

Burial Practices

You are in the Beautiful House, where ancient Egyptian priests are preparing the dead for burial and their journey to a life after death. You are looking at mourners and priests putting the final touches on a mummy. One of the priests is wearing a mask of the jackal-headed God Anubis.

Ancient Egyptians believed strongly in an *afterlife*, a life that continued after death. They believed that a dead person's *ka*, or spirit, would not be able to enjoy the many pleasures of the afterlife unless the person's body was prepared for burial in a certain way. Most importantly, the body could not be allowed to *decay*, or fall apart, after death. So, the Egyptians developed a process called *embalming*, which stopped the body from decaying.

Ancient Egyptians considered preserving a dead body to be a sacred process that involved several steps. First, the priests removed all of the body's inner organs except the heart. They placed the organs in a pottery or limestone container, called a *canopic jar*. The priests, or embalmers, then removed the brain by hooking it through the nostrils. Next they put the body in a wooden box and covered it with a kind of salt called *natron*, which dried the body out. After 40 days, the priests washed, oiled, and wrapped the body in several hundred yards of fabric. As a final step, they sometimes spread a black, gooey substance, *momia*, over the body. This Arabic word is the origin of the term *mummy*.

When the embalming was complete, the body was ready for burial. Ancient Egyptians buried their dead along with items to be used in the afterlife. These items might be food and drink, gold and jewelry, or everyday items such as clothes, games, and mirrors. Burial ceremonies differed for the common people and the wealthy. Poor people were not usually embalmed. Most poor people were just wrapped in discarded clothing and buried in the ground. Those people who could afford it had a simple funeral ceremony, and were laid to rest in a plain wooden box that was buried in the sand or in a cave. Wealthier people held more elaborate ceremonies and buried their dead in tombs. Pharaohs had the grandest funerals. Priests laid the pharaoh's body inside a coffin, which was placed in a large stone container called a *sarcophagus*. They surrounded it with treasures and artifacts to be used by the pharaoh in the afterlife. Workers built special boats to transport the body of the pharaoh and the treasures to the burial site. In early times, some pharaohs were buried in pyramids. Later, Egyptians buried them in temples and, eventually, in secret locations, to prevent people from breaking into the sites to steal the treasures.

Discussion Question: What did the ancient Egyptians do with a person's body after death?