

CHAPTER 6

IT'S A WRAP
MUMMIES AND THE AFTERLIFE

66 PYRAMID TEXTS,
BOOK OF THE DEAD,
AND HERODOTUS



Mummies make terrific horror movie creatures, as the actor Boris Karloff did when he starred in the 1932 movie *The Mummy*. What's spookier than a 3,000-year-old corpse suddenly coming to life?

In monster movies the Mummy lurches forward, dragging his leg. Ancient Egyptians wouldn't have been scared by this stumbling bag of rags. In fact, they would probably have pointed and laughed, because every Egyptian knew mummies don't lurch. They don't drag their legs. They walk with the grace of an athlete, because in the Field of Reeds, which is where the dead lived, that limp would magically disappear. Deaf in one ear? No problem. Festering wound? No problem. Perfect health is yours in the Field of Reeds.

The Egyptians imagined that the Field of Reeds looked like home—only better. A gentle river meandered through fertile fields while munching cows looked on. The cows were fat and happy. They didn't even need to swish their tails, because there were no annoying flies in the Field of Reeds. The fields were always bursting with ripe foods ready to pick. No one was ever sick or hungry, and best of all, no one had to work.

The trick was getting in.

The Egyptians believed that everyone had three spirits—the Ba, the Ka, and the Akh. Each spirit played a different role when the body died. In its natural state, the Ba—the person's personality—looked like a bird with a miniature version of the dead person's head. After death the Ba lived in the tomb, but was free to come and go as it pleased. The Ba often went to the land of the living where it changed into anything it fancied.

The Ka, on the other hand, was stuck in the tomb. It had to stay with the body. In order to survive, the Ka needed to eat and drink. Friends and family of the dead person would bring offerings to the tomb for the Ka. They even brought clothing for it. The Ka needed the corpse, or the spirit would perish—and if it perished, good-bye Field of Reeds. In an emergency situation, the Ka could use a statue

that looked like the deceased as a fallback body. Or it could even occupy a picture of the deceased on the tomb wall. Pharaohs paid artisans to recreate their images *everywhere*. A forgotten pharaoh was doomed. No sense taking chances.

The Akh was the spirit that represented immortality. It could shine with the stars at night and the sun in the day, or live forever in the Field of Reeds. The three spirits' main responsibility was to make sure that the dead person lived forever. Their job was to gain entrance to the Field of Reeds.



WORKING STIFF

No eternal bliss is complete without servants to attend to every whim. To do the work in the next world, stone or wooden figures were buried with the dead. These figures, called *shabti*, were statues of people performing chores such as farming and baking, each engraved with the spell that would make sure they did what they were supposed to do.

Step-by-step directions on how to make a mummy were painted on this stone coffin called a sarcophagus. In the top three panels, Anubis, the jackal-headed god, takes care of the deceased.

And here's where it got tricky, because entering the Field of Reeds was as challenging as any video game.

When a person died, his or her spirit took off toward the setting sun and entered the dangerous Underworld. After a long journey the spirits arrived at a labyrinth of gates and doors. The gatekeepers and the magical doors would quiz the spirits.

"I will not let you through me," says the jamb of the door, "unless you tell me my name."

"I will not open for you," says the bolt of the door, "unless you tell me my name."

There were many names to memorize in order to open the doors, names such as "She Who Licks Her Calves" and "He Who Cuts Up An Opponent" and "Toe of His Mother." Call one tormentor by the wrong name and you were condemned to haunt your own grave and wander the desert moaning through eternity.

With so much to lose, the Egyptians came up with a cheat sheet. During the Old Kingdom, only pharaohs could get into the Field of Reeds. Not wanting to risk forgetting a name or a spell, the kings had the answers to all the questions, along with all the magic spells, buried with them. We call the book of spells from the Old Kingdom the Pyramid Texts. During the Middle Kingdom, when the Field of Reeds was open to everyone, the spells were conveniently written on the sides of the coffins. We call those the Coffin Texts. In the New Kingdom the spells were written on scrolls and buried with the body. The words written during the New Kingdom are now known as the Book of the Dead. The Egyptians thought of every possible unpleasantness and wrote spells to protect against it. They even had a spell that prevented them from having to stand on their head and eat feces—or step in some. "What I detest is feces, and I will not eat it . . . and I will not touch it with my toes." Obviously the ancients weren't taking chances on anything less than a perfect afterlife.

The Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead all had the same purpose—turn the quiz into an open-book exam and guarantee that the spirits passed.

66 Pyramid Texts, about 2375–2184 BCE

66 Book of the Dead, about 1500–250 BCE

66 Book of the Dead, about 1500–250 BCE

Once safely through the labyrinth of portals, the spirits entered the hall of judgment. Before 42 gods, the spirits declared their innocence to everything the Egyptians could think of. The cheat sheet helped them remember all the sins they didn't commit. The spirits addressed the gods one by one. Some of the gods had creepy names: Bone Breaker and Blood Eater, for example. Some gods had rather unusual names: Fiery Eyes, Hot Foot, and Pale One. Others had names that would make good video game demons: Demolisher, Lord of Truth, and the Accuser. Still others sounded a bit goofy, as if they were one of the Seven Dwarfs—Nosey, for example. The spirits had to remember which sin they denied to which god (with the help of their cheat sheet). Apparently being noisy was considered sinful. One of the denials was "O Water-smiter who came forth from the Abyss, I have not been loud voiced."

If all went well in the hall of judgment, the spirits moved on to the final test—and this is where Anubis came in. Anubis had the body of a human and the head of a jackal. One of his official titles was "Lord of the Mummy Wrappings." It was Anubis who administered the final test. On one side of a balance scale, he would place the dead person's heart and, on the other, a feather that symbolized truth and justice. The god Thoth, who was the scribe of the gods, stood by with his pen ready to write down the test results. Would the heart weigh heavy with sin? Or would it balance with truthfulness and justice? If it balanced, the deceased was given a plot of land in the Field of Reeds. But if the balance tipped, the deceased met a very different fate. Near the scales a fierce monster called "The Eater of

66 Book of the Dead, about 1500–250 BCE



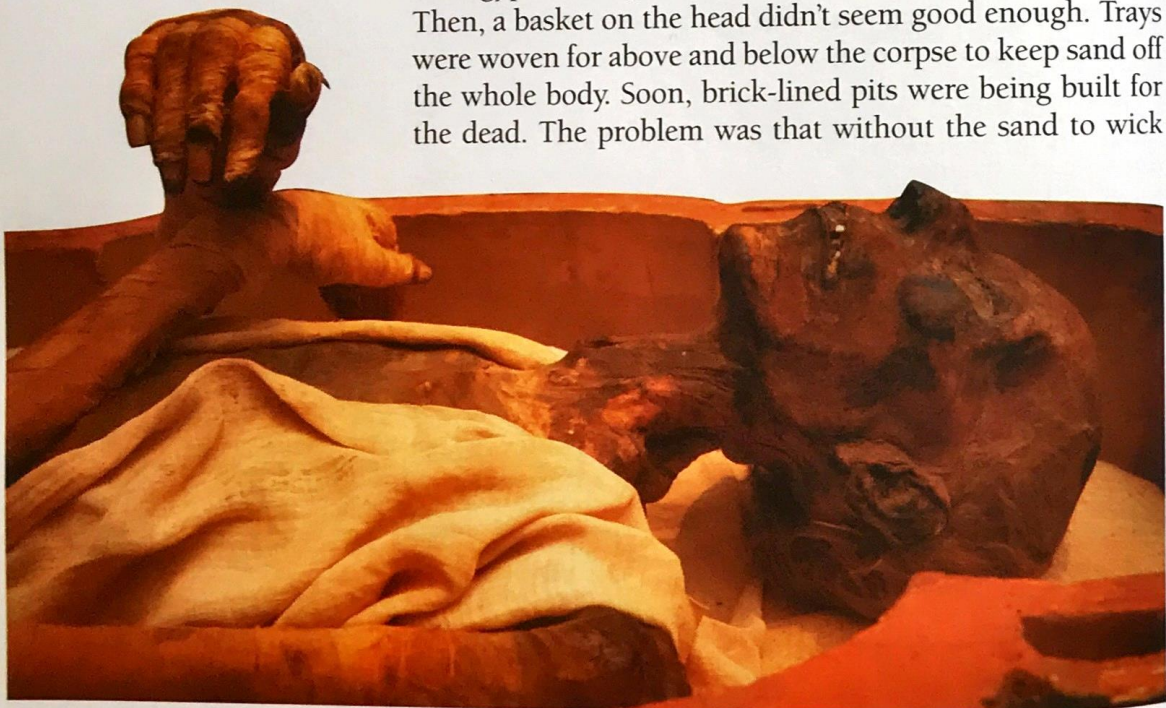
In this drawing from the Book of the Dead, the demon known as the Eater of the Dead has the head of a crocodile, the body of a lion, and the hindquarters of a hippo.

SACRED ANIMALS

For the Egyptians it was unthinkable that a sacred animal (or beloved pet) be left to rot. They mummified animals by the thousands—sometimes millions. At Tuna el-Gebel, the cemetery of Hermopolis, scientists have unearthed more than four million mummies of a storklike bird called an ibis.

the Dead” waited—and he was hungry. Anubis fed the Eater of the Dead the hearts of those who failed the final test. Without a heart, the dead person was doomed. Egyptians believed that the three spirits needed their *whole* body to live in the Field of Reeds. If they were missing any essential part, they would spend eternity as evil spirits haunting the living. Naturally, the living did everything they could to preserve the body.

In the beginning nature preserved the bodies. The Egyptians buried their dead in the sand, on their sides, with their knees curled into their chest, facing the setting sun in the direction their spirits were headed. The hot, dry desert sucked the body fluids away. The skin hardened into a leathery shell, keeping everything in place. Ironically, concern for the corpse was what created problems. To keep sand from getting into the dead person’s eyes and mouth, the Egyptians began to put a basket over the body’s head. Then, a basket on the head didn’t seem good enough. Trays were woven for above and below the corpse to keep sand off the whole body. Soon, brick-lined pits were being built for the dead. The problem was that without the sand to wick



Ramesses II was publicly unwrapped in June 1886 in less than 15 minutes. His exposed body became contaminated by fungi and bacteria, which literally ate him bit by bit. In 1975 scientists used gamma rays to sterilize Ramesses II’s body, and he is now stored in an anti-bacterial case.

away the moisture, the bodies were rotting. That would never do. Without the entire body, the spirits could not lounge in the Field of Reeds. Haunting was happening. And so the Egyptians experimented and gradually developed the process of **mummification** during the Old Kingdom period.

Because everyone wanted their loved ones preserved, the funeral trade was a good one. The embalmers, who prepared the dead for burial, guarded their money-making secrets, passing their skills down from father to son. What we know about making a mummy comes from the Greek historians Herodotus, who wrote during the 5th century BCE, and Diodorus Siculus, who wrote during the 1st century BCE. The Greeks were fascinated by Egypt, as they were with many foreign cultures, and wrote about both the country and its history. Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus describe three mummy options: one for the very rich, one for the not so rich, and one for the poor. From their writings, we have the following recipe for a mummy (in this case, a top-of-the-line mummy):

1. First stop for the dead is the Place of Washing, which the Egyptians called *Ibu*. After a good washing, the embalmers performed a ceremony with Nile water and a kind of salt found in the waters of the Nile called natron. The ceremony symbolizes rebirth. For more reasons than one—secrecy and stench, to name two—*Ibu* is not close to town.
2. Next stop is *Per-nefer*, the House of Mummification. Herodotus reports what went on there: “They take first a crooked piece of iron, and with it draw out the brain through the nostrils.” Then the embalmers flush out the skull with water and lay it on its side to drain while they “cut along the flank . . . and take out the whole contents of the abdomen.” The heart is left inside the body because the Egyptians believe this to be the most important organ. A few things are tossed because they are considered so unimportant—the brain, for one. The rest of the internal organs are

mummiya = “pitch”
When mummies were first examined, people assumed that the bodies had been dipped in pitch, which comes from tar. The fact that the mummies burned like torches when set on fire supported their incorrect assumption.


RIP AND RUN

From Diodorus Siculus we know that the embalmer who made the “cut in the flank” was called the Ripper. The Egyptians considered any cut an offense to the body. So in a symbolic performance after the cut was made, the rest of the embalmers threw stones at the Ripper and chased him away with curses.

66 Herodotus, *Histories*, about 450 BCE



The crouching figure of Anubis on the handle of this knife is the clue that leads scholars to believe that embalmers used this instrument to cut open corpses.



MEANWHILE
IN THE
AMERICAS...

In coastal Chile the Chinchorro people were also making mummies, but their process involved taking the body apart and then putting it back together again. They beheaded, dismembered, and skinned the corpse. Once dry, the parts were reassembled using sticks and grass stuffing to shape the body.

cleaned and stored in jars so that the spirits have a complete home when the time comes to reoccupy the body. Fingernails and toenails are wrapped with twine to keep them from falling off when the skin shrinks. The body is stuffed, covered with natron, which is even better than sand for drying, and left to dry for 40 days.

3. Next stop *Wabet*, the House of Purification. Here the embalmers remove the stuffing from the body cavity and repack it with sawdust, rags, natron, or sometimes even plants. They rub the skin with oils to restore its softness. Once the body looks its best, the wrapping begins. It can take two weeks to wrap a body and nearly 500 square yards of linen. The family of the deceased spends the next 40 days while the body is drying collecting anything that can be torn into strips to supply the embalmers with wrappings. To help the Ka and Ba recognize their body under all those rags, an artist paints a mummy mask that looks like the dead person's face.

From start to finish, embalmers chanted spells and performed rituals. The whole process took on average 70 days—unless, of course, you went for the economy option, and then the embalmers had you in and out in 7 days. And that's a wrap.



These three nesting coffins are person-shaped, or anthropoid. Only the very wealthy could afford to pay artists to carve mummy cases. The richer you were, the fancier your burial would be.