

Background information

Exhibition overview

The ancient Egyptians feared and celebrated death. This exhibition reveals their preparations for death, how and why they preserved their bodies for burial, and what they believed happened when they died.

The visitor experiences all this from the perspective of Namenekhamun, a wealthy father from Thebes, as he relates the final journey of his young daughter Keku. These were real people who lived and died nearly 2700 years ago. Their story is supported by evidence from scientists and researchers, who have been able to piece together the past from the artefacts, writings, and bodies that this civilisation left behind.

The beliefs and practices are those of the ancient Egyptians living in the Late Period (664–332 BCE).

Dates used in the exhibition

The terms BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) have been used throughout the exhibition and are interchangeable with BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini). Archaeologists and historians increasingly use the terms BCE and CE over the exclusively Christian BC and AD.

Before 664 BCE, dates in the chronology of ancient Egypt are all approximate. Not all historians agree on the exact dates of the earlier periods. The exhibition uses the most widely accepted dates, but these may differ from those found in some reference books.

Ancient Egyptian religion

Common themes

Ancient Egyptian religion was based on the cycles of nature, including the rise and fall of the Nile. Fertility, birth, death, and resurrection were common themes in beliefs and practices. Death was simply a natural part of the cycle and was seen as a gateway to a new life.

These themes remained generally constant throughout most of ancient Egypt's history, but the actual beliefs and practices did not. The ancient Egyptians tended to merge new beliefs with old ones rather than simply replacing the old. This tendency has made it difficult for modern scholars to fully understand the ancient beliefs, and much remains a mystery today.

Gods

The ancient Egyptians worshipped hundreds of gods and goddesses. Many of these deities had the same or similar roles, both because of the complex nature of the religion as well as the political organisation of the state.

Each city or region worshipped its own gods. If a city came to prominence, the local gods rose to prominence as well, becoming 'state' gods worshipped by the wealthy and the elite. The general population would

continue to worship their local gods. As a result, some gods were worshipped only by certain classes of people, in certain areas, or in certain periods.

A walk through the exhibition

Egypt: Beyond the Tomb is divided into sections that follow the chronology of death.

Preparation for death

The ancient Egyptians believed that when they died, their spiritual body would continue to exist in an afterlife very similar to the living world. However, entry into the afterlife was not guaranteed. The dead had to negotiate a dangerous underworld journey and face the final judgment before they were granted access. If successful, they were required to provide eternal sustenance for their spirit.

A person could achieve these things if they prepared properly during their lifetime. The preparations included the following.

Purchasing funerary items

Before the Late Period, people usually purchased individually made funerary items from specialist shops and temples. By the Late Period, mass-produced funerary items could be obtained from the marketplace (although wealthy people would also commission items such as furniture, expensive coffins, and jewellery). This mass-production meant that the poorer classes could afford to take more items to their graves.

The funerary items fell into two main classes:

- those to protect and guide the dead person on the underworld journey and in the afterlife, for example, amulets, stelae (memorial stones), and the *Book of the Dead* or other funerary texts
- those to provide nourishment, leisure, and comfort for their eternal spirit, for example, food, clothing, and shabtis (small funerary statuettes).

Buying a coffin

Coffins, which the ancient Egyptians called 'chests of life', were the most important funerary items. The wealthy often purchased two coffins – an inner coffin and an outer coffin, which protected the inner one. Every aspect of a coffin was designed so that it would protect the physical body in the living world and the spiritual body in the afterlife.

The iconography and shapes of coffins changed over the 3000 years they were used. Early coffins were rectangular in shape. Mummy-shaped coffins appeared in the Middle Kingdom, about 1900 BCE. Despite such changes, the general purpose of the coffins remained the same.

Building the tombs

The ancient Egyptians often spent many years building and preparing tombs, which they called 'houses of eternity'. They usually built them on the west bank of the Nile, in the land of the dead, using non-perishable material such as stone – a contrast to the mud-brick and straw houses they occupied in life.

The tombs of wealthy people in the Late Period (664–332 BCE) generally consisted of two parts: the burial chamber and the mortuary chapel.

- The burial chamber was under the ground. It housed and protected the body and was decorated with scenes and spells that would help the person in the afterlife.
- The mortuary chapel was above the ground. It was accessible to visitors, who would perform rites and make offerings such as food and drink for the dead person's spirit.

In the tent of the embalmers

This section deals with all aspects of the mummification process – the origins of mummification, why the ancient Egyptians believed it was so important, and the processes and rituals involved.

What is a mummy?

A mummy is a dead body (either human or animal) that has not decayed because of specific natural or artificial conditions.

The word 'mummy' derives from the Persian/Arabic word *mummiya*, meaning tar or bitumen. When the Arabs encountered the Egyptian mummies in the seventh century CE, they thought they were covered in tar. Although the Egyptians did occasionally use tar in the mummification process, they mostly coated mummies in dark resin, which gave the skin a black colour.

The origins of mummification

Until relatively recently, the accepted view was that artificial mummification began with the preservation of Old Kingdom royals about 2600 BCE, and that it developed from observing bodies that had been preserved naturally in hot desert sands. However, new evidence shows that artificial mummification began much earlier. Recent excavations of 'working class' burials at Hierakonopolis in Upper Egypt show that various complex burial practices existed about 3500 BCE. These practices included ritually extracting the internal organs and wrapping specific parts of the body.

The embalmers' tent

The embalmers' tent was where the body was taken after death to be washed and mummified. The embalmers preserved the body, ensuring that the person's ba (soul) would always have the physical base it needed in the afterlife. The embalmers also carried out many religious rituals as part of this process. These rituals ensured that the dead person would be associated with Osiris, god of the underworld.

How were the dead mummified?

At different times in history, the Egyptians used different methods to mummify people. By Keku's time, mummification was a major industry and affordable to most classes. This was not the case in earlier periods, when the bodies of those who couldn't afford embalming were generally 'preserved' by drying them in hot desert sands or by covering them with resin.

The best and most complicated mummification technique (and so reserved for the wealthy) was practised from the New Kingdom to the start of the Late Period (about 1550–664 BCE). The first step in this technique involved removing and preserving most internal organs. The lungs, stomach, liver, and intestines were separately embalmed and stored in Canopic jars – vessels especially made for this purpose. The heart, which represented the centre of all knowledge and emotions, was usually left inside the body while the brain was often thrown away.

Natron (a salt from desert lakes) was used to absorb water from the body and prevent decay. After forty days, the natron was removed and the body cavities were filled with linen, natron pouches, herbs, sawdust, sand, or chopped straw.

The skin and first few layers of linen bandages were covered with molten resin and then the body was wrapped, often with amulets. A mask was usually placed over the head of the mummy. The whole process lasted about seventy days.

Animal mummies

Almost every kind of animal that lived in ancient Egypt has been found as a mummy – from bulls, birds, snakes, and crocodiles to fish, cats, and scarab beetles. Many animals were seen as manifestations of gods. These animals appeared to share similar qualities with the gods so were considered sacred.

Three main categories of animal mummy existed:

- pets buried with their owner in a tomb
- animal mummies sold to the public as offerings to the gods
- temple animals preserved for religious reasons (such as the Apis bull).

In the later periods, sacred animals were specifically bred for use as offerings to the gods. X-rays show that numerous mummified animals had broken necks or battered skulls, indicating that they were deliberately killed for mummification. Many were not well mummified, and some supposed mummies contained only rubble or parts of an animal. This could mean that some buyers were deliberately deceived or that the religious significance of the mummies was related to the way they looked rather than to their contents.

Usually, only one temple animal was alive at one time. This animal was believed to be the physical manifestation of a god. Priests would travel throughout the country in search of the right creature with the proper markings on its body. Once identified, the animal was fed and nursed in the temple until its death, when it received extensive mummification and an individual burial.

A woman called Keku

Who was Keku?

Keku was the daughter of Namenekhamun, Chief Butcher in the temple complex of the god Amun, and of Isetemkheb, the mistress of the house. Keku lived in Thebes during the early Late Period (about 660 BCE) and probably died there, aged in her early twenties.

Keku's tomb has not been located, although it is likely that her family had a fairly elaborate communal tomb. Much about Keku's life has been pieced together by looking at how other wealthy Egyptians of the time lived and died.

Keku's coffins

Keku's outer coffin (a luxury that only the wealthy could afford) protected her more highly decorated inner coffin. The hieroglyphs in the centre column of the lid identify Keku as the owner of the coffin and also tell us her title and the names and titles of her parents. (Names were important to the ancient Egyptians because they held the essence of a person. Preserving and remembering a dead person's name would help them survive in the afterlife.) The horizontal band along the side of the case contains offering formulas and prayers to the gods.

Keku's inner coffin has a painted head with the feminine characteristics of pale skin and a segmented wig. This painting served as a mask and helped Keku's spirit recognise her body. It also provided her with an idealised face for the afterlife. Other parts of the inner coffin are covered with prayers and spells from the *Book of the Dead*, important religious symbols, and scenes of gods and goddesses associated with death, protection, and the underworld.

Keku's mummy

X-rays have confirmed that Keku was female and that she was aged between 21 and 23 when she died. It is not known exactly how she died, but the most likely cause is disease. The x-rays also reveal that there are no amulets inside her bandages.

Computerised Tomography (CT) scans of Keku show that both her heart and brain were not removed. It was quite unusual for Egyptian mummies to retain their brains. The fact that Keku still has hers could mean that the mummification technique she purchased, though expensive, was not the best available at the time. Alternatively, the embalmers may have taken shortcuts.

Leaving the land of the living

This section contains a simulated trip from the land of the living (the east bank of the Nile) to the land of the dead (the west bank of the Nile).

Funeral processions and burial rites

The embalmed body and coffin were collected for the day of burial, probably from the embalmers' tent. Wealthy Egyptians, like Keku, had elaborate funeral processions to display their status to onlookers.

Relatives were positioned at either end of the coffin, which was usually drawn along by oxen. Two female relatives or priestesses acted the roles of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys, chief mourners in ancient Egyptian religion. The procession included hired mourners, dancers, musicians, and priests. Some participants carried Canopic jars and other goods for the tomb. The procession continued to the edge of the Nile, where all the participants were required to board boats and cross the river to the western side, the favoured location for burials.

The concluding funerary rites took place in front of the tomb. The mummy was raised upright for the Opening of the Mouth ceremony. Priests performed this elaborate ritual, which allowed the dead person to use all their senses in the afterlife. The rituals included purifying, anointing, reciting prayers, and touching the mummy with ritual objects to restore the senses.

Afterwards, food and clothing were offered to the dead person and mourners participated in the funerary banquet. The mummy was then placed in the burial chamber of the tomb, fully prepared for the afterlife.

Journey through the underworld

What was the underworld?

To the ancient Egyptians, the underworld was a dangerous region that one's spirit had to traverse to reach the paradise that was the afterlife. In the underworld, the dead person's spirit would have to contend with gods, strange creatures, and gatekeepers to reach Osiris and the Hall of Final Judgment. There, they would plead their case for entry into the afterlife.

Who was Osiris?

Osiris was the god and chief judge of the underworld. He was also the god of vegetation and the annual Nile flood and was closely associated with death, resurrection, and fertility. The ancient Egyptians believed him to be a dead king miraculously restored to life after being murdered by his brother Seth. For this reason, he came to symbolise the hope for eternal life.

Osiris is usually depicted as a mummiform human figure. In his hands, he holds a crook and a flail, signs of royal dignity. On his head, he wears the atef crown, a white crown flanked by ostrich feathers and sometimes adorned with the horns of a ram. Occasionally, Osiris' skin is green or black, a reference to vegetation and fertile earth.

Funerary texts

Funerary texts acted as 'travel guides' for the journey through the underworld. These texts were written on walls, coffins, statues, or papyri (writing material made from the papyrus plant). They contained all the required passwords and spells for use in the underworld. In the burial chamber, they were placed so that the dead person could reach them when necessary.

Initially, funerary texts were only available to royals. Such texts have been found written inside pyramids of the Old Kingdom (about 2575–2134 BCE) and are today known as 'pyramid texts'. As part of the 'democratisation of the afterlife', the texts were revised at the start of the Middle Kingdom (about 2100 BCE) so that officials and nobles could use them. The texts became known as the 'coffin texts' because they were mostly written on coffins.

The Book of the Dead

Eventually, at the start of the New Kingdom (about 1500 BCE), a funerary text was made available to the general population of Egypt. The ancient Egyptians knew it as the *Spells for Going Forth by Day*, but today we call it the *Book of the Dead*.

This text was not a book in the modern sense of the word. Rather, it was a collection of spells, passwords, and images to be used by the deceased in the underworld. The spells were normally written on papyri (which made them affordable to most people) but also on grave goods, coffins, walls, and mummy bandages.

The complete collection contains about 200 spells, although no papyrus includes all of them. This suggests that not all the spells were required in the afterlife and that the number of spells purchased depended on the needs and wealth of the buyer.

The Amduat

The *Amduat* (meaning 'that which is in the underworld') is one of several funerary texts that belong to a separate literary tradition from that of the *Book of the Dead*. These texts include the *Book of Heavens*, *Book of Night*, and *Book of the Celestial Cow*. Rather than containing passwords or spells, these books provide descriptions and images of the underworld.

The *Amduat* focuses on the journey of the sun god through the twelve regions of the underworld. Each region corresponds to an 'hour' of the night. The sun god is reborn each morning as the rising sun, symbolising the hope of the deceased for rebirth. The *Amduat* has mostly been found written on the walls of royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. However, it occasionally appears on papyri in the tombs of wealthy people.

The final judgment

At the end of the underworld journey, the dead person reached the Hall of Final Judgment. Judgment was a two-part process.

Part 1: Declaration of Innocence – The dead person pleaded their innocence of any wrongdoing during their lifetime. The *Book of the Dead* provided them with the correct words to use for each of the forty-two divine judges.

Part 2: Weighing of the Heart ceremony – The heart, which contained a record of all the dead person's actions in life, was weighed against the feather of the goddess Ma'at, symbol of truth and justice. If the heart was heavier than the feather, it was fed to Ammut, the Devourer, and the soul was cast into darkness. If the scales were balanced, Osiris welcomed the dead person into the afterlife. Spell 30B from the *Book of the Dead* helped to prevent the dead person's heart from 'betraying' them.

The afterlife

The Field of Rushes was the afterlife for the ancient Egyptians. Life in the Field of Rushes was a reflection of the living world, with blue skies, rivers and boats for travel, and crops that needed to be ploughed and harvested.

The dead were granted land in the Field of Rushes and were expected to maintain it. They could either perform the labour themselves or get their shabtis to work for them. Shabtis were small funerary statuettes that were placed in tombs for this purpose. They came to life by reciting a spell. The shabtis often carried agricultural tools like hoes and, after about 1000 BCE, were sometimes led by an overseer, who carried a flail instead of tools.

Ba and ka

To the ancient Egyptians, an individual's personality was made up of several parts, which continued to exist after death. The ba and ka were the most important of these.

The ba resembled the modern concept of a soul and was depicted as a human-headed bird. When a person died, their ba could move about the tomb and even leave it to visit relatives in the land of the living.

The ka was the actual life force, symbolised by a pair of raised open arms. Unlike the ba, it was restricted to the tomb, where it would receive the food and drink it needed to survive in the afterlife.

Maintaining the connection

The dead were not forgotten. One way in which they stayed connected to the living world was through the mortuary chapel. The dead person's ka (life force) was able to enter this space through the tomb's false door and take a physical form by inhabiting a statue of the dead person. This allowed the ka to accept the food, drink, and other essentials that visitors placed on the offering table.

Every ancient Egyptian would have hoped that their tomb would be well maintained when they died. But if living relatives stopped making offerings to their spirit, the tomb decorations, inscriptions, and other objects ensured that the dead person would still be well supplied in the afterlife.

For most of ancient Egypt's history, the mortuary chapel and tomb were normally situated near each other. This tradition changed in the New Kingdom (about 1550–1069 BCE). Rulers started burying their bodies in hidden tombs in the Valley of the Kings and building their mortuary chapels elsewhere. This trend became popular with other wealthy Egyptians. It wasn't until the Late Period (664–332 BCE) that mortuary chapels and tombs were again built close to each other.