

Mummification: Information Pack

Overview

The desert of Egypt naturally dried out bodies, showing to the Egyptians that they did not disappear after death. But, when bodies were buried in tombs, they decomposed. To deal with this problem, the process of mummification was developed.



Evidence

Bodies

Our best evidence for mummification are the surviving mummies themselves. Early scholars unwrapped the bandages to examine the bodies and preservation techniques. Nowadays, this isn't necessary and CAT-scans and other imaging techniques allow us to see everything inside the bodies in great detail.

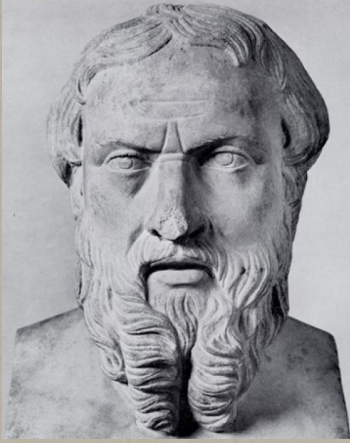
Ancient Images and Scenes

The ancient Egyptians didn't discuss or record how they mummified bodies. Tomb scenes show the god Anubis standing over mummified bodies (suggesting the process), but our only written evidence is from the Greek historian Herodotus*.

Herodotus

During his time in Egypt, Herodotus wrote about mummification and notes that there were three types, which differed mainly on price:

- 1) Most expensive: removal and disposal of brain; removal and bandaging of other organs; filling the body cavity with myrrh, etc.; drying in salt for 70 days; bandaging.
- 2) No removal of organs; body injected with oil from cedar tree; drying in salt; oil is drained out (and with it the gloopy organs); only dried skin and bones left.
- 3) Clearing out the intestines with an enema; drying the body in salt.



Herodotus

Born in Halicarnassus (in modern Turkey) in ca. 484 BC, Herodotus is best-known for writing *The Histories*. The main focus of his writing was Greece's war against the Persians, but in his research he travelled to other lands that had contact with the Persians. During his time in Egypt (after 454 BC), he wrote about both the places that he visited (some of which no longer exist), religion, and the people. While historians today question how reliable he was (he couldn't speak Egyptian and relied on other people), he remains sometimes our only evidence for some aspects of Egyptian life.

Showing Mummies in the Classroom

Is it okay to show mummies in the classroom? While mummies are always popular among children and adults interested in Egypt, and pictures of mummies are easily found online and are shown in the news when new discoveries are found, there are some issues to consider:

- Showing dead bodies may be upsetting to some students, especially in cases when the bandages have been removed, exposing the body itself;
- Different religions have different attitudes to dead bodies and individual relationships / attitudes to the dead need to be taken into consideration;
- Mummies were once living people, so should they be shown in the same way as any other type of object?

Examples of Mummies in UK Museums

Many museums have mummies in their collections and many display them in different ways, e.g., only in their coffins vs out of their coffins.

The **British Museum** exhibition, 'Ancient Lives, New Discoveries' in 2015, examined a number of mummies in the collection and how to display them, as well as what can be learned about the actual lives of the deceased individuals; see, e.g.,

https://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/ancient_lives_new_discoveries.aspx

https://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/ancient_lives_new_discoveries/about_the_exhibition.aspx

Possible Points for Exploration

Bodies and Health

How Egyptians mummified bodies tells us about what they thought was important: why did they throw away the brain? What organs were important (based on special measures taken to preserve some organs)?

The bodies themselves also supply evidence about health in the ancient world, from dental to other physical conditions.

Mummies as Horror

Mummies have been part of popular culture (whether literature, film, cartoon, etc.) since their discovery in the 19th century. Mostly, they are portrayed as horror figures and monsters. But, during their lives, these were just normal people. How does this affect general understanding of mummies?

Mummies in Museums

Should mummies be on display in museums as objects? How should they be displayed? What are the important things to teach people about mummies?

