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# **Death and Immortality in Ancient Egypt**



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## Introduction

Death and immortality in ancient Egypt is an extensively discussed topic. The ancient Egyptians' attitude towards death was influenced by their belief in immortality. They regarded death as a temporary interruption, rather than the cessation of life. To ensure the continuity of life after death, people paid homage to the gods., e.g., Osiris, both during and after their life on earth. When they died, they were mummified so that the soul would return to the body, giving it breath and life. Household equipment and food and drink were placed on offering tables outside the tomb's burial chamber to provide for the person's needs in the afterworld. Written funerary texts consisting of spells or prayers were also included to assist the dead on their way to the afterworld.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, Egyptian mummies provide a unique, challenging resource to study occurrence and pattern of disease as well as the methods in which they fought the disease. It is possible to dig out the mummies and carry out forensic examinations on mummies for scientific requirements. We have also observed how museums have become the centre of economic transaction with knowledge and learning<sup>1</sup>.

In Egypt, the mummies were centre of attraction of tourist bringing foreign exchange although it



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<sup>1</sup> [Ancient Egyptian Mummies: Their Contribution to the 21st Century](#), Visited on 10 December 2020)

saw its downfall from 2010, when Muslim brotherhood came to power giving a rise to violence and regional instability due to the changes in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. And with the onset of COVID-19, it came with an innovative way of virtual trips to museums such as, two of the tours—the tombs of Meresankh III and elite Egyptian official Menna—include background information accessible by clicking circles overlaid atop specific features. The former's tomb, dated to some 5,000 years ago, is the oldest of the Egyptian sites available as a virtual walk . Meresankh, a queen wed to King Khafre, was the daughter of Prince Kawab and Hetepheres II of the fourth dynasty, and the granddaughter of Great Pyramid builder Cheops, also known as Khufuand, these virtual trip started from 17th April 2020.<sup>2</sup>

## **Necessity of mummification in Ancient Egypt**

To reside again in the Egyptian version of paradise, however, required that the dead maintain an association between the land of living and that of the dead. This association was the physical body together with the various elements making up what might today be called the spirit. However, the physical body of the dead also had distant aspects. A living body was called Khet. When a person died, the body was known as a Khat or corpse. It was transformed by mummification into a mummy or sah ----- a word implying nobility or dignity, thus, giving a person's physical remains an air of divinity. The more spiritual side of an individual's makeup was even more complicated. It consisted of several aspects, some of which remain only slightly understood . These included the ren or name; shuyet or shadow; Ka or alter ego; Ba or soul and akh or spirit.<sup>3</sup>

### **Some of the elements:**

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<sup>2</sup> [Take a Free Virtual Tour of Five Egyptian Heritage Sites](#) Visited on 5 January 2021)

<sup>3</sup> Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

A person's name was indispensably vital both in life and death. It provided not only something by which one was called when alive but also served to establish the person as a mortal organism. To be nameless was to cease to exist. To prevent this, Egyptians went to great lengths to preserve their names. Names were frequently painted or carved on the sarcophagus that held them on the walls of the burial chamber. Friends and relatives who brought offerings of food often used bowls or pottery that bore the name of the dead.

Like the name, one's shadow was considered a fundamental part of the dead person being. Because the shadow seemed inextricable from the person, Egyptians believed it contained part of the person's personality. Although the shadow's function was unclear in the ritual held after death but it was thought to have the power to go forth from the tomb and roam the earth while the mummy could not. The ka was immensely associated with the physical body of the dead. The ka was a sort of spiritual twin that enabled a person to be alive. The other words used by the Egyptians in place of shadow were "life force," "soul," "spark," and "willpower."<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the ka, the ba came into existence only after a person's death. Although it is sometimes compared with the concept of the soul in Christianity, many experts contend that the term personality would be more accurate. The ba contained all the attributes that made individuals different from one another. Various Egyptologist went so far as to say the ba was not part of the person but was a spiritual manifestation of the entire person. The ba, however, was not a purely spiritual entity. Egyptians believed that it had the same physical requirements and desires as the deceased. Like the ka, it needed food and water. It even possessed a sexual nature that it somehow was able to satisfy.

A union of the ba and ka produced the akh, which was the ultimate manifestation of the deceased's being that took place at the end of the journey after death. A person could achieve the state only if he or she was judged by the gods to have lived an exceptional life. Those who achieved the important Egyptian concept of ma'at, or harmony and balance with nature and with other people, attained the status of an akh. On becoming an akh, a person became an immortal being associated with the stars. The akh was thought to dwell among the gods but was not itself

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<sup>4</sup> Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

divine. The akh could, however, intervene in the affairs of the living, doing either harm or good, and the word can be translated as “power” or “effectiveness.” The akh could act directly on the living and could benefit those who set up some sort of shrine in the home or who brought prayers to the tomb in the form of letters to be left there. If something were beyond the powers of an akh, it might appeal to the proper gods for assistance.<sup>5</sup>

The Egyptians believed that the continuity of humanity on the surface of the Earth helped in eternal life in the underworld. The deceased were kept alive through statues, inscription of their name and other ways. Maintaining the physical self was the purest sign of maintaining the elements of the soul, i.e., ka, ba and others. To that end, Egyptians paid equal attention to their bodies, personality and tombs where they ultimately rest.

There is no evidence that shows the legend of Osiris’s resurrection by Isis gave rise to mummification or the other way around. There are various evidences that show that when the Egyptians saw how the desert sand preserved bodies, they began seeking ways to improve the process. Beginning of intentional mummification is debated. Though various Egyptologists made the assumption that the Third Dynasty (about 2663 - 2597 BC) was a probable starting point.<sup>6</sup>

It is preserved by various Egyptologist when Egyptians saw that the dead body could be preserved by the desert sand they started finding new ways to improve the process which led to the belief in the afterlife. The earliest graves, thousands of years before the first pharaohs ruled. Shallow pits were dug to bury the bodies which were usually placed on its side in a curled-up fashion and fetal position. The mummies faced the east to greet the rising sun. As the dead bodies were buried in the hot and extremely arid desert it resulted in drying out in place of decaying. As the matter of fact, the muscles and the internal organs reduced to almost nothing but the skeleton remained, as did the skin and often even the hair.

Numerous spells contain instructions on their use that do not call for their integration into a larger papyrus compilation. The instructions usually were written in red, like the title of spells,

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<sup>5</sup> Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

and are referred to as rubrics, a term derived from Latin RUBRICA (Red ochre) it was used to highlight titles of the medieval manuscripts.<sup>7</sup>

*“In the Ptolemaic Period, it was especially common to inscribe the spells on thin linen strips in wide columns of hieratic texts accompanied by illustrations. When many spells were included a large number of strips would have been used, both to accommodate all the spells, but also to fully wrap the body. Several rare examples, atleast to a practice of plastering a Book of the Dead papyrus directly to the mummy and it appears that the spells were laid out on the papyrus to coincide with their replacement over particular body parts.”<sup>8</sup>*

In few cases, the rule describes how the jinx was used in conjunction with a particular amulet.

*“BD 30B is a spell for preventing the heat from condemning a man in the judgement hall. The associated rubric instructs that the spell is to be written on and recited over a scarab made from green stone. It is likely, therefore, that the written version of this spell originated with these particular artifacts and it probably had a longer history of oral transmission for which we have no written evidence.”<sup>9</sup>*

## Steps and Process of mummification and Osiris Myth

### Osiris Myth:

The multitudinous cycle of nature ----- like the sun also known as the great god Ra ----- rising in the east, setting in the west, only to rise anew the next day, came to be reflected in religion as well. It was believed that if someone was born, they live again in a lush underworld. A key to the

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<sup>7</sup> Luce, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

<sup>8</sup> **Scalf Foy, editor. *Book of the Dead: Becoming God In Ancient Egypt*. Chicago, USA, The Oriental Institute museum Publication 39, 2017 pg 25**

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

afterlife, however, was preservation of the body and this belief is nowhere better illustrated than in ancient Egyptian legend of Isis and Osiris.

Ra, king of the gods, believed that if his wife Nut, goddess of the nights, has children one would end his reign on Earth. Eventually, Ra cursed goddess Nut with the curse of infertility but she bore three sons with two daughters namely Osiris, Horus the Elder and Set, Isis and Nephthys respectively with the help of the magic done by Thoth, god of wisdom. In consequence, Osiris married Isis while Set married Nephthys. Isis wanted her husband----Osiris to rule Earth, therefore, she tricked Ra and got the secret name by which Ra used to rule the earth. Thus, Osiris came to power and began ruling earth.

As Osiris began to emerge as a pacifist, Set was jealous of his younger brother and planned to kill him. As Set arranged a lavish banquet in his younger brother's honour, in this banquet he also made an announcement that he has ordered a wondrous casket to be made from the most expensive woods and painted with gold. The person who fit the best inside the casket would be given the extravagant gift. While the cruel Set had other plans going on in his mind, he had secretly obtained Osiris's accurate measurement. When Osiris laid inside the casket, Set associates locked the casket up and threw over the Nile, it was carried downriver into the Mediterranean Sea. Although grief-stricken for the sudden disappearance of her husband, Isis was determined to find him and started wandering around the world in search of the casket. Ultimately, in the city of Byblos in present day Lebanon, she heard people gossiping about the over-sized Tantrisk tree which the king of the land had ordered his men to cut using the main pillars the palace. Isis knew that the casket had washed ashore, lodged in a bush and then the Osiris's spirit had magically caused the tree to oversize. Finally, Isis recovered Osiris's body and returned to Egypt, hiding the body.

Unfortunately, fate had planned something else that Set happened to be haunting in the same area. He discovered the casket, ripped it open and in a rage and jealousy, tore Osiris's body in 14 parts and threw them in the Nile for the alligator to eat. When Isis found that her husband went missing again, she once again set out to recover her husband's body. Fortunately this Isis was aided by her sister Nephthys, who abandoned her husband-- Set. She was finally able to find 13 parts of Osiris's body out of 14. Despite Set's wish the alligator had not eaten them

because of their reverence for Isis. Only one piece, the penis was missing having been eaten by a fish.

Isis re-edified the existing parts and through her magical powers, was able to fashion the missing penis out of gold. She then sang a song to Osiris that brought him back for a long time that she was able to conceive a son, Horus. When Osiris died once more, Isis embalmed and hid him away in a place that only she knew. As a spirit Osiris crossed to the underworld and became the ruler of the dead. On the other hand, his son, Horus, later defeated Set in a great battle and ruled on Earth following his father's footsteps.

To Egyptians, this story was more than myth because they believed that their king, the pharaoh was personified to Horus. That is why the pharaoh and king were carefully preserved and sent to their journey to the underworld. As time passed, the practice was extended beyond royalty, and everyone, even the lowliest slave, could hope for some form of immortality.<sup>10</sup>

### **Steps and Process of Mummification:**

Washing the body, removing some of the internal organs, drying the body, anointing it with sweet, stuffing it for shape, and finally the last but not the least wrapping it for burial were the basic steps involved in mummification. Steps of mummification has modernized with passing time thus, inviting variation from century to century and from location to location.

As there were economic disparities, every mummy could not avail all the process, the number of rituals done on the deceased largely depended on what the families could afford. As categorised by Herodotus mummification had three general categories: one for the wealthy, one for the ordinary citizens and one for the poor. Embalmers showed clients the scale made from woods which represented the categories from which the clients could choose. "Perankh" or "House of life" were a place where a person was taken after he/she died. This place contained the facilities for mummification. The first step took place at the ibw, where it was washed. These temporary structures were usually located close to both the Nile and the cemetery. The dead bodies were

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<sup>10</sup> Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013



also rubbed with palm wine that had about 14% ethyl alcohol besides water which was good for killing bacteria<sup>11</sup>.

***“ The mummification descriptions of both Herodotus and Diodorus refer to natron ‘baths’, but modern experiments have shown that natron was used in its solid , not liquid, form ”***<sup>12</sup>

The body was then turned over to the embalmers, who worked in a more permanent structure known as wabt wat (pure place) or per nefer (beautiful house). In Egypt, embalmers were considered as highly skilled craftsmen, unlike other cultures around the world. The embalmers have their own guilds and kept details of their art secret, only shared with their successors. The traditional mummification process lasted for 70 days, probably because the star Sirius who was associated with Anubis, god of the underworld, disappeared from the view for 70 days during the year. Evisceration the process by which the internal organs were removed lasted for 15 days. It took 40 days to dry up the body and 15 days to wrap it. This process was first introduced around 2600 BC. This process got more aspects to it as time changed<sup>13</sup>.

**“ According to Herodotus, the brain was removed first and was thrown away because the Egyptians had no idea of its functions. One method to remove the brain involved the use of a long metal instrument with a hook on the end”**<sup>14</sup>. “

The metal instrument was used by embalmers to break through the ethmoid bone, located at the bridge of the nose and then either scraped the brain away from the skull and muddled it until it was liquefied enough to be poured out through the nose. The organs which could not be removed were washed out with palm wine with the sweet-smelling resin frankincense. Afterward the empty cavity was filled with resin derived from the sap of Cedar tree, Fir trees and pine trees.

Great care was taken by the embalmers with the organs they thought the person would use in afterlife. As said by Diodorus, a scribe who was also a low-level priest marked a spot for incision,

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<sup>11</sup> Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

<sup>12</sup> ***Lace, William W. Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013, Pg 27***

<sup>13</sup> Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

<sup>14</sup> ***Lace, William W. Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013, pg 28***

usually somewhere on the lower left side of the body. Then the cutter or splitter made the incision. Body organs like the intestines, stomach, lungs and liver were removed to be dealt later on. However, the heart was mummified separately, and then placed in the same cavity. Egyptians believed that the heart was the source of the person's spirit and that after death of the person the gods carried the heart with them.

After the process of evisceration, the body was washed with water and palm wine once more before going to the next process. The dead body was packed by salt from all sides by the embalmers known as natron. The natron was a mixture of four sodium compounds found naturally near the Nile delta. To absorb the body moisture, a bag of natron was placed in the body cavity. The natron was referred to as netjry or "divine salt" by Egyptians and it had two functions: (a) drying the body and (b) dissolving the fatty tissues.

In equal interval of time, the natron was changed as it soaked up fluids and fat. When the body fully dried, the body was rinsed the final time after which the cavity was filled with some substances so that it could retain its shape, e.g., rags, grain chaff, and leaves were among the various stuffing materials used. Workers then sewed up the incision and anointed the body with costly, aromatic oils. From time to time, liquefied resin was poured over the body both to in preservation and to hold in place some magical charms placed on the body emblem ers went through all the steps only with those who could afford the entire process. The dead body was covered in the divine told 40 days do that a liquid was allowed to drain out carrying the internal organ with it<sup>15</sup>.

The poor were not wrapped; instead they had the intestine flushed out and then dried in the divine salt they were buried in a sand pit and sometimes were wrapped in a sleeping mat that they used when they were alive. Wrapping the dead body was the next step for the wealthy; it involved an entirely new set of workers, it was considered a sacred process and hence these rituals were conducted by the priest who had good knowledge of religion and culture of Egypt. The process of wrapping was led by the hery sesheta or "overseer of mysteries", who wore

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<sup>15</sup> Lace, William W. Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

a mask of the god Anubis. The priest who performed the wrapping of the dead body was called the hetemw netjer or high priest. The second type of priests who was involved in the process of mummification was called the heb or "reader priest", the reader priests read aloud the prayers and spells while the high priest wrapped the dead body.

The amulets were another name for the charms that took many forms and served many purposes. The intentions for which amulets were used was to protect the mummies or the deceased from harm, aid the deceased on the journey through the Underworld and take the place of the body part that was missing in the dead body. The amulets derived its powers from various ways such as the shape, their colour, the substance from which they were made, the spells carved on them or spells recited over them. Scarabs were among the most popular amulets. Scarabaeus sacer, was a amulet that symbolised the resurrection. The scarab that was placed above the heart was considered as the most important, because it helped the heart to receive a complimentary judgement in the afterlife.

The Horus or Wadjet eye was also an important amulet. It was believed that the eye of horus helped in providing protection from harm for the dead bodies and also ward off curses, not only for the dead body in the afterlife but for the living on the surface of the earth. Two layers of amulets were placed on the dead body: inner and outer. The amulets on the inner layers were more in number and were mostly made from stone. On the other hand the amulets on the outer layers were made from semi precious stones such as lapis lazuli, Jasper and others. As time passed the number of amulets placed in and out of the dead body increased for example the early mummies had 10 or 15 amulets in total whereas the latter mummies had 55 or more amulets in total. The mummy of the pharaoh Tutankhamun who died in about 1336 BC had 143 amulets possibly because as modern science has shown already he was extremely sickly and died young

Contradictorily, the amulets were intended to protect the mummies were often the cause of destruction because there were tomb robbers who burned the mummy in order to reach the most valuable charms or amulets especially the amulet that was placed in the heart of the mummies<sup>16</sup>. The arms of the dead bodies were kept in various positions throughout the history, for instance, for few the arms were crossed abdomen, for some crossed over the private area and for few

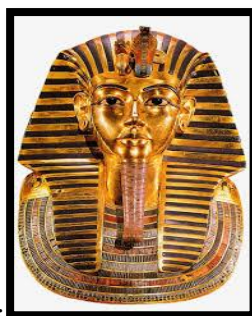
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<sup>16</sup> Lacey, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

crossed over the chest. From time to time, the position of the arms were a combination such as one arm on the side and another arm over the chest. Some of the pharaohs had their fist clenched which was a Egyptian symbol of kingship. A major change took place at around 2200 BC in the process of wrapping, after individual body parts were wrapped, the mummy as a whole was wrapped again in a spiral form. Then was covered with shrouds or shrouds held together with long strips. The wrapping process of only one mummy at a time alone consumed 4,036 square feet of linen cloth.

When Egypt was ruled by Greece and Rome, less attention was paid to preservation of the body and more to wrapping of the body. As mummification reached its peak, after which the quality of embalming declined. Mummification was designed to make the final results similar to the deceased as far as possible. During the Roman rule, faces of the mummies were not wrapped, with passing time it was replaced by helmet-like mask that only covered the head. In later period; the mask covered much of the chest, upper back as well as the front.<sup>17</sup>

The mask was more than a decoration. It helped in forming the soul's face in the afterlife. The early masks were made of linen soaked in plaster, but as time passed different versions were crafted from metals, e.g., gold for royalty and people who could afford it. The mask of Tutankhamun, for instances is one of the most famous and most recognised works of art in history. The mask's feature were has similarities with the features of the young pharaoh made of gold surrounded by a headdress for blue faience, coloured glass, carnelian, lapis lazuli and translucent quartz. Placing the mask in the face of the dead body symbolised that the mummy was ready for its adventure to the tomb. Before putting the mask, the intestines, stomach, liver and lungs were separately mummified. They were packed in natron to dry and then were wrapped with the same kind of linen cloth used on the mummy.



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<sup>17</sup> Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

The organs which were mummified were kept in canopic jars. The earliest known canopic chests date from about 2550 BC. The canopic jars for the ordinary citizen were carved out of wood while the canopic jars for kings were carved out of stones like calcite, quartzite and granite. The inside of the canopic jars were divided four quadrants, one of each organ. The jar lids at first were flat or domed. The human heads were guarded by the hawk-headed Horus, later it was relieved that Horus's four sons Imseti, Hapy, Duamutef and Qebehsenuef. Human-headed Imseti protected the liver, Hapy pictured as an ape, held the lungs. Duamutef represented by a dog and held the stomach and Qebehsenuef, a falcon, held the intestine. In about 1700 BC, external features of the canopic jars changed and represented different aspects of god Anubis. We again see a change in the jackals in the canopic jars be replaced by four guardian goddesses: Isis, Nephthys, Neith and Selket. In case of Tutankhamun's tomb, the goddesses stood facing the facing inward and their arms extended in a protective embrace.

When preservation of both the body and the internal organs had been completed, the mummy was ready for the steps----- the adventure to the afterlife<sup>18</sup>.

## **Relevance of Mummification in the Modern World**

People from various areas of interest like ancient historians to modern scientists have fascination and fantasy towards the Egyptian mummies. Originally, the mummies were plundered for their jewellery, ground up for medicine and burned as firewood. As curiosity got the best of people, buying tickets to watch the mummies unwrapped was common. The wrapping of the mummies were used to make paper. Earlier, Hollywood made the mummies, villains in endless horror movies.

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<sup>18</sup>Lace, William W. *Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt*. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013

From the late 1800s, however, mummies also became an area of scholarly research. Ancient or modern robberies involved getting inside the tomb. Nothing was able to stop them because they were more advanced than the citizens. As the country was taken over by the Persian, Greeks and Romans in succession, people out of Egypt grew more of mummies. The theory that mummies had healing powers originated from a mistake. Before the 20th century, people believed that the mummies had a very dark colour because they were coated with bitumen. The mummy coating came to be called *mummi*, which in English became mummy.

In 1852, Johann Czermak undertook what was called the first microscopic examination of mummy tissues, discovering that the dead had suffered from atherosclerosis, a hardening of the arteries. Since then, scientists have learned that heart disease was most common in Ancient Egypt that been suspected. Between 2005 and 2010, in a middle of a study in Orange County, California, found the oldest known case of heart disease in the mummy for a woman who dies around 1550 BC.

Grafton Elliot Smith, chose Thutmose IV for performing X-ray. The X-rays results were surprising. By reading the old manuscripts, it was believed Thutmose IV died 50 years old , but by observing the X-ray plate, it revealed that Thutmose IV died when he was 25 years old.

By studying the condition of their mummies, scientists were able to make out their age and diet<sup>19</sup>. As there was advancement in science and technology, scientists could find more on the mummies.

Mummies also had cultural and economic effects worldwide as in, if we see, In India also we find mummies in many cities: Indian Museum, Kolkata ; Y.S Rajasekhara Reddy State Museum, Hyderabad ;Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai, thus bringing cultural exchange with economic effects as Indians from different states visit the museums to look at the mummies.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lace, William W. Mummification and Death Rituals of Ancient Egypt. San Diego, Reference Point Press, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> [6 Egyptian Mummies you can see in India!](#) Visited on 13 January 2021