

Ancient Egyptian Deathcare

The mysteries and wonders of Ancient Egypt still command the attention of the modern world over 5,000 years later. While the archaeological evidence uncovered from the remains of the ancient civilization contain a diversity of insight, the funerary practices of elaborate entombments and mummification remain among the most fascinating. Because of the great deal of care Egyptians took in burying their dead, we have near-perfect preservations and archaeological evidence to study. While modern burial practices look somewhat different from those of Ancient Egypt, the core elements of caring for the dead are actually quite similar, bridging the connection between ancient and modern deathcare.

As in many ancient and modern civilizations, deathcare and funerary practices were greatly informed by religious and spiritual beliefs. Ancient Egyptians had a highly developed cosmological system which was recorded in detail by religious scribes. Much of what we know about Egyptian theology comes from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

Pert Em Hru - The Egyptian Book of the Dead

The Egyptian Book of the Dead is translated from the phrase *Pert em hru*, which actually means *The Chapters of Coming-Forth-By-Day*. Despite the name, the Book of the Dead is not actually a book, but is a collection of prayers, hymns, instructions, and mythology about Egyptian funerary practices and beliefs. The texts have been mostly found buried with corpses who were of a prominent status in life. It is assumed that religious scribes assembled a particular collection of texts to be buried with a specific person, tailoring each assortment to the needs of the individual. While the message



throughout the texts is not consistent, all the texts demonstrate a belief in an immortal soul, resurrection, and life after death.

Ancient Egyptians paid close attention to Earth's natural cycles and rhythms. They applied the cyclical patterns to human life as well, and believed that death, rather than being an end, was merely a significant transition to a different form of existence. Many of the stories and mythologies found in the *Pert em hru* center the Egyptian Gods, Ra and Osiris.

Ra is one of the most famous Gods of Ancient Egypt and is also known as the God of the Sun. In accordance with the natural cycles of the day, it is said that Ra travels across the length of the sky day and night, bringing the sun up with him when he rises, and setting it back down on the horizon at day's end. One prominent belief was that upon death, the deceased person would



be resurrected in the afterlife, and join Ra on his journey throughout the sky.

A different belief with regards to the afterlife was about the God Osiris. Osiris was believed to be the Lord of the Underworld; a position he gained due to his miraculous resurrection after his body was cut into fourteen pieces and scattered in the four winds. When an Egyptian person died, they would be required to pass a series of tests and judgements, before being allowed to enter the eternal kingdom of the underworld ruled by Osiris.

While both the stories of Ra and Osiris enact resurrection in a different manner than belief systems like Christianity, the principle of a renewed existence remains pertinent. These beliefs heavily influenced the funerary practices and burial preparations which were all in the service of ensuring a good afterlife.

Egyptian Body Care and the Process of Mummification

The process of mummification was no small undertaking. In order to ensure a successful transition into the afterlife, Ancient Egyptians believed the dead must be buried in a particular way. Technical records have been uncovered which detail the process of embalming and

mummification as it was done in Ancient Egypt. Additionally, the nearly perfect mummified corpses that have been studied by researchers today, have provided much information on how Egyptians cared for their dead.

The first step after a person had died, was to perform a ritual washing. Cleaning and washing the body is still a very common practice in modern day deathcare, and is often tied to religious and spiritual significance. Because Ancient Egyptians believed that the body must enter the afterlife in its most perfect form, washing the body to rid it of impurities was essential.

Next, the body would be opened up to remove all the internal organs and brain. In order to prevent decomposition of the body, the organs were removed so the body could eventually be filled with dry, moisture-wicking packing. The only exception was the heart, which always remained in the body of the deceased. Because the heart was at the center of the body, the Egyptians believed that it was an important and perhaps essential part of the person, which could not be separated from them in the afterlife.

To dry the body, Egyptians would make pouches of a salt compound called natron which would be placed inside the body cavity. The naturally salt substance was good at absorbing moisture from the body, which would prevent decomposition. The process took about forty days in total. After the body was completely dry, it would be packed with a mixture of sawdust, earth, linen, and aromatic substances intended to make the body smell pleasant.

With the internal part of the body prepared, it was time to address the external appearance. The body would be moisturized with oils to try and restore some of the life-like qualities and give it a pleasant aroma. The hair was styled in an appealing way, and the body

might have been adorned with jewelry. The goal of this part of the process was to make the corpse look the way it was to be in the eternal afterlife. Therefore, Egyptians took great care to make the body look as perfect and life-like as possible.

Finally, the body was wrapped in long strips of linen and crowned with masks that were intended to represent



the deceased in a perfect form that they would achieve after entering the afterlife.

Those who were royalty or considered prominent figures were buried in elaborate tombs that were designed to honor the individual who was buried in it. The walls were etched with hieroglyphics that blessed the dead and the chamber was filled with personal belongings of the deceased. It was also common to put food in the tomb which acted as an offering that would sustain the person in the afterlife. Because food could not be continuously put in the tomb after it was shut, other offerings to the deceased were offered through magical rituals.

The Significance of Mummification

While it was believed that after death the spirit would depart from the physical body, the corpse itself still remained vital for a good afterlife. Energies called the *Ka* and the *Ba* were written about extensively in funerary texts and in the *Pert em hru*. The *Ka* and the *Ba* were understood to be spirit entities that had the privilege of unrestricted movement after death. The *Ka* and *Ba* represented the essential part of the human which lived on in the afterlife. However, in order for them to remain alive, they had to have periodic contact with the physical body. Additionally, if the name of the person was forgotten from cultural memory, the *Ka* and *Ba* would die out. For that reason, names of prominent people who died were written about extensively and continuous magical sacrifices were performed in order to sustain the existence of their *Ka* and *Ba*.

Deathcare as a Cultural Bridge

Ancient Death care in Egypt points to the ways in which communities have practiced caring for their dead for thousands of years. Ensuring that the deceased are treated with respect in order to facilitate a good afterlife is a practice that connects deathcare throughout history. The parallel ways that Ancient Egyptians and modern people care for their dead demonstrate how important the pillar of deathcare is in shaping communities and societies across time and space.

Citations

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