

Egyptian Animal Mummies

Beginning in 2,950 BC in Abydos, Egypt, kings were buried with mummified dogs, lions, and donkeys in their tombs. However, as time passed, animal mummies were accompanying not only elites but also commoners who had passed away (Williams 2). Archaeologists have discovered an astonishing variety of animals that have been mummified by being dehydrated using natron and then wrapped up in linen bandages. According to Salima Ikram, the founder of the Animal Mummy project at the Egyptian Museum, the collection of animal mummies encompasses pets such as cats and dogs, animals such as ibises, cattle, bulls, and cows, and creatures as small as shrew mice and scarab beetles (Heritage Key, “Animal Mummies Explained”).

There are a few reasons behind the Egyptians’ practice of animal mummification. Some animals were mummified and buried with people so that they could provide companionship. Many deceased people were buried with their pets, especially dogs and cats and even gazelles (Dodson and Ikram 135). Besides that, certain parts of animals, parts such as good cuts of beef, geese, and ducks were salted, dried, and wrapped with linen (Williams 3). These preserved meats, stored in wooden coffinetts and baskets, served as food in the afterlife (Ikram 4).

Another common reason for mummifying animals is that certain animals represented Egyptian gods in animal cults. One of the most significant animals to be mummified was the Apis bull. According to Williams in his article for the *National Geographic*, “[the Apis bull had] a white triangle on his forehead, white winged patterns on his shoulders and rump, a scarab silhouette on his tongue, and double hairs at the end of his tail. (3)” People visited the temples to

seek wisdom from the sacred bull that was given lavish treatment in its lifetime. After devotees had made their requests of the bull, priests interpreted the movements or sounds that the bull made in response (Heritage Key, “Salima Ikram Shares”). Once the bull died, the body was desiccated for 40 days. After that, another 30 days would be dedicated to wrapping up the dehydrated body. The Apis bull was so important to the Egyptians that on the day of its burial, there was communal mourning among the city’s residents as the mummified bull was brought to and placed in a sarcophagus (Williams 3).

In addition, animals were also mummified to become sacrificial offerings. Animals such as cats and ibises were often made into votive offerings that acted as messengers between pilgrims and gods (Ikram 9). Votive mummies were conveniently sold outside the temples where pilgrims stopped to purchase their offerings to particular gods. The business for animal mummies grew to a point where the animals were bred for the specific purpose to be killed and then mummified as sacrificial offerings. Temples and surrounding villages also carried out extensive breeding programs to make up for the decreasing number of animals in the wild (O’Brien). The demand for votive mummies even created jobs as animals “[had] to be bred, cared for, dispatched, and mummified (Williams 4).”

Animals were clearly an integral part of the Egyptian way of life. In their lifetime, some animals were beloved pets while others were revered as representations of gods. In their death, animals served as eternal pets or foods. Animals even provided job opportunities in the thriving business of producing votive mummies. The strong relationship that humans had with animals in Egypt was central to everyday routines and, especially, to the Egyptian religious belief in the sacredness of life that extended beyond the physical world.