

THE ROAD TO THE AFTERLIFE

I MUMMIFICATION IN ANCIENT EGYPT I

The goal of mummification was to preserve the body in the most life-like state possible. Mummification, or the embalming of a dead body, was practiced throughout most of ancient Egyptian history. Everyone, rich or poor, received some kind of embalming process after death. Though estimates vary for how long the practice was carried out, what is known is that for thousands of years, the Egyptians were truly the “masters of mummification.”

The brain was carefully pulled out through the nostrils by a special hook.

When the body was completely wrapped, it was often then returned to the family to be placed in a coffin and then a sarcophagus, a type of outer container, and then buried in a tomb.

The organs that were removed were then placed in special containers, called canopic jars. The jars would be placed along with the body in its tomb.

1 The mummification process took seventy days to complete for a single body. Special priests with knowledge of anatomy and the mummification process carried out the procedure and made certain that the body received the necessary religious rites of death. Mummification was considered an art, and it was not uncommon for processes to be passed down from generation to generation of priests. To begin, the body was washed and purified.

2 To prevent bacteria and disease from entering the body, priests drained the blood, then made an incision on the left side of the body, and removed the organs that might decay quickly. The only organ left intact inside the body was the heart, as the Egyptians believed it to be the center of a person's entire being. The body was then rinsed with wine to kill any remaining bacteria.

Canopic jars were made out of different materials, such as stone, wood, and pottery. These jars were from the New Kingdom period (1550–712 B.C.E). Each jar depicted a different animal head. The heads represented the four sons of Horus, the god of the sky and protector of the pharaohs. The human head guarded the liver, the monkey head protected the lungs, the jackal head took care of the stomach, and the falcon head sheltered the intestines.

3 At this point, the body was covered and packed tightly with natron, a special salt found in dried lakebeds. The body was then left on a table to dry out completely. This part of the process was the most extensive part of the mummification procedure, taking almost forty days to complete.

4 One result of the drying-out process was that areas of the body would “sink,” and the body would appear blackened and shriveled. The skin would be massaged to make it more life-like. Pieces of linen were also inserted inside the body to fill it out. False eyes, rouge, and other facial cosmetics were added as well. The body was then washed again and covered with oils.

5 A head priest dressed as Anubis (the god of the dead) would say prayers over the body to ensure that the deceased traveled safely to the afterlife. The body was now coated with resin (a sticky substance) and wrapped in linen. Hundreds of yards of linen could be used to wrap a single mummy. The wealthier individuals would also have amulets or other personal tokens wrapped between the layers of linen.