

0. EGYPTIAN MUMMIES - Story Preface

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Image depicts the mummified face of Rameses II. Photo by ThutmoselIII, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

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 desiccating (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."

Of all the mummies in the world, the most famous are Egyptian pharaohs from the land of pyramids. (How, parenthetically, did ancient builders erect those enormous pyramids?) Had mummified rulers like "King Tut" - and those who lived before and after him - been buried in a sand pit, their bodies would have undergone much less decay. Even so, what remains is interesting to see.

Because grave robbers (who also stole artifacts from royal tombs) were such a problem, the mummies of pharaohs were buried in hidden places in the Valley of the Kings. Even those graves were often plundered, although the mummies were not desecrated.

If the final resting place of a pharaoh had been robbed, mummies would sometimes be moved to Western Thebes. Of the bodies hidden there, the most famous pharaohs were:

- Rameses I whose mummified remains (for a time) were believed to be "owned" by a museum in Atlanta, Georgia.
- Seti I, father of Rameses II, who was a great pharaoh and warrior.
- Rameses II, who was known as Rameses the Great, was unusual in many respects. He was about six feet tall at a time when his countrymen were just over five feet. Ruling sixty-seven years (1279-1212 B.C.), he lived until he was nearly ninety. (That was more than double the average life span of a healthy Egyptian.) He built a monument to himself on the west bank of the Nile which, today, is known as Abu Simbel.
- Tuthmosis III who was unwrapped, in 1882, by Emile Brugsch.

Although not the most important pharaoh, King Tut is the most famous. The incredible treasures in his tomb, still completely intact when they were rediscovered in 1922, have been exhibited in many places outside Egypt. Today, Tut's mummy resides at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Let's take a look.

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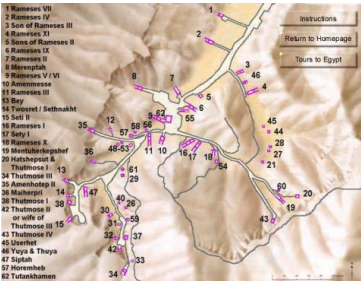


King Tut - Face Mask

Photo by Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, online via Wikimedia Commons.

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Location of Pharaohs - Excavation Sites in Egypt

Image online, courtesy Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

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Egyptian Desert Seen From Space

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Valley of the Kings Pathway

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Rameses II - Pharaoh of Egypt

Image from an Egyptian Museum handbill. Online, courtesy Cairo's Egyptian Museum.

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Pharaoh - Rameses II (The Great)

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Rameses II - Closeup View of Mummy's Face

Image from an Egyptian Museum handbill. Online, courtesy Cairo's Egyptian Museum.

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Rameses II Monument

Image of Rameses II statue at Abu Simbel by Hagor. Online, via Wikimedia Commons.

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