Herodotus on ‘Mummies’ – Book 2: 83

‘Mummification is a distinct profession. The embalmers, when a body is brought to them, produce specimen models in wood, painted to resemble nature and graded in quality; the best and most expensive kind is said to represent Osiris, the next best is somewhat inferior, while the third is cheapest of all. The most perfect process is as follows: as much of the brain is extracted through the nostrils with an iron hook, and what the hook cannot reach is rinsed out with drugs; next the side of the body is opened with a flint knife and the whole contents of the abdomen removed; the cavity is then thoroughly cleansed and washed out, first with palm wine and again with an infusion of spices. After that it is filled with pure bruised myrrh, and every other aromatic substance with the exception of frankincense, and sewn up again, after which the body is placed in natrum, covered entirely over, for seventy days – never longer.

When this period, which must not be exceeded, is over, the body is washed and then wrapped from head to foot in linen cut into strips and smeared on the other side with gum. In this condition the body is given back to the family, who have a wooden caste made, shaped like the human figure, into which it is put. The case is then sealed up and stored in a chamber, upright against the wall.

When for reasons of expense, the second quality is called for, the treatment is different: no incision is made and the intestines are not removed, but oil of cedar is injected with a syringe into the body through the anus which is afterwards stopped to prevent the liquid from escaping. The body is then pickled in natrum for the prescribed period of days, on the last of which the oil is drained off. The effect of it is so powerful that as it leaves the body it brings with it the stomach and intestines in a liquid state, and as the flesh, too, is dissolved by the natrum, nothing of the body is left but the bones and skin. After this treatment it is returned to the family without further fuss.

The third method, used for embalming the bodies of the poor, is simply to clear out the intestines with a purge and keep the body seventy days in natrum. It is then given back to the family to be taken away.

When the wife of a distinguished man dies, or any woman who happens to be beautiful or well known, her body is not given to the embalmers immediately, but only after the lapse of three or four days. This is a precautionary measure to prevent the embalmers from violating the corpse, a thing which is said actually to have happened in the case of a woman who had just died. The culprit was given away by one of his fellow workmen. If anyone, either an Egyptian or a foreigner, is found drowned in the river or killed by a crocodile, there is the strongest obligation upon the people of the nearest town to have the body embalmed in the most elaborate manner and buried in a consecrated burial place; no one is allowed to touch it expect for the priests of the Nile – not even relatives or friends.