

Anthropologist's Journal

This journal belongs to

Mummification and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt

SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF MAN
LANGUAGE ARTS AND ANTHROPOLOGY
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Introduction

The Way of Decay

Imagine leaving a piece of fruit out on a table. What is going to happen to it after a couple of weeks? It will start to turn brown, then black, and before long it will be covered with fungus and mold. The fungus and mold, as well as much smaller forms of bacteria, are eating that piece of fruit and causing it to rot, a process known as decaying.

If you want to preserve food for a long time, where do you put it? In the refrigerator, or better yet, the freezer. The cold, dry air of the refrigerator (or freezer) slows down the growth of bacteria, fungus, and mold, and helps to preserve food longer.

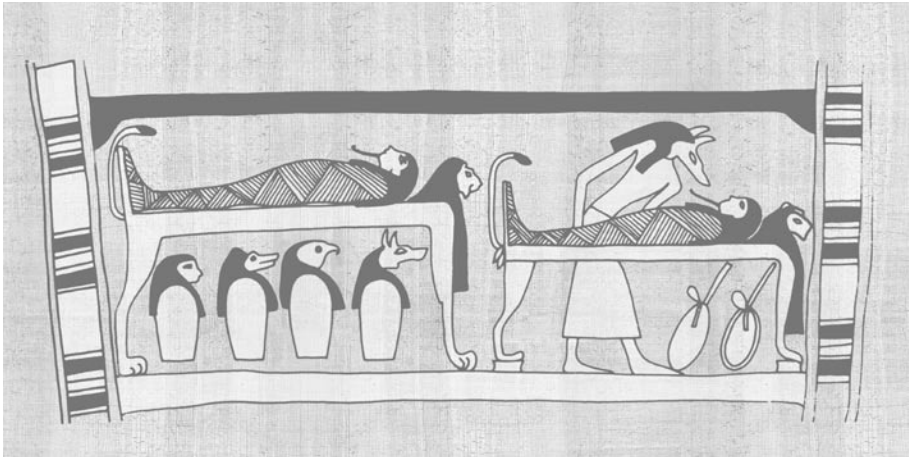
Can you think of any other ways that we preserve food? Have you ever had dried fruit? Does that need to go in the refrigerator? No. Removing the water kills the bacteria (bacteria need water to live just like us), thereby preserving the food. Food can usually be dried out using hot, dry air, such as the power of the sun (sun-dried tomatoes are an example).

Another way to keep food from decaying is by using salt. Covering food with salt draws moisture out, causing it to dry out faster, and preventing bacteria from growing. Salt has been used by a variety of cultures and civilizations to preserve food, especially meat. In ancient Egypt for example, salt was commonly used to preserve fish.

Initial Questions

Have you heard or read about any famous mummies recently? Write a short summary of any recent mummy news you have heard.

What is the oldest mummified human or animal that you have heard of?



Reading Selection 1

What Makes a Mummy?

Now, let's think about what happens to an animal after it dies. It starts to decay, just like a piece of fruit that's been left out for too long. If the animal has an endoskeleton, which means that it has a skeleton inside its body, then before too long, only the bones will be left (that is, if it has bones: the endoskeleton of a shark is made of cartilage—like the flexible tissue in your ears and nose). Soft tissues such as skin, muscles, and organs decay faster than bones. After a very long time, unless the organism becomes a fossil, even the bones may turn to dust.

Sometimes, instead of all the soft tissue decaying completely, a little skin, hair, or other soft tissue is preserved in addition to the bones. If that happens, then you have a mummy. Some mummies are thousands of years old. How could the tissue have been preserved for that long? Certain environmental conditions can help create a mummy. For example, hot and dry air in the desert, or cold and dry air in a mountain cave, can preserve soft tissue. If this happens, a mummy will be made naturally. This has happened to some human remains throughout the world in places such as South America, Mexico, Europe, and, of course, Egypt.

Activity 1

Vocabulary

Write the word, used in the previous passage, next to the sentence that describes its meaning.

_____ : To rot or fall apart.

_____ : The opposite of rotting.

_____ : Having bones on the inside of the body.

_____ : The flexible tissue that makes up the ears and nose.

_____ : The parts of our body like skin, muscles, and organs.

_____ : A hot, dry environment where mummies can occur naturally.

Reading Selection 2

Steps of Mummification

The first thing most people imagine, when they hear the words “mummy” and “Egypt,” is a body wrapped in strips of cloth. But, in ancient Egypt many thousands of years ago, the first mummies were made naturally in the desert sand. As their belief system developed, the ancient Egyptians began making mummies artificially. This means they deliberately preserved the bodies of people who had just died, otherwise known as embalming.

It took up to seventy days for the ancient Egyptians to artificially turn a dead person into a mummy. The following are the steps the ancient Egyptians followed to mummify someone:

1. Wash and clean the body with water from the Nile River.
2. Remove the internal organs. Because internal organs have a lot of water, they had to be removed before the body could be embalmed.
 - a. The brain was taken out through the nose and thrown away. The ancient Egyptians believed the brain wasn't very important, that it was just stuffing for the head.
 - b. The heart was left inside the body. For Egyptians, the heart was the most important organ. They believed that the heart controlled thoughts and emotions, and served as the place where memories were stored.
 - c. Four organs were taken out and embalmed separately—the liver, lungs, stomach, and intestines. Each of these four organs was placed in a separate container called a canopic jar. These canopic jars were placed beside the mummy when it was later put in a tomb. Other organs were thrown away.
3. The body was covered in a type of salt called natron for forty days. It took that long for the body to completely dry out.
4. The mummy was then stuffed with incense (frankincense and myrrh were commonly used) and covered with resin to make it waterproof.
5. Finally, the mummy would be covered with amulets and wrapped in strips of linen. Linen is a cloth material made from flax, which is similar to cotton. Amulets are carved figures that are thought to have magical power. One important amulet was the scarab beetle, which was placed over the heart to protect it.

Activity 2

Fill-in-the-blank

The following is a brief summary of the above passage. Using words from the above reading, fill-in the correct words in the passage below.

During a procedure that lasted up to seventy days, the ancient Egyptians _____ turned their deceased into mummies. Another word for deliberately preserving the body of a dead person is _____.

After the _____ organs were removed, the body was covered with _____ for forty days. Four special organs—the _____, _____, _____, and _____—were embalmed separately and placed in _____ jars. After stuffing the body with different types of _____ to make it smell good, the body was covered in _____ to make it waterproof. Lastly, the body was covered with magical _____ and wrapped in strips of _____.

An important amulet was the _____ that protected the heart.

Now, go back and review *Reading Selection 1. What Makes a Mummy?* Write a short summary of that section in the space below using the words you wrote in *Activity 1. Vocabulary*.

Reading Selection 3

Beliefs in the Afterlife

After the mummy was complete, it would be placed in a coffin—a box, usually made of wood, that holds a dead person. Egyptian coffins looked like people—they had faces, shoulders, and feet, and were decorated to look like the person did in real life. This coffin would then be placed, along with other important items, in a tomb—a special burial chamber.

Why would the Egyptians go to so much trouble to turn people into mummies and place them in tombs? The answer is complicated, but basically it has to do with their religion. The Egyptians believed strongly in an Afterlife—that after they died, they continued to live on in a different world. This Afterlife was a perfect version of life along the Nile River, with an abundance of water, fruit trees, animals to hunt, and especially crops. If you were rich and did not want to have to farm, you made sure there were plenty of little statues called ushabtis placed in your tomb. A ushabti is a small, carved, mummy-like figurine that has a spell placed on it, ensuring that it will do any hard work for the entombed person.

In addition to ushabtis, many items from everyday life were included in a tomb along with the mummy, the coffin, and the four canopic jars. These everyday items could include clothing, furniture, cooking equipment, and even food. If the mummified person was very wealthy, many of these items would be made out of gold, and other riches would be included in the tomb as well. For example, the famous pharaoh King Tutankhamun's tomb included not one but three elaborately decorated coffins, a special shrine to hold the canopic jars, a couch made of gold, a golden throne, and numerous pieces of finely crafted jewelry.



Activity 3

Short answer

Using the information provided in the previous reading, answer the following questions in complete sentences. Be sure to include the words listed in parentheses in your answer.

Describe what happens to a mummy after it is wrapped in linen and covered with amulets? (coffin, tomb)

Why were ushabtis included in tombs, along with everyday objects such as food, clothing, and furniture? (Afterlife, beliefs)

Other Activities

Mummify an apple: to learn more about the process of mummification, create an experiment that tests how different substances (different types of salt, baking soda, etc.) mummify apple slices. Have students write detailed observations each day about changes occurring in different apple slices exposed to different substances.

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