Primary Sources: Herodotus on Making a Mummy
Original document in the public domain, adapted by Newsela staff

Editor's Note: Herodotus was a Greek historian who lived in the 5th century B.C. (about 484 B.C. to 420 B.C.) He authored "The Histories," which is widely considered to be the world's first comprehensive work of written history. The following portions from "The Histories" describe the ancient Egyptian methods of mummification. A mummy is a person or animal whose body has been preserved intentionally by other people, or unintentionally by nature. Ancient Egyptians believed that a person's spirit stayed in his or her body after death. Their process of mummification preserved the body, it was believed, to protect the spirit inside. Modern scientists have found that Herodotus' account of mummification is not entirely accurate. New research dismisses many of the details Herodotus included as over-imaginative descriptions.

Mourning A Death
After the death in any house of an important man, the women of the family spread mud on their heads and sometimes their faces and walked through the city, hitting their own chests as a part of mourning the dead. All the female relatives joined them and did the same. The men also did this, but separately.

When these ceremonies were over, the dead person's body was carried away to be embalmed. This is the process that delays or slows the decomposition of the body, which is the natural breakdown of a living being after it dies. A group of men in Egypt practiced the art of embalming; it was their profession.

Ways To Make A Mummy
The process of embalming began by removing the brain. The embalmers took a crooked piece of iron and used it to pull out the brain through the nostrils. Next, they made a cut along the side of the body with a sharp stone and removed the contents inside. They washed the body with wine, filled it with aromatics and sewed up the opening. The body was placed in salt for 70 days for preservation. Then, the body was washed and wrapped from head to foot with bandages of fine linen cloth. The cloth was smeared with gum, which was used by the Egyptians instead of glue.

The body was given back to the family members, who enclosed it in a wooden case in the shape of a man. They fastened the case and placed it upright against the wall in a tomb. This was the most expensive way of embalming the dead. There were two other less-costly methods that people could choose.

Different Rules For Some
The most beautiful women and the wives of important men were not embalmed immediately. After they had been dead three or four days, these women were taken to the embalmers. This was done to maintain their dignity after they had died.

If anyone died from a crocodile attack or by drowning in the river, the law said that the people of the city near where the body was found were responsible for having it embalmed and buried in a sacred place. Only the priests who prepared the body and laid it in the tomb could touch the body. It was considered to be sacred.

Some Animals Were Mummies, Too
There were also mourning and mummification processes for certain animals. For example, if a cat died a natural death in a private house, all people who lived in the house shaved their eyebrows.
After cats died, they were taken to a particular city, where they were embalmed and buried in sacred places. Dogs, though, were buried in the cities where they lived, also in sacred places. However, dead bears and also wolves were buried wherever they were found.

The crocodile was deemed sacred by some of the Egyptians, and as an enemy by others. In the cities where crocodiles were liked, people kept one crocodile and taught it to be tame and controllable. People adorned the crocodile’s ears with earrings of stone or gold, put bracelets on its fore-paws and gave it food every day. They treated the crocodile with the greatest possible attention while it was alive and embalmed and buried it in a sacred place after it died. On the other hand, people of one small Egyptian island did not consider these animals to be sacred and even ate them.

Possible response options:
- Why might there be different rules for the mummification of some? Explain.
- Respond to this excerpt from the passage: “The crocodile was deemed sacred by some of the Egyptians, and as an enemy by others.” Explain.
- Select any passage and respond to it.