

Squiz Kids Shortcut to... Ancient Egypt

It was a place where men wore makeup, and women could be kings... where the rich were mummified in tombs, and the poor in the desert. This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to Ancient Egypt—the podcast where we dive into the who, what, when, where, why and how of the big news stories. I'm Amanda Bower.

And I'm Bryce Corbett.

A while back on Squiz Kids Today, we heard about a 3,500 year old royal mummy that was digitally unwrapped in Egypt, without a single bandage being removed. Experts learned a lot and the world was fascinated. Centuries after the decline of Ancient Egypt, we are still intrigued by mummies, pyramids, and hieroglyphics ... but there are a lot of myths around that we need to bust.

Today, we'll take you through WHAT are some of those main myths about Ancient Egypt; WHY Egyptian men and women wore makeup; and HOW to make a mummy at home.

Listen carefully - there's a Squiz at the end!

WHAT

Okay, Bryce, let's start with the pyramids. Most people will tell you that the pyramids were built by slaves, and that every king had one. Right?

Right.

Wrong! Egyptologists - those people with the cool job of studying Ancient Egypt - say that this myth was started by the Greek historian Herodotus, who was born 2000 years AFTER the Great Pyramid of Giza was built. He said that 100,000 slaves had built the 146 metre tall structure, but actually, evidence dug up in Egypt shows that it was in fact built by a workforce of 5,000 paid employees, and another 20,000 temporary workers who put in a three- or four-month volunteer shift on the building site before returning home.

[FX]

That sounds better than slaves being whipped as they worked! [Pause for whipping FX]
So... did every king, or Pharaoh, have a pyramid built to house their body when they died?

Nope, that's a myth too. Ancient Egyptian history starts around 3150 BC, but by 1550 BC, pyramids were out of fashion. From that point onward, kings arranged to have their mummies buried in hidden tombs on the west bank of the river Nile, which is the massive river running through Egypt.

Ah, good, I'm glad you mentioned mummies. And of course, we're not talking about mummies in the mum and dad sense. We're talking about the process of preserving a

dead body by wrapping it cloth bandages. Why did all Egyptians mummify themselves? Or... don't tell me... is that another myth?

I'm afraid so! The process of mummifying a human body was really expensive... and it took 70 days! So it was only for kings and the very rich.

70 days! Why does it take so long to mummify a body?

First, special priests would carefully remove all the internal organs. The most delicate operation was getting the brain out... they did that by sticking a special instrument up through the nostrils and then pulling the brains out. [FX]

Yikes! Lucky the person was dead and couldn't feel anything.

I'll say. All the organs were removed, put in jars, and buried with the person. But the priests left the heart behind, because the Ancient Egyptians believed that was where a person's intelligence and soul were. Now, that wasn't the time consuming part. Once all the guts were removed, the priests had to remove all moisture from the body.

Why's that?

Well, think about how quickly an apricot goes off sitting on the kitchen bench, versus a dried apricot. Drying things out preserves them. So they covered the body with natron, a type of salt, and put extra salt inside the body. The salt drew the moisture out. Once the mummy was completely dried out, the wrapping began. Each mummy needed hundreds of metres of linen. They also put special charms called amulets between layers of linen, and wrote prayers on some of the linen strips.

So that's what happened to the rich who died. What about regular, ordinary, everyday Ancient Egyptians? You know, like us. What would have happened to you or I if we died back in Ancient Egypt?

We would have been buried in pits in the desert. The funny thing is, we would basically be mummified too, because the sand was so hot and sterile that it would dry us out. In fact, the first mummies in the world were created that way, in the hot desert sand of northern Chile. We've talked about them on Squiz Kids before - they're up to are 9000 years old!

So there's another myth busted... Ancient Egypt wasn't the first place to mummify the dead.

Now Amanda, when we see movies set in Ancient Egypt, everyone is wearing dark black eye makeup. Is that another myth that men and women painted their faces?

No, that one is true!

Okay, so WHY?

WHY

All men and women in ancient Egypt painted their eyes with black and green powders because they thought it had magical healing powers. Now, I don't know about magic, but it did protect their skin from the sun—kind of like coloured zinc does. And incredibly, in 2010, French researchers analysed makeup preserved from the ancient past, and found that it contained lead salts, which are antibacterial. So they really did help to prevent or treat common eye infections.

Wait a second... lead salts? Isn't lead toxic?

Yep, that's sort of the point. Toxic to the bacteria trying to infect your eye, but it is also toxic to the person. Those French scientists were very quick to say that no one in the 21st century should be wearing lead makeup to treat an eye infection! There are medicines available for that ... Now Bryce, while we're on the subject of men and women, you may be interested to hear that in Ancient Egypt, men and women were considered equal in the eyes of the law. Women could own, earn, buy, sell and inherit property.

Something that only started in Australia in the late 1800s, and still isn't allowed in some countries today.

Ancient Egyptian women could also live alone, and, if their husband died or they got divorced, they could raise their own children. That sounds obvious to us nowadays, but again, in many countries it still isn't permitted. And in Ancient Egyptian, the word for "king" wasn't attached to any gender... so women could also be kings.

How often were there female kings?

Women took the throne at least three times.. The most successful of them was Hatshepsut, who ruled Egypt for more than 20 prosperous years. Now, I'm definitely not saying that Ancient Egyptian men and women were completely equal in all ways ... for one thing, women were expected to stay home and raise the kids while men went out to work. So no paid pyramid building, and no work as a mummification specialist.

Speaking of mummies, you promised to teach us HOW to make our own mummies...

HOW

Well, the good news for those of you playing along at home is that you don't need a dead human body. We're going to make this mummy from a chicken. The full details are in your episode notes, but essentially, you're going to need a raw chicken, salt, baking soda, and a container that you can seal tightly. Oh, and 40 or 50 days. [FX]

Wow! I guess it takes time to dry out a chicken, too... unless you forget it in the oven ...

Yeah, we're not going to cheat by cooking it! Every ten days, you're going to wipe off the old salt and soda mixture, and re-cover the chook. And in case it's not obvious, you'll want to wear rubber gloves while handling a raw chicken.

And then can you wrap up your mummy?

Sure can! Wrap it up, attach amulets, write some hieroglyphics on the linen, and then, when it's all finished, you can FINALLY hold the funeral... just like they did for the pharaohs.

"This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening...

1. Who did the Greek historian Herodotus say built the great pyramids? "

2 What did Ancient Egyptian priests pull out of dead kings' nostrils?

3 What did black and green makeup help prevent? (remember, don't try lead makeup at home!)

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of Ancient Egypt.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.