



Priests shaved their heads as one of many steps in achieving religious purity.

9.4 Priests

Like government officials, priests were powerful and highly respected in society. A large network of priests served under the pharaoh, who was considered the highest-ranked priest of all.

The Duties of Priests Priests had different jobs. The High Priest advised the pharaoh and oversaw all religious ceremonies. Temple priests were in charge of the temples scattered throughout Egypt. Other priests handled more common concerns and requests. They gave advice and performed healings.

Women were allowed to be priestesses in Egypt. They were generally regarded as equal to male priests. Their main duty was to oversee temples that were devoted to music and dancing.

Temple priests played an extremely important role in Egyptian religion.

Every temple was home to one or more Egyptian gods. A temple priest's primary job was to take care of his temple's special god in a variety of ways.

A temple's god was thought to live in a statue. The statue was housed in a holy room called a sanctuary. Only a priest who had purified (cleansed) himself could enter the sanctuary. There were many steps a priest had to take to be purified. He had to avoid certain foods, such as fish, that were associated with the lower classes. He had to cleanse his body by bathing in holy pools, three or four times a day. He also had to shave off his body hair. And he had to wear clothes made of linen cloth, because animal products like leather and wool were considered unclean. Once he was purified, the priest could perform his sacred duties.

The Priests' Role in Burial Practices

Priests had a special role to play in burial practices. Egyptians believed in a life after death. They thought that in the **afterlife**, a person's body remained with his or her dead spirit. For this reason, the Egyptians used a method called embalming to preserve bodies from decay. Priests oversaw this sacred ritual.

afterlife an existence after death

The embalming process had many steps. First, the embalmers removed the body's organs, such as the brain, lungs, and liver. They used hooks to pull the brain out through the nostrils. Only the heart was left in the body. Egyptians believed that the gods used the heart to judge a dead person's soul.

Then, the organs were packed in jars to preserve them. The organs and body were dried out with a special salt called natron.

After about 70 days, the embalmers washed and oiled the body. Then they wrapped it in hundreds of yards of linen. The embalmers decorated the wrapped body, or mummy, with pieces of jewelry and protective charms. Often, they placed a mask over the head. Finally, they spread a black, gooey gum over the body and wrapped it a final time.

The mummy was then ready for burial. First, it was placed in a wooden box. The box was then stored inside a large stone coffin called a sarcophagus. Because the ancient Egyptians believed that the afterlife was much like life in this world, they buried other items along with the box or coffin. These included food and drink, furniture, statues, jewelry, gold, clothes, games, and mirrors.

Not all Egyptians could afford such complicated burials. But even poor Egyptians wrapped their dead in cloth and buried them with loaves of bread and other items they thought would be needed in the afterlife.



The Egyptian process of embalming a body produced a mummy, such as the one shown here.