

DEATH, MAGIC AND MUMMIES

We know a good deal about the ancient Egyptians' religious beliefs through the work that archaeologists and anthropologists have done in investigating the contents of tombs. Tomb decorations, coffins, the preservation of bodies and the many objects buried with the dead show us that death and the belief in an afterlife were very important to the ancient Egyptians.

EMBALMING AND MUMMIFICATION

The Egyptians believed that a body had to be properly prepared in order to live on in a similar way in the afterlife. Most importantly, the body had to be preserved. The Egyptians used **embalming** and **mummification** to preserve their dead. The deceased person's body also had to be recognised by its Ba, the bird that represented the person's spirit. The person's life energy, or Ka, would need food and drink for the next life. The preserved body would also be accompanied by familiar possessions. These depended on the person's status in this world and could include clothes, jewellery and even work tools.

Source 2.7.1

A modern artist's impression of the mummification process with the instructions an embalmer would need to follow

STEP 1 Have your jackal mask ready so you can dress up as the god Anubis. Learn the prayers and magic spells from the Book of the Dead. You will need to chant these over the dead body as you work.

STEP 2 Wash the dead body with water or palm wine.

STEP 3 Use a long hook to pull out the brains through the left nostril. Throw them away.

STEP 4 Cut the left side of the stomach and remove the liver, lungs, intestines and stomach. Don't remove the heart as it contains the personality.

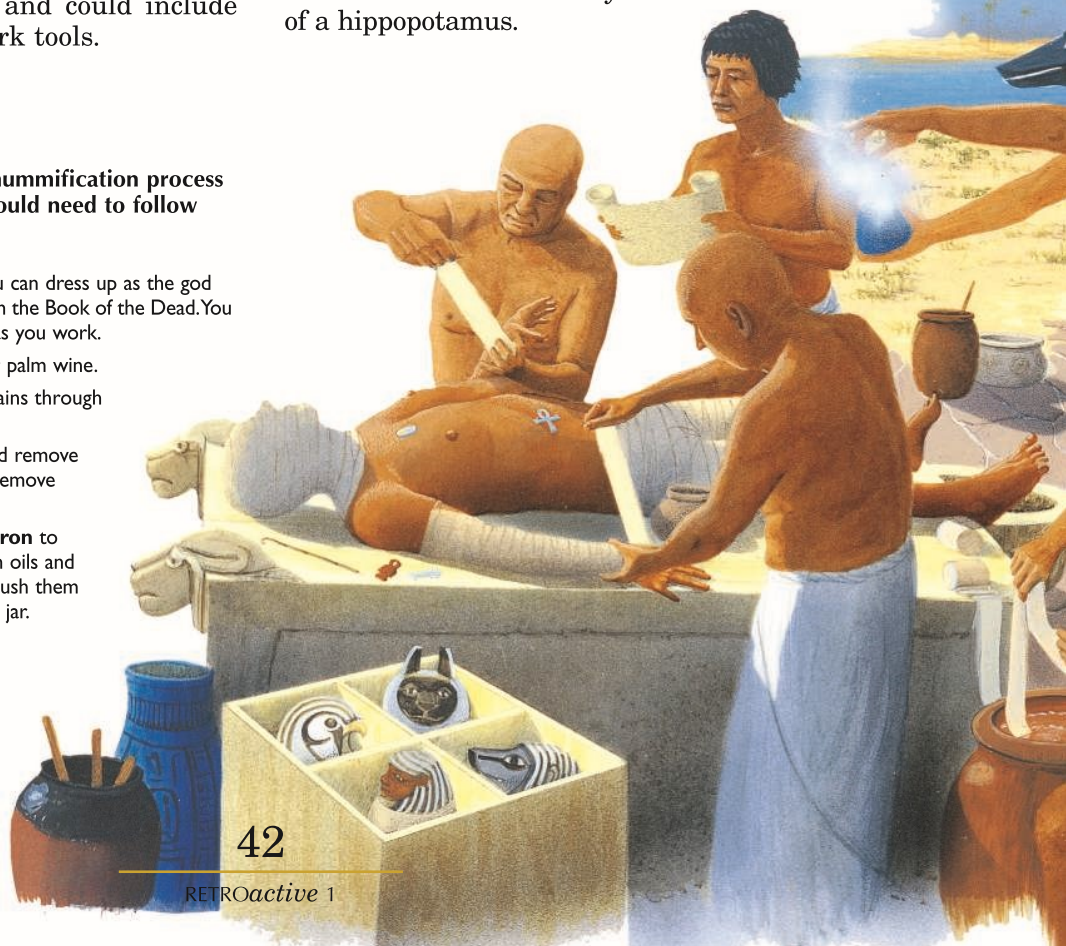
STEP 5 Cover the internal organs with **natron** to absorb all moisture. Rub the dried organs with oils and resin and wrap them in linen bandages. Then push them into **canopic jars**. Put each organ in the right jar.

STEP 6 Cover the body with natron for 40 days to dry. Then rub the dried skin with palm oils and ointments. Pack the stomach cavity with perfumed linen and sew up the wound.

MAGIC, JUDGEMENT AND THE JOURNEY TO THE AFTERLIFE

The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* consists of scrolls of **papyrus** containing more than 200 spells. These spells were like good wishes or prayers to help the deceased person survive the journey to the afterlife. The Egyptians believed this journey was full of dangers such as poisonous snakes, fire-filled lakes and even executioners. Knowing the correct spells was an important safeguard, so they were often recorded on coffins.

The most important test of the journey to the afterlife was the 'weighing of the heart' held in the Hall of Two Truths. People believed that the gods put the dead person's heart on a balance and weighed it against the feather representing ma'at, the goddess of justice. The heart had to weigh less than the feather to allow the person into the afterlife. If the heart was heavier than ma'at's feather, the person would be sent to be eaten by Ammit. Ammit had the head of a crocodile. From the front, Ammit had the body of a lion and from the rear the body of a hippopotamus.



STEP 7 Place a magic charm over the stomach wound and a scarab (beetle-shaped charm) over the heart. Then wrap the body with linen bandages dipped in gum. Wrap every part separately. You will need about 370 square metres of linen. Put amulets and charms such as ankhs (✚) in with the bandages. The dead person's soul will need these during its journey to the Kingdom of Osiris.

STEP 8 Place a mask made from linen and glue over the person's head and shoulders. If you have time, paint this or cover it in gold leaf. Also place a panel across the top part of the body, decorated with protective symbols and drawings.

STEP 9 Place the wrapped mummy in a body-shaped coffin that has been decorated with jewels, paintings and inscriptions of spells. Paint the coffin so it looks a bit like the person when he or she was alive. Be flattering!

STEP 10 Tell the relatives the mummy and the canopic jars are ready for burial. Your chief priest will need to accompany the funeral procession to the tomb so he can conduct the ceremony to open the mummy's mouth. The person's soul needs to talk in the afterlife. Remember, the professional mourners will be noisy!



Check your understanding

1. What can you learn from source 2.7.1 about Egyptian skills in embalming and mummification?
2. Explain the Egyptian beliefs that are behind each part of the process as shown in source 2.7.1.
3. Why was the weighing of the heart an important test?

Use your understanding

Imagine you are an Egyptian embalmer. Design a poster advertising your skills and the different types of preservation you offer. Your poster should include detailed information on what you promise to achieve, the processes involved and the importance of having the work done by a professional. You may choose to use desktop-publishing or other software to present your advertisement with text and images.

More information can be found by going to www.jaconline.com.au/retroactive/retroactive1 and clicking on the Mummification weblink.

Communicating

Using information in the source and the text, create a shadow play that enacts the process of mummification. You will need to form five groups with each group responsible for the following tasks.

Group 1: Set up a large screen or sheet with a light source behind it, making sure there is enough room for students to act out parts behind the screen. Make appropriate props to represent the materials or equipment that would have been used in the mummification process.

Group 2: Practise and perform the roles of Anubis (chief embalmer), an assistant embalmer and the deceased person.

Group 3: Practise and perform the role of narrator, telling the story of the mummification process. Two or three students can share this role.

Group 4: Promote the play to students and teachers outside of the class. For example, create and display posters, and any other activities that would be appropriate.

Group 5: On large sheets of paper or old fabric sheets, paint scenes suitable for an Egyptian tomb to help create a backdrop for your play.

Worksheets

- 2.3 Design and create your own cartouche inscription

