NO PREP

Mummification

Preserving the Body for the Afterlife

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

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Name: Period: Date:

Mummification: Preserving the Body for the Afterlife

The Theology Behind the Technology

To understand why ancient Egyptians developed one of the most sophisticated preservation techniques in human history, you first have to understand what they believed happened after death. Egyptian theology held that a person's soul was not a single, unified spirit but a complex assembly of spiritual elements. The ka was a spiritual double created at birth that needed the body as a physical home. The ba was the personality and individual character of a person — roughly what we might call the soul — capable of traveling between the world of the living and the world of the dead. For the ba to return to the body each night and for the deceased to be reborn into eternal life, the physical body needed to survive. This theological requirement drove the Egyptians to solve one of nature's most persistent problems: decomposition. The hot, dry desert

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The Seventy-Day Process

The full mummification process took approximately seventy days and was performed by a specialized class of embalmers who combined the roles of priest and mortuary technician. The process began immediately after death. First, embalmers removed all internal organs except the heart, which the Egyptians believed was the seat of intelligence and emotion and needed to remain with the body for the judgment of the dead. The brain was removed through the nasal cavity using a long hook. The

Egyptians considered the brain unimportant, and it was discarded. The lungs, liver, intestines, and stomach were removed through a cut in the left side of the abdomen. The removed organs were preserved separately in four canopic jars, each protected by one of the four Sons of Horus: Imsety (human-headed, protecting the liver), Hapy (baboon-headed, protecting the lungs), Duamutef (jackal-headed, protecting the stomach), and Qebehsenuef (falcon-headed, protecting the intestines). The body cavity was then packed with natron (a naturally occurring salt found in dried lake beds), and the entire body was covered in natron for forty days, drawing out all remaining moisture. After forty days, the shriveled body was cleaned, rubbed with oils and resins, and wrapped in hundreds of meters of linen bandage, with protective amulets tucked between the layers.

Who Got Mummified?

Full mummification was expensive: the seventy-day process with all its materials and priestly services cost approximately the equivalent of a skilled worker's annual salary. As a result, elaborate mummification was initially reserved for the pharaoh and the highest nobility. Over time, as Egypt's wealth grew and the funerary industry expanded, middle-class Egyptians could afford simplified versions of the process. By the New Kingdom, even lower-status Egyptians might receive basic preservation, and animals such as sacred cats, ibises, baboons, crocodiles, and bulls were mummified in enormous quantities as religious offerings. Animal mummies have been found in the millions. The catacombs of Saqqara, south of Cairo, contained well over a million ibis mummies alone, packed into clay pots and stacked in underground corridors for hundreds of meters. Cats were mummified so frequently that in the 19th century, when Egyptian farmers discovered large deposits of cat mummies, they were shipped to England and ground up as fertilizer before archaeologists realized their historical value. Recent analysis using CT scanning has revealed that many animal mummies (perhaps a third) contain no animal at all, just feathers, sticks, or mud, suggesting that the mummy-making industry was not always strictly honest.

The Book of the Dead and Judgment

Mummification alone was not sufficient for eternal life. The deceased also needed to navigate a dangerous journey through the underworld, the Duat, guided by a collection of spells, prayers, and instructions collectively known as the Book of the Dead (more accurately translated as 'The Book of Coming Forth by Day'). These

texts were written on papyrus scrolls placed in the coffin or painted directly on tomb walls. They provided magic words to open doors, neutralize threats, and eventually reach the Hall of Two Truths for the most critical moment: the Weighing of the Heart. In the judgment scene depicted in countless tomb paintings, the deceased's heart was placed on a scale and balanced against the feather of Ma'at — the feather of truth and justice. The jackal-headed god Anubis operated the scale while the ibis-headed god Thoth recorded the result. If the heart was heavier than the feather — weighted down by sin and wrongdoing — it was fed to Ammit, a monster with a crocodile's head, a leopard's torso, and a hippopotamus's hindquarters, who consumed it and ended the soul's existence forever. If the heart balanced the feather, the deceased was declared 'true of voice' and permitted to enter the Field of Reeds — the Egyptian paradise.

What Modern Science Has Learned

Modern technology has allowed Egyptologists to study mummies in extraordinary detail without unwrapping them. CT scanning has revealed the health histories of individuals who died thousands of years ago: evidence of atherosclerosis (hardened arteries) in ancient Egyptian nobility, suggesting their rich diet caused heart disease; evidence of malaria in Tutankhamun's mummy; signs of tuberculosis, arthritis, and bone fractures healed and unhealed. DNA analysis has traced family relationships between royal mummies, resolving debates that lasted decades about who was related to whom in the royal family. Chemical analysis of the resins, oils, and bitumen used in mummification has revealed that the Egyptians sourced ingredients from as far away as Southeast Asia — evidence of trade networks far more extensive than previously suspected. A 2023 study analyzed residues from 31 ceramic vessels in an Egyptian embalming workshop and identified substances including pistacia resin, juniper oil, and compounds found in tropical plants. The mummy-making industry, it turns out, was both a theological practice and a global commercial operation.

Key Information: Mummification

Detail	Information
Duration of Process	Approximately 70 days

Detail	Information
First Step	Removal of internal organs (except the heart) and the brain
Brain Removal Method	Hook inserted through the nasal cavity; brain considered unimportant
Natron	Natural salt packed around body for 40 days to remove moisture
Canopic Jars	Four jars protecting removed organs, each guarded by a Son of Horus
Cost	Approximately equal to a skilled worker's annual salary for full mummification
Animal Mummies	Found in millions; ibis mummies alone number well over a million at Saqqara
Book of the Dead	Collection of spells guiding the soul through the underworld
Weighing of the Heart	Soul's heart balanced against feather of Ma'at in final judgment
Modern Discoveries	CT scans reveal ancient diseases; resins traced to southeast Asia

Case Study: What Ipy Found

Ipy had been an embalmer for eighteen years. He had prepared the bodies of nobles, merchants, a minor official of the royal court, and once, briefly, had assisted with a priest of high rank whose name he was forbidden to speak afterward. He was good at his work — careful with the bandaging, precise with the amulet placement, respectful with the prayers even when no one was watching to verify he said them. But he had seen things in the preparation room that troubled him. The nobleman on the table before him now had been a powerful man in life. The body told a different story. Ipy could see, in the condition of the organs he carefully lifted from the body cavity, evidence that was unmistakable to a trained eye: this man had not died of age or illness. Someone had helped him along. He paused over the canopic jar and thought. He was a craftsman, not a judge. His job was preservation, not justice. The man's family had paid for the finest preparation, the full seventy days, the gilded coffin. They had paid Ipy personally, generously. In the theology of his profession, his responsibility was to the body and its journey to the Field of Reeds. 'I prepare the dead,' he thought. 'I do not investigate them.' But his hands were slow in reaching for the natron, and he stood there a long time in the quiet preparation room, saying none of the prayers.

1. Ipy faces a moral dilemma that modern forensic scientists recognize: the evidence of a crime versus professional responsibility. Based on the reading's explanation of the embalmer's role in Egyptian society — as both priest and technician — what pressures might prevent Ipy from reporting what he found? What pressures might compel him to?

2. The reading explains that the Egyptians believed the heart would be judged against the feather of Ma'at after death. How might this theological belief have complicated Ipy's situation? Consider both the nobleman's judgment and Ipy's own.

Multiple Choice

1. Why did ancient Egyptian embalmers remove all internal organs except the heart?

    a) The heart was removed last and placed in the most prestigious of the four canopic jars with respect

    b) The heart was too close to the ribcage to be safely removed with ancient tools

    c) The heart was believed to be the seat of intelligence and was needed for the judgment of the dead

    d) Egyptian priests believed the heart regenerated the body's other organs after death

2. What role did natron play in the mummification process?

    a) It was applied to the outside of the linen wrappings to harden them into a protective shell

    b) It was a salt that was packed around the body for forty days to draw out moisture

    c) It was a resin imported from Southeast Asia that prevented insect damage to the wrappings

    d) It was the fluid used to dissolve the brain after it was removed through the nasal cavity

3. What happened to a soul whose heart failed the Weighing of the Heart judgment?

a) The soul was condemned to wander the desert as a ghost for one thousand years

b) The soul was sent back to the living world to complete unfinished moral duties

c) The soul was reincarnated into a new body and given another chance at a righteous life

d) The heart was consumed by Ammit and the soul's existence ended permanently

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Canopic jars	A) The monster with a crocodile's head that consumed the hearts of those who failed the divine judgment
2. ___ Natron	B) The Egyptian spiritual element representing individual personality and character, capable of traveling between worlds
3. ___ Book of the Dead	C) A naturally occurring salt packed around the body to draw out moisture during mummification
4. ___ Ammit	D) Four containers that held the removed organs of the mummified dead, each protected by a Son of Horus
5. ___ Ba	E) A collection of spells and instructions meant to guide the Egyptian soul through the underworld

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Egyptian concept of the _____ was a spiritual double that needed the preserved body as a physical home after death.

2. During mummification, the brain was removed through the _____ cavity using a long hook and was discarded as unimportant.

3. The final judgment of the Egyptian soul involved balancing the deceased's heart against the feather of _____, the goddess of truth and justice.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading explains that mummification became available to lower-status Egyptians over time as costs decreased. What does this gradual democratization of mummification tell us about Egyptian society and its economy?

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2. Modern CT scanning has revealed diseases in mummies like atherosclerosis and malaria. Why is this kind of medical information important to historians and scientists, beyond just being interesting?

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3. The reading notes that approximately one-third of animal mummies may contain no animal, suggesting fraud in the mummy-making industry. What does this tell you about ancient Egyptian society and the tension between religious belief and commercial activity?

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