

A photograph of an ancient Egyptian mummy, heavily wrapped in yellowish-brown linen, lying in a dark, rocky, and unevenly textured environment. The mummy's head is wrapped in a similar material, and its arms are crossed over its chest. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the linen and the ruggedness of the surrounding rock.

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN  
WONDERS

# Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt

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# A TIMELINE OF ANCIENT EGYPT

Editor's note: Dates for major events and periods in ancient Egyptian history vary widely. Dates used here coincide with a timeline compiled by John Baines, professor of Egyptology at University of Oxford in England.

First pyramid, the Step Pyramid at Saqqara, is built by Djoser.

Capital city of Memphis is founded.

Upper and Lower Egypt unify as one kingdom.

Great Pyramids of Giza are built by Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure.



Late Predynastic Period  
(ca. 3100–2950 BC)

Early Dynastic Period  
(ca. 2950–2575 BC)

Old Kingdom  
(ca. 2575–2150 BC)

First Intermediate Period  
(ca. 2125–1975 BC)

Middle Kingdom  
(ca. 1975–1640 BC)

Hieroglyphic script is developed.



Old Kingdom collapses, resulting in a period of social upheaval and political chaos.

Mentuhotep reunites Egypt.

Egypt prospers during its classical period of art and literature.

## Life, Death, Rebirth

**L**ife in ancient Egypt was characterized by constant renewal. All that was had been before and would be again. The sun—the great god Ra—rose in the east, set in the west, only to rise anew. The Nile River overflowed its banks each summer, bringing fertile topsoil for crops, and waned in the winter before rising again the next year.

This endless cycle of nature came to be reflected in religion. Those who were born would die and—if found worthy by the gods—live again in a lush underworld. A key to the afterlife, however, was preservation of the body, and this belief is nowhere better illustrated than in the ancient Egyptian legend of Isis and Osiris.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Of the many versions of the Isis-Osiris myth, experts consider the one recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus in about 450 BC to be the most accurate.

his reign on earth. He placed a curse of infertility on her. But through the magic of Thoth, god of wisdom, she bore three sons—Osiris, Horus the Elder, and Set—and two daughters—Isis and Nephthys. Osiris and Set would later marry Isis and Nephthys, respectively, thus setting the pattern for royal brothers and sisters to intermarry.

Ra ruled both heaven and Earth, deriving his power from a secret name. Isis, however, wanted Osiris to rule, and she managed to learn the secret name. Ra's reign on Earth thus ended, and he ascended to the sun. Osiris became ruler and was hailed as a bringer of peace and plenty. The evil Set, however, was jealous of his younger brother and

*The god Osiris, ruler of the underworld, is flanked by Isis (right)—his sister, wife, and divine symbol of motherhood—and Horus, their son, in this ancient gold statue. The myth of Isis and Osiris symbolizes the ancient Egyptian belief in the afterlife and the divinity of kings.*



## **A SIGN OF HUMILITY**

Wrapping someone's body in old clothes was not a form of disrespect; it was intended to demonstrate the transitory nature of life on Earth. In some ceremonies, the final words spoken by relatives before a mummy's tomb was sealed were "the good shepherd has gone to the land of Eternity; he who willingly opened his feet to going is now enclosed, bound and confined. He who had so much fine linen, and so gladly put it on, sleeps now in the cast-off garments of yesterday."<sup>10</sup>

The cloth strips were frequently soaked in a natron solution to produce further drying and might also have been dipped in a mild resin solution or coated with oil to hold them in place. These would also act as a glue to secure the charms placed at various points on the body.

As each part of the body was treated, a priest recited the proper lines of prayer: "For you comes the oil! It brings life to your mouth,

*During mummification, each limb was wrapped separately. The positioning of the arms varied. In many instances, the arms were crossed over the chest as can be seen on the mummy of New Kingdom pharaoh Thutmose IV.*





sight to your eye. . . . It gives you ears to hear what you like. . . . It gives your nose to inhale the festal perfume. . . . It gives you your mouth after having provided it with its discernment, like the mouth of Thoth [god of wisdom], which discerns what is just.”<sup>11</sup>

Each limb was wrapped separately, with the head and neck coming first. Each finger and toe was individually wrapped, followed by the arms, legs, and—in the case of males—the genitalia. At this point the various charms were put in place and prayers recited. Finally, the legs were tied together with linen pads between them and the arms were positioned.

## **THE POSITION OF THE ARMS**

The arms were placed in various positions throughout the history of mummification. They might be at the sides, crossed over the abdomen, crossed over the pubic area, or crossed over the chest. Sometimes the position was a combination, such as one arm at the side and one over the chest. Palms were usually flat, although some pharaohs had their fists clenched as if still grasping a shepherd’s crook and a flail, the Egyptian symbols of kingship.

The torso was the last of the body to be wrapped. For centuries, this was the extent of wrapping. A major change took place sometime around 2200 BC. After all the individual parts were covered, the entire mummy was wrapped again in a spiral from head to feet and then wrapped with a large shroud or shrouds held together with long strips. The shrouds were made from a type of linen different from the usual wrapping cloth and were sometimes colored red for men.

The wrapping process could consume a considerable amount of cloth—4,036 square feet (375 sq. m) of linen for just one mummy. A mummy from the Eighteenth Dynasty, unearthed by archaeologists, was wrapped with 14 sheets, 80 cloth strips, 12 cloth pads, and 4 sets of long cloth strips. Egyptologists spent four days unwrapping this mummy, determined to be the mother of a pharaoh. Some of the wrappings from mummies during a later period, about 500 BC, could weigh up to 60 pounds (27kg).

# FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

## Books

Margaret Bunson, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Facts On File, 2012.

Wendy Christensen, *Empire of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Chelsea House, 2009.

Fergus Fleming, *Ancient Egypt's Myths and Beliefs*. New York: Rosen, 2012.

Kathleen Kuiper, *Ancient Egypt: From Prehistory to the Islamic Conquest*. New York: Britannica Educational, 2010.

Green Roger Lancelyn, *Tales of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Penguin, 2011.

Joyce Tyldesley, *Tutankhamun: The Search for an Egyptian King*. New York: Basic Books, 2012.

## WEBSITES

**Ancient Egypt** ([www.ancientegypt.co.uk](http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk)). This British Museum site is devoted to different aspects of ancient Egyptian culture. Major divisions include mummification, pyramids, gods and goddesses, and temples. One page challenges visitors to make their way through a virtual Egyptian underworld.

**Egyptian Mummification** ([www.spurlock.uiuc.edu/explorations/online/mummification/index.html](http://www.spurlock.uiuc.edu/explorations/online/mummification/index.html)). This page, which is hosted by the Spurlock Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has sections on mummification history, rituals, and materials.



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