

Mummy: ancient egypt and mummification assignment

[History](#)



The Importance of Mummification One of the first thoughts that usually comes to an individuals mind when thinking about Egyptian history is pharaohs, pyramids and mummies. This is a common thought that has led many historians and archaeologist to study Egyptian history. My research will be focused on mummies. Mummification is one of the most mysterious aspects of Egypt's past. I hope to show you how important mummification was for the Egyptians by my research done on the history, purpose and process of mummification. To begin, the practice of mummification by the Egyptians seems to have started sometime before 3100 BC.

However, there is a lack of written evidence or valid physical proof from this period to really confirm or deny this. One of the oldest surviving mummies is Ginger, currently stored at the British Museum. Ginger was buried in a shallow grave and wrapped only in light cloth but due to the hot, dry desert he survived intact to discovery in the late 19th century. Ginger's name comes from the color of his hair, which is still attached to his body. Evidence from his discovery supports the belief that even at this early age the Egyptians believed in the afterlife.

Tools and pottery were found buried with Ginger's body, which suggests that there was belief in life after death. It was common practice for the Egyptians to place such items as pottery, food, and water in the grave with their dead. Examples of these are bread, duck, dried fish, and figs. The mummification process was thus improved over time and eventually spread from royalty and dignitaries all the way down to the middle and lower class man. The purpose of mummification can be traced to strong Egyptian cultural beliefs in

life after death. Egyptians believe the body consisted of four categories, the ka, the ba, the shut, and the khet.

These categories could be further split into the physical and spiritual. The khet was the physical body and the shut was the shadow of one's physical body. The survival of there shadow was something that was very important to them. The Egyptians believed that inappropriate behavior by an individual could result in an individual's shadow being devoured by a demon known as the ' shadow gobbler'. None the less, the state of the ba and the ka in the after life is what started the practice of mummification. It was believed that without the survival of the physical body the ba and ka would be unable to survive.

Ba and ka were non-physical in nature and the two main elements survived after death. Egyptians believed ka was formed at birth but was a mirror of the living individual after death. Some scholars also believe that the shut, along with a person's name, also survived into the after life but it did not hold the aura of the ba and the ka. Ba was believed to have been similar to what we consider individuality and was separated from the body at death. The ba was represented in Egyptian hieroglyphics by a bird, and was said to have flown from the grave, to the afterlife to be with the ka.

Before doing so it would hover over the dead waiting for the akh, spirit, to pass through the land of the dead. Originally, the ba was the exclusive possession of the king, but as mummification spread from the pharaohs to the population as a whole so did the assumption that all men had their own ba (Montet 167). Records indicate that all men regardless of wealth or social

status had a ka. The ka can be compared to our modern day version of the soul. They believed that the ka would leave the individual at death and travel to the after life hoping to someday reunite with the ba, and form a new body in the after life.

The first night after a persons burial was considered to be a long night. The akh, which is a person's spirit, would travel to the land of the dead to be judged by the gods. The gods would often test the akh to see if it was good enough to pass through to paradise on the other side. An individual was expected to be a moral, upright citizen and live according to the various religious texts given to them by the god Osiris. The book used by the Egyptians to protect the dead in the afterlife was the Book of the Dead, or The Book of Coming Forth by Day as it was also called.

The book contained approximately one hundred and ninety chapters which consisted of different spells, chants, and guidance on how to live your life. These spells and words of wisdom were intended to help guide and protect people through the land of the dead. Egyptian priests and family members would cast various spells over the deceased to help protect them as they traveled through the land of dead on their way to paradise. These spells would be cast on amulets and wrapped up with the mummified body. It was not uncommon to find hundreds of amulets wrapped up with the individual.

If there was one amulet that mattered more than others it was the amulet protecting the heart. The heart was endeared by the Egyptians and was never to be removed from the body. The Book of the Dead even contained spells specifically slated for re-attaching the heart to the body in case it were

somehow removed or accidentally severed during mummification. Once the akh made it to the next world it would be reunited with its ba and its ka and live forever in paradise free from the worries of the past world. The act of mummification was an art in ancient Egypt and embalmers were held in great regard.

The process of mummifying the dead was different depending on social and financial status. The mourning, embalming, and burial practice among royalty and upper class Egyptians could take as long 120 days. In contrast, the body of a lower class citizen could be prepared for burial and buried on the same day that death occurred. The actual act of preparing the body for burial was quite interesting and varied among classes. Preparation for burial of a lower class individual usually consisted of nothing more than immersing the body in salts or bitumen and then wrapping it in cloth bandages.

These mummies were then buried in shallow graves and have survived very nicely over the years due to the dry, desert heat and lack of moisture in the body. As Egyptian society evolved the dead began to be buried in caskets and small stone rooms. These burial methods did not allow the climate to dry up the body's moisture and thus led to quick deterioration and contamination of the body. This problem required a new solution to the burial of the dead and resulted in the practice of mummification. The best documentation to date on the way in which the Egyptians mummified the dead comes from the writings of Herodotus in the fifth century BC.

He laid out three methods in which the Egyptians were mummified and prepared for burial. The most luxurious of these consisted of removing the

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internal organs from the body, cleansing those organs, and then injecting chemicals into the empty corpse. The brain was usually removed first and was done so by taking a sharp pointed instrument and inserting it in through the nostrils to open up a big hole through which the brain could be removed. The embalmer would then insert a metal hook into the nose and pull the brains out through the nose.

Another option used by embalmers to remove the brain was to make a small incision at the base of the brain and extract the brain through this incision. The brain was in such bad shape after removal that it was always thrown away. The next step taken by the embalmers was to make a cut in the side of the individual and remove the bladder, stomach, liver, and intestines. Once these organs had been removed they were washed in palm wine, dried out, and then covered with resin before being wrapped in cloth and placed in urns for burial with the body. Andrews 17). Upon burial the urns would be placed in their own separate boxes, big enough to hold the four urns. Then they would place the urns next to the casket or in the place of burial with the dead. The abdomen was then cleansed, treated with perfumes, myrrh, and a host of aromatic spices excluding frankincense, and then the side was sewed backed up. The body was soaked in natron and left to cure for seventy days. After the seventy days passed, the corpse was washed, wrapped in cloth bandages, and smeared with gum.

Bodies were strictly permitted from soaking in the natron for more than seventy days. The body would then be placed in a wooden casket and turned back over to the relatives for burial. They often painted the caskets and

shaped them like the individual who was to be buried. Another manner in which the body was prepared for burial was to inject juniper oil into the anus of the dead, plug up all cavities from which the oil could leak, soak the body in natron, and after seventy days unplug the anus and release the oil.

The juniper oil, or oil of cedar as it was also called, would dissolve all the internal organs and wash them out of the body when the anus was unplugged. The natron would serve to purge the body of all other cartilage, leaving just skin and bones. The body would then be returned to the family and placed in a casket or box for burial. The last method employed by individuals unable to afford more extravagant methods was to internally rinse the midsection with palm wine and sweet smelling fragrances. The body would then be soaked in natron for seventy days.

Once the seventy days was up the body would be turned back over to the family for placement in the grave. During embalming the family of the dead would publicly mourn the loss of the dead by covering themselves with mud and running through the streets of the city crying out for them. Upon completion of the embalming process the body would usually be laid to rest. There were some cases where the relatives would keep the mummy unburied in their home with them. This was rare but it did occur. Three types of Egyptian gravesites existed, the mastaba, the rock tomb, and the pyramid.

I will explain mastaba, the other two I assume is self explanatory. A mastaba consisted of four slightly slanted walls and a table like top. It was sometimes visible from above the ground but most of the mastaba laid underneath the

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earth. It usually had several chambers to house the various items that were buried with the mummy. Some of the items they included were the internal organs of the deceased, food, water, and various daily amenities such as tools and dishes. The mummification, mourning, and burial process was very ritualistic and important to the Egyptians.

It was built upon all of their varying religious and spiritual beliefs. The passage from this world to the afterlife was something every Egyptian longed to someday partake of. Egypt's religious views about mummification changed as the country changed but the act of mummification still remained sacred to the Egyptian people. Cults still exist to this day that worship Osiris and Re, two prominent Egyptian gods, and utilize modern technology to mummify their dead. The greatest gift the Egyptians may have left us was the fact that they mummified their dead.

Mummification and the dry desert heat has allowed us to clearly see what the Egyptian people looked like, how they lived, what they believed in, and how they cared for their dead. This is a blessing that we do not enjoy with any other past culture or civilization. We should be very thankful to the Egyptian people for leaving us this gift, which paints for us such a clear picture of their legacy. Carol Andrews, *Egyptian Mummies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 9. Ginger, approximately 3300 BCE, British Museum, Cambridge. In Carol Andrews, *Egyptian Mummies*(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 37.

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