed in a larger box known as a *Canopic chest*. The Canopic containers were then placed in the tomb, usually close to the “main” portion of the body.

In several cases, it appears that the organs stood in a watery solution of natron, rather like formaldehyde or glycol are used nowadays for preserving biological specimens, rather than simply being treated with dry natron as the body itself was; the nature of the jars as such would have permitted this treatment for the organs.

Why these particular organs were chosen is unclear—why the pancreas, spleen, and kidneys, for example, were ignored or discarded is unknown. In the later periods (from the late New Kingdom onwards), the rewrapped viscera were usually replaced in the body along with the heart, but “dummy” Canopic jars are still usually found in the tombs of the wealthy, even carved from a single block of stone and never hollowed out or even split into jar and lid. Again, the reasons for this change are unknown.

2.3 Wrapping

Once the body had been desiccated thoroughly, it was time for wrapping. The linen strips used for bandaging the mummy were usually torn neatly from old sheets. Brier speculates that it was customary to use “the bed sheets that one slept on in life for the sleep till resurrection.”² The quality of the wrapping varied widely. In the finest cases, the individual fingers and toes received a few layers of bandage before being pulled into the bundle for that limb, which in turn was pulled into the overall bundle of the trunk.

In the embalming of wealthy people, thick aromatic perfumes were usually poured over the body at various stages in the wrapping process; ironically, in the case of Tutankhamen, this resulted in a less well-preserved body, as the perfumes contributed to the slow oxidation of the body. Had his body been stripped not long after its burial, like so many of his fellow pharaohs were, and then rewrapped on a low budget, his body would have been better preserved than it actually is.

Also, numerous amulets were placed in the wrappings, over various parts of the body, in order to ensure the body would be well-protected and durable. The most common of these amulets were the *udjat*, or Eye of Horus; the *djed*, or pillar of Osiris; and the *tet*, or knot of Isis, in addition to small figurines of those and other deities, particularly the four sons of Horus.

3 Animal Mummies

Homo sapiens was not the only species mummified by the Egyptians. There are several different categories of mummified animals in the Egyptian record. One of these types, sacred animals, has already been considered in our course: the most famous example was the Apis bull, which was mummified by a modified version of the “expensive” technique described above and buried with elaborate ceremony.

The second major category of animal mummies are the mummies of pets. These are perhaps the most “adorable” type, and the name says it all. It was common for a beloved pet to be depicted in tomb illustrations, and even to have its name recorded thereon, which given the Egyptian belief in funerary magic, would have been sufficient to grant the animal existence in the afterlife with its master. But the wealthiest people (mainly royalty, of course) could afford to have the pets’ actual bodies mummified and interred in the tombs with them.

The third type of animal mummies are called *victual mummies*. These might better be thought of as “mummified food” than “mummified animals”. Ducks, beef, and fish are found wrapped in linen and with their outer surfaces seared and cooked from the application of hot resins, much like those which would be used on the bodies of wealthy people, but applied at a much higher temperature for the “cooking” effect. By having a piece of meat so preserved in the tomb, the owner would be able to partake of that type of meal for eternity.

The last type of animal mummies is probably the most common: *votive mummies*. These were small, cheaply made mummies sold to pilgrims on the way to temples, which apparently were thought to deliver the prayers of the pilgrims to the gods, and since they were mummified, they would continue to deliver the prayers for eternity. The animal in question is typically the animal sacred to that particular god: ibises for Thoth and cats for Bast, for example.

²*Ibid.*, p. 71.

4 Funerary Texts

Funerary texts are found throughout the dynastic period and seem to serve the role of surrogate priesthoods, as we discussed earlier in this course. The Egyptians believed strongly in the power of words, and if words were inscribed in the tomb or on the coffin, the deceased could benefit from them by reading them aloud in the afterlife.

The oldest corpus of funerary texts are the Pyramid Texts, most famously collected in the pyramid of Unas, last ruler of the Fifth Dynasty. The “spells” or “utterances” of the Pyramid Texts describe the properties of the gods, and describe those of Unas as being similar, so that he will enjoy eternity in the company of—and empowered like—the gods:

“O Unas, you have not gone dead, you have gone alive to sit on the throne of Osiris. Your scepter is in your hand that you may give orders to the living, the handle of your lotus-shaped scepter in your hand. Give orders to those of the Mysterious Sites [the dead]!”

“Your arm is that of Atum, your shoulders are those of Atum, your belly is that of Atum, your back is that of Atum, your bottom is that of Atum, your two legs are those of Atum, your face is that of Anubis. The sites of Horus serve you, the sites of Seth serve you.”

“Shu, this your son is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!”

By the Middle Kingdom, the Pyramid Texts had been replaced by the Coffin Texts. These were more accessible spells, written primarily on the box-shaped coffins which characterized the Middle Kingdom, but also on most any available surface in a tomb, and thus available to non-royals as well. But the most famous funerary text is that from the New Kingdom called *The Book of Going Forth by Day*, more popularly called *The Book of the Dead*.

The most famous copy of the book is that which belonged to Ani, a scribe of offerings, now in the British Museum. The book contains a number of very important spells for the deceased to use to gain admittance into the afterlife, as well as to obtain the most enjoyment there. The book begins:

“Here begin the chapters of going out into the day, the praises and recitations for going to and fro in the god’s domain which are beneficial in the beautiful West, and which are to be spoken on the day of burial and of going in after coming out.”

The most well-known chapters are the chapter addressed to the heart, asking it not to testify against the deceased when he is judged; the chapter empowering the Ushabti figure, of which more later; and Chapter 125, the famous “Negative Confession.”

“O my heart which I had from my mother, o my heart of my different ages! Do not stand up as a witness against me, do not be opposed to me in the tribunal, do not be hostile to me in the presence of the Keeper of the Balance, for you are my Ka which was in my body ... Do not tell lies about me in the presence of the god ...”

“O Terrible of Face who came forth from Rosetjau, I have not destroyed the food offerings.

“O He-whose-Face-is-behind-him who came forth from his hole, I have not caused [anyone] to weep.

“O Nosey who came forth from Hermopolis, I have not stolen.”

There are 189 different chapters known in various copies of the book. No one copy contains all the chapters, but merely a selection of them.

5 *Ushabtis*

Funerary figurines known as *ushabtis* (or *shabtis* or *shawabtis*, depending on the period and location) serve as assistants, servants, and even “stunt doubles” of a sort.

In the early part of the dynastic period, the little figurines were formed in the shape of mummies and simply carried the names of the deceased. During the Eighteenth Dynasty, however, the figurines began to carry baskets, hoes, hammers, picks, brick molds, chisels, and so forth, and thus they could serve as versatile agricultural servants and craftsmen. But not only did they replace the servants of the deceased, they also could work *in the place of* the deceased. Chapter 6 of *The Book of the Dead* instructs the figure on its duties.

“O ushabti, allotted to me, if I be summoned or if I be detailed to do any work which has to be done in the god’s domain; if indeed obstacles are implanted for you therewith as a man at his duties, you shall detail yourself for me on every occasion of making arable the fields, of flooding the banks, or of conveying sand from east to west; ‘Here am I’, you shall say.”

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