

Egyptian Mummies: Exploring Ancient Lives

descriptive audio tour

Stop 1

Welcome

Welcome to *Egyptian Mummies: Exploring Ancient Lives*. This exhibition was created by the British Museum, to highlight extraordinary research into the lives of six mummies. Through non-invasive techniques like CT-scans, the British Museum has been able to construct a more nuanced portrait of life in ancient Egypt over a thousand-year span. It is our great pleasure to bring this research to the Royal Ontario Museum and share it with you.

Please be advised that this exhibition contains mummies and digital displays of human remains from the British Museum. The ROM also holds and cares for some human remains, to expand our knowledge of ancient cultures. When we make the decision to display remains, it's to broaden our understanding of the ways people lived and cared for their dead – and with the support of the related communities or places of origin.

This descriptive audio tour will introduce you to the six lives that make up the heart of this exhibition. We'll also explore other themes around daily life in ancient Egypt. From jobs, health, hobbies, and diet, we hope you'll find a few surprising connections with their world.

Greeting you at the entrance to this exhibition are two projections of Anubis. Anubis was an important god to the ancient Egyptians. He is depicted as human, but with the head of a jackal – a wild animal in the same family as wolves, coyotes, and dogs. The ancient Egyptians associated jackals with the afterlife because they often saw these animals in cemeteries.

As you travel down the hallway to your right, you enter a dark space. Tiny lights hang overhead, mimicking a star-filled sky. Under your feet is an image of the Nile, the longest river in the world. In both ancient and modern Egypt, the Nile is

extremely important. Its waters and fertile soil help life thrive in the middle of a desert.

At the end of the hallway is a wooden model of a funerary boat. It's about the length of an adult's arm, and brightly coloured. The yellows and greens that make up the boat have stayed vivid for over a thousand years. The boat carries three figures surrounding a tiny mummy on a funerary bed. The two women at either end of the bed likely represent Isis and Nephthys. They were sisters of Osiris, the god of the afterlife. The man sitting at one end of the boat may be a priest, reading rituals that helped the deceased reach the afterlife. This model represents the deceased's journey to the tomb and, symbolically, to the afterlife.

Here's where your journey begins. In the first space, you'll encounter the mummy of Nestawedjat, a woman who lived in Egypt almost three thousand years ago. Find out in the next section how researchers construct the life of someone who lived so long ago.

Stop 2

Nestawedjat: A Married Woman from Thebes

In this space are three large coffins. The case on your left contains the mummified body of Nestawedjat. She was an upper-class woman who died around seven hundred BCE. The other cases contain her outer, middle, and inner coffins. They're a bit like Russian nesting dolls – one coffin fits inside the other. Coffins were among the most important items of funerary equipment. They were believed to magically protect the deceased and symbolize a rebirth into the afterlife. Her inner coffin shows a likeness of a woman, gazing upwards. Her eyes are lined in heavy black kohl liner. An image of the goddess Nut appears on the front. Her wings span the width of the coffin.

'Nestawedjat' is a woman's name, but British Museum staff had long wondered if these coffins *actually* contained a woman's remains. In the nineteen sixties, early x-rays indicated the mummy of a man. However, with a CT scan, researchers have since confirmed these were a woman's remains. Without unwrapping her linen, they could examine her pelvis and the shape of her hipbones to confirm her sex.

Wear on her pelvis joints reveal she was between thirty-five and forty-nine when she died. This sounds young to us, but she lived a long life for an ancient Egyptian.

Researchers also noticed how well-preserved Nestawedjat's mummy is. It's a perfect example of the careful mummification process that was central to funerary beliefs.

Mummification was so important to ancient Egyptians because they believed a mummified body was the keeper of a person's three souls. The first soul, or 'ka', was the person's double and stayed in the tomb with the body. The second, or 'ba', was a human-headed bird, and was free to travel at will. And finally, the 'akh', was the blessed or transfigured spirit, which entered the Afterlife. These spirits might be lost if the body was destroyed through natural decomposition.

To preserve the body, special priests called embalmers removed most of the internal organs soon after death. They removed the brain by making a small hole in the deceased's nose and pulling the tissues out. The embalmers then dried the body in a natural salt called natron for about thirty-five days. Finally, they wrapped the body in many layers of linen. In some places, Nestawedjat's linen is as thick as the length of an adult's thumb.

Embalming had both practical and spiritual dimensions. The ancient Egyptians believed it was overseen by a divine power – Anubis, the jackal-headed god who greeted you at the beginning of the exhibition. You'll hear more about him at the next stop.

Stop 3

Anubis and embalming

In ancient Egyptian religion, Anubis is both protector of the burial ground and inventor of embalming. According to legend, he performed the first mummification on the body of the god Osiris, who then became Lord of the Afterlife. During the embalming process, the priests were meant to embody Anubis' spirit. In fact, some might have worn jackal masks during mummification.

The jackal is a close cousin to wolves, coyotes, and dogs. Ancient Egyptians linked Anubis to the afterlife because they often spotted jackals lurking in burial grounds.

In nature, jackals typically have light reddish-brown fur with a grey patch on their back. However, in ancient Egyptian art, Anubis is always jet-black – the colour of rebirth. This association comes from the Nile river. When the Nile flooded, the soil along its banks turned a rich black, reviving the farmlands and signifying the beginning of the growing season. Naturally, the god that helped the deceased achieve immortality – a spiritual rebirth – would be black too.

Nearby is a small Anubis sculpture. It's metal and was made between six sixty-four and three thirty-two BCE. It's small – about the size of an adult's index finger. Its surface is almost black aside from a bright glint in its eyes, where the artist added small gold inlays.

In the next section you'll encounter a temple singer. She worshipped in the cult of Amun, whose priesthood was an incredibly powerful and influential religious group.

Stop 4

Tamut: a chantress of Amun

Tamut was a singer in the Temple of Karnak, the city of Thebes' most important religious centre. She and her father, a priest named Khonsumose, both worked among the priests running the cult of Amun, the most powerful god in Egypt. His name means "the hidden one." Both Tamut and her father took part in religious rituals at the temple.

Amun-worship was widespread in Egypt by Tamut's lifetime. The temple at Karnak was *massive* – its ruins show us it was one of the biggest religious complexes in the world. Karnak was so influential that the high priests running the temple even challenged royal power at times.

Tamut's mummy is covered by a cartonnage case. Cartonnage looks a bit like papier-mâché. Makers used linen, plaster, and glue to create a hard outer-shell that protects the mummy. An artist has covered Tamut's cartonnage case with colourful religious scenes. In one image on the coffin's front, Horus, the falcon-headed god of the sky, leads Tamut to a company of gods. The crowd includes Osiris and his sisters Isis and Nephthys. Even though the cartonnage is almost three thousand years old, much of the colour is still vibrant.

Like Nestawedjat, the first mummy you encountered, researchers believe Tamut was between the ages of thirty-five and forty-nine when she died. We see this age reflected in the wear and tear on her joints.

CT scans also reveal that she had dental disease and plaque in her arteries. Plaque can lead to strokes and heart attacks. Today, cardiovascular disease is regarded as the main cause of death in the developed world. Mummies like Tamut show that the disease has a longer history than we previously thought.

Tamut's CT scans revealed a lot of information around health in ancient Egypt. But the British Museum's research team also noticed something intriguing that helps us understand more about the cultural practices around death in ancient Egypt – specifically magical rituals. Continue the audio tour when you're ready to hear more.

Stop 5

Amulets

Tamut's mummy offers an incredible record of disease in ancient Egypt. But under the wrappings are items that reveal cultural – and magical – practices around caring for the dead.

CT scans show Tamut's body is covered in amulets and other protective items. Objects like these were believed to have magical powers that protected the dead and helped them achieve immortality. Amulets came in many different forms, including gods and animals. But it wasn't just an amulet's shape that made it

powerful –the colour, the materials used to make it, or the spiritual words used to activate it, were also factors.

Tamut has an amulet of a winged goddess curved around her neck, in the form of a kneeling female figure with outstretched wings. The figure is probably Nut, goddess of the sky and eternal mother of the deceased.

On one of Tamut's breasts is an amulet of the sun god Ra-Horakhty. He appears in the form of a falcon, a large bird that's like a hawk. Artists often depicted him on coffin lids. He symbolizes the renewal of life through the power of the sun.

A vulture-shaped amulet rests on her pubic area. Vultures often represent the goddesses Nekhbet and Mut, who are associated with birth and rebirth.

Narrow leather bands called stola run from Tamut's shoulders to her stomach, crossing at her chest. Stola were considered the trappings of the gods – in fact, depictions of Osiris often show him with similar chest straps. Stola were probably meant to provide divine status to the deceased.

Nearby are amulets that were common in ancient Egypt – the djed pillar, the heart scarab, and the wedjat eye. All of the amulets are small and would fit in the palm of your hand.

The djed pillar symbolized stability and endurance. It's shaped like a small column, with four ridges at the top. It's a reference to Osiris – the god of the dead – and his backbone. The Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a collection of magical spells believed to guide the deceased's journey into the afterlife, contains a reference to the djed pillar: 'Raise yourself, O Osiris, you have your backbone...'

Among the most important amulets were those in the form of a scarab beetle inscribed with spell 30B of the Book of the Dead. Spell 30B reads in part, "...O my heart, the heart of (my) mother! O my heart of the different forms! Do not stand up as a witness in the presence of the Balance. Do not be opposed to me in the Tribunal." The Egyptians believed these words would prevent the heart from revealing a person's wicked deeds when judged in the hall of Osiris.

The wedjat, or Eye of Horus, was one of the most popular amulet styles. According to myth, the god Horus's right eye was injured in battle, but later magically healed.

The wedjat eye became a symbol for integrity and the state of being whole. Believers saw it as a protector from injury or harm. The lines beneath the eye are a reference to markings around the eye of a falcon, the bird used to represent Horus. The embalmers who prepared Tamut's body for mummification placed two metal plates with engraved wedjat eyes over cuts in her abdomen, as a form of magical healing.

In the next section, you'll encounter a priest who reveals quite a bit about dental health in ancient Egypt.

Stop 6

Irthorru: A Priest from Akhmim

You've arrived at Irthorru's mummy and coffin. Researchers believe he was between the ages of thirty-five and forty-nine when he died.

Irthorru was a priest who lived in Akhmim, a town on the Nile River. In ancient Egypt, most priests served one month out of four. During their off time, they worked outside of the temple or served in another sanctuary. Individuals could hold several priesthoods at the same time. Their role was prestigious and lucrative – daily food offerings were probably shared among the priests after being offered to the gods. By Irthorru's lifetime, most positions were inherited. Many members of his family served in the priesthood.

An artist has painted various scenes across Irthorru's coffin. In fact, illustrations of Irthorru appear in several. As a living person, he is introduced to the gods of the afterlife by Thoth, the god of wisdom, magic, writing, and the moon. Below the scene lies his mummy. Soaring above his body is his ba spirit in the form of a bird with a human head. This suggests his ability to travel between the afterlife and the world of the living.

Irthorru's face is covered in a gilded mask with a false beard. It's a perfect face for eternity – gold symbolized the skin of the gods. Masks like these usually covered the whole head of the deceased, but CT scans reveal this mask only covers Irthorru's face. It's an unusual feature for mummification during this period.

The scans also revealed Irthorru had extremely poor dental health. He had numerous lesions that were probably abscesses – infections that would have released pus – which would have probably been very painful.

We don't know why Irthorru had such poor dental health, but research by the British Museum may offer some clues. Analysis on thirty different bread loaves from their collection revealed many surprising ingredients – stones, sand, and chaff, a grain casing that humans can't digest. These coarse additions may have caused the heavy wear observed in some ancient Egyptian mummies' teeth. Such dental wear would have allowed the bacteria of the mouth to enter the pulp chamber – that's the centre of the tooth - causing an infection.

We'll shift from the mouth to the top of the head in this next section and explore hair. In today's world, hair carries so much meaning and significance – and the same was true, thousands of years ago, in ancient Egypt.

Stop 7

A Temple Singer from Thebes

The number of unearthed styling tools tell us haircare was serious business in ancient Egypt. Men usually shaved their faces. Tweezers helped both sexes remove unwanted growth.

Hair could also be symbolic. Styles and length could reveal information about age, sex, and social standing.

Although we don't know her name, the inscription on this woman's cartonnage case tells us that she was a priestess. It's possible she had a high status in society too. When researchers reviewed her CT scans, they noticed she had extremely

short hair – a cut that may indicate she wore wigs for special occasions. Both high-ranking men and women wore elaborate wigs of human hair with their natural hair cut short or shaved. These status symbols concealed receding hairlines and discouraged lice – a big problem for many ancient societies.

This priestess lived in Thebes around eight hundred BCE and probably worked at the temple of Karnak. CT scans show that she was probably between thirty-five and forty-nine years old when she died.

A painter has decorated her cartonnage case in colourful scenes that offer divine protection. On her chest is a falcon with a green ram's head. There's also a red circle symbolizing the sun god Ra emerging at dawn.

The scans reveal the embalmers placed a few different amulets under her wrappings, including one shaped like a headrest. The headrest is u-shaped and supported by a thick base. The *Book of the Dead* explains the magical functions of the headrest. It elevated the head of the deceased, in reference to the sun god's rise in the east each morning. It was also believed to offer magical protection against decapitation.

Like Irthorru, the priest in the previous section, these CT scans also show various dental diseases – bread was a staple for all levels of society, and perhaps those rough ingredients wore down her teeth, too.

Based on what we know about religious life in Egypt, it's likely the priestess played musical instruments during spiritual ceremonies. You'll hear a bit more about ancient Egyptian music in the next section.

Stop 8

Musical Instruments

Music was an important part of ancient Egyptian life – we see performance depicted in different types of art, including paintings and carvings. We also have many examples of musical instruments – different types of drums and shakers, as well as flutes and string instruments, like lutes and harps. These give us a general

idea of the types of sounds instruments made, but we don't know exactly what melodies or hymns were like – there aren't any examples of arrangements.

The god Bes, protector of households and families, was associated with music. Artists usually depicted him dancing or playing the tambourine while sticking out his tongue, as a way of warding off evil forces.

The next section focuses on the symbolism of the family in ancient Egypt. It also features an alcove, containing the mummy of a young child who died during the period of Roman rule in Egypt. Objects that explore the importance of the family structure and childhood in ancient Egypt are outside of the alcove.

Stop 9

A Young Child from Hawara

We know little about the ancient Egyptians' beliefs about children in the afterlife. Few children received elaborate burials, perhaps because many died young. But during the Roman period, which began in thirty BCE and ended in six-forty CE, the practice increased. Researchers have located many examples of mummified children at different burial sites.

During Greek and Roman rule, residents of the city of Arsinoe buried their loved ones in the cemetery at Hawara. Some graves at the site often contain several bodies. This young boy was discovered with other mummies, including a woman and two children. We do not know if this group was related.

CT scans confirm this boy was around two years old when he died. His spine and ribs show damage which may have happened during mummification. Many layers of bandages cover his body. His cartonnage mask is gilded with intricate decoration, suggesting he came from a wealthy family. The cartonnage also shows traditional scenes, such as a priest – or maybe the boy himself – performing rituals and presenting offerings to the gods. On the back of the mask an artist has painted a scene showing the child being purified in life-giving waters by the gods Horus and Thoth. Horus is falcon-headed. Thoth has the head of an ibis, a bird with a long, pointed beak. Both gods have human bodies.

The family unit was central to life and was often explored by artists and sculptors. For the ancient Egyptians, the ideal family unit contained a father, mother, and a child. This grouping was also echoed in religious art. Many works show Osiris and Isis together, with their child Horus.

This child passed away during the first hundred years of Roman rule over Egypt. Until about three hundred CE, some burial traditions remained the same. But the era saw new practices too. In the last section, you'll hear how methods shifted as ancient Egypt entered a new age.

Stop 10

A Young Man from Roman Egypt

Mummification continued under Roman rule, but techniques and styles changed over time. One major shift was the 'mummy portrait' – wooden panels that showed the deceased as they appeared in life. Despite this change, funerary practices still centred around the deceased's rebirth into the afterlife in the footsteps of Osiris.

CT scans reveal this young man skeleton has nearly finished growing and he died between the ages of seventeen and twenty. His mummy portrait shows a young man with dark curly hair, large expressive eyes, and thick eyebrows. His face is slim, but CT scans show he was significantly overweight when he died. He also had significant tooth decay – perhaps his diet was high in sugar and starchy foods. The shroud that covers his body is unusual because it's plain. During this era, funerary shrouds usually had elaborately painted scenes or complex criss-crossed bandage patterns.

You've almost reached the end of the exhibition. Before you go, spend a bit of time with the short film at the end. You'll learn that the study of ancient Egypt has come a long way since the eighteen hundreds. While x-rays made in the nineteen sixties helped uncover some information, today's CT scans provide details that would amaze early Egyptologists. As technology improves, we're able to answer questions we thought we'd never solve. And that leads us to wonder – what will tomorrow's researchers discover? How will we refine our understanding of life

and death in ancient Egypt? What more can we learn from the people beneath the wrappings? And what could an ancient Egyptian exhibition look like in twenty years?

We hope you've enjoyed your visit to *Egyptian Mummies: Exploring Ancient Lives*. If you're eager to spend more time with this history, please visit the ROM's own Egyptian galleries and the Mummy Portrait display, which are both located on the 3rd floor.