



0. MEET A MUMMY - Story Preface

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Acquired by an American diplomat called Samuel Cox, in the 19th century, a mummy which now resides at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) is "our . . . most richly decorated [specimen]," says curator Melinda Zeder. There's an interesting story how that mummy, seen here in a photo by Stephen Voss, came to America.

*...As much of the brain as possible is extracted
through the nostrils with an iron hook,
and what the hook cannot reach
is dissolved with drugs.*

Herodotus, Greek Historian
On making Egyptian mummies
450 B.C.

When Herodotus of Halicarnassus (his town is called Bodrum today) visited Egypt, around 450 B.C., priests in that country told him how they made mummies. His rendition of the process, the earliest-known written description of mummification, continues:

Next, the flank is slit open with sharp Ethiopian stone [probably a flake of obsidian] and the entire contents of the abdomen are removed. The cavity is then thoroughly cleansed and washed out, first with palm wine and again with a solution of pounded spices. Then it is filled with pure crushed myrrh, cassia, and all other aromatic substances, except frankincense. The opening is sewn up, and then the body is placed in natron, covered entirely for 70 days, never longer.

What, exactly, is a mummy? It is a preserved dead body which has retained some of its soft tissue. It may still have skin, for example, or muscle tissue or organs, which can be further studied to learn about who the person once was.

Mummies have fascinated us for centuries. They can develop, unaided by humans, when a body is buried (or left) in extremely cold or very hot, arid conditions. More than 5,000 years ago (in the Predynastic Period), most Egyptians were simply buried in the desert, where they were placed in sand-filled pits. As it happened, those natural conditions were perfect for mummy-making.

The desert sands were essential to the process. As a dessicating (drying) agent, sand in a burial pit acts like blotting paper, absorbing fluids which leak from a corpse. After time, the dried-out body is naturally preserved and a mummy results. It is much more effective (with far less decomposition) than the elaborate, manmade processes which Egyptians developed later.

It was those meticulous processes, though, which gave a mummy its name. The bitumen tar, used to coat the

linen strips which wrap the body, is called "mum." Scholars estimate that 70 million mummies were made in Egypt over a 3,000-year period. If you keep Herodotus' instructions in mind, you can virtually create one yourself.

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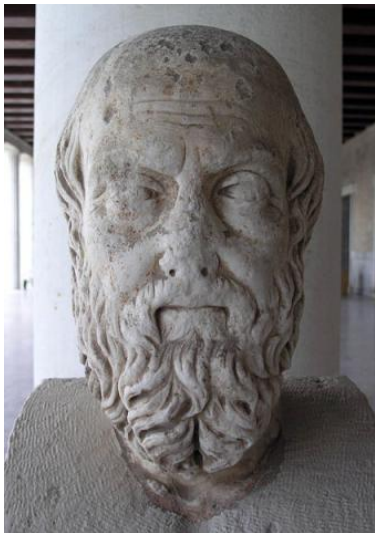
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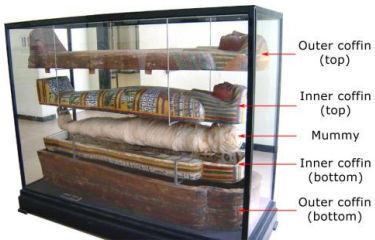
Egypt, Late Period - Mummy Hook

Image online, courtesy British Museum.
Quoted passage, from Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt, page 53.
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Herodotus of Halicarnassus

Image online, courtesy the ancientgreece.com website.
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Egyptian Mummy - With Inner and Outer Coffin

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