

## Ancient Egypt

### The development of mummification

#### Key Stage 2

#### About mini-lessons

Mini-lessons have been developed to focus students on one aspect of a culture in more detail. They are high resolution enough to be used as a whole-class whiteboard resource, although can also be accessed by students working in small groups or individually. Use the enquiry questions below to help your students get the most out of this resource.

#### Find out more

To access more information about each of the objects featured, follow the links underneath the slides within the presentation. You can also search on the Museum's collections online database, which features over 2 million objects. Go to

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/search.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx)

Open the 'Advanced search options' pane. The final section gives the option to 'Search by Museum number or reference'. Enter the Museum number exactly as it appears underneath the slide. Tick the 'images only' box at the top of the page if you only wish to view entries with images.

#### 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

#### 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.

- Before artificial 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. Slide 4 shows the burial of a Predynastic Egyptian man from around 3500 BC and illustrates this preservation.
- Slide 7 shows an early Egyptian coffin burial, around 3000BC. 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 soft tissue 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 as shown in Slide 4.

### Enquiry questions

- *Slide 2: Why was mummification and the survival of the body so important to the ancient Egyptians?*
- *Slides 4 or 5: Why must a body be dehydrated for mummification to occur?*
- *Slide 4 and/or 11: What else can you see in the grave/tomb apart from the body? Why do you think these items were placed here?*
- *What information do Slides 2 and 11 reveal about ancient Egyptian thoughts about the afterlife?*
- *Slide 8: What equipment, materials and /or tools would the specialist performing an artificial mummification need?*
- *Slide 9: Why are coffins often in the shape of a human body?*
- *Slide 10: What materials have been used to make Hornedjitet's coffins? Why might these have been chosen?*

#### Over-arching questions:

- Was it expensive/difficult to get fully mummified? Who do you think had it done?
- What might other cultures at the time (eg the ancient Greeks) have thought of the ancient Egyptian process of mummification?
- What does this evidence tell us about ancient Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the different burial types? Think about expense, time and preservation.

### Further reading

#### For children:

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

Strudwick, Nigel. *The British Museum Pocket Dictionary of Ancient Egyptian Mummies*, British Museum Press 2004

#### For teachers:

Taylor, John. *Egyptian Mummies*, British Museum Press 2010

Taylor, John. *Mummy: the inside story*, British Museum Press 200

**Online information**

- Explore the *Mummification* chapter of the British Museum's Ancient Egypt website: [www.ancientegypt.co.uk](http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk) which provides information on mummification, a virtual mummy and coffin to explore and a challenge to journey through the underworld.
- Explore the tomb of Nebamun, an ancient Egyptian official, on the British Museum website:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/ancient\\_egypt/room\\_61\\_tomb-chapel\\_nebamun/nebamun\\_animation.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/ancient_egypt/room_61_tomb-chapel_nebamun/nebamun_animation.aspx)
- See our other ancient Egypt mini-lessons for schools:  
How were mummies made? >  
Reading a papyrus >