



# Life after Death: The Significance and Evolution of the Mummification Process in Ancient Egypt

Amber Bein<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

## Abstract

*The dedication, complexity, and elaborate burial practices show the significance that death and the afterlife was to the Ancient Egyptian people and culture. Life after death was a motivating factor when it came to preparing for one's death and success in the afterlife. To ancient Egyptians, death was only the beginning. The Ancient Egyptians developed a complex process of mummification in order to preserve bodies for their crossing into the afterlife. The process of mummification was a complex ritual that changed and evolved overtime. The significance of mummification and the afterlife, however, did not change.*

**Keywords:** Death, Afterlife, Mummification, Egyptian, Body, Religion, Organs

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Since mummification was an important aspect of ancient Egyptian religion and culture, it is important to understand what this process all entailed. There were five major steps involved in the mummification process: embalming of the body, removal of the brain, removal of internal organs, the drying out of the body, and lastly the wrapping of the body.

The first step in the process of mummification is the embalming of the body. The body was cleaned with palm oil or wine and then rinsed with water from the Nile River by priests. This was done in order to purify the body for their journey to the afterlife. Water from the Nile River was used because it was believed to be sacred for agriculture and life. Water from the Nile River was the key source of water used in agriculture and was extremely important to the Egyptians because there was little rainfall in Egypt's arid climate.<sup>1</sup> The embalming process took place in a tent called an *ibu*.

The second step in the process of mummification was the removal of the brain. A long metal hook was inserted into the nasal cavity and pushed into the brain. With the hooked end, the brain was shredded up and removed out through the nasal cavity. Chemicals were also used in order to dissolve any remaining parts of the brain still left inside the skull that were unable to be removed. The brain was viewed as significant by the ancient Egyptians, so it was discarded or dissolved.

The third step in the mummification process was the removal of internal organs. A cut was made on the left side of the stomach area where the internal organs were removed from. These organs were removed relatively quickly because these would be some of the first things to start breaking down and decomposing after death. The organs that were removed were the liver, stomach, intestines, and the lungs. The tools used in these first two steps included a hooked metal rod used for the removal of the brain, round and oval shaped spoons, scalpels, needles, chisels, and knives.

These organs, once removed, were mummified, and placed into small coffins called Canopic jars. The lids of the jars depicted the four sons of the god Horus, the Egyptian God of the Sky. These four sons were believed to each rule over a fourth of the world.<sup>2</sup> Hapi, depicted as a baboon head, was where the lungs were placed. Duamutef, depicted by the head of a jackal, was where the stomach was stored. Qebhsenuf, depicted by the head of a falcon, was where the intestines were placed. Imset, depicted by the head of a human, was where the liver was

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, B. G., Mieroop, M. v., Glahn, R. v., & Lane, K. (2012). *Crossroads and Cultures: A History of the World's Peoples* (Vol. 1). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Budge, E. A. (1960). *The Book of the Dead*. New York: Gramercy Books. 131.

stored.

The heart was placed back into the body because the ancient Egyptians believed that this was the most important part of one's body and was where one's being and spirit, reasoning, and intelligence was stored. The heart was needed to be weighed against a feather by the goddess capital Maat in order to determine if a person was good or bad in their lifetime. After the removal of the organs, the inside of the body was washed with varying lotions, palm oil, wine, honey, spices, and preserving fluids.

The body was then packed in order to keep the deceased person's shape. The materials used for the packing of the body include straw, natron and natron packets, onions, mud, incense, spices, resin, sawdust, and linen. Sometimes parts of the body would collapse, and they would be filled in with the various matters mentioned before. In some cases, like that of Seti I, even parts of the face were reconstructed.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth step of mummification was the drying out of the body. The body was then placed upon a tilted slab and covered with natron. Natron is a natural salt found in the dessert surrounding Egypt. The purpose of using natron was that it absorbed the water within the body, helping to dry and preserve the body and preventing the body from rotting. The natron was replaced every few weeks to ensure that the fat and moisture would be completely removed from the body. This drying out process usually took forty days to complete with the overall process of mummification averaging about seventy days. After the body was dried out, it was washed again in order to remove any remaining chance of lingering bacteria to prevent decaying.

The fifth step of mummification was the wrapping of the body. The symbol of the eye of Horus was placed over the abdomen incision that the internal organs were removed from. The body was then wrapped in linen. The family of the deceased would provide the priests with linens that were once used by the deceased such as clothing or bedding. Egyptians wore mostly linens made from flax plants which were commonplace along the banks of the Nile.<sup>4</sup> Much linen was required in wrapping the mummy; usually averaging in the hundreds of yardages.<sup>5</sup> Even finger and toes were individually wrapped with great care.

Within the different layers of linen wrappings, charms, amulets, and papyrus were added in order to protect the body and person after death by ensuring safe passage and existence in the afterlife.<sup>6</sup> In the case of King Tut, more than 140 amulets were found within his linen wrappings showing the significance that were placed on amulets. A specific type of glue called mummia was applied to the linens to hold them all together in place.

During the process of wrapping the mummy, the priests would read spells meant to protect, reawaken, and aid the deceased in the afterlife. A mask was placed over the head of the mummy so that the ka of the deceased would be able to recognize their body. Then the mummy was finally placed in a decorated coffin.

A ceremony called the "Opening of the Mouth" was performed before the mummy was placed within the tomb. Spells and rituals were performed at this stage to allow the mummy to be able to eat, see, hear, and move in the afterlife.<sup>7</sup> The ritual was done by a priest by touching the parts of the body responsible for the five senses. This ritual took place at the tomb's entrance and was one of the most important parts of the ceremony.

Once ready to be entombed, the canopic jars containing the mummy's organs, as well as a copy of the Book of the Dead and their personal belongings, were placed within the room for the deceased's use in the afterlife. These personal items included furniture, figurines called ushabtis, jewelry, chariots, weapons, stone palettes, pottery, food. Ushabtis were first introduced in the Middle Kingdom and were usually made of materials such as wax, clay, pottery, faience, wood, or stone.<sup>8</sup>

While the preservation of the dead can be seen throughout most of Egypt's ancient history, the processes and techniques used changes and evolved through the different periods. The first mummies that came from Ancient Egypt were accidental natural mummies.<sup>9</sup> Bodies that had been buried in the sand and shallow pits were naturally preserved by the hot and dry air and sand during the first and second dynasties.<sup>10</sup> It was during the Third to Fourth dynasties that mummification began to become artificially carried out and introduced the use of chemicals.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Lynnerup, N. (2007). Mummies. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 134(45), 179.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, B. G., Mieroop, M. v., Glahn, R. v., & Lane, K. (2012). *Crossroads and Cultures: A History of the World's Peoples* (Vol. 1). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Smithsonian Museum. (n.d.). Egyptian Mummies. Retrieved May 2022, from Smithsonian: <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/ancient-egypt/mummies>

<sup>6</sup> Cook, S. (2016). Ancient Egyptian Burial Practices the Connection to Religious Beliefs & Government. *Religious Studies Conference*. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Smithsonian Museum. (n.d.). Egyptian Mummies. Retrieved May 2022, from Smithsonian: <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/ancient-egypt/mummies>

<sup>8</sup> Oxford 170

<sup>9</sup> Shaw, I. (2000). *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Cook, S. (2016). Ancient Egyptian Burial Practices the Connection to Religious Beliefs & Government. *Religious Studies Conference*. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 3.

It was with the Middle Kingdom that resin really began to be utilized systematically in the mummification process but there is evidence to suggest that they were starting to be used on a smaller scale in the Old Kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

The positioning of the mummies also changed. In the beginnings, mummies were placed in a curled-up position. During the Middle Kingdom, bodies were laid on their sides in coffins.<sup>13</sup> This, again, later changed to a laying down position on the back with the arms folded over the chest. When it comes to the mummification style, there was two major ancient texts written about the process and practices of mummification; texts written by Herodotus and by Diodorus Siculus.<sup>14</sup>

It was during the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties that the ancient Egyptians began to purposely mummify their deceased. It was during the Middle Kingdom that decorated face masks were introduced with the purpose of helping a person's ka to find their body after death. The change in burial habits, more specifically the transition from shallow sand pits to the use of coffins in burial chambers and tombs, caused a growing need and innovation in new ways of preserving the body after death. During the time of the Old Kingdom, a cloth mask was placed over the head of the mummy.<sup>15</sup> The most preserved and best prepared mummies are from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Dynasties.

Mummification was an important aspect of life for ancient Egyptians. This is because death was viewed not as an end but rather a beginning of a new existence.<sup>16</sup> Ancient Egyptians believed in an afterlife and that their body would be resurrected to live again after death.<sup>17</sup> When a person died their soul leaves the body and it is then in the afterlife that the body and soul are once again reunited. It was important for the body to be preserved as much as possible so that their bodies could be used after death.<sup>18</sup> This makes the preservation of one's body important because the afterlife could only exist if there was a recognizable bodily form that the Ba (meaning personality) and Ka (meaning soul) could repossess and could act as a bridge between the dead and the living "with all his mental and spiritual attributes".<sup>19 20</sup> In other words, death was seen as the beginnings of "providing more of an opportunity for fulfillment".<sup>21</sup>

Since mummification was a costly process, it was mainly performed on those from royal or wealthy backgrounds even though it was a theoretical option for everyone because anyone could live in the afterlife. Though there were cheaper options available for families with limited resources, according to Herodotus.<sup>22</sup> By the time of Greek and Roman arrivals, mummification became more widespread as noted by Diodorus Siculus.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that the cost of mummification became more affordable to the public overall. The ancient Egyptians not only mummified their dead, but also mummified their animals such as cows, cats, dogs, and birds and food. These are called *virtual mummies*.

While the process and techniques eventually evolved with time, the overall processes and significance of mummification remained paramount in ancient Egypt. So vital was mummification to their religious beliefs and culture that great expenses were taken, especially by those of the royal bloodlines, to ensure the best possibility for them in the afterlife.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, J., Higham, T. F., Oldfield, R., O'Connor, T. P., & Buckley, S. A. (2019, e103608–e103608.). Evidence for Prehistoric Origins of Egyptian Mummification in Late Neolithic Burials. *PloS One*, 9(8). 1.

<sup>13</sup> Shaw, I. (2000). *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 170.

<sup>14</sup> Davey, D. J. (2017). Ancient Egypt: Mummification and Burial Sites as Historical Resources. *Agora*, 52(2). 21.

<sup>15</sup> Shaw, I. (2000). *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 114.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, B. G., Mieroop, M. v., Glahn, R. v., & Lane, K. (2012). *Crossroads and Cultures: A History of the World's Peoples* (Vol. 1). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Cook, S. (2016). Ancient Egyptian Burial Practices the Connection to Religious Beliefs & Government. *Religious Studies Conference*. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, B. G., Mieroop, M. v., Glahn, R. v., & Lane, K. (2012). *Crossroads and Cultures: A History of the World's Peoples* (Vol. 1). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Budge, E. A. (1960). *The Book of the Dead*. New York: Gramercy Books. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Cook, S. (2016). Ancient Egyptian Burial Practices the Connection to Religious Beliefs & Government. *Religious Studies Conference*. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Davies, J. (1999). *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*. London: Routledge. 28.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

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