

Topic Page: [Mummies](#)

Definition: **mummy** from *The Macmillan Encyclopedia*

A human or animal body prepared and embalmed for burial according to ancient Egyptian religious practice. The internal organs were extracted and sealed in Canopic jars and the body was desiccated by packing in dry natron, anointed, and encased in linen bandages.



Image from:

[Archaeologist Howard Carter examines the... in Scientific Exploration and Expeditions: From the Age of Discovery to the Twenty-First Century](#)

Summary Article: **mummy**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

dead human or animal body preserved by embalming or by unusual natural conditions. As a rule mummies are from ancient times. The word is of Arabic derivation and refers primarily to the burials found in Egypt, where the practice of mummification was perfected over the centuries to an extreme of elaboration.

Investigations of mummified remains have grown increasingly sophisticated with advances in dating techniques and forensic science. Mummies provide clues to everyday life through such items as clothing, tools, and tattoos. Stomach contents may reveal data on subsistence and the local ecology. Trace-element analysis of hair can reveal exposure to toxic elements (e.g., mercury and lead). Causes of death and active or inactive disease processes

can often be ascertained and sometimes point to murder or ritual sacrifice. Mummies can yield blood and DNA samples providing valuable medical and genetic information.

Mummification in Egypt

Egyptian mummies more than 5,000 years old consist of hardly more than bones, skin, and hair, owing their preservation largely to the dry air of Upper Egypt. In humid Lower Egypt practically all mummies have perished. By the time of the New Kingdom (1570–322 B.C.) the art of embalming had reached its height, and it is possible to determine fairly accurately how the great pharaohs appeared in life, e.g., Amenhotep II (in his tomb near Thebes) and Thutmose III, Thutmose IV, Tutankhamen, Seti I, and Ramses II (all in Cairo). Mummification was related to beliefs concerning the afterlife and was undertaken to safeguard the fate of the soul. The Egyptian method of preparing the body varied over time and also with the social status of the deceased. At first only kings were mummified; later their retinue received similar treatment. Eventually, numerous animals that were considered sacred (cats, dogs, cows, etc.) were likewise embalmed. From the Middle Ages until the 18th cent., ground Egyptian mummies were sold in Europe as a panacea.

Mummification in Other Parts of the World

Outside Egypt, in such widely separated places as the Aleutian Islands, the Canary Islands, China, and the countries now composing what was the Inca civilization, bodies preserved by various artificial means have been found. The venerated mummies of the Inca kings were destroyed by the Spanish. The Chinchoros culture of the N Chilean coast practiced artificial mummification around 5000–3000 B.C., and around 4000 B.C., corpses were deliberately salted at La Paloma, in central Peru. Pre-Columbian burials on the arid coast of Peru and Chile, often wrapped in textiles, tended to become

naturally mummified. In the late 1990s a cache of late prehistoric mummies of the Chachapoyas culture was found in a rock shelter in humid NE Peru. In 1974 in the Changsha area of China, an embalmed woman, later identified as a matron of the Han dynasty, was disinterred, along with many artifacts, from an air- and watertight tomb, in a remarkably well-preserved state. In Xinjiang (Chinese Turkistan), other exceptionally well-preserved mummies, dating back as far as 4,000 years and having European features, have posed a mystery to anthropologists; some believe they may be Tokharians, members of a so-called lost tribe of Indo-Europeans known from later inscriptions.

Natural Mummification

Natural mummification occurs in favorable soils and climates, particularly cold, arid areas, ice, and peat bogs. Peat bogs have revealed naturally preserved corpses dating from as long ago as 840 B.C. Bodies of Inuit women and children dated at 500 years old have been found frozen in Qilakitsoq, in W Greenland. The frozen bodies of children, ritually sacrificed 500 years ago in Inca ceremonies, were found on Andean summits in 1995 and 1999. A Bronze Age woman of high rank was found frozen in a well-equipped burial chamber in Siberia. The most exceptional frozen specimen is the 5,300-year-old "Ice Man," discovered during an unusual thaw in the Tyrolean Alps in 1991. Another find of a man in a melting glacier was made in NW Canada in 1999. The partially mummified body of the so-called Spirit Cave man, found in Nevada in 1940, was dated in 1996 as over 9,000 years old; Acha man, a mummy from the Atacama Desert, is of a similar age.

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