

# Ancient Egypt Information for Teachers



Figure 1 Cartonnage of Egyptian Mummy Shep en-Mut

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## Introduction

This information accompanies a series of worksheets aimed at KS2 pupils, exploring a variety of aspects of Ancient Egyptian life and death. The activities have been based around RAMM's collections of artefacts from Ancient Egypt, and we encourage you to access these objects online through our collections database [rammcollections.org.uk](http://rammcollections.org.uk)

## Background to RAMM's Ancient Egypt Collection

The Devon and Exeter Institution was established in Exeter Cathedral Close in 1813. From its earliest days it included Egyptian material, including a Twenty-first Dynasty mummy, mummy board and coffin, given in 1819. Between 1868 and 1871, the Institution transferred its holdings to a new museum that had been commissioned in memory of Albert, Prince Consort (1819-1861) on a plot of land in Queen Street. It took the name 'Royal Albert Memorial Museum' (RAMM) following the opening of an extension by the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George V and Queen Mary) in 1899.

Various objects from Egypt were donated to museum from its earliest days, including in 1869 one of coffins and mummies brought back from Egypt by the Prince of Wales.

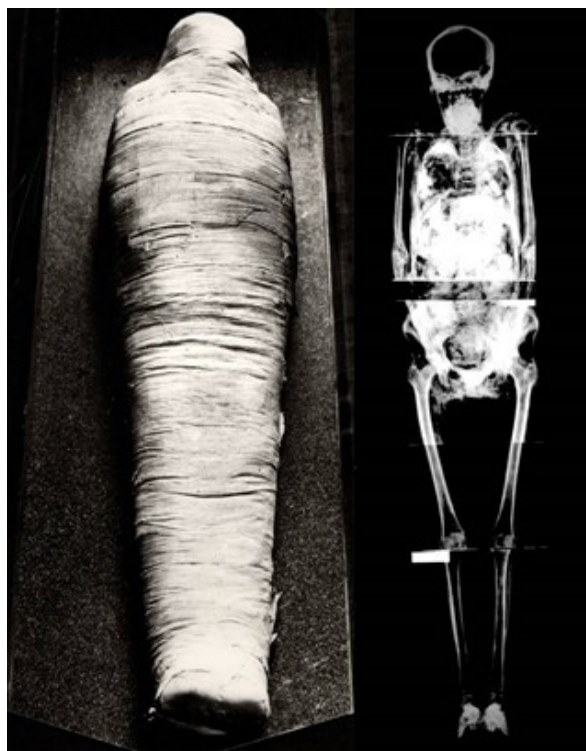


Figure 2 Mummy and x-ray of Shep en-Mut

Little information survives on the way in which the Egyptian material was originally displayed. See the picture on page 22 of the gallery. One coffin-set remains in the collection, and another coffin was transferred to Swansea University in 1982 and is now on display in the Egypt Centre on the Singleton Park campus.

For information on Shep en-Mut, RAMM's remaining mummy, please see page 17.

## Map of Ancient Egypt

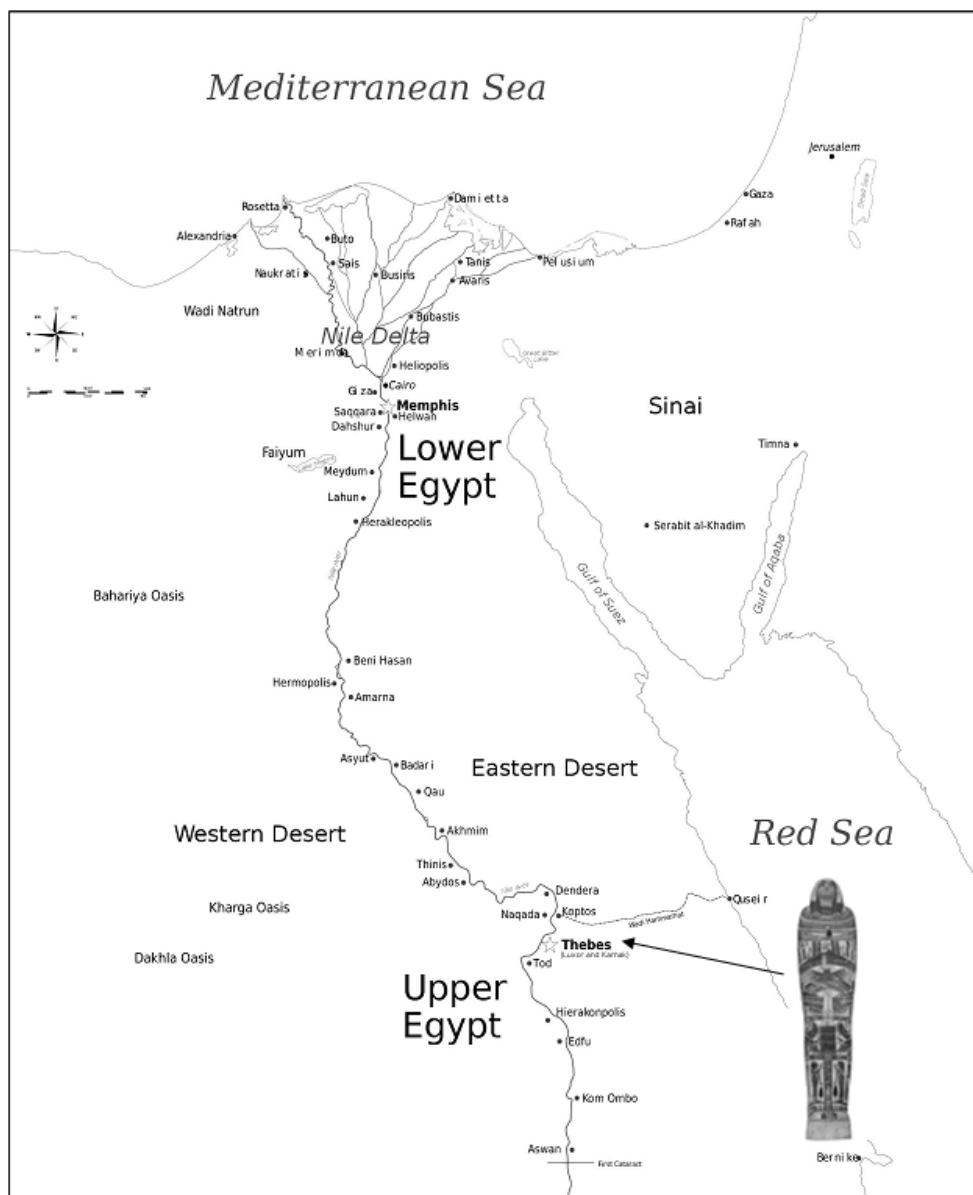


Figure 3 Map of Ancient Egypt

# Geography

Egypt is located on the north-eastern coast of Africa, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Red Sea to the east and the Sahara Desert to the south and west.

Egypt can be divided into four main regions:

## The Nile

**The Nile** shaped the lives and beliefs of the ancient Egyptians in many important ways, from the food they ate and the clothes they wore to their society and religion. It flows from south to north and comprises the **Nile Valley**, known as **Upper Egypt**, and the **Nile Delta**, known as **Lower Egypt**. (An easy way to remember this is to recall that water runs downhill).

Shep en-Mut is from this area of Egypt.

## The Western Desert

**The Western Desert** helped protect Egypt's western border by making it difficult for enemies to invade, and although it was wild and dangerous, it was good for hunting and rich in natural resources. The Western Desert contained several oases, which were important to Egypt's trade routes; these also produced foodstuffs such as dates.

## The Eastern Desert

**The Eastern Desert** mountains were a rich source of gold, gemstones and other minerals, and it was a key transport route between the Nile and the Red Sea. It also formed a natural barrier against invasion.

## The Sinai Peninsula

**The Sinai Peninsula** was a key trade route between Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, and a rich source of copper ore and turquoise.

# Ancient Egyptian Timeline

<b>6000-3100 BCE</b> <b>PREDYNASTIC PERIOD</b>	Hunting, farming, trading Pottery, weaving Copper smelting
<b>3100-2686 BCE</b> <b>EARLY DYNASTIC PERIOD</b> Dynasties 1-2	Unification Writing
<b>2686-2181 BCE</b> <b>OLD KINGDOM</b> Dynasties 3-6	National administration Stone tombs and temples Pyramids
<b>2181-2040 BCE</b> <b>FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD</b> Dynasties 7-10	Climate change, famine Economic problems Egypt divided
<b>2134-1690 BCE</b> <b>MIDDLE KINGDOM</b> Dynasties 11-14	Egypt reunited by rulers from Thebes Conquest of Nubia Increased foreign trade Economic revival
<b>1674-1549 BCE</b> <b>SECOND INTERMEDIATE PERIOD</b> Dynasties 15-17	Invasions from Asia (Hyksos) and Nubia Egypt fragmented
<b>1549-1069 BCE</b> <b>NEW KINGDOM</b> Dynasties 18-20	Egypt reunited by rulers from Thebes Nubia reconquered Empire in Syria-Palestine Peace and prosperity Royal tombs in Valley of the Kings
<b>1069-653 BCE</b> <b>THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD</b> Dynasties 21-25	Economic collapse Rival rulers in Nile Valley and Delta Invasions from Libya and Nubia
<b>653-332 BCE</b> <b>LATE PERIOD</b> Dynasties 26-31	Occupation by Assyria and Persia Last native Egyptian kings
<b>332-30 BCE</b> <b>PTOLEMAIC PERIOD</b>	Alexander the Great conquers Egypt Ptolemy established dynasty Increasing dependence on Rome
<b>30 BCE-323 CE</b> <b>ROMAN PERIOD</b>	Rome defeats last Ptolemaic ruler, Cleopatra VII Egypt part of the Roman Empire

# Egyptian Society

In many ways ancient Egyptian society resembled the order of medieval Europe, with power devolving downwards from the throne. The literate elite (1% of the population), held all the power.

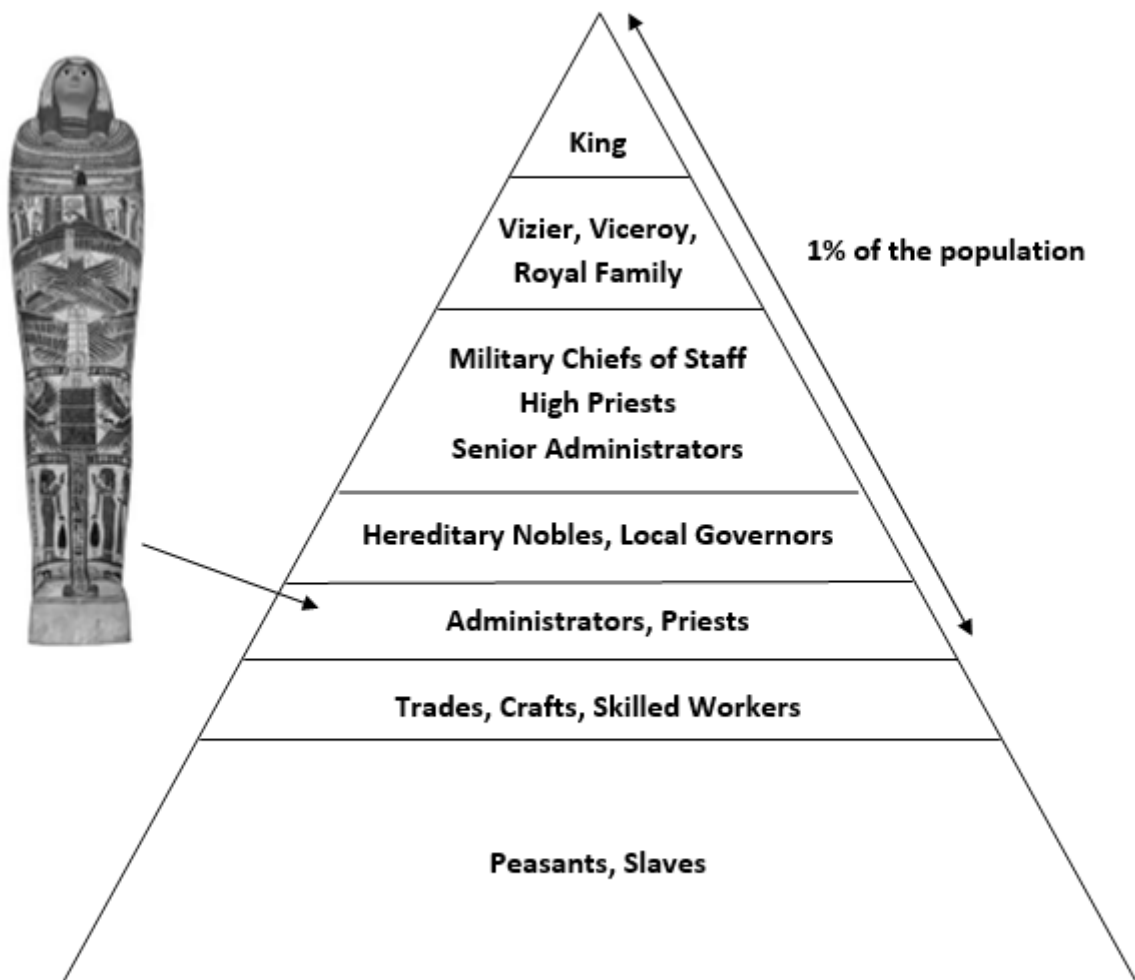


Figure 4 Pyramid showing the social-structure of ancient Egyptian society



# The Home

As in villages throughout Egypt today, ancient Egyptian houses were built of mud brick, plastered and whitewashed to reflect the sun. Mud bricks are easy to make and use, and are good in a hot climate because they help to keep the inside of the house cool.

The ancient Egyptians built their houses with the walls sloping inwards to make them strong in case of floods or earthquakes. They had tiny windows to keep them cool and shady inside, and to keep burglars out. Some homes even had air vents on the roof to create cool breezes through the house.

There were huge differences between the homes of the rich and the poor. The enormous villas of the rich were set in great estates. They had many rooms, and separate stables, storerooms, workshops and kitchens; most houses just had a small yard at the back with a clay oven and a grindstone. Wealthy homes even had bathrooms and toilets, while most people had to wash in the river.

Big or small, though, most houses had the same kind of plan. At the front there was a reception area, sometimes with a porch. Behind were the private rooms, where members of the family ate and slept. In towns, where ground space was limited, there was often an upper floor, and in hot weather, people often slept on the roof. Some houses also had cellars, where things were stored for safety.

The ancient Egyptians did not use nearly as much furniture as we do today. Although the rich had beds, most ordinary people slept on mud benches covered in mats. Instead of pillows there were head rests made of ivory, wood or pottery. In wealthy homes there were chairs to sit on, and three-legged stools were also popular.

There were no cupboards or wardrobes - clothes and household goods were kept in wooden chests and boxes of various shapes and sizes, while foodstuffs like oil and grain were stored in pots and baskets. Instead of tables, tall stands were used to hold trays of food or jars of drink.

## The Family

The family was the centre of ancient Egyptian life, and paintings in tombs often show the different generations enjoying each other's company. Because people did not expect to live to an old age, they usually married young and tried to have plenty of children to live after them. When a boy reached adulthood, he left his parents' house and set up his own home. Girls usually lived with their parents until they got married. In the highest levels of society marriages were often arranged for political reasons, but generally people got to choose who they married, and many did marry for love.

Marriage was quite informal - if both families agreed, a couple moved in together. No religious or legal ceremony was required, though sometimes a marriage contract was drawn up in case of disputes over children or property. People often remarried, either because their partner died or because they broke up. Divorce was quite common.

As far as the Egyptians were concerned, a woman's place was in the home, and women were usually depicted with paler skin to show that they stayed indoors. Even among the nobility, girls were not usually taught to read and write, but stayed at home with their mothers learning to keep house until they got married and had children of their own.

A housewife's daily chores included fetching water, cooking, cleaning, grinding grain, baking bread, brewing beer and washing and mending clothes. Some women had vegetable gardens to tend and animals to care for; others did spinning and weaving or made clothes.

Some women went to work as servants for others, helping in the house or caring for the children. Others worked as musicians, dancers or entertainers. Even though they were not formally educated, women could own their own farms and businesses, and some became very wealthy and successful.

## Gods and Religion

Egyptian religion was based around the natural cycles of the sun, moon, stars and river. The year began in the summer with the start of the Nile flood, and was divided into three seasons connected with farming activities: *akhet*, the flood season, *peret*, the growing season, and *shemu*, the harvest season.

Egyptian religion can be very confusing because hundreds of deities are mentioned in Egyptian religious texts and depicted in art.

Over time, the local deities of the most important cities – including Memphis, Thebes, Abydos and Heliopolis – were adopted nationally. These deities were often worshipped in triads (three) comprising a male god, his female consort and their child. At Memphis, the creator god Ptah was worshipped with his consort Sekhmet, the goddess of destruction, and their son *Nefertum*, a god of rebirth. At Thebes, another creator god, *Amun*, was worshipped with his wife *Mut* and their son *Khonsu*, a lunar deity.

The Egyptians were fascinated by the idea of the ‘First Time’, a remote era when everything was done for the first time. All Egyptian creation myths agree that before the First Time there was nothing but a dark watery chaos. Then the spirit of the creator became conscious in the waters. A common belief was that a small hill, known as the Primeval Mound, was the first thing to appear above the surface and from this the first god emerged.

# Death

The Ancient Egyptians believed that death was simply an interruption rather than the end of life. The afterlife was very much like their day-to-day life on earth and would consist of the best that were available and enjoyable in life. They believed they would continue to eat, sleep, work and play.

At its simplest, enjoyment of the afterlife could be achieved by burying the body with a set of funerary equipment.

At its most elaborate, enjoyment of the afterlife was achieved by building richly decorated tombs complete with food, drink, tomb servants and other desirable objects.

Whether the burial was simple or elaborate, the aim was to preserve the body so the person could live in the next life. Their spirit or *ka* could come and go from the body.



Figure 5 *Ka* statue of *Horawibra*  
Courtesy of Egyptian Museum, Cairo

## The Afterlife

The ancient Egyptians believed that every human being had seven elements needed to survive death: their body, name, shadow, *ka* (pron. car) or spirit double, *ba* (pron. bar) or soul, *akh* (pron. ak) or transfigured spirit and *shm* (pron. sekem) or vital energy.

The body could be preserved by mummification and the name by inscriptions on the deceased's coffin, tomb, sarcophagus or funerary stela. This was important because the *ka* stayed near the body to protect and nourish it, and needed to find its way in and out of the tomb in order to do so. It could not do this without the name to go by, which is why defacing a dead person's inscriptions was the worst possible punishment – they would be unable to survive in the afterlife. However, if the mummy was lost or damaged, the *ka* could inhabit a statue instead. The *ka* also needed nourishment to survive. Offering spells in tombs promise eternal supplies of bread, beer and 'all good things on which a god lives' for the *ka*.

The *ba* held the memory and personality of the dead person. It was usually shown as a bird with a human head and arms and had the power to visit the world of the living in bird form. Soon after death, the *ba* had to make the dangerous journey from the Western horizon and through the underworld to the judgment hall of Osiris. If the deceased was found 'Justified', they became an *akh*, or shining spirit. As an *akh*, the dead person might shine among the stars of the night sky or serve in the court of Osiris.

# Mummification

A mummy is a dead body that has been preserved by drying. Mummification sometimes occurs naturally when bodies are buried in dry places, but many people around the world, including the ancient Egyptians, developed artificial techniques for preserving their dead in this way.

They decided that the dead needed their bodies for the afterlife, and tried to find ways to preserve them. Their first attempts were unsuccessful: burying the bodies in wooden coffins or brick tombs stopped the sand from drying them out, and though wrapping them in bandages held the bodies together it did not prevent them from rotting. But by the Old Kingdom, Egyptian embalmers had discovered how a kind of salt called natron could be used to dry and preserve bodies.

The embalming process lasted 40 days and took place in special tents in the desert, far away from where people lived. The embalmers, known as Anubis-men, were treated as outcasts because of the gruesome nature of their profession.

Embalming was extremely expensive, and different levels of treatment were available depending on the family's means. Even so, only the top 1% of the population could afford it at all. Most people were simply buried in pits in the desert as they had been since prehistoric times.

# Mummification Process

- a) The body is washed.
- b) The bodily fluids are drained, and then the body is washed again.
- c) The brain, which was not thought important, is removed via the nose with and thrown away (in some cases it was left in place).
- d) An incision is made in the left lower abdomen.
- e) Through this the lungs, liver, stomach and intestines are removed and embalmed separately. They are then placed in canopic jars or returned to the body before wrapping.
- f) The heart is either removed for embalming and then returned to the body, or left in place, as the deceased would need it for judgment in the afterlife.
- g) The body is cleaned inside, washed again, and filled and covered with the natron. This dried it out and killed the bacteria that caused decay.
- h) This process continues for 40 forty days, with the natron being replaced periodically.
- i) At the end of the embalming period, the body is cleaned again, and then stuffed with linen or sawdust, together with perfumes and sweet-smelling herbs.
- j) The embalming incision is sealed with a plate bearing the protective Eye of Horus.
- k) The skin is rubbed with ointment to make it supple, and then coated in melted resin to make it strong and waterproof. Our word 'mummy' comes from *mummiya*, the Arabic name for this resin.
- l) The mummy is wrapped in linen bandages.

## Canopic Jars

During mummification, the internal organs were removed and embalmed separately. Sometimes they were placed inside special containers known as Canopic jars.

To keep the organs safe, the jars were often sealed with stoppers shaped like the heads of four gods known as the Sons of Horus. *Hapy*, with an ape's head, looked after the lungs. *Imsety*, with a man's head, looked after the liver. *Qebehsenuef*, with a hawk's head, looked after the intestines, and Duamutef, with a jackal's head, looked after the stomach. The jars were normally kept in a chest decorated with images of the four goddesses who protected the dead: Isis, *Nephtys*, the Delta goddess *Neith* and the scorpion goddess *Selket*.

Canopic jars get their name from the town of Canopus in the Nile Delta, where Osiris was worshipped in the shape of a jar with a human head on top. Because the jars used in mummification looked similar, early Egyptologists called them 'Canopic' jars by mistake.



Figure 6 Canopic jars of *Neskhons* from *Deir el-Bahari*,  
Upper Egypt, 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty, 1069-945 BC  
Courtesy of the British Museum



# Mummy Masks

Funeral masks were placed over the heads of the dead to protect them and help their spirits find their way back to their bodies. The face represented the way the dead person wanted to look in the next world.

The faces of mummy masks were often gilded or coloured gold because gold never rots or corrodes. People believed that the flesh of the gods was made of gold and hoped this magic quality would help to preserve their bodies and make them like gods, too. In some mummy masks, the skin is coloured green or black, identifying the deceased with Osiris, but by the Third Intermediate Period, a skin tone was the norm.

By the Roman Period, mummy masks had been replaced by realistic painted portraits of the deceased.



Figure 7 2nd Intermediate Period Mummy mask fragment

This is part of a mask from a coffin which showed the deceased as the *ba* spirit. It is decorated with expensive materials including gold leaf.

# Coffins

The earliest Egyptians were buried in shallow graves in the sand without any kind of coffin. This simple type of burial was all that poor people could expect throughout Egyptian history.

The earliest coffins are of basketwork or wood. The best wood was cedar from Lebanon. This has a pleasant scent that repels most wood and cloth-eating insects. Most ordinary coffins were put together from small pieces of wood cut from native trees.

Royalty and high officials normally had an outer coffin of stone, known as a sarcophagus.

By the Third Intermediate Period a material called *cartonnage*, made from layers of linen and plaster, was commonly used for whole or partial body cases, which offered a cheaper alternative to an inner coffin. It also had the advantage of being light and easily moulded and painted.

During the Old and Middle Kingdoms, coffins were usually rectangular. From the New Kingdom, they began to take on the shape of the human body. This 'anthropoid' (human-shaped) type of coffin remained popular for the next two thousand years. It was intended to serve as a substitute body for the dead person if their mummy was damaged or destroyed.

Mummy cases like Shep en-Mut's are often intricately painted with funerary texts and images of protective deities and symbols. This was intended to compensate for the fact that the deceased would probably have been buried in a shared tomb with few, if any, grave goods. The prayers, divine images, protective symbols and offering texts painted on their mummy case and coffin were all they would have to ensure their survival in the next world.

## Shep en-Mut's Mummy



Shep en-Mut was donated to RAMM in 1897 by Richard Bowerman West of Streatham Hall (Reed Hall) Exeter, who became High Sheriff of Devon.

The mummy was x-rayed, unwrapped and examined in the 1960s, and was found to be that of a woman, perhaps in her 50s. It was examined again in 2011.

The body was arranged in a lying position, with her hands over the pelvic area. There was damage to the feet, which may well have occurred after her death, possibly during the mummification process.

Her skull is intact, with the brain left in place. The abdominal cavity contains four packages, which are assumed to be canopic packages containing her embalmed organs.

Following embalming, Shep en-Mut's mummy was carefully wrapped in linen bandages before being placed in its *cartonnage* case.



# Shep en-Mut's Cartonnage



Formed from *cartonnage* (layers of linen and plaster) and painted in bright colours, Shep en-Mut's anthropoid (human-shaped) mummy case is typical of the Third Intermediate Period.

The face shows Shep en-Mut as a young woman with pink skin and dark eye paint. She wears a heavy black wig with a floral headdress and gold winged lappets at the sides. Floral and beaded collars extend around her neck and across her upper chest. Below this is a kneeling winged figure of the goddess Nephthys, one of the protectors of the dead, and a solar falcon flanked by the Sons of Horus.



## Shep en-Mut's coffin

Shep en-Mut's anthropoid (human-shaped) outer coffin is typical of the Third Intermediate Period. Made of thin planks and pieces of different woods patched together, its decoration is very simple in comparison to her mummy case, with much of the surface left bare.

As on the mummy case, Shep en-Mut is shown as a young woman with a pink face and blue eye paint, wearing a heavy wig adorned with a fillet and petal garland. Again, her neck and upper chest are covered with decorative collars, and a white band bearing an offering inscription runs from her collar to her feet.

There are more inscriptions running around the sides of the base, and inside a figure of a goddess with her arms raised to embrace and protect the deceased. The inside of the lid is undecorated.



Figure 8 Shep en-Mut's outer coffin, typical of the Third Intermediate Period



Figure 9 Coffin and *cartonnage* of Shep en-Mut as displayed during the early twentieth century in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery.