5.5 Gods and the afterlife

Death was a very important event for ancient Egyptians. It connected life on Earth with life ever after, so a lot of effort was spent preparing for it. This focus on death has been very valuable for historians, because most of what we know about ancient Egypt comes from what has been found in tombs. Many of the deities of ancient Egypt, whether good or bad, played a role in a person’s journey to the afterlife.

The ancient Egyptians believed the next world was a fantastic place. However, it was a long way away, and reaching it was not easy. First, the dead person had to cross a wide river. Then he or she had to chant secret spells to get through seven gates guarded by fierce monsters, all the while looking out for traps set by evil gods and attacks by savage crocodiles and venomous snakes. Then the dead person’s heart was weighed on scales against a feather to see if it was ‘heavy with sin’. Forty-two judges decided the outcome.

Preparing for the journey of the soul

The ancient Egyptians believed that a dead person had a number of souls. Two of these were the ka and the ba. The ka, the person’s life force, stayed within the tomb, getting strength from the food and drink left there. The ba, the person’s character, set off on its journey towards the afterlife, returning to the tomb to rest each night. To do these things, the soul needed a body. So dead people’s bodies were carefully preserved, or embalmed, so they did not rot. An embalmed body is called a mummy.

Mummies were buried with lots of the possessions the person’s soul might need in the afterlife. They included food and drink, clothing, perfume, furniture, jewellery and special charms called amulets. Sometimes small wooden or stone figures representing servants doing things such as making bread, ploughing a field or sailing a ship were placed in tombs. As well, prayers, hymns and magic spells from the 200 such texts in the Book of the Dead were often written on a scroll of papyrus and buried with the mummy or carved in hieroglyphs on the walls of the tomb. These texts were thought to protect the soul from evil and guide it through the afterlife.

After a dead person’s body was mummified, a funeral ceremony was held. The body was carried in a boat across the Nile and buried on the western bank, where the sun set. This was the direction in which the next world was believed to lie. Important people such as pharaohs were buried in elaborate underground tombs consisting of many rooms and tunnels. Poorer people were buried in the hot, dry sands to help preserve their bodies.
EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

1. What is embalming?
2. Outline the complications of the journey to the afterlife.
3. Which Egyptian deity was linked to each of these animals: jackal; hippopotamus; ibis; falcon; cow?
4. How different were Egyptian ideas from modern ideas about life after death?
5. Using clay or plasticine, design and mould a figurine suitable for a pharaoh’s tomb. Display your model and explain its features and purpose to the class.

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

   a. Which figure is the monster?
   b. Who do you think are the figures along the top of the painting?
   c. Will the soul who owned this heart be joining Osiris in the afterlife?
   d. Which figures represent Anubis, Thoth and Horus, and what is each of these gods doing?
7. What do you think the figurines in Source 2 are supposed to be doing?

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

8. According to Source 3, how important were cats in ancient Egypt?
9. In what ways do you think such attitudes to animals are different from or similar to attitudes in our own times?
5.6 Mummies unwrapped

The art and hieroglyphs found on the tomb walls of ancient Egyptians, and the mummies made of their dead bodies, have told historians a lot about the way of life of the ancient Egyptians.

Dead mummies do tell tales!

At first, all ancient Egyptians buried their dead in the hot desert sands. However, in time wealthier Egyptians, especially pharaohs, began to build elaborate tombs. They would also mummify bodies so their souls would always have a ‘home’ to rest in, and be able to ‘eat and drink’.

Mummies allow us to have some idea of what famous pharaohs looked like. Scientists and historians can also find out details such as their age, their body shape, whether they had had children, what diseases and health problems they suffered — even, sometimes, what they died of. Researchers have found, for example, that cancer was probably rare or non-existent in ancient Egypt. On the other hand, broken and worn teeth were very common because of their crunching on sand grit and hard pieces of corn that were mixed up in bread.

Instructions to a priest for preparing a mummy

Source 1 Instructions to a priest for preparing a mummy

Source 2 The mummy of a six-year-old Egyptian boy

Step 1 Have your jackal mask ready so you can dress up as the god Anubis. Learn the prayers and magic spells from the Book of the Dead. You will need to chant these over the dead body as you work.

Step 2 Wash the dead body with water or palm wine.

Step 3 Use a long hook to pull out the brains through the left nostril. Throw them away.

Step 4 Cut open the left side of the stomach and remove the liver, lungs, intestines and stomach. Don’t remove the heart as it contains the personality.

Step 5 Cover the internal organs with natron to absorb all moisture. Rub the dried organs with oils and resin and wrap them in linen bandages. Then push them into canopic jars. Make sure you put each organ in the right jar.

Step 6 Cover the body with natron for 40 days to dry it out. Then rub the dried skin with palm oils and ointments. Pack the stomach cavity with perfumed linen and sew up the wound.
Step 7 Place a magic charm over the stomach wound and a scarab (beetle-shaped charm) over the heart. Then wrap the body with linen bandages dipped in gum. Wrap every part separately. You will need about 370 square metres of linen. Wrap amulets and magic charms such as ankhs ( kombucha) in with the bandages. The dead person’s soul will need these during its journey to the Kingdom of Osiris.

Step 8 Place a mask made from linen and glue over the person’s head and shoulders. If you have time, paint this or cover it in gold leaf. Also place a panel across the top part of the body, decorated with protective magic symbols and drawings.

Step 9 Place the wrapped mummy in a body-shaped coffin that has been decorated with jewels, paintings and inscriptions of spells. Paint the coffin so it looks a bit like the person when he or she was alive. Be flattering!

Step 10 Tell the relatives the mummy and the canopic jars are ready for burial. Your chief priest will need to accompany the funeral procession to the tomb so he can conduct the ceremony to open the mummy’s mouth. The person’s soul needs to talk in the afterlife. Remember, the professional mourners will be noisy!

**EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION**

1. Write the sentences hidden in the table below by correctly matching the phrases in the left and right columns.

| A mummy is used to assist the journey of the dead person’s soul. |
| Natron is a mineral salt used to dry out dead bodies. |
| Bodies were mummified a body that has been preserved by drying and wrapping. |
| Canopic jars were used so that their souls would have a place to rest in. |
| Magic charms were wrapped in with the bandages a mineral salt used to dry out dead bodies. |

2. What have historians learned about ancient Egyptians by studying mummies?

**PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS**

3. Discuss as a class:
   a. why the ancient Egyptians thought it was important to preserve a dead body
   b. the similarities and differences between the burial practices of the ancient Egyptians and those used today.

**ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES**

4. The face of the boy shown in [Source 2] is painted with gold. What does this tell us about his position in ancient Egyptian society?