

Mummification and Death Rituals

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

There is a classic dilemma, Duncan, that every society faces: what to do with dead bodies. This is going to come across as insensitive but there's no getting around the fact that corpses are very inconvenient. It would be great if we all perished like a Thanos finger-snap or a vampire from Blade, just crumbling into dust, but the only non-Hollywood method for achieving that cool disintegration effect is via cremation, either in a specially designed oven or by launching flaming arrows into a boat as it slowly drifts toward the sunset, and FYI that's how I want to be sent to the hereafter. You're younger than me so presumably you'll be in charge of my funeral arrangements, you should probably start saving up now. Boats made of kindling aren't cheap. Maybe just use a raft...I was picturing an elaborate Viking funeral but knowing you I'm guessing you'd just lash some reeds together and squirt lighter fluid all over my body and torch me in a

scummy pond. But I do want to be cremated because cremation is the most logical option, it results in the least amount of wasted space. The other popular solution humans have come up with—packing the dead into boxes and planting them in giant fields—is remarkably wasteful and inefficient. As George Carlin pointed out. But it could be worse, because there are other, even more wasteful and pointless methods for handling the dead, and we're going to discuss one of the absolute worst but most fascinating in this episode. We are talking this week about Death Rituals and specifically mummification.

Now, death rituals vary across cultures. They often include a mourning period, and either burial or other ceremonial methods of disposing of the body.

The oldest intentional burial site that we know of is Qafzeh in Israel, which dates back to the Paleolithic era almost 90,000 years ago. And while burial or burning have traditionally been the most common death rituals, plenty of other techniques have been developed over the years. Some of them are extremely elaborate. To this day some natives of Madagascar engage in Famadihana, or "dancing with the dead." it's also known ominously as "the turning of the bones." The Malagasy people believe that the soul can't depart the body until the corpse is fully decomposed. So in a giant celebration every 5 to 7 years families dig up the bodies of

their deceased relatives and (as the name implies) turn the bones and apply new dressings. Mourning is not allowed, Famadihana is a rollicking drunken celebration...and yeah I think I'd have to knock back a few beers before confronting my rotting ancestors. Unfortunately, "Turning the Bones" also has the side effect of spreading horrific disease, such as pneumonic plague, and so it has been steadily falling out of favor. It's also gross, but I guess maybe that's just a product of my Western upbringing. I'm not judging, I'm just silently disgusted. I'm not angry I'm just disappointed.

There is no shortage of unique death rituals around the world. Many Tibetan Buddhists traditionally practice so-called "sky burial." Which sounds way cooler than it is. It consists of placing the corpse on a hill and letting birds and animals tear it apart. Calling it "sky burial" makes it sound dramatic and celestial, like they launch their dead loved ones into the stratosphere with a giant catapult. If that were the case I would totally sign up for sky burial. Actually I changed my mind, instead of the Viking-raft-pond thing I want to be catapulted into space. With my luck I'd just be launched into the Santa Cruz mountains, land in some hippy's pool. That's one way to wake up in the morning. Human projectile in your backyard. Anyway, sky burial is supposedly a celebrated and storied death ritual, but it just seems like laziness, really. It's the least amount of effort you can possibly employ beyond

just leaving the body where it fell.

In South Korea, on the other hand, they expend a little more effort: many families choose to press the cremated remains of their relatives and friends into colorful burial beads and fashion them into an artistic display.

That's cool, you can wear grandma. If you wanted to; they probably just hang the designs on a wall. Shame. Missed opportunity, really. "Oh wow, I love your earrings, where did you get them?" They're...vintage.

In America and many western countries mourners typically wear black, a tradition that goes back to Roman times. There is often a viewing, during which family members awkwardly gather in a room with the dead body of their relative and mill around trying to pretend the whole experience is not intensely creepy, and then there is usually a funeral, with a series of public speeches in which everyone tries to think of nice things to say about racist uncle Joe, and then a funeral procession, where everyone drives in a single file line to the cemetery, then pall bearers carry the body box, and everyone gathers around while the casket is placed in a hole and then attendees often toss dirt at the box that is holding their loved one, it's all very strange. We can make fun of other cultures and their weird traditions but damn now that I say it out loud, that's silly af. And death rituals of course evolve and change with the times...during Covid we saw

the rise of drive-through funerals, "The drive-thru involves a large glass window on the side of the funeral home, where the recently deceased can be laid out in all their grandeur, for all and sundry to view."

It's like a drive-in movie, you can grab some popcorn and make out with your gf in front of grandpa's body. It's a good time.

However the most famous death ritual worldwide without a doubt is mummification, and it's our primary topic today. And first we have to define our terms, because not all mummies are created equal. Not all mummies in fact are intentionally *created*; some just kind of happen. There are natural mummies and artificial mummies, or a better distinguisher might be intentional and unintentional. If you die under the right conditions, Duncan, you too can be a mummy. I believe in you. It's all about the climate. Certain climates are more mummy-friendly than others. If you live in a swamp you're pretty much out of luck, and that's because the key to the mummification process is desiccation, or the removal of moisture. Nature is a very efficient recycler, and it has to be, because if dead animals and humans just piled on top of each other and never disintegrated, the world would quickly fill up with corpses. They wouldn't stink or anything, because that's a function of the recycling and disintegration process, but it would still be disturbing and unpleasant.

You'd be sharing a bed with all of your ancestors, eventually the house would be so packed with dead bodies you'd be using them as furniture, there'd be human mannequins in every department store, it would be a mess. So thank God for corpse-rot and maggots and decomposition, amirite. In particular thank god—or mother nature or whatever—for bacteria and fungi. Because when it comes to breaking down organic matter, they are the true heroes, and those tiny microscopic beasties thrive on water and heat. Which is why we refrigerate our food and dry out meat if we want it to last: jerky is basically the inspiration behind mummies...ultimately a mummy is people-jerky. When it comes to human bodies, decomposition begins right after death, and there are a few phases to the process. First is autolysis, and this is a fun fact (by which I mean disgusting and not fun at all): you know how you have enzymes in your gut that digest your food, well after you perish those digestive enzymes immediately begin to digest your own guts. About three days later comes putrefaction, also very appetizing, I hope all of the insomniacs are sitting down to dinner right now; putrefaction is the physical process of decomposition, when the body—which for an adult is around 50% water—begins to be consumed by all of that water-loving bacteria. In normal circumstances and standard climates, the putrefaction process happens naturally to all of us over the course of a few months (faster in

wetter climates, slower in drier ones). But in extremely cold and dry climates, when all of the water is removed from flesh, bacteria can't develop, and thus there's no breakdown of organic tissue. It's basically a race: mummification occurs if the corpse is drained of water before the tissues can be broken down. It's the mummy race. I'm not sure that becoming jerky and having your shriveled leathery corpse displayed in a museum even counts as a win, but ok. According to a New York Times article on natural mummification: "The hands, toes and scrotum are among the fastest body parts to dry out." So you could conceivably stumble across a dead body that is just a skeleton with fully intact hands and feet and a leathery ball sack. Like a skeleton with those truck nuts. I want to go to museums and put truck nuts on skeletons. I have modest dreams. I don't need to achieve fame or fortune, I just want to traumatize some third graders on a field trip.

If you aspire to be organically mummified I would recommend dying in a peat bog or on a glacier, either might work, but the optimal substance for achieving mummification is sand. You know how if your phone gets wet, you can put it in a bag of rice and it will suck out all the moisture? That's how I like to imagine mummification. Deserts are nature's rice bag. Also, that doesn't work. It's a complete myth, don't do that, but it was a handy analogy, so I went with it. And btw, now I think we've solved the mystery

as to why the Egyptians discovered and became obsessed with mummification; a civilization built on sand would have witnessed the natural version of mummification firsthand before deciding to attempt it themselves.

Side note: If mummies came to life they would be super thirsty, you know how mummies are always lurching after the hero in the movie, they're probably just trying to ask for a glass of water. If you're being chased by a mummy, grab a hose. Be a bro, help a mummy out. The mummy will thank you. Mummies aren't evil; they're just dehydrated and misunderstood.

We're mostly going to focus on artificial mummies...in fact the word mummy comes from the Arabic word mumiya meaning tar or bitumen, which refers to the black color that artificial mummies developed as a result of oils, preserving chemicals, dirt and age. Old Dirty Oily, ew. Please don't mummify me. Don't bury me either, I'm claustrophobic. We talked about how I want to die, what about you Duncan. This is a great opportunity to publicly state our death wishes...not death wishes, I don't have a death wish, but I also don't have a will, so we can use this podcast as a platform to officially state our postmortem requests. You want to be (blank) and I want to be cremated and I want to be either launched into a pool or be cremated and have my ashes blown into the eyes of my enemies Anyway, even

though we'll spend the majority of this episode focusing on intentional mummies, there are a few really fascinating and famous natural mummies that we should talk about. For instance: Otzi the iceman was discovered in 1991. He'd been entombed in a glacier more than 5,000 years ago, and was found by a German couple who were on vacation near the border between Austria and Italy, in the Otztal alps, thus the name. There's nothing more romantic on a couples' vacation than stumbling across a shriveled prehistoric corpse. That's a real Instagram moment. Otzi was a murder victim; there was an arrow buried in his shoulder along with various other wounds, and the body was so well preserved that his more than 61 tattoos were visible. Otzi was kind of a badass. And possibly kind of a jerk, we don't know if the murder was justified. He might have started it. Otzi fucked around and found out. I mean we know he wasn't very smart, because Otzi was carrying an axe while the other guy had a bow. Not the best strategist. Actually, Otzi had an unfinished, nonfunctional bow in his possession, so even though we don't know the details I guess the murderer was just a step ahead, at least from what we can determine from the evidence. They don't have this scenario in Clue. "Homicidal caveman on a glacier, with a bow." As for Otzi's tattoos, the tattoo "ink" consisted of soot which was rubbed into incisions. That seems unhygienic and gritty. You have to really want to be decorated. Or

hate your skin. Take that, skin. Kind of sad. That took a turn to self-harm, I apologize.

Scientists used 3D scanning technology to reconstruct Otzi's face which revealed a beard, deep-set brown eyes, and furrowed skin. From the scan experts concluded that he looked "tired and ungroomed." It was 3,000BC, give the guy a break. Was anyone in the Bronze Age *not* tired and ungroomed? It's 5000 years later I'm *still* tired and ungroomed.

Otzi also had an intestinal parasite called whipworm and a large amount of tooth decay. Being a caveman, not as glamorous as you might expect. This was the bronze age so not really a caveman but pretty close. According to scientists, Otzi was also lactose intolerant. Kind of TMI, it's like at this point scientists are just showing off. But I guess the sheer volume of information we have about his life based on all of the evidence does indicate how well-preserved a mummy can be, even an accidental mummy. His hair and skin were largely intact; scientists were even able to extract whole blood cells. And Otzi was a natural, accidental mummy, so imagine what can be achieved via intentional mummification. Sidenote, there was some controversy with the discovery of Otzi: a Swiss woman named Sandra Nemeth subsequently claimed to have found Otzi before the German couple, and she said she could provide proof, because in order to stake her claim she had spat on the body. Miss

Nemeth demanded that the body be analyzed for her DNA, and honestly if this is true I think you're disqualified from claiming this body. Who does that? I also find it unlikely because she had no way of knowing that the body was 5000 years old and valuable, it could've been some stupid tourist who didn't wear a jacket and died in the 1950s, this Swiss lady wasn't a scientist. In fact couple who are credited with finding Otzi thought that the body was just some hiker who had died a few years back, and no one figured out the truth until laboratories got involved, so do we really believe that Swiss Sandra knew that the body was going to be a valuable discovery; for all she knew she could've been spitting on some boomer? But honestly her saliva tactic is kind of diabolically brilliant, as long as it's not a human body. If I ever find some giant diamond or like something that is too heavy to lift I'm going to piss and spit all over it to mark my territory. If any of you listeners come across a valuable object that is smeared with feces and vomit, you will know that it is the property of Shane. Respect the fluids.

Other famous natural mummies include Juanita, a young Incan girl who was sacrificed to the god Ampato over 500 years ago. Juanita was discovered on the summit of mount Ampato, which makes sense, and had been preserved by ice and snow. Child sacrifice was common in Peru; Incas believed that the gods rewarded

human sacrifice with rainfall and would withhold avalanches if they were appeased via kid-killing. These are benevolent gods, that's the kind of god I want to worship. A sadistic deity who thirsts for the blood of children. "Juanita was chosen as the most beautiful and innocent and would be 'guaranteed eternal life with the gods'. As the other bodies were further down the mountain, they were not as pure and worthy as Juanita." What an honor, to get to die at a slightly higher elevation. Death seems like an interesting reward for being beautiful and innocent. Kind of an incentive to go the opposite direction. Another time traveler tip: if you ever find yourself in ancient Peru, your best strategy is to be ugly and corrupt. I would live a long happy life in Mesoamerica. Juanita was so well-preserved that her stomach contents were identifiable; we know she was upper class due to the fact that she was eating animal protein as opposed to the standard vegetarian diet. And as per tradition, Juanita had been given coca and alcohol before her death, which probably helps you resign yourself to your fate. If you have to be sacrificed to a mountain god, you want to be blitzed out of your gourd on cocaine and moonshine. That's just common sense, I've always said that. It's the best case scenario wrapped in a worst case scenario.

So pivoting from accidental mummies to on-purpose mummification, I guess the obvious question is *why would*

anyone want to create a mummy? Well in the modern world we create mummies for medical training, often using *plastination*, we can now replace fats and water with plastics via a process called forced impregnation (ouch). Impregnated by plastic, it's like if a dildo ejaculated. I apologize again. If you've seen a plastinated specimen it looks like a 3D model of an organ or body part or whatever and we use this process for displaying chunks of animal or even humans for anatomical educational purposes. Or for, you know, paper weights, or to masturbate on if you're a psychopath. They're multifunctional.

So mummification can be useful even in the modern era, but why did Egyptians in particular want to recreate the natural phenomenon of mummification? They presumably had discovered natural mummies in the desert, which when mummified in the sand would have looked like crispy human shells, and somehow they found these person-kabobs... aspirational? Appealing? Seems strange. Why would you want to do this to your dead relative. And not just relatives; as most of you probably know, Egyptians didn't just mummify humans. There have been over 1 million animal mummies discovered in Egypt, many of them were birds, and of course the Egyptians loved to honor their feline companions with mummification, that might be my favorite thing about Egypt. you can judge an ancient society based on how

it treated its cats. You could but you shouldn't, that would be stupid. Like I guess we'd have to just ignore the whole slave labor and human sacrifice situation, but hey, they appreciated a good cat and that's where I focus. The reason Egyptians developed such elaborate mummification and death rituals has to do with their complicated beliefs regarding the soul and the afterlife. Egyptians viewed the physical body as extremely important because it was the anchor for the soul, which was actually divided into multiple parts. This gets really complicated depending on the era of Egyptian history and the information source, but here's a simplified version: The ka was the part of the soul that resided in the body, while the ba on the other hand could travel between the realms, and was depicted as a bird with the head of the human to which it belonged. Then there was the akh, which depending on the source was essentially the elevated version of the soul, it was basically the joining of all the parts of the soul and could only be achieved when the deceased person had passed through the trials of the afterlife. Like, literal trials. And I'll explain.

You might be passingly familiar with the so-called book of the dead, which is not actually a book but is a series of scrolls and spells and instructions that would guide the deceased through the harrowing nether regions. That sounds like not what I meant to say. The dead did not voyage through a world of

shadowy genitalia, I meant the netherworld. Or underworld, both terms were used in my sources. The underworld in ancient Egypt was called Duat, and it probably wasn't even shadowy—the actual title of the book of the dead when translated literally is more like the *Book of Coming Forth by Day* or *The book of emerging forth into the light* because they believed that the deceased would be emerging into a new world very similar to ours. *The book of the dead* wasn't the only collection of spells and guides related to the next realm, there were also coffin texts, which were spells written directly on the coffin and sarcophagus, plus if you were super rich and important there was pyramid text, which were spells carved into the pyramid where your bougie body was entombed. Not every book of the dead was the same; they were commissioned typically by the wealthy and included whichever of the 192 known spells had been requested, but the most famous netherworld ritual involves spell 30 and chapter/spell 125 of the Book of the Dead. After journeying through the underworld the deceased would encounter 42 judges or “assessors” in the hall of Maat, (M-A-A-T) who was the Egyptian goddess of justice and these were basically her henchman. And you had to know them by name; step one of your trial was reciting all 42 names of the assessors. This was the butt kissing portion of the afterlife. Buttering up the minions. You also had to list all of the sins in your life that you had NOT

committed... it was like the opposite of confession. "Applaud me fathers for I have not sinned. And these are my not-sins: I never once coveted my neighbor's ass. I never enslaved thousands of Jews and forced them to erect giant monuments to my ego. Oops."

After reciting your non-sins, the jackal-headed god of the dead, Anubis, would reveal his infamous weighing-scale, and the goddess Maat plucked a single ostrich feather from her headdress and placed it on one side of the scale and the heart of the deceased would be placed on the opposite side of the scale. Kind of awkward to have your recently extracted heart on a plate in front of everyone, all 42 of those minions plus a couple gods staring at your naked heart, kind of mortifying. What if your heart is unattractive? I have enough insecurities in life without having to worry about a bunch of god's judging my internal organs. But the Egyptians believed that if you had sinned during your life those sins were stored in your heart and converted into...heart weight, I guess? If you were a sinner you had a fatass heart, although even a skinny heart would weigh more than an ostrich feather so I'm kind of struggling with the rationale behind all of this. But if your heart tipped the scale, if it outweighed a feather, then it would immediately be devoured by a hippopotamus with lion legs and a crocodile head, and you would cease to exist. Cease to exist again, since this was all post-mortem. The heart-

devourer was the goddess Ammit, who was a mashup of those three animals because those were the three largest so-called "man eating" creatures in ancient Egypt. I think most people now understand that hippos are dangerous AF, and they can and occasionally do eat meat. Don't fuck with hippos.

So the way this all relates to mummies...we mentioned that the body was the anchor that joined the different parts of the soul. So if the body disintegrated, the ba and the ka would fly away and be lost forever, and there would be no opportunity for the deceased to complete the trial of Anubis and transcend the physical world to continue in the next realm. So the body had to be maintained and preserved and even nourished in the afterlife. Thus the complicated mummification ritual, and here's how it worked (this is maybe a good time to put down that after-dinner snack; if we already ruined your dinner we're about to put you off food for the next 8 hours minimum):

Step one was to carefully remove the internal organs and rinse out the body cavities with palm wine and spices. Like a Thanksgiving turkey. I wonder if any mummies were discovered packed with delicious aromatic stuffing. The heart was left in the cadaver's chest, for netherworld weighing, as we've discussed...the brain, on the other hand, was treated with slightly less reverence. Ancient Egyptian's didn't

have much respect for brain matter, and if you're like me, most of you probably learned this as a kid, way before you were ready to handle the information. Although, in reality the procedure was a little bit different than I'd been led to believe.

Scientists used to tell us that Egyptians used a metal hook to pull out chunks of the corpse's brain through the nose, but modern discoveries indicate that instead a rod was inserted through the nostril and the brain was simply mashed up and liquified, and the cranium was filled with antibacterial solution and sloshed around and then this semi-liquid brain-milkshake was allowed to drain out of the nasal cavity via gravity.

You're welcome. Btw, *there's* a job. Maybe don't bring up your career on a first date. "Oh you're a bartender? That's cool. I mash brains, sometimes I spice dead bodies. Depends on the day. I'm a veteran brain-masher and body-spicer. Is that your cat? Let me know when it dies, I'll hook you up." I told you this would be appetizing.

So the chunky liquified brain cocktail was disposed of, and the skull was packed with aromatic resins, and then the remaining organs were either removed and dried and placed in sealed canopic jars or dried, wrapped, and returned to the body cavity. This was not a short process, it could take more than a month, usually around forty days. That seems like a lot. I feel like these mummifiers were either getting paid by the hour or savoring

the process too much. I guess maybe this is referring to the drying-out process, which was the long part...I don't think it took 40 days to remove and package the organs, but this next part took a while. The body was now placed in a solution of natron, a salt-based chemical harvested from dry lake beds, which accomplished the desiccation. It was the proverbial bag of rice...if that worked. Then the mummified corpse was coated in resin as a preservative and sealant and finally the dried body was wrapped in those famous cloth strips, along with little amulets and mystical objects, then you cap it off with a shroud or golden mask, toss the corpse in a sarcophagus, and boom! Mummy. I like that they included little amulets like prizes for the tomb raiders, it's like Christmas morning. "Ooh an amulet, I was just expecting a leathery corpse and a curse. Best Christmas ever.

Now the procedure I've just described was the full-on, elaborate mummification process, which Greek historian Herodotus described as the "most perfect method." But for those who couldn't afford the luxury package and yet for some reason didn't want to allow their souls to dissipate into the ether, there were budget options. If the full process was a Ferrari, you also had the Tesla version: the corpse's anus would be plugged, and then a solution of cedar oil would be injected into the abdomen. Apparently cedar oil has the ability to liquify organs, so if anyone

offers you a cedar-oil cocktail, pass. Avoid drinking tree-based oils. The body was next placed in a natron solution and pickled for 70 days, and then all of the dissolved organs were drained out of the rectum.

Finally you had the least expensive process, the Ford Pinto package if you will. Inject some organ-obliterating liquid into the anus, toss the body into natron for seventy days, and return it to the family. Like here, drain your grandpa. "Herodotus gives no further details." He's like *you* figure it out, peasant.

One legendary historical figure who got the full deluxe package is still the most famous mummy of all, Tutankhamun. AKA King Tut. The product of an incestuous marriage between siblings, Pharaoh Tutankhamun reigned for only 9 years, from 1332 to 1323 BC. He was small in stature and suffered from scoliosis, a badly deformed foot, as well as gynecomastia (enlarged breasts due to hormone imbalances), he had mild intellectual disabilities, Klinefelter Syndrome resulting in infertility and small testicles, plus an androgen disorder called AIS, and something I don't even understand called Aromatase excess syndrome, plus a version of epilepsy and a warped skull. That's not the full list, but I think it paints a picture. No idea why he suffered from so many physical defects, it's a mystery, but genetic tests also showed that he had been

infected with malaria, because his life wasn't tough enough, and as a result of any number of these issues he died at around 18. However, he accomplished quite a bit during his short time in power. Mostly he rolled back all of the damage his father had done, including restoring the Ancient Egyptian Religion, which his father Akhenaten had outlawed. His dad was a real rebel; he began life named Amenhotep IV but changed his name around the same time he made a revolutionary announcement: he told everyone hey, you know how we all worship a bunch of different gods and I'm the manifestation of Horace on earth, well forget all that. The one true god is called Aten, and btw my new name just happens to include the name of god, call me Akhenaten. This pissed a lot of people off, it was not well-received though weirdly the Pharaoh had taken a self-imposed downgrade...most Pharaohs, as noted, claimed to be embodiments of a god, but Akhenaten claimed that he was just God's number one prophet. So when his son King Tut—who was named Tutankhaten initially—took power around 8 years old, it probably seemed like a good idea to enact a few popular decrees and simultaneously dunk on his unpopular dead dad by renouncing the god Aten and changing his name to Tutankhamun. I'm guessing King Tut had some advisors who might have assisted with these decisions. But it seems smart either way...if you want to rule over the masses, it never hurts to reassert your

divinity. As we all know, *if someone asks if you are a god, you...say...yes.*

King Tut's tomb was actually kind of small in comparison with other rulers of his stature. There is speculation that maybe it was intended as a temporary resting place while his grand tomb was being built, and maybe the final version was never completed. Either way, it was humble in size and kind of off the beaten path, hidden by debris kicked up by the construction of larger nearby tombs. This is probably why it hadn't be emptied of its treasures by tomb robbers and thus became such a momentous find. The discovery of King Tut's tomb marks the most famous and certainly one of the most significant moments in the history of Egyptology and probably the history of history. It sparked worldwide fascination with archaeology and antiquities; the tomb and especially the mummy itself kicked off an international mummy-craze that at the time was dubbed "Tutmania" and hasn't fully dissipated. And of course the tomb also resulted in fame and wealth for its discoverers. One man who definitely did NOT benefit from discovery of the tomb was renowned excavator Theodore Davis. In the early 1900s Davis had been granted the excavation rights to the Valley of the Kings and had made a few marginally significant discoveries but hadn't found anything like the luxurious Pharaoh-tombs that he'd been picturing, and he eventually became disillusioned and quit, writing, "I fear

the valley of the tombs is exhausted." It would later turn out that when he ceased excavations he had been less than two meters from KV62, King Tut's tomb.

Discovery of the tomb would instead be credited to British archaeologist Howard Carter. On November 4th, 1922, Carter's excavators uncovered a single stair. Further excavation revealed a staircase leading to a sealed entranceway inscribed with the name Tutankhamun. Carter's team breached the doorway to discover... another sealed doorway. Damn you, King Tut. You little floppy-titted jerk. Carter later co-authored a book that included a passage describing the moment he finally entered the outer chamber of the tomb: "With trembling hands I made a tiny breach in the upper left-hand corner. Darkness and blank space, as far as an iron testing-rod could reach, showed that whatever lay beyond was empty, and not filled like the passage we had just cleared. Candle tests were applied as a precaution against possible foul gases, and then, widening the hole a little, I inserted the candle and peered in...at first I could see nothing, the hot air escaping from the chamber causing the candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold—everywhere the glint of gold." It took months to catalog and clear out the antechamber before progressing further into the burial tomb, and two

full years before they began praying open the sarcophagus. Tutankhamun's mummy was entombed inside a multi-layered sarcophagus that was built like nesting dolls, there were three layers and the innermost consisted of over 240 pounds of solid gold. It must have been a truly dramatic moment when the final lid was removed and the mummy was revealed for the first time in over 3000 years. Carter explains, "The pins removed, the lid was raised. The penultimate scene was disclosed – a very neatly wrapped mummy of the young king, with golden mask of sad but tranquil expression, symbolizing Osiris ... the mask bears that god's attributes, but the likeness is that of Tut.Ankh.Amen – placid and beautiful, with the same features as we find upon his statues and coffins. The mask has fallen slightly back, thus its gaze is straight up to the heavens." There has been speculation that the mask was intended for queen Nefertiti, the primary wife of Tut's father (who probably wasn't his mother), but no one knows for sure. But of course we're all familiar with the elaborate and striking gold burial mask, the striped headdress decorated at the forehead with a protruding cobra and vulture, symbolizing his dominion over both the upper and lower kingdoms, and of course the dramatic eyeliner and the long cone-shaped plaited beard. The beard had become detached at some point and was carefully repaired via the insertion of a wooden dowel, and then in 2015 during a cleaning it once again fell off

and was hastily glued into place by panicked museum workers. They didn't do a great job, but it still took a year for anyone to notice, and eight of the workers would face disciplinary action. I feel for them, honestly. You don't want to have to admit that you knocked off King Tut's beard. The back of the mask is very cool as well, I don't think I'd ever seen it. A very suave plaited pony tail, the whole thing is just exquisite. The mask is also inscribed with protective spells, and you can learn all about the so-called curse of the mummy in podcasts that are hosted by suckers, because it's not a real thing. One guy involved with excavation died due to an infected mosquito bite and a bunch of conspiracy-oriented people did what conspiracy-oriented people do...there have been studies showing that the workers and scientists at the excavation did not end up having shorter-than-average lifespans, so the curse is not a thing and we're not going to talk about it, but the threatening inscriptions are cool. Overall there were approximately 5000 treasures found in the tomb and they're pretty amazing, there are chariots and weapons, elaborate pendants with jeweled scarabs, golden statues of the king, plus a ton of decorated canes or walking sticks, which make sense. It was like something out of Aladdin, a cave full of bejeweled loot. The mummy itself was actually not in great shape. It seems to have been poorly preserved, it was in far worse condition than many

other mummies of the era. Fungi had infiltrated the tomb, and the body had been essentially carbonized, as if burned. But King Tut wasn't the only mummy in his tomb; there were also the mummified fetuses of his two stillborn daughters as well. One of the tiny mummies even had a death mask, though it was "several sizes too large," and on the other, eyelashes and eyebrows and even some hair were still present. "The eyes were wide open, containing only the shrunken eyeballs." The pictures I've seen of these tiny mummies are pretty fucking creepy, I'm not gonna lie. The whole situation is disturbing. But it makes sense that the Egyptians would mummify even stillborn children in order to preserve their bodies, since it was the mortal anchor of their souls, and allowed them to continue their journey in the afterlife. If you want to visit King Tut's tomb in Egypt I'd recommend waiting a bit; from their website: **"When the Grand Egyptian Museum fully opens to the public in late 2020, it will be the largest archaeological museum complex in the world and host to more than 100,000 artifacts. For the first time ever, King Tut's entire treasure collection will be on display alongside artifacts from pre-historic times through Egypt's many thousands of years of pharaonic civilization..."** That 2020 timeframe has been adjusted as you might imagine, no idea why, and the museum is now projected to open at the end of this year.

So moving away from ancient times, what is the legacy of mummification? We've talked about modern tissue preservation, but there have also been entire, intact dead bodies preserved within the most recent century. Take Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin, the head of Soviet Russia. After his death he was embalmed, placed in a glass sarcophagus and displayed for posterity in all his mustachioed, goateed, bald headed glory. From a Scientific American article, "Generations of Russian scientists have spent almost a century fine-tuning preservation techniques that have maintained the look, feel and flexibility of Lenin's body." However, I'd say the phrase "Lenin's body" might be a bit misleading. "The job of maintaining Lenin's corpse belongs to an institute known in post-Soviet times as the Center for Scientific Research and Teaching Methods in Biochemical Technologies in Moscow. A core group of five to six anatomists, biochemists and surgeons, known as the "Mausoleum group," have primary responsibility for maintaining Lenin's remains. (They also help maintain the preserved bodies of three other national leaders: the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh and the North Korean father-son duo of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, respectively.) The Russian methods focus on preserving the body's physical form—its look, shape, weight, color, limb flexibility and suppleness—but not necessarily

its original biological matter. In the process they have created a "quasibiological" science that differs from other embalming methods. professor of social anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, Alexei Yurchak, says "They have to substitute occasional parts of skin and flesh with plastics and other materials, so in terms of the original biological matter the body is less and less of what it used to be." So this scenario is a bit less like a mummy in a mausoleum and more like an exhibit in the creepiest wax museum ever. Even creepier than a standard wax museum, which is effing creepy.

Other examples of milestones in modern mummification: Since 1975 a weird-ass American cult called Summum has been offering a service they refer to as "eternal memorialization via modern mummification." It is available for both pets and humans, and the group claims that over 250,000 mummies have been created so far. If you head to summum.org you will immediately be confronted by a picture of a mummified cat, it looks like a papier-mâché piñata. Like I do not have any faith that there is an actual cat under all that plaster. But they swear there is. "Our in depth research, experience, and knowledge in realms of both science and esoterica has resulted in Modern Mummification® — a synthesis of medical technology, modern chemistry, and esoteric art. Still, our process of Mummification includes

traditional wrappings in fine cloth (embroidered, representing your personal philosophy or religion)."

Are you interested, Duncan? Well it's probably good that you aren't.

"Because Mummification is a very elaborate, detailed, thorough, and lengthy process, it incurs extensive costs. And because we are a 501(c)(3) organization, we ask for a donation so that we can make this tradition available to you." So this is a nonprofit organization making mummies for charity, you understand. They just expect a little donation. Packages start at \$67,000, so if you have an extra 67k lying around...send it to us because this idea is fucking stupid. Please don't do this. Incidentally there's an asterisk when it comes to the cost: "The price may increase for special circumstances, such as very large adults, etc." So take note, husky insomniacs, they charge by the pound. I want to know if there's a discount for skinny dudes. Actually you'd have to pay *me*. I don't want to be Shane-jerkey.

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[Theodore M. Davis - Wikipedia](#)

[Discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun - Wikipedia](#)

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