

Ancient Egypt: Mummification



Mummy of a young boy with a portrait panel

From Hawara, Egypt

AD 100-120

Visit resource for teachers
Key Stage 2

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Before your visit

Background information

The preservation of the body was an essential part of ancient Egyptian funerary belief and practice. Early mummification involved the wrapping of specific parts of the body such as the face and hands. It has been suggested that the process developed to reproduce the naturally occurring desiccating (drying) effects of the hot dry sand on a body buried within it.

The best literary account of the mummification process is given by Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian. He records that the entire process took seventy days. The internal organs, apart from the heart and kidneys, were removed via a cut in the left side. The organs were dried and wrapped, and placed in canopic jars, or later replaced inside the body. The brain was removed, often through the nose, and discarded. Bags of natron or salt were packed both inside and outside the body, and left for forty days until all the moisture had been removed from the remaining body tissue. The body was then cleansed with aromatic oils and resins and wrapped with bandages, often household linen torn into strips.

Scientific analysis of mummies using processes such as X-ray and CT scanning has revealed a wealth of information about how individuals lived and died. It has been possible to identify conditions such as lung cancer, osteoarthritis and tuberculosis, as well as parasitic disorders.

The Museum has on display a sand burial dating from about 3400 BC. The body was buried directly in the desert sand, which completely covered the body, dried it out and thus preserved it. Such burials may also contain grave goods – objects buried near the body – such as bowls, jars, jewellery and flint tools.

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 would have 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.

Resources

British Museum websites

Explore

Explore is an online database of over 5000 objects from the Museum's collection. To investigate objects from ancient Egypt use the Explore option on the homepage www.britishmuseum.org

Ancient Egypt website www.ancientegypt.co.uk

This is an interactive learning and information website with text, images and maps relating to a range of key themes. It includes a wide variety of online activities for students and an area for teachers providing guidance and ideas for the classroom. There is a section of the website dedicated to mummification.

Books

For adults

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.

For children

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.

Gallery information

Rooms 62 and 63 contain objects connected with funerary practice in ancient Egypt including mummies, coffins and other tomb artefacts. The galleries also show the use of modern technology for investigating mummies, with x-ray and CAT-scan images of some of the exhibits. Room 62, case 2 contains a number of wooden coffins illustrating the development of the coffin in ancient Egypt. There are animal mummies in case 29 and a good display of papyri in case 24. The mummy of Artemidorus in case 22 includes a CAT-scan image of his mummy inside the coffin. Room 63 contains further examples of mummies and coffins including the stunning gold gilded coffin of Henutmehyt in case 9. In case 6 there is a display of canopic jars whilst case 11 contains tomb models. Cases 15 and 16 contain a display of shabti figures.

Room 64 covers the development of early Egypt from the Stone Age to 3000 BC. It contains objects which reflect the change from a hunter-gatherer society to the beginnings of settled life under dynastic rule. Objects on display include pottery, stone tools, stone palettes and basketwork. The gallery contains an early natural sand-dried mummy and examples of coffin burials.

What is it like to visit these galleries?

All three galleries form part of the ancient Egyptian suite of galleries on the Upper Floor of the Museum. Rooms 62 and 63 tend to get very crowded while Room 64 is often quieter. All three galleries have doorways at both ends and the middle section in all three galleries serves as a route way between the Egyptian galleries. Room 63 has an additional two doors making it a cross-roads gallery with a lot of movement at the centre. You will tend to find that areas near the side wall cases are quieter, even in a busy gallery.

Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

Preliminary activities

General introductory activities

- Locate the area covered by ancient Egypt in an atlas and look at the modern countries which currently exist in this region of the world.
- Discuss the issues around displaying human remains. In addition to the wrapped mummies, the students may see skeletal and other human remains in the Museum. The ethical arguments concerning such displays are an important subject for discussion, but you may also want to take into account the personal circumstances of the students.
- Discuss the process of human burial and confirm vocabulary such as 'coffin' and 'grave'. Consider the burial rites followed by today's world religions.
- Look at objects from ancient Egypt on the British Museum website. In particular search for examples of mummies and look at the Mummification PowerPoints available in the classroom resources section of the Ancient Egypt Learning Pages.

Activities to support gallery activities

- Discuss the process of decomposition. Leave a piece of fruit out and observe what happens to it. Discuss how the process of drying out helps to preserve something. Look at examples of dried fruit such as raisins and prunes.
- Wrap some objects in crepe paper. Wrap some tightly and others with lots of layers which hide the shape of the object. Can the students tell from the outer shape what is inside? How can one find out, without unwrapping, what is inside? (leading to the idea of using X rays and CT scans to investigate mummies).
- Talk about the general nature of Egyptian funerary practices, familiarise the students with the different sorts of objects which were put into tombs and why.
- Look at the *Mummies* section of the ancient Egypt learning site (www.ancientegypt.co.uk) to find out about artificial mummification.

During your visit

Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Rooms 62, 63 and 64. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers

Gallery activity: Sand and coffin burial comparison

- Early burials in ancient Egypt did not involve artificial mummification. Bodies placed directly in the sand often dried out naturally while those in a coffin did not, which allowed the flesh to rot away. Observation of how a dried body was preserved led to the development of artificial mummification using natron (a type of salt) to dry out the body.
- This activity encourages the students to consider the advantages and disadvantages of these two early forms of burial and how this led to artificial mummification as seen in the next galleries.

Gallery activity: Animal mummies

- The process of artificial mummification was applied to animals as well as humans. Animal mummies were created for religious use – either as a present for a deity or in recognition of the animal's religious importance in life.
- This activity encourages the students to identify mummified animals from the outer wrappings. Consider what could be used if this proved difficult (e.g. X-ray).

Gallery activity: Burial beliefs



- The ancient Egyptians placed objects in the tomb to help them in the afterlife. This included their mummified body, canopic jars for the dried internal organs, food, lucky amulets, helpful information written on papyrus scrolls and shabtis.
- This activity involves the students in looking for historical evidence which helps us to understand ancient beliefs nowadays.

Gallery activity: Mummy-maker

- Embalming a body to create an artificial mummy took 70 days. 40 days were spent drying out the body using natron. The body also had to be prepared with anointing oil to stop the skin cracking and wrapped in linen to protect it. Wooden coffins were highly decorated. Early examples are rectangular whilst later on body-shaped coffins developed.
- This activity takes the students through the process of mummification and encourages them to consider the tools and materials used in this process.

Sand and coffin burial comparison

- Look carefully at the sand and coffin burials and then fill in your answers for each burial on the table below.

| | Sand Burial | Coffin Burial |
|---|--|---|
| |  |  |
| Have the skin and flesh survived? | yes / no | yes / no |
| Have the bones survived? | yes / no | yes / no |
| Has the hair survived? | yes / no | yes / no |
| What position is the body in? | | |
| Was the body buried in a container? | yes / no | yes / no |
| Was the body in direct contact with the sand? | yes / no | yes / no |
| Were objects buried with the body? | yes / no | yes / no |

- Now use your answers to decide if you agree or disagree with the statements below. Circle 'agree' or 'disagree' depending on what you think.

The desert sand helped to preserve dead bodies.

| | |
|-------|----------|
| agree | disagree |
| | e |

A body survived better without a coffin.

| | |
|-------|----------|
| agree | disagree |
| | e |

The Egyptians always buried objects with the dead.

| | |
|-------|----------|
| agree | disagree |
|-------|----------|

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During your

The sand burial is more like a mummy burial.





The coffin burial is more like a mummy burial.

| | |
|-------|---------|
| | e |
| agree | disagre |
| | e |
| agree | disagre |
| | e |

Animal mummies

Animal mummies were given as a gift to a god or goddess by worshippers visiting a temple.

- Look carefully at the animal mummies in cases 28 and 29. Find a mummy of each of the animals below and then draw their mummy.

| animal | mummy |
|--|-------|
|  <p data-bbox="295 902 343 936">cat</p> | |
|  <p data-bbox="287 1274 343 1308">bull</p> | |
|  <p data-bbox="252 1615 384 1648">crocodile</p> | |
|  <p data-bbox="295 1951 343 1980">ibis</p> | |

- Continue looking to see what other animals you can find.

Burial beliefs

Objects can help us understand what ancient people believed.

- Look at the objects in Rooms 63 and 62. Write down or draw the ones which you think provide evidence for these statements.

| Objects | Ancient Egyptian belief |
|---|-------------------------|
| A person's spirit still needed a body in the afterlife. | |
| All of the body's internal organs would be needed in the afterlife. | |
| Food and drink were needed for the afterlife. | |
| Good luck charms (amulets) were needed to protect a person on their journey to the afterlife. | |
| A person needed written instructions to help them complete their journey to the afterlife. | |
| There was hard work to be done in the afterlife. Objects which would do this work for you would be very useful. | |

- Discuss which you think would be the three most important objects to have in your tomb if you were an ancient Egyptian.

Mummy-maker

The process of mummifying a body was undertaken by specialist craft workers.

- Follow the process below and see if you can find objects used for each stage of the mummification process. Make notes or sketches in the boxes.

Extraction of internal organs

Look in case 3 for tools to take the brain out and make an incision in the body ready to remove the organs.

Drying and anointing the body

Look in case 3 for the natron to dry the body and the pots for oils to pour on the dried body.

Preservation of organs

Look in case 6 for canopic jars in which to store the dried organs

Making the coffin

Look in case 5 for the material used to make the coffin, the shape of the coffin and the decoration on the coffin

Wrapping the body

Look in case 6 for the linen used to wrap the body and the weights to secure the wrappings.

- Now discuss which part of the process you think would be the most difficult. Which stage do you think would take the longest? Why?

After your visit

Follow-up activities: introduction

Follow-up activities encourage students to reflect on the work undertaken in the Ancient Egyptian galleries during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the students to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.
- You may also wish to look at some of the activities available on the ancient Egypt learning website (www.ancientegypt.co.uk) which relate to your visit.

Follow-up activity: Sand and coffin burial comparison

Curriculum links: science, RE

- Remind the students of the three types of burial seen in the galleries – a natural sand-dried mummy, an un-dried body buried in a coffin and artificial mummies in coffins.
- Make a chart to compare key elements of all three burials.
- Consider things such as level of body preservation, nature of body covering (if any), type of coffin (if any), position of body (crouched or straight limbed), type of mummification (if any), etc.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each type of burial including consideration of factors such as the preparation time needed before burial could take place, expense, level of body preservation
- Issues raised could be compared with thoughts about the modern practice of green burial using bio-degradable coffins.

Follow-up activity: Animal mummies

Curriculum links: history

- Investigate the role of sacred animals in ancient Egypt. Which animals were associated with which gods and goddesses? Think about why particular deities were associated with particular animals in terms of that animal's behaviour – for example the goddess Sekhmet is shown with a lion's head because she was a fierce warrior goddess like the fierce, powerful lion.
- Make a chart of different gods and goddesses and their associated animals. Can the students begin to see any connections between the role of a deity and their associated animal?

Follow-up activity: Beliefs about death

Curriculum links: history, RE

- Revise the various ancient Egyptian burial beliefs investigated by the students during the gallery activity. Ask them to recall the evidence they found in the galleries which helped us to understand particular beliefs and how the Egyptians ensured that it would happen.
- Organize a debate to decide what the students think would have been the most important beliefs and why. This could take the form of a balloon debate where particular groups have to advocate particular beliefs or a pyramiding activity where pairs order the beliefs and then carry a limited number of beliefs forward to order in small, and then larger, groups.
- Remind the students of the importance of supporting their choices with evidence from the objects seen in the ancient Egyptian galleries as well as their own personal opinion.

Follow-up activity: Mummy-maker

Curriculum links: history, art and design

- Continue investigating coffins in ancient Egypt. Use books and the Explore option on the British Museum website to look for different shapes of coffin and the different colours, pictures, writing and symbols used in the decoration of both the inside and outside of coffins.
- Encourage the students to be aware of how shape and design changed over time and how particular coffin forms are associated with particular periods of Egyptian history. Good examples of this are the mummy portraits such as that on the coffin of Artemidorus (Roman Period, around AD 100-120).
- Ask the students to create their own coffin design which can then be drawn up in a 2D format as a design plan showing each face of the coffin or created in a 3D form using a light construction material.

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