

Ancient Egypt – Story of Mummification

Aims

- To help students understand how and why artificial mummification was developed by the ancient Egyptians
- To provide students with information about the processes (both natural and artificial) involved in mummification
- To encourage students to explore the topic of mummification

Description

- A sequence of 8 slides to explore an overall topic 'The Story of Mummification'
- Slide 2 briefly describes the progression that led to artificial mummification
- Slides 3 and 4 show a sand dried mummy and explain this process
- Slides 5 and 6 show a body buried in a coffin and explains how this prevents dehydration and therefore mummification
- Slide 7 combines the previous ideas and introduces the process of artificially mummifying a body

Teaching ideas

- The presentation can be used on a whiteboard with the whole class or could be followed by individual students or groups.
- Use slide 2 to introduce terms that will be used in the presentation such as mummification and coffin.
- Whilst looking at slides 2 or 3 explain why a body must be dehydrated for mummification to occur. (Water in the body contains bacteria which causes rotting)
- Slide 3 can be used to discuss ancient Egyptian beliefs relating to the afterlife and how this is reflected in burials.
- Use the presentation as a starting point for understanding why mummification and the survival of the body was important to the ancient Egyptians.
- Explore the *Mummification* chapter of the British Museum's Ancient Egypt website: www.ancientegypt.co.uk which provides information on mummification, a virtual mummy and coffin to explore and a challenge to journey through the underworld.

Notes on the pictures

Slide 2: The story of mummification (images are listed in the order they appear)

- Predynastic Egyptian man from around 3500 BC. Before mummification was developed around 2700 BC, bodies were placed in shallow desert graves, in direct contact with the sand. They frequently did not decay because the hot, dry sand dehydrated the bodies. Even in later times, those

who could not afford the cost of mummification were buried in a very simple fashion not unlike this man.

- Early Egyptian coffin burial, around 3000 BC. The coffin is made from local timber and is shorter than later examples. The body was lain inside in a contracted position with the knees drawn up to the chin. The wooden coffin separated the body from the drying effects of the sand. The soft tissue decomposed, leaving only a skeleton.
- Inner coffin of Shepenmehyt, from Thebes, approximately 600 BC. This coffin is decorated inside and out with scenes and inscriptions from the afterlife. Her face is painted green to reflect the association with Osiris.

Slides 3 and 4. Both slides show the Predynastic Egyptian man seen in Slide 2. The reconstruction of his grave-pit illustrates the early Egyptian custom of placing the body in a contracted position.

Slide 5. This shows part of a faience pectoral from the New Kingdom, around 1250 BC. The jackal represents Anubis, the god of embalming and a protector of the deceased. The use of the colour yellow is a further reference to resurrection, this time through the rising and rays of the sun.

Slide 6. Early Egyptian coffin burial, as seen in Slide 2.

Slide 7. Wooden anthropoid coffin from the 21st Dynasty

Background information

- The preservation of the body was an essential part of ancient Egyptian funerary belief and practice. The body was needed to house the ba (spiritual aspect) and enabled the person to live in the afterlife.
- The Museum's earliest coffin burials date from about 2950 BC. Here the body was placed in a coffin made of wooden planks or reed basketwork which might be buried in the ground or placed in a cave. Although the coffin was intended to protect the body from wild animals (direct sand burials were vulnerable to being dug up and disturbed by wild animals), it actually kept the sand (which dried the body out) away from the body, thus allowing the flesh to rot away leaving only the skeleton. The ancient Egyptians would have become aware of the problems associated with coffin burials through opening graves for subsequent burials as well as through accidental uncovering of sand burials. Increasing understanding of the processes of natural preservation, coupled with the religious emphasis on the importance of the body in the afterlife, led to the development of full mummification which involved artificially drying the body before placing it in the coffin to ensure the complete preservation of the body.
- Mummification was carried out by people specifically trained for the process. It was expensive and only a small percentage of the population could be artificially mummified. The majority of the population were buried in pits in the sand.
- For further reading, we can recommend the following:
 - Andrews, Carol. *Egyptian Mummies*, British Museum Press 1998 (2nd edition)
 - Spencer, A. J. (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, 2007.

Filer, Joyce. *The Mystery of the Egyptian Mummy*, British Museum Press, 2003.

McDonald, Angela. *The British Museum Pocket Dictionary of Ancient Egyptian Animals*, British Museum Press, 2004.

Pemberton, Delia. *Egyptian Mummies*, British Museum Press 2000.

Strudwick, Nigel. *The British Museum Pocket Dictionary of Ancient Egyptian Mummies*

British Museum Press, 2004.

Taylor, John. *Mummy: the inside story*, British Museum Press 2005.