

Mummy



Figure 1: Scientists prepare to X-ray a 1,900-year-old Egyptian mummy. Scientists use X-rays to learn more about mummies without taking apart the wrappings.

A dead body that has been preserved with chemicals is called a mummy. The Inca of Peru made mummies. Ancient peoples in Australia and on some Pacific islands did also. However, the ancient Egyptians are the best-known makers of mummies.

The Egyptians made mummies for more than 3,000 years. The methods they used changed over the centuries. During the New Kingdom (1500s–1000s bc), Egyptians mummified dead kings and nobles in a process that took 70 days.

Funeral workers started the process by removing the brain and all the inner organs except for the heart. They packed the organs in jars. Next, they soaked the body in salt or chemicals to remove the fat and the outer part of the skin. After the body dried out, they treated both the inside and the outside with spices and preservatives. Then they wrapped the body in linen bandages. Egyptians often painted the wrappings with religious symbols and a portrait of the dead person's face. Finally, they placed the mummy in a carved and painted wooden coffin.

The Egyptians did not use this process for the bodies of poor people. They merely dried them with salt and wrapped them with coarse cloths. The Egyptians also mummified certain animals, especially cats.

Mummies had a religious purpose. Ancient Egyptians believed that dead people needed their bodies in order to pass successfully into the next world. They thought that as long as the body was preserved, the soul could live.

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