**Egyptian Mummification and the Afterlife**

Man's quest to understand his body and it's functions, to heal the sick, to protect the loved, to honor the dead, is perhaps the most pervasive compulsion humans have shared across the ages. From the time our ancestors first huddled together in caves for warmth we have been intricately connected to one another. In many civilizations throughout the world these connections transcend death. Funerary Rites are as varied and numerous as stars in the sky. Most rituals were influenced not only by spirituality, but also by practical use of the resources available and consideration for the surrounding climate.

In the pre-Vedic civilization of the Indus Valley, members of Harappan society began the practice of cremating their dead and storing the physical remains in burial urns. This practice has transformed and evolved over time. It continues to be reflected in the present day Hindu ritual of the funeral pyre, Antyesti, which is believed to release the soul from the body. Viking Funerals also frequently involved a funeral pyre. In Norse tradition, the deceased was placed in a longship surrounded by the belongings he needed in the afterlife. Servants would also be required to attend their master through eternity. They were often included in the pyre by means of ritual sacrifice.

The smoke of the great pyre carried the soul of the Norse king, along with his servants and other possessions, as he made his journey to Asgard. The sacred hieroglyphs and the power of spoken words would provide a similar service for the Egyptian, but his spirit did not make a one-time journey. The Ka resembled the deceased. It could inhabit representations of the king in many forms. Ideally it moved from one suitable incarnation to the next, as it benefited from the diligence of the temple cult. While the Ba was able to travel, it was always required to return to the tomb, to the Ka. This enduring connection to place, to the physical world, surely made preservation of the physical body an important consideration.

In the image provided, the process of ritual mummification is depicted on four registers. In the bottom register the body of the deceased is depicted during purification. Cleansed with sweet wine, and later with the water of the Nile, the body was prepared as a priest recited the sacred prayers. In the second register the body is shown on the lion table. Anubis is present with the priests and attends the body. The third register again depicts Anubis as he leans over the mummy. A funeral mask has been placed and the mummification is almost complete. In the final image of the third register we see both the mummy and the canopic jars which contain vital organs. The top register depicts the funeral procession and the establishment of the cult.

Given the universal development of rituals honoring the dead, it is not surprising to discover the significance with which intricate details are applied to Egyptian funeral rites. The evolution of these rites developed simultaneously with culture and religion. These three aspects were irreversibly bound together. This symbiosis was crucial to the holistic ideology that developed and endured for thousands of years. In ancient Egypt, life existed in separate incarnations. In the time between birth and death life existed incarnated in both the physical body and the spiritual. Logic followed that life after death would be similar, requiring both the physical body and the spiritual in order to reincarnate. Perhaps this is the genesis of a desire to preserve and protect the body for its use throughout eternity.

Innate curiosity and a desire to understand the physical body must have driven early physicians to explore and experiment with the great mysteries surrounding death. Development of funerary practices may initially have resulted from close clinical observation. The removal of the organs which are quickest to decay, and thereby cause great harm to the body, is one of the hallmarks of mummification. By placing these organs in beds of natron and then later wrapping them in bandages, embalmers preserved and protected the organs. This essentially halted their decay and protected the body from their damaging effects. The organs were placed in hollow canopic jars which had been carved into representations of the four sons of Horace.

In an interesting contrast to the treatment of other organs, the heart is left within the body during the embalming process. The heart was considered the center of intelligence and compassion. As such it would be a crucial to the deceased in his journey through eternity. In the afterlife, the heart would be weighed to determine the sum of one's earthly deeds. A light heart indicated a life properly lived and brought an afterlife of suitable reward. A heavy heart indicated improper living and would cause Ammut to appear and devour the damned. The significance given to the heart may also have been a reflection of observations made during the development of the mummification process. In contrast to the almost immediate decay visible in the abdominal organs, the thick muscle of the heart would seem to be a marvel of resilience. Obviously it was somehow more impressive than the brain, which was scrambled, removed through the nose and subsequently discarded.

The wrappings of the mummy are a study in contradiction. Fingers and toes are wrapped individually. Legs and arms are likewise defined. The care given to separate the appendages would indicate the importance of mobility in the afterlife. If fingers and toes were to be fixed in position, like the webbed treatment seen in statuary, it seems they would be wrapped together as a unit. After an initial layer of separation, mobility is totally disregarded as layer after layer of bandages are applied with sticky resin. Limbs are positioned, covered in linen and secured with bands from head to toe then all around. Total immobilization is complete. This is one of the intricate details that abound in Egyptian funerary practices. As nothing in these rites is left to chance, it must be somehow significant.

The wrapping of the fingers is just one of the beautiful quandaries that can be found in the culture of ancient Egypt. The mysteries of mummification are intricate, with roots that began to develop in the pre-dynastic period. Funerary rituals reflect the culture of early Egyptians, their devotion to religion, and a practical use of materials and climate. After almost three hundred years of study, we have much information about these rituals. Without benefit of the context five thousand years provides, we will continue to know so little.