

4B Egyptian Mummification

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The ancient Egyptians believed that following the successful judgment of their moral worth, the deceased became an imperishable god who dwelled forever in the afterlife. The preservation of the body was thought to be essential to this eternal life because the spirit (the *ka* and *ba*) needed an earthly home.

The key to Egyptian mummification was the removal of moisture. Until about 2900 BCE, bodies were buried in direct contact with the desert sand that acted as a natural desiccant. As burials became more elaborate and the deceased was placed in mats or coffins, new techniques of artificial preservation were developed and, by at least 2560 BCE, desiccation was aided by the removal of the internal organs.

By about 2450 BCE, after their death both men and women were thought to become Osiris, the god of the dead. Legends relate that Osiris was murdered and dismembered, and that his wife Isis gathered the pieces of his body and bound them together with linen, allowing for his revivification. This was the mythical basis for human mummification and renewed life—the linen wrappings of a mummy imitated the bindings of Osiris and promised eternal life among the gods.

Although mummification was the ideal, it was not always practiced. Throughout ancient Egyptian history, members of the non-elite were still buried in desert graves where they were naturally preserved, and there are examples of affluent individuals who were not artificially mummified (Toivari-Viitala 2001, 223; Cooney 2011, 36).

In the fullest form, mummification was an elaborate and expensive process that ideally took 70 days, an interval based on observations of the decans—stars that rose above the horizon every 70 days, an appearance equated with rebirth (Hornung 1990, 136). The corpse was taken to the embalming workshop, called a *wabet*, the “pure place,” where it was cleaned, and the stomach, liver, lungs, and intestines removed through an incision made on the left side of the abdomen. The kidneys and reproductive organs were usually not removed, and there is inconsistency whether the heart was left in place. The brain was usually removed through the nose. From about 500 BCE, quicker and less expensive methods of injecting caustic solutions into the body and skull could be employed (Figures 4.8–4.13).

The body was then packed with natron (sodium carbonate or bicarbonate), a salt that occurs in the Wadi Natron northwest of modern Cairo (whence “Na” for sodium on the periodic table). Once dry, a process that took about 40 days, the body was wrapped in meters of linen,

often with layers of resin, or later bitumen (a petroleum product), that acted as an adhesive and waterproofing. Stone or faience amulets might be positioned on or between the wrappings. Depending upon the family’s budget, the bandaging could be extremely elaborate, with each finger and toe being individual wrapped. Usually, a large linen shroud was wrapped over the mummy and tied with linen strips.

The four internal organs were separately dried and placed in canopic jars (Figure 4.8). The Four Sons of Horus—the gods Duamutef, Qebehsenuef, Imseti, and Hapi—protected the organs (stomach, intestines, liver, and lungs, respectively). Until about 1200 BCE, all four gods shown on the lids of the jars had human heads; thereafter they were shown as a jackal, falcon, human, and ape. The brain was discarded. In many cases, a large stone scarab, usually inscribed with Book of the Dead Spell 30, was placed on the chest as a substitute or spokesman for the heart (Figure 4.9).

Once finished, the mummy was released to the family for burial. In some eras, a wood or stone tag with the name and age of the deceased was hung around the neck to ensure that the finished mummy was delivered to the correct family.

Animal Mummies

Animals were also mummified. Some dog, cat, and gazelle mummies were once beloved pets. Some bulls, crocodiles, and falcons that dwelled in temples were considered to be the earthly incarnation of a god, and they were mummified and buried in elaborate coffins. A much larger number were “victual mummies,” fowl or choice pieces of bovines that were preserved and placed in the tomb as food for the mummy.

By about 600 BCE, the majority of animal mummies were produced as offerings to the gods. They included dogs, cats, birds, monkeys, mongooses, shrews, crocodiles, bovines, fish, and other animals. They were associated with a specific god through shared traits. For example, the shrew’s keen eyesight was equated with that of the falcon who represented the gods Horus and Re, and the cat with the fierce lioness Sekhmet. These animals were raised commercially by temple staff, then killed, mummified, and sold to pilgrims who offered them to the god in hope of the deity interceding on their behalf, as related by inscriptions that ask the god to grant “life and prosperity,” to the donor. Once a year, amidst processions and rituals, the priests would transfer the mummies to the temple catacombs.

Figure 4.10. Egyptian model house, also called “soul house” (FM 31594), and leather sandals belonging to an elite Egyptian individual (FM 110847).

Donation of animal mummies was not only a common practice but a big business, and it has been estimated that four million mummified birds were deposited in the ibis catacombs at Saqqara alone (Ikram 2005, 11).

The majority of animal mummies were not eviscerated, but rather dried with natron, or dipped in a preservative and aromatic like turpentine. In contrast, the linen wrappings could be very elaborate, with different colored linen strips creating herringbone or diamond patterns, and the exterior painted with the animal's features. Some animal mummies were placed in coffins, others in clay pots, and yet others were simply stacked in the chambers of the catacomb.

The Embalmers

Our fullest documentation about embalmers dates to the seventh–first centuries BCE and consists of contracts, receipts, and letters. As a result, the written sources relate more about the administrative side of mummification than the processes involved. Embalming was a male-dominated profession, but a few women also functioned in that role (Cannata 2020, 118, 495–96, 574). Embalmers (*kes* or *cheryw-heb*) and the ranks of funerary priests were professionals organized into associations with rules about their behavior and mutual support (Reymond 1973, 23–29; Cannata 2020; Donker van Heel 2021). They were assisted

by funerary priests (“lectors”) who recited the protective spells and sequence of actions.

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Ancestor Simulacra

But when the real body is absent, societies make great efforts to produce representations, or even simulacra, of ancestors. Simulacra were the exact representation or imitation of an ancestor. For some societies, simulacra were more than representations, they were the embodied personification of the deceased and, as such, an ancestor in his or her own right (Alberti and Bray 2009). The physical manipulation of images, symbols, objects, figurines, or simulacra of ancestors gave the living a sense of “control” of the dead, propelling the dead’s conversion into a tangible expression for easy experimentation: an object amenable to worship.

Many times, the placement of these simulacra in specific spaces of the household or the community bestowed sacrality on such spaces, as ancestors were seen as “inhabiting” those spaces through their physical presence. These spaces become, too, loci of encounter and interaction, ornamented with elements that reinforce their sacrality. Ancestor simulacra were the center of symbolic actions and performances that were orchestrated both on ordinary and extraordinary occasions. At home, these spaces were constantly revered, offered, and evoked during domestic tasks.

Pre-Hispanic cultures of the Andes such as Recuay, Pucará, and Chiripa produced real-size ancestor imagery in the form of lithic sculptures, and the people’s engagement with this imagery was active and deeply emotive. Ancestor imagery was placed in patios and plazas in an upright position, as if standing, and it was impossible to pass by without giving them “recognition” and “acceptance.” Despite their recurrence, representations of ancestors showed differences between one another, suggesting a desire to display a particular individuality. The face, for instance, was an important locus of recognition and was a means for the adscription and recognition of individual and group identity (e.g., through facial markers and paints). Likewise, different types of facial and ear ornaments, headdresses, and other bodily ornaments could have indicated an identity, affiliation, or rank among the ancestral entities themselves (Lau 2013). In addition, the head was an essential locus of interaction and was considered the prime vehicle of communication and direct mediator between the social actors and ancestors. As Lau (2013, 64) states: “the physical interaction was directed to the ancestor’s ears (songs), nose (aromas), and mouth (feeding). The eyes were an important means for co-presence and ubiquity. The always oversized and wide-open eyes marked the ancestor’s capacity to witness, observe, and give acquiescence of living people’s action.”

Figure 4.11. Shabti figure of individual placed in burial (FM 31605.A and .B), and scarab amulet (FM 238009), symbolizing immortality and resurrection, top and bottom.





Figure 4.12. Mummified remains of an Egyptian cat (late first millennium BCE), perhaps an offering to the cat-headed goddess Bast or a revered pet (FM 111505).



Figure 4.13. Shabtis: figures of individuals placed in the burials to act as servants for the deceased in the afterlife (FM 31024, 31029, 24423.1, 31031).

In general, the inability to interact with ancestors, either in their real or representational form, could have been seen as a critical rupture with the divine forces, and the physical absence of the ancestor as something tragically irremediable. If the capacity to materialize the presence of the ancestor into something tangible was absent, then that could have symbolized the oblivion of, and disaffect by, that powerful ancestor (see Kusimba in this volume).

Sensoriality and Experience

Sensorial perceptions are important aspects of death-related rituals and performances. Although many have argued that senses must be understood as culturally constructed, linguistically determined, and essentially arbitrary and unfettered by the external world, we cannot deny that memory is “put to work” when senses are properly stimulated (Connerton 1989). Yannis Hamilakis (2013) argues that sensorial experiences from the past are not ephemeral but, rather, material phenomena, as they require contact with the material in order to be activated. However, performance scholars argue that the body does not need the material to activate its own stimuli, as the body remembers through its own corporeal and kinetic memory (Giannachi, Kaye, and Shanks 2012). During death-related rituals and performances, sight, sound, touch, hearing, and smell, and other senses, either working independently or synesthetically (all together), are, ultimately, the means through which we connect with emotions and activate memory. We can safely say that the effectiveness of the production of meanings, emotions, and memory during funerary performances is highly reliant on the level of stimulus of our senses.

Music and auditive sensations are key in the ritual experience of the death, and it is particularly the control and the manipulation of sound, in its various manifestations, that were sought in the past (and even in the present) to create augmented sensorial experiences. Wind instruments (and their potent vibratory amplitude), such as the ones documented in archaeological contexts from the Andean region (Figures 4.1–4.3), were likely used as means of overture of mortuary performances, as well as of invocation of the ancestral presence. In the ancient Andes, flutes, panpipes, *pututo* conch trumpets, and whistles—as well as the still poorly studied whistling bottles that produced sound through an interplay of water, air, and matter within the ceramic bodies (Figure 4.4)—were played in performance settings, such as the circular sunken plaza of Caral (3000 BCE) or the underground galleries of Chavín de Huantar (1200 BCE). In general, music set the mood and enabled the initiation of an extraordinary time, of liminality, when the participant begins a process of social reconfiguration.

Wind instruments as the ones displayed in this exhibit were manufactured using materials such as

bone, ceramic, and reed, and it is believed that the zoomorphic depictions rendered on some of them had a relationship with the type of sound the instrument could reproduce—and even instruments generating meaningless or clangorous (to modern ears) sounds could have been highly desired in ritual settings. Nasca whistles with bird representations, for example, produced sounds as high-pitched as the ones produced by desert hummingbirds from the south coast of Peru, and the connection between these particular animals and the Nasca ancestors seems to have been manifested through their representation in gigantic geoglyphs drawn on the desert, which can only be seen from the sky and mountains.

Although still poorly studied, musicians in Andean funerary rituals could have fulfilled particularly important roles, not only through their performative skills, but also their capacity to create sounds and vibrations that were considered “stabilizing” of the chaos (La Chioma 2018). Cosmogonic myths ethnographically collected in the Amazon region, for example, highlight the role of music and musicians in the process of both creation and destruction of the world. As recounted by Eduardo Huárag Álvarez (2018), for the Amazon native people from the Marañón Basin, the world is believed to have been created by a female musician-priestess who, with the help of their ancestors and other divine forces, travels around the woods while playing a flute. This flute was then hidden in her genitals.

The role of musicians was greatly appreciated in the past and, perhaps, was a symbol of status and prestige. In iconographic representations, Moche musicians are depicted lavishly dressed and participating in large-scale funerary performances and processions celebrated in Moche temples, along with ritual officers, dancers, and skeletal figures representing ancestors. Musicians with particular disabilities (e.g., lip and nose deformation) were considered mediators between the world of the living and the dead: they had the capacities to transit between different worlds, linking the mundane and spiritual (Figure 4.5). Moche Musicians typically played percussion instruments (drums and rattles) during the ritual enactments and, sometimes, used their own body to produce sounds. Percussive sounds helped create paused rhythms marking time during rituals and, as Jerry Moore has noted, percussion, and drumming in particular, could have been key in large-scale Chimú funerary spectacles to drive away evil spirits, encourage the soul on its own flight, summon the spirits, and create social solidarity through a shared sensitive experience (Moore 2006). Similarly, for the Moche, it has been proposed that rattles were rhythmically played during funerary spectacles in order to “awaken” the ancient ancestors (Bourget 2006) and help reopen the underworld, so the newly converted ancestor could emerge victoriously from it.

4C The Ghanaian Fantasy Canoe Coffin: A Box with Proverbs

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Field Museum

When unmitigated against, death may mark the end of many people's dreams, but throughout the world many families use burials and associated grave goods to ensure that the wishes of the dead are met. Beyond wishes, funerary objects are used to communicate and celebrate deceased's occupation, familial identity, and social position (Otto 2019). In Ghana in West Africa, a combination of chance and curiosity in the face of the changing colonial and postcolonial dynamics surrounding death, leadership, and community relationships led to a twentieth-century tradition of elaborate fantasy coffins.

Under the British colonial law dating back to 1888, Ghanaians were forced to use public cemeteries, as opposed to the traditional, relatively private, burial under house floors. By the 1930s, the people of Ghana were already warming up to the idea of abandoning basket- and mat-wrappings in favor of coffins (Gundlach 2017). The transition to fantasy coffins was spurred by the Ga people's long tradition of figurative palanquins that were used exclusively by the chiefs (Secretan 1995; Bonetti 2010). A palanquin is a one-passenger box or seat carried on two horizontal poles by four or six bearers. Both figurative palanquins and fantasy coffins relied on a deeply rooted practice of commissioning crafts, but skewed access to wealth and power meant that the elites were the ones who had the luxury and political muscle to commission the best works.

For a long time, Ghanaians and their neighboring communities used palanquins (also commonly known as sedan chairs) as figurative royal coffins. In the 1950s, among the Ga people, the dominant ethnic group of the region of Accra in Ghana, what started off as a routine figurative royal palanquin for a local chief turned into reality when a cocoa-pod-shaped palanquin was used as the actual coffin of the commissioning chief, who died unexpectedly before the festival (Kreamer 1994). The unique coffin drew many admirers beyond royalty. Inspired by the enthusiasm of the crowds at the chief's funeral, Seth Kane Kwei (1925–92), one of the cocoa-pod-coffin carpenters made an airplane-shaped coffin for his grandmother who died not long after the first palanquin coffin event. His grandmother grew up in Teshie, a coastal suburb near Accra's airport and was fascinated by the idea of planes, but she never got the chance to fly. By burying her in an airplane-shaped coffin, Kane Kwei ensured that his grandmother would fly into eternity but, more importantly, this seeded the idea that even commoners can choose to celebrate death in palanquin coffins.

Several local people began to request customized fantasy coffins soon after the airplane coffin event (Figure 4.14). As the practice became widespread, the Ga people gave these coffins a new name: *Abebuu adekai* meaning

boxes with proverbs. The motifs of the coffins revealed a number of things: (1) the message for perpetuity of one's profession (for instance, a fisherman would be buried in a boat-shaped coffin); (2) the dreams and aspirations of the deceased, such as a plane or a luxurious car; (3) character or temperament, such as a coffin in the shape of a red-hot chili pepper for an assertive person; or (4) status (for instance, certain animal shapes such as the elephant were reserved for high-ranking officials) (Van Der Geest 2000; Otto 2019; Gundlach 2017).

The tradition never lacked admirers and soon its popularity spread beyond the borders of the Ga people of the Accra region, to the Ashanti region (Kumasi), the Ewé region, and even as far as parts of Togo. It also did not take long for the fantasy coffins to catch the attention of Western museums which began collecting and commissioning several examples for their own museum displays in the 1970s. Seth Kane Kwei remained one of the household names, together with a few others, such as Joseph Ashong, popularly known as Paa Joe (Otto 2019). Kane Kwei and Paa Joe have since been featured in several art festivals, shows, and galleries around the world because of these fantasy coffins. It was within this context that the canoe-shaped Ghanaian Fantasy Coffin which appears in this exhibition was produced by Seth Kane Kwei himself in 1989. The shape is consistent with the motifs of Ga fishermen, who used to carve and place a little dummy-canoe on the graves of their deceased, long before fantasy coffins were introduced (Potocnik 2018). The canoe-shaped coffin was on display at a gallery in Los Angeles, and was produced just three years before the death of Kane Kwei. His family continued the workshop and its tradition, and the workshop is now managed by his grandson, Eric Adjete Anang, an artist and master coffin maker himself (<http://www.kanekwei.com/past-events>). The business is generally a high earner, with a typical fantasy coffin costing nearly as much as an average Ghanaian earns in a year.

The commissioning and acquisition of fantasy coffins for museum and art gallery displays necessitated additional changes. For instance, coffins destined for burial were typically made from light wood such as *Altonia boonei* but those manufactured for Western museum displays are now made from hard wood such as *Terminalia superba* or African mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*; <http://www.kanekwei.com/past-events>).

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