

## MUMMIFICATION AND RELIGION\*

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The word 'mummy' derives from Arabic "el-Mumia", which denotes a substance like asphalt and bitumen. The word is quite appropriate, as these substances were actually used for mummification purposes in later periods.

Mummification is not unique of Ancient Egypt. With varying degrees of success, other peoples have tried to preserve the bodies of notably their rulers. Thus, the Incas were fairly successful, be it, when entombing their rulers high up in the Andes, partly due to climatic conditions. Some Chinese emperors were found clad from head to foot in something like a suit of armour made of jade plates. Presumably, the Chinese thought such suits would help preserve the bodies. Unfortunately, this practice has not proved effective.

Bodies have also been preserved by sheer circumstance. The well-known bog bodies from northwestern Europe and 'ice mummies' like Ötzi nicely exemplify this. Examples from Dutch soil are the corpses from the crypt of the church on the terp (dwelling mound) of Wieuwerd in Friesland. These are well preserved, be it under unclear circumstances.

Embalming is not a thing of the past. Thus, members of the Dutch royal family will be embalmed, Evita Peron was, and, of course, Lenin. Techniques have changed, however. Today, preservative fluids are injected into the veins, whereas the Egyptians primarily desiccated the bodies. The techniques of modern taxidermists may be quite near the Egyptian practice.

In the Christian and Jewish traditions it is also deemed important for bodies to be preserved. Here, the idea is that at the Last Judgement the deceased will (body and soul) rise from the dead. Hence the once resistance against cremation and the riots regularly arising in Israel when archaeologists seem to disturb Jewish graves.

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Why exactly did the ancient Egyptians mummify their deceased? The answer is in the idea of 'KA', a person's 'double', born together with him or her, yet surviving after death as if it has a physical shelter. These shelters can be images of the deceased persons (many of which were found in graves), but the deceased persons' very bodies are preferred. To this purpose, the bodies have to be preserved some way or another. In earlier times, when the Egyptians simply buried their dead in pits in the hot sands of the skirts of the desert, preservation followed naturally. From about the 1st dynasty (around 3000 B.C.) onwards, grave constructions were more and more complicate, involving the use of wood and stones. The corpses no longer being preserved naturally, people developed artificial ways of preservation. At first, they wrapped the bodies in linen bandages soaked in gypsum. After a body's decay, this practice would at least maintain its shape. Later on, mummifying techniques were ever more improved upon. The Greek author Herodotus gave us a famous description of some of these techniques, for which the reader is referred to the other contributions in the present volume. Quite remarkably, the Egyptians always bandaged their mummies, even when, with well mummified bodies, there was no need to. Apparently, the bandages had become a matter of course, much like a travel- or rather space-suit. In a few cases, mummies were even partly wrapped in copies of the so-called 'Book of the Dead', a kind of travellers' guide for the Realm of the Dead. Canopic jars containing the intestines of the deceased (separately mummified as they decayed faster), were among the standard grave-goods accompanying mummies. Other standard goods were the shawabtis, mummy-like images that were to do the hard jobs for the deceased in the Realm of the Dead, where these had to be done just as in the world of the living.

Mummification did not invariably serve its purpose. In the Delta with its humid clay-soil, buried mummies would not remain well preserved.

The Egyptians mummified not only human beings, but also quite a few animal species (from snakes, beetles and crocodiles to bulls), the latter usually for reasons different from those for mummification of human beings. In Egypt, worship of animal deities strongly rose, especially in later periods, when a mummy of the animal devoted to such a deity became a standard sacrifice. Cats, bred to the purpose, first had their necks wrung, were mummified and then sacrificed to cat goddess Bastet. Many thousands (!) of ibis-, falcon- and baboon-mummies were found in the subterraneous galleries in Saqqarah south of Cairo. These are so numerous as to have been left on the spot, there being no big enough storage room to contain them.

Things were different with the sacred Apis-bulls from Memphis. These

were treated like human beings, buried in huge sarcophagi and given sjawabti's with bull's instead of human heads.

In the Late Period, mummification practice had developed into something like an industry, especially on the west bank of present-day Luxor. Mummies almost invariably being subject to 'maintenance contracts' stipulating what rituals were to be observed at what expense of the relatives, the priests of the dead were in a position to deal among themselves in mummies and remunerations or leave these to their relatives. From a certain point of view, a curious practice.

Mummifying was so much part of Egyptian thought that it remained common practice for quite some time even while Egypt developed into a Christian nation. It took a while for the christianised Egyptians to realize this pagan practice was unbecoming of Christianity and to abandon it.

In the near past, mummies were not always handled with due care. Even in the last century, a great many cat mummies were shipped to England to be processed into artificial manure. In Chinese pharmacy, (parts of) mummies are still put into medicines. Supplies are running low, however. To make up for this, every now and then fresh corpses are traded as 'antique' mummies.

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