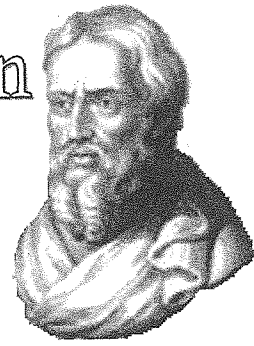


Herodotus on Mummification



Herodotus was a Greek writer who lived in the 5th century B.C. In his Histories he wrote of many events in Ancient Greece and elsewhere, including this account from his travels to Egypt.

Their fashions of mourning and of burial are these:

Whenever any household has lost a man who is of any regard amongst them, the whole number of women of that house forthwith plaster over their heads or even their faces with mud. Then leaving the corpse within the house they go themselves to and fro about the city and beat themselves, with their garments ... and with them go all the women who are related to the dead man, and on the other side the men beat themselves ... In addition, unrelated mourners were apparently hired. These mourners were led by ... two women, probably priestesses, who accompanied the corpse, one walking at its head, the other at its feet, as Isis and Nephthys had done with their brother Osiris; and when they have done this, they then convey the body to the embalming.

In this occupation certain persons employ themselves regularly and inherit this as a craft. These, whenever a corpse is conveyed to them, show to those who brought it wooden models of corpses made like reality by painting...; the second which they show is less good than this and also less expensive; and the third is the least expensive of all. Having told them about this, they inquire of them in which way they desire the corpse of their friend to be prepared. Then after they have agreed for a certain price depart out of the way, and the others ... embalm according to the best of these ways thus:

First with the crooked iron tool they draw out the brain through the nostrils, extracting it partly thus and partly by pouring in drugs; and after this with a sharp stone they make a cut along the side and take out the whole contents of the belly, and when they have cleared out the cavity and cleansed it with palm-wine they cleanse it again with spices pounded up: then they fill the belly with pure myrrh pounded up and with cassia and other spices except frankincense, and sew it together again. Having so done they keep it for embalming covered up in natron (a mineral found in salt beds) for seventy days, but for a longer time than this it is not permitted to embalm it; and when the seventy days are past, they wash the corpse and roll its whole body up in fine linen cut into bands, smearing these beneath with gum, which the Egyptians use generally instead of glue. Then the kinsfolk receive it from them and have a wooden figure made in the shape of a man, and when they

have had this made they enclose the corpse, and having shut it up within, they store it then in a sepulchral (funeral) chamber, setting it to stand upright against the wall.

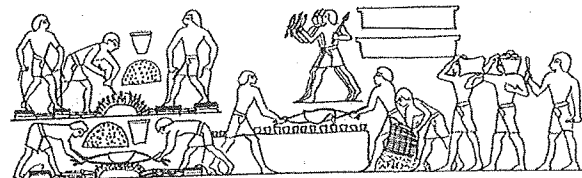
Thus they deal with the corpses which are prepared in the most costly way; but for those who desire the middle way and wish to avoid great cost they prepare the corpse as follows:

Having filled their syringes with the oil which is got from cedar-wood, with this they forthwith fill the belly of the corpse, and this they do without having either cut it open or taken out the bowels, but they inject the oil by the breech, and having stopped the drench from returning back they keep it then the appointed number of days for embalming, and on the last of the days they let the cedar oil come out from the belly, which they before put in; and it has such power that it brings out with it the bowels and interior organs of the body dissolved; and the natron dissolves the flesh, so that there is left of the corpse only the skin and the bones. When they have done this they give back the corpse at once in that condition without working upon it any more.

The third kind of embalming, by which are prepared the bodies of those who have less means, is as follows: They cleanse out the belly with a purge and then keep the body for embalming during the seventy days, and at once after that they give it back to the bringers to carry away.

The wives of men of rank when they die are not given at once to be embalmed, nor such women as are very beautiful or of greater regard than others, but on the third or fourth day after their death (and not before) they are delivered to the embalmers. They do so about this matter in order that the embalmers may not abuse their women...

Whenever any one, either of the Egyptians themselves or of strangers, is found to have been carried off by a crocodile or brought to his death by the river itself, the people of any city by which he may have been cast up on land must embalm him and lay him out in the fairest way they can and bury him in a sacred burial-place, nor may any of his relations or friends besides touch him, but the priests of the Nile themselves handle the corpse and bury it as that of one who was something more than man.



Primary source adapted from
nefertiti.iwebland.com/texts/herodotus_burial.htm

Document Based Questions

1. What did you find to be most interesting or unusual about the way the Ancient Egyptians mourned, according to Herodotus? Explain.

2. Which of the three options for mummification do you think was probably chosen most often? Explain why.

3. What do you think was the basis of the embalmer's pricing of the three options? (What made one more or less expensive?)

4. How do you think people in Ancient Egypt viewed the embalmers? Do you think it was a respected job? Why or why not?
