

Mummification

During the Pre-dynastic Period (6000 to 3000 B.C.), Egyptians buried their dead in shallow oval graves dug in the desert. Corpses were preserved because hot, dry sand naturally absorbs bodily fluids. Egyptians came to believe that the preserved bodies were home to a soul that was still living.

Once Egypt was unified into a single state and stone tombs and coffins were made, the bodies, no longer in contact with the drying sands, began to deteriorate. Believing it was necessary to keep the body intact, the Egyptians first began to artificially preserve them. Some of the corpses were wrapped in layers of linen soaked in resin (a liquid plant waste product similar to sap that hardens into a transparent solid). Each finger, toe, and limb was wrapped separately. The organs and skin decomposed completely, leaving just a skeleton wrapped in linen. In an attempt to counteract this, the Egyptians tried to create physical features out of padded linen in a shape similar to a human body.

During the fourth dynasty, (2613 - 2494 B.C.), it became common practice to remove the corpse's organs. Sometimes, the body was filled with vegetable matter to give it a more life-like appearance. The organs were placed in containers called canopic jars. These jars were kept in the burial chamber with the body so that the organs could be reunited with the body in the afterlife. The embalmers also used natron, a salt found in the desert to artificially dry out the body.

By the Early Middle Kingdom they made the first attempts to remove the brain through the base of the skull. During the same time period face masks were created for mummies. The masks were constructed of plaster-soaked papyrus or linen, painted or gilded, then placed over the head of the mummy.

In the New Kingdom, (1550 to 1069 B.C.) embalming became more and more sophisticated. Embalmers began to artificially compensate for the loss of life-like features. They made slits in the skin of the torso and limbs and inserted mixtures of sawdust, fat, linen, and salt to imitate muscle.

During the Third Intermediate Period (1070-653 B.C.) the



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embalmers coated the body with resins and sometimes even added artificial eyes.

By the Late Period, embalmers started to fill bodies with molten resin rather than the more realistic sawdust or linens. Egyptians continued to mummify their dead in preparation for the afterlife up until the advent of Christianity in Egypt around 500 A.D.

