Discover...

TREATMENT OF THE DEAD

Preparing for Eternity

The Ancient Egyptians believed in the possibility of attaining life after death. They also believed that their next life would be eternal. As the treatment of the dead in Ancient Egypt was designed to prepare and equip the deceased for all time, the materials favoured for making burial items or building tombs were ones that would last, particularly stone and precious metal. The body was mummified for the same reasons, so it would last for eternity.

Purpose of Mummification

The aim of mummification was not to preserve a person's body as it had been in life but to create a new body that could last for eternity. The Ancient Egyptians believed that a person was made up of a number of physical and non-physical elements. The body was the physical part. The ka and ba, together with a person's name and their shadow, were the non-physical parts. Mummification was intended to create a body that could continue to house a person's ka and ba. The ka was a 'life force' sustained by the consumption of food and drink. In the afterlife it also required nourishment to survive. Food offerings left by the living at the tombs of their ancestors sustained the ka. Depictions of offerings on coffins, tomb walls, or other burial objects magically fulfilled the same function.

▲ Lid of inner coffin of Irterau Ancient Egypt, 1887.1.481.1-5

The most important characteristic of the ba was its ability to move. It could leave the body and travel through the worlds of the living and of the dead, enabling the dead to participate in both. It was believed that the ba needed to return to the body regularly in order to survive. Particular attention was paid to the external appearance of a mummy to enable the ba to recognise its own body and return

to it safely. The body, a combination of ka, ba, name and shadow, was thought to make a person complete in this life and in the next. The dead could only fully enjoy eternal life if all the different parts survived.

Ancient Egyptian Coffins

Coffins themselves were placed in secure tombs, which protected mummified bodies from intruders and from the elements. The texts and pictures on Egyptian coffins were intended to provide their owner with the magical assistance and knowledge needed to survive and prosper in the afterlife. Throughout Ancient Egyptian history, despite many changes in emphasis and fashion, there were two major themes in the decoration of coffins. These reflected two of the most important strands of belief concerning the afterlife. The first theme concerned the sun god. According to one major creation myth, the sun god was the maker of the universe. Egyptians hoped that after death they might ascend to the sky and, once there, accompany the sun god on his journey through the sky by day and through the underworld by night. In this way they could be rejuvenated and reborn with the sun each morning in a repetition of the moment of creation.

The other major theme of coffin decoration incorporated elements drawn from the myth of Osiris. The Egyptians believed that the god-King Osiris was murdered by his brother Seth. Osiris was restored to life by his wife Isis, with the aid of her sister, Nepthys, and became King of the Underworld. Osiris' son Horus later avenged his father's death and succeeded him as the king of this world. Egyptians hoped that by linking themselves with Osiris, they might achieve a second life after death, just as he had done. The dead were often referred to as 'The Osiris [name]'.

The sky goddess Nut was the mother of Osiris and an important protector of the dead. As the dead person was identified with Osiris, coffins came to be identified with Nut. This placed the deceased back inside their mother, from where they could be reborn. As a sky goddess, Nut could also be identified with the coffin lid, laying herself over the deceased, just as she stretched herself over the world, and protecting the dead person from harm. Nut can be seen on the painted coffin of Irterau, a mummy on display in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Irterau lived in or around Thebes (modern Luxor) in southern Egypt more than 2,500 years ago. On Irterau's inner coffin lid, Nut's body and face have been painted green, a colour associated with new life. The faces of the dead were often painted yellow to make them appear like divine beings, which were thought to have golden skin. On the finest coffins, real gold would have been used.

Canopic Jars

Canopic jars were referred to simply as ‘jars of embalming’. The modern term ‘Canopic’ comes from the town of Canopus in the Nile Delta where Classical writers tell us the local god was depicted as a jar. This jar (below) has no direct connection to embalming jars but the term has become popularised nonetheless.

▲ Canopic Jar and stopper Ancient Egypt, 1884.57.15 and 1884.57.17.1

As the aim of mummification was to transform the body for its new existence rather than to maintain it as it had been in life, internal parts of the body could be removed without endangering a person’s chances of survival in the afterlife. The organs were treated differently according to their importance. The brain was removed and discarded, as its importance and function were apparently not understood. The heart was left in place as it was considered the centre of intelligence and vital for survival in the next life. Other internal organs were often removed and the lungs, liver, stomach, and intestines were singled out for special treatment, perhaps because of their links to nourishment. These organs were preserved, wrapped separately, and stored close to the coffin. A set of four Canopic Jars made from stone, pottery, or wood was often used for this purpose. Even when the internal organs were not removed or were placed back into the mummified body, a set of jars was often still placed in the burial. This is thought to indicate the importance of the jars, not just as containers, but as magical protection for the organs wherever they were.

Canopic jars had characteristic stoppers. On early jars human-headed stoppers probably depicted the deceased. In later periods the different jars were linked to four protective deities called the Sons of Horus and the jar stoppers depicted these gods. The head shaped stopper of the example shown here probably depicts Imsety, one of the four sons of Horus. No surviving inscriptions state which god was associated with which organ but suggestions have been made, based on the evidence of undisturbed archaeological finds.

Shabti Figures

Shabti (called ushabti or shawabti) are model figures that were placed in burials from the Middle Kingdom, between about 4000 and 3500 years ago, until the the Ptolemaic Period, around 2300 years ago, when the practice died out. These figures evolved from the belief that the afterlife would be similar to the living world. People believed they would be surrounded by friends and family, would need food and drink, and that they might also be required to work.

▲ Pottery Shabti Ancient Egypt, 1884.57.11

In Ancient Egypt a labour system existed for important communal projects such as maintaining the irrigation systems that controlled the Nile flood. It was imagined that such a system might also exist in the afterlife and wealthy Egyptians hoped that a shabti would magically do the work required of them, just as servants had during their life. Many shabtis carry agricultural tools and have baskets painted or modelled on their backs, symbolically enabling them to undertake these tasks. Shabtis, including the pottery example shown here, were often inscribed with excerpts from a text known as the ‘Shabti Spell’. The spell instructed the shabti to answer ‘Here I am!’ when its owner was called upon to perform unpleasant tasks in the world of the dead.

Given their active role it may seem odd that shabtis are usually mummy-shaped. Early shabtis were closely identified with the deceased person themselves, rather than with servants, so modelling the shabti as a mummy was thought to make it more effective. As well as helping the deceased these models also identified the dead person with the mummified god Osiris. Later shabtis retained the mummy form. The highest quality shabtis were made from stone, bronze or wood. In later periods a single burial might contain hundreds of shabtis, sometimes grouped into work gangs with their own ‘overseer’ shabtis that wielded whips to keep them in line. These shabtis were often made from cheaper materials, such as faience (a ceramic made from fired, crushed quartz or sand), pottery, or dried mud. Such shabtis were often very simple and thumb marks are sometimes visible on their backs where the makers pressed the material into moulds.

Further Reading

John H Taylor, 2001, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, London: British Museum Press.

Harry M. Stewart, 1995, *Egyptian Shabtis*, Princes Risborough: Shire.

John H Taylor, 1989, *Egyptian Coffins*, Princes Risborough: Shire.

The objects found in this Information sheet can be found at the following locations:

Court (ground floor)
Case no. C7A - Ancient Egypt

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Pitt Rivers Museum
Anthropology and World Archaeology

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