EMBALMING AND MUMMIES

The embalming process, which prevented bodies from rotting away, was perfected over hundreds of years. If it was done properly, it was a lengthy, messy and gruesome job, but it did work.

THE NEW KINGDOM METHOD

Mummification took 70 days altogether. First, a slit was made in the side of the body so that the ‘viscera’ – the intestines, lungs, liver and stomach – could be taken out. The viscera were embalmed separately and placed in four ‘canopic jars’ (see opposite). The heart was left in the body, because Egyptians believed it would be judged in the Next World.

Jewels and amulets (charms) were placed between the layers, to protect the person in the next life, and each layer was covered in oils, resins and perfumes, too.

Finally, a mask was placed over the mummy’s head. This was done by the chief embalmer, wearing the jackal mask of the embalming god Anubis. At last, the mummy was ready to be put in its coffin.

Over time, the oils and resins used in the wrapping stage became thick and sticky, almost like tar. The local word for this substance was mumiya, meaning ‘bitumen’ (tar is made partly of bitumen). So, this is where the word ‘mummy’ comes from.
CANOPIC JARS

There were usually four canopic jars with each mummy, containing the mummified liver, lungs, stomach and intestines. Each jar had a different stopper, in the form of one of the four sons of Horus, who protected the viscera.

MUMMIES REVEAL THEIR SECRETS

In the 19th century, mummies were often unwrapped so that investigators could inspect them. Later, it was recognized that this practice damaged them badly, so it was stopped. Now, when scientists want to find out about a mummy, they put it into a CAT scanner, which sees through all the bandages. They can also carry out tests on tiny scraps of mummy flesh to find out about their DNA, the unique blueprint that each of us has in our cells. For example, DNA tests have shown that Tutankhamun and the body found in KV55 (see page 28) were definitely related.