Death in Ancient Egypt was a magical experience. There were gods to judge and guide you, amulets and spells to protect you, mumification to preserve you, even shrines to do your work for you in an afterlife.

Embalmment is performed by their specialists. Their first step is to insert an iron hook through the nostrils and pull out the brain. Next, using an Egyptian sharpening tool, the embalmers cut a slit along the soft part of the body, and remove all the intestines. After this, they stuff the cavity with sweet-smelling spices. Once the stomach has been filled, they saw it back up and pickle the body by packing it in natron (a salt mixture). It is then left, for seventy days, after which the embalmers wash the corpse, then wrap it in bandages made from fine linen.

This is the most expensive method of preparing a corpse.

Herodotus, The Histories, II.6 5th century BC

Each day, the sun, Ra, rises in the morning and rolls across the sky, before disappearing down into the earth as night falls, to bring light to the underworld.

One staff, who has been given to me, if my name is called on it, can detach it from me by which has hands in the realm of the dead ... you shall act for me on every occasion, be it cultivating the fields, irrigating the land, or carrying sand from west to east. Here I am, you shall say.

Apart from The Book of the Dead, a collection of magical spells intended to help the deceased on their journey to the afterlife.

Shabtis were symbolic figures who undertook the menial tasks expected of the deceased in the afterlife, where existence was supposed to be eternal and leisurely.

Oh staff, who has been given to me, if my name is called on it, can detach it from me by which has hands in the realm of the dead ... you shall act for me on every occasion, be it cultivating the fields, irrigating the land, or carrying sand from west to east. Here I am, you shall say.

The Egyptians say that Osiris and Isis are the rulers of the underworld.

Herodotus, The Histories I.123 5th century BC

The story of the god Osiris, of his wife and sister Isis, and of their son Horus, is one of the most elaborate and important of all Egyptian myths, and of it there are many versions.

Osiris, the ruler of Egypt, was murdered by his jealous brother, Set, the god of violence and chaos. His body was either thrown into the Nile or cut into pieces and scattered across Egypt. It was recovered and preserved by Isis and her sister Nephthys, who restored Osiris to an 'alive-ness' in the Underworld where he became its ruler. This is the premise for mumification.

Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, finally defeated Set, bringing peace and stability. Dynamic succession to Egypt. In the battle, Horus lost his left eye, torn out by Set. It was found and returned by the goddess Hathor.

Horus gave the eye to Osiris, hoping that it would bring his father back to full life. It didn’t bring his father back to full life, but this, the so-called, eye-yew, became one of the most powerful of all magical amulets, symbolising sacrifice, protection, healing, and most importantly the restoration of the body to full life.

The bronze and stone figures on display represent Osiris, Isis, and Horus as a child.

The head belonging to this broken torso is in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, and identifies the ash god Osiris. Broken in antiquity and separated, the torso was acquired in Thebes in or before 1856, while the head was found in 1900 in archaeological excavations at the temple complex of Karnak at Thebes.

The statue was made during the reign of Tutankhamen in about 1320 BC, immediately following the iconoclastic reign of Akhenaten. It is supposed that Akhenaten may have come into the funerary temple of Tutankhamen, which was destroyed by Herakhotep I.

The kneeling man holds a staff as an offering. Inside the shrine is the figure of the god Osiris. Osiris appears again together, with his sisters, Isis and Nephthys, sitting on the back of the kneeling man. By making this offering, the man is accepting to share in the generosity and good fortune of the god.

An inscription on its back identifies the man as Ps-êt-away-en-nehet, son of Hor-hetep. The statue dates to about 600 BC.

The Egyptians saw the movement of the ball of dune across the earth as mirroring the movement of the sun across the sky, and they believed that out of each new life.

Ra, as the rising sun, bringer of new life, appears in funerary art as the scarab, Khepri. He is predominantly on top of the head of the coffin of the priest Païshadikhaibout and on the front of the coffin of Mursil (both on display).

Before the introduction of scarab amulets in about 2300 BC, real scarab beetles were buried in jars with the deceased.

Herodotus, The Histories, II.6 5th century BC

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The Snakes at the Threshold

Donated by Sir Charles Nicholson, 1860.

On loan from the Faculty of Veterinary Sciences, the University of Sydney.

This red granite column capital is from the entrance hall to the temple of the cat goddess Bastet, Bastet, a once important town in the Nile Delta. It was carved in the 9th century BC.

The face, which appears on both the front and back, is of the cow-eared Hator, the dangerous yet protective goddess associated with female sexuality, love and motherhood.

Hator was also the Mistress of the West, the desert land of the setting sun, who welcomed the dead into the afterlife. She can be seen as a cow, at the edge of the desert, on the mummy coffin of Meruah on display.

On one side of the capital are two cartouches of the Pharaoh Dsoerok II, who ruled Egypt from the Delta between 872 and 837 BC.

In about 450 BC, the Greek traveller Herodotus visited the sanctuary of Bastet, describing it as: 

"... truly remarkable. Other sanctuaries may be larger, but none is more beautiful."

Herodotus, The Histories, ii 137-38. 5th century BC

The head of a sacrificed bull is cut off, loaded with curses, and thrown into the river. The curses directed at the head take the form of a prayer:

May we, who have made this sacrifice, and all of Egypt with us, be spared any evil that threatens— and may it fall instead upon this head!

Herodotus, The Histories, ii 39. 5th century BC

The vital requirement for continuation of life after death was a favourable judgment in the court of the Underworld, presided over by the god Osiris.

The deceased’s life, represented by his or her heart, was set in the scales, balanced against an ostrich feather representing Maat, the goddess of universal and divine order. If the heart was not as light and pure as the feather, the deceased was condemned to everlasting oblivion.

This magical journey from life to death, to afterlife, is rated graphically on this panel from a mummy coffin, dating to the 1st century AD.

The Nemen of the Weighing of the Heart

The deceased’s heart, raised in supplication, and his body, raised to the left of the Judgement, stand in front of the sacred tree of life, the tree of the tree of life, the tree of life.

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Horus: the jar with the baboon-headed jackal, god of the moon and magic, stands beside the coffin, which lies on a hipposon, god of the hippopotamus, sits on a pedestal holding a feather.

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