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HOW THE EGYPTIAN EMBALMED HIS DEAD¹

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There is a widespread credo that the art of embalming as practiced by the ancient Egyptians is lost to the knowledge of modern man; a notion that is far from the truth. There are three sources of information that have and will continue to yield valuable information concerning the process. The first sources to be mentioned, though by no means the most important, are the descriptions of the process given us by the ancient Greek travelers and historians. The second are the instructions given by the Egyptians themselves concerning the preparation of the several parts of the body; and lastly the chemical analyses of the mummies that have come down to us. A combination of the information gleaned from these three sources enables us to reconstruct the actual scene and the sequence of operations in the embalming room with a great deal of accuracy. Fundamentally the process was one of salination and dehydration, both of which are used for a different purpose at the present time and are in no wise lost nor in any measure mysterious.

Simple as the process was it was not achieved at a single bound, nor did the process remain invariable throughout the entire series of the Dynasties. In fact the progressive expansion of the Egyptian empire can be closely followed by identifying the different materials used to preserve and lustrate the body throughout the rise and fall of that great nation. There is every reason to believe that the first mummies of Egypt were made by the elements quite incidentally and without the aid of man. Several of the Predynastic mummies have been unearthed and show that the natural dryness of the sand of the desert in which the Neolithic bodies were buried effected the mummification perfectly; perfectly in the sense that the natural mummies are in a much better state of preservation than the artificial ones.

It is quite probable that the natural mummification gave the ancient Egyptian the notion of artificial mummification, from which, too, there sprang into consciousness the incipient idea of immortality. The marks of previous burials were soon effaced by the shifting sands and grave diggers undoubtedly unearthed long forgotten

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remains to find them dessicated and excellently preserved, which led them to observe that the body had not suffered corruption but had put on incorruptibility. Jackals unearthed the bodies, too, and in company with the vultures and beetles devoured all that was earthly. The desire to preserve the body from the ravages of necrophagus organisms led to the preparation of more durable tombs and to the use of amulets to charm the evil things away. An abstract concept of an immortal soul did not come into Egypt until after the rise of Christianity, hence the ancient Egyptian had what may be called a material notion concerning life after death, which, for successful perpetuity depended upon the prevention of decay of the tissues and the preservation of the individual's personal identity. This desire for personal and individual perpetuation became so fixed in the mind of the ancient Egyptian that he bent his energy, expended his resources, enlarged his kingdom, exacted his tribute and charmed the ghouls in a vain hope of attaining immunity from extinction. His personal duration ceased with the complete annihilation of his corporal remains, hence to destroy or mutilate his mummy was to render a most heinous and irreparable damage.

As the social organization grew in complexity, the Empire expanded and specialized artizans entered into the warp and woof of the ancients' daily life. Quite naturally certain gods and goddesses became entrusted with the care of the dead and these had representatives that practiced the art of embalming. It is to be mentioned here that the most advanced thinkers that ancient Egypt produced knew little about the physiology of life or death, and so all that was necessary to cause the dead to live on in that mystic limbus so vaguely conceived was to have the gods preserve and restore the attributes of the living that were lost in death and to remove those that death bestowed, most obnoxious of which was the foul smell. In order to appreciate in an interesting way just how this was accomplished, let us follow an offspring of the Sun god from his death to his burial.

Naturally the Egyptian did not believe that all mankind was entitled to immortality; in the early Dynasties only the Pharaohs and those born of his household were embalmed. After the limited democratization of the Empire the rich and titled were vouchsafed the privilege; but the slaves and menials never were and their bodies were often cast into the Nile to be devoured by the sacred crocodiles.

When an Egyptian of high degree died the male and female members of his household daubed dust or mud in their hair; the males baring themselves from the waist down and the females from the waist up so that their breasts were bare, lamented loudly and long about the dwelling, the while executing weird squatting movements, attracting the attention of the neighbors who often joined in the din, until the noise reached the ears of the embalmers, one of whom went to the house bereaved by death to negotiate for the body. During the Middle Empire there were three prices; one very costly, one moderate and one cheap. The most expensive method cost

about 440 drachmae. (The value of a drachma varied from 25 to 35 cents.) The second cost about 150 drachmae, and the third cost "little at all." The agreement was reached at the house to embalm the body by the third method. The remains were then carted to the House of Purification, here the representatives of the gods proceeded to embalm them according to the most costly method.

All the operations in the House of Purification were under the direct supervision of the god Anubis, the god of embalming par excellence. The body was placed upon a stone slab so oriented that the first rays of the morning sun falling through a little window in the east would strike upon the face and chest of the deceased, at which time the first lustration was performed, accompanied by the following prayer:

Great god of the Sun and all you other gods admit me into your everlasting presence. I have committed no murder, nor betrayed a trust, nor committed any other deadly sin. But if in this life I have sinned in eating and drinking that which was unlawful the fault was not mine but of the stomach.

An assistant of Anubis then slit the abdominal wall down the left flank with a stone knife, who ran from the scene holding his nose, while all those standing about pelted him with whatever object they could lay hands on, chanting and dispelling the wrath of the unclean emotions that were liberated along with the bowels. Again was the body anointed while incense burned. Imsety, first son of Horus came forward and removed the liver, wrapped and perfumed it and placed it in a large canopic jar. Duamutef, second son of Horus removed and perfumed the stomach and placed it in the second jar. Hapy, third son, removed the lungs and treated them as were the liver and stomach, depositing them in a third jar. Qebeh-snewef, fourth son, removed the intestines and placed them in the fourth jar. All the jars were sealed with melted wax, perfumed and set aside to be delivered with the embalmed body. The kidneys and heart were left in the body, probably because they rarely emit foul odors. Amulets were placed in the heart, gold scarabs, miniature vultures and other charms having heads like apes and jackals, to appease the eaters of carrion.

Sometimes the viscera were not placed in the canopic jars, in which case they were merely wrapped and perfumed and laid to one side. Rarely were they ever replaced in the abdominal cavity. The cavity was filled with wads of straw and chaff soaked in resin and cedar oil. Rolls of linen were often used to fill up the cavity, as were chips of cedar wood and shavings from the carpenter's benches. After the Semitic invasion asphaltum from the Dead Sea was used to soak the linen, chips and shavings in. As soon as the visceral cavity was filled the body suffered another lustration to the accompaniment of incantations, prayers and supplications and was then immersed in a bath of salt and soda where it was left for thirty-five days.

If the epidermis peeled off it was rolled into balls and saved. If the nails loosened they were tied on with thread or replaced and held with metal thimbles. The sunken orbits were refilled with a small onion and soft wax, the external surface smoothed over and a new eye painted thereon. The shrunken genitals were remade from wax or clay. Strips of cloth were gouged under the skin of the arms and legs to lessen the effect of the withered muscles. In fact, everything was done to make the body as near life-like as possible. At the end of the thirty-fifth day the body was removed from the vat, yet not dry enough to endure forever.

Two hundred and six hin of fat was boiled, as is boiled for the sacred bull, and into this vat of hot oil the body was intermittently soused. It is not sure just what this oil was; it might have been tallow; it might have been a mixture of animal fats perfumed with volatile oils from the land of Punt and the cedars of Lebanon. At any rate the immersion in hot oil dehydrated the tissues and the laborious process of wrapping and bandaging the body began. Amulets were placed on the arms and legs, which were bandaged separately. Amulets were placed on the belly; rarely was the incision in the left flank sewed up. The trunk was bandaged and the special ordeal of wrapping the head was begun.

The brain was removed through the nose with a hooked rod, or an incision was made in the back of the neck and the brain extracted through the foramen magnum. Hot wax was then injected into the cranial cavity and the head bandaged by itself. After all the parts were bandaged separately a garment much like a night gown was placed on the body, the legs tied together at the ankles and the arms placed along the thighs or folded across the chest. In females the hands were always placed over the vulva. On top of the night gown another layer of bandage was added from the head to the feet and then another gown. This was repeated until there were as many as sixteen layers of gown and bandage.

On the seventieth day the body was returned to his dwelling, ready to meet the god of the midnight sun. Not always was the body buried at once, though it often was, and yet some bodies were kept for longer or shorter intervals in the house where they had died. Probably until the tomb was prepared.

Such in brief is the process of mummification as practiced by the ancient Egyptians during the XVIII Dynasty. There were great variations and during the four thousand years or more that the Egyptians embalmed their dead great changes occurred in their religion, great changes occurred in the manner of disposal of their dead as well as in the process of embalming. At the onset of the XIX Dynasty more attention was paid to the mummy case than to the mummy itself. Hence there arose the elaborately decorated coffins and death masks so common in the XX Dynasty and these were made to look more and more like the deceased. The representation became the thing rather than the thing itself, and by the time of the

Ptolemys little attention was paid to the actual process of mummifying the body, but the most ornate and life-like replicas of the dead body were sculptured, and the sculptor was considered to be the one who creates life. Creator and sculptor were one and the same being.

The advent of Christianity put an end to mummification, for then the concept of an immaterial soul superseded the material concept of immortality, and so long as a disembodied spirit was the immortal thing, it became sacrilegious to try to perpetuate the material remains.