

Mummies

The ancient Egyptians put great effort into the burial of their dead. They believed in a life after death that depended on preparing the body properly and offering the dead person protective symbols, useful items and beautiful things. The dead also needed their bodies for use in the afterlife and mummification preserved the body. Mummification cost a lot, so only the rich could afford to be mummified when they died.

Mummification was varied and perfected over time. Early Egyptians buried their dead in pits dug in the sand. They wrapped the dead body in linen [[Death 1](#)] or animal skins and put it in the pit with a few useful objects such as pottery and weapons. The objects show us that they believed in the afterlife and the need to prepare for it. The dry sand, heated by the sun, **desiccated** (dried out) the bodies. The bodies in these pits still look a bit like live bodies because they dried so fast instead of rotting.



After a while the Egyptians began to dig deeper pits or tombs. Because the bodies in these deep tombs were far away from the hot, dry sand they didn't desiccate naturally. So the Egyptians invented a chemical process that preserved the body with a near lifelike appearance. We learn about the process from texts, tombs, objects found in them (like **canopic jars**, which held organs) and the mummies themselves.

Like us, the Egyptians identified people by their facial features. This explains why they paid so much attention to the face of the mummy, which had to look as lifelike as possible. In early times they placed masks over mummy faces [[Death 2](#)]. Later they moulded facial features out of cloth or papyrus and plaster. Finally they painted portrait faces on flat boards that were placed on top of the mummy faces [[Egypt 2](#)].

Leslie Bonaventura

How to make a mummy

You will need:

- Fabric (Egyptians preferred linen)
- **Natron**: a chemical – similar to salt – that dries things out
- Palm wine
- Perfumed oil
- **Resin** (melted): a sticky substance made by plants
- A table

1. Place the dead body on a table. We have found examples of **embalming** tables, but you can use any clean table.
2. Remove the brain first because it rots quickly. Egyptians used tools to remove brains through noses. The brain was important to them so they threw it away.
3. Cut a slit in the side of the body. Through this slit remove the organs from the belly and chest. Make sure to leave the heart. The Egyptians thought that the heart was the seat of the soul, so it was important to preserve it and protect it. Most mummies have their hearts protected by scarabs [[Egypt 8, 20](#); [Death 4–7](#)].
4. Clean the inside of the body with palm wine. No wine or oil [step 10] has been found in mummies but texts tell us how Egyptians used them.
5. Prepare the organs: lungs, stomach, intestines and liver. Clean them and cover them with natron, which will dry them out like the sand did in the old pit tombs. Cover each organ with resin, wrap it in linen, and place it in a container (Egyptians put organs in **canopic jars** or mini-coffins).
6. Stuff the body with linen so it keeps its shape as it dries.
7. Cover the body with dry natron and leave it to dry out for 40 days.
8. Take out the stuffing, but don't throw it away! The Egyptians kept everything that had touched the body and buried it in the ground near mummies.

9. Stuff the body again, with linen, bags of sawdust, earth and natron: we have found such stuffing on x-rays of intact mummies.
10. Seal the cut with melted resin or wax and anoint the body with perfumed oil.
11. Stuff the open spaces of the head (nostrils and ears) with wax or resin-soaked linen. Cover the eyes with linen pads.
12. Spread melted resin all over the skin. The resin strengthens the skin and protects the dried body from moisture.
13. Wrap the body in strips of linen. Decorate it with jewellery and amulets, as much as you can afford. A really expensive mummy would be wrapped very thoroughly – each finger individually – and draped with jewellery and protective amulets as the wrapping progressed. These objects appear in x-rays of intact mummies.