

Ancient Egypt – What is mummification?

Aims

To help students understand the process of mummification
 To provide students with initial information suggesting why bodies were mummified
 To encourage students to consider a range of sources in their enquiries

Description

- A sequence of 10 slides to explore an overall question: 'How were mummies made?'
- Slide 2 is a quote from Herodotus describing mummification
- Slides 3 to 9 describe the process of mummification

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, Herodotus' description of mummification, to break the process into stages. These could be supported and linked to images of objects used during each process.
- Explore the types of evidence used to show the process of mummification in this presentation. Discuss the use of written evidence and evidence derived from objects.
- 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 3: Removal of the organs (images listed below in the order they appear)

- Bronze probe from Egypt, after 664 BC. Hooks such as this were used to remove the brain. X-rays of mummies sometime show small broken bones in the nasal cavity caused when removing the brain.
- Bronze tweezers from Egypt, after 664 BC. Tweezers are thought to be involved in removal of the organs. Examples have been found in embalmers' kits.

- Scene from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer (1275 BC) which shows Hunefer's heart being weighed against the feather of Maat (the established order of things). Anubis watches over the scales whilst the 'devourer' (shown here as part-crocodile, part-lion and part-hippopotamus) waits to see the judgement.
- Image of dried organs.

Slides 4 and 5: Painted wooden canopic jars from around 700 BC depicting the Sons of Horus, minor deities who protect the organs. Initially, canopic jars had plain disc lids but human-headed lids later became more common. After the late Eighteenth Dynasty (about 1550-1295 BC), the stoppers often represent the four Sons of Horus. A change took place in the embalming practice during the Twenty-First Dynasty (about 1069-945 BC) when the internal organs were returned to the body cavity after being wrapped, protected by wax or clay figures of the Sons of Horus. This made the canopic jars redundant, though they were still included in the tomb as they were viewed as an essential element of a good burial. The jars were often not hollowed out and were simply dummies, though as in these examples, they were decorated and inscribed as if they were intended for use.

Slide 6: Cleaning and dehydrating the body (images listed in the order they appear)

- Painted jar dating from around 1300 BC. The decoration is coloured blue, red and black. The motifs are floral with echoes of the elaborate collars worn by wealthy Egyptians.
- Linen bag of salt for mummification, 1550-1070 BC. The deceased's body was covered in natron, a natural salt, the dehydration process took forty days.
- Faience perfume jar in the shape of a lotus bud dating to around 1300 BC. It was found in the cemetery of an Egyptian colony in Sudan.

Slide 7: Wrapping the body (images listed in the order they appear)

- A piece of linen decorated with blue and red stripes on the edge. It dates from around 1550 BC. Mummy bandages were not always specifically made but could be strips of household linen.
- The mummy of a young woman dating to 950-650BC. It has been estimated that a mummy such as this one required about 448 square yards of linen wrappings.
- Faience wedjat eye dating from 1069-945 BC. Their regenerative power meant that wedjat eye amulets were placed in mummy wrappings in great numbers. Faience is a type of ceramic, commonly used to make amulets.
- The winged amulet is a pectoral depicting a hovering falcon. It is gold with inlaid glass, dating from after 600 BC.

Slide 8: Coffins

- (top left image) Coffin of King Nebkheperre Intef who ruled in the 17th Dynasty which dates from around 1600 BC

- (image on right) Inner coffin of Henutmehyt from about 1250 BC. The coffin is covered entirely in gold leaf apart from her wig, eyes and eyebrows

Slide 9: Page from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer, around 1300BC. The centrepiece of the upper scene is the mummy of Hunefer, shown supported by the god Anubis (or a priest wearing a jackal mask). Hunefer's wife and daughter mourn, and three priests perform rituals. The two priests with white sashes are carrying out the Opening of the Mouth ritual. The white building at the right is a representation of the tomb, complete with portal doorway and small pyramid. Both these features can be seen in real tombs of this date from Thebes. To the left of the tomb is a picture of the stela which stood to one side of the tomb entrance. Following the normal conventions of Egyptian art, it is shown much larger than normal size, in order that its content (the deceased worshipping Osiris, together with a standard offering formula) is absolutely legible.

At the right of the lower scene is a table bearing the various implements needed for the Opening of the Mouth ritual. At the left is shown a ritual, where the foreleg of a calf, cut off while the animal is alive, is offered. The animal was then sacrificed. The calf is shown together with its mother.

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 best literary account of the mummification process is given by Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian. Part of this account is given in Slide 2.
- Mummification required a high level of knowledge and skill. The process took approximately 70 days, 40 of which were used during the dehydration process.
- The body was washed and the organs were removed (except the heart). The body was then dehydrated by covering it in natron, a type of natural salt and leaving it for 40 days. Once dehydrated cavities were stuffed with bandages or clean natron. The eyes were replaced with artificial eyes as these could not be preserved but would be needed in the afterlife. The body was coated in resin and sweet smelling oils to aid preservation. The bandaging was done very carefully with amulets placed in-between layers to protect the body and spirit. The mummy was then ready to be placed in its coffin/s for the burial ceremony.
- 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.