EGYPTIAN MUMMIES: THE MYTH UNWRAPPED

Follow-Up Activity:
The Story of Osiris and Isis
Passport Distance Learning Program

Background
In ancient Egypt, the mummification process was an essential part of the culture, where an individual transitions, or moves, from the world of the living to the afterlife. In this activity, students will discover why ancient Egyptians practiced these traditions. Students will learn that with many cultures, most traditions start with stories. When the tradition of storytelling is a part of a culture’s belief system, many of these stories will be about people and Gods that have shaped the world that the present people now know. The process of mummification comes from one of these stories: the Story of Osiris and Isis.

Focus Question
- How are ancient Egyptian beliefs and traditions reflected in the Story of Osiris and Isis?

Student Objectives
Students will:
- Know who Osiris and Isis are and their significance in ancient Egyptian mythology
- Identify steps in the mummification process narrated within the story.
- Explain how stories can become traditions

Materials
- Pencils or pens for each student
- One Story of Osiris and Isis story sheet for each student
- One Story of Osiris and Isis question sheet for each student

Vocabulary
- **Osiris**—god of regeneration and rebirth, judge of the dead in the afterlife. Osiris was the first being to be mummified in Egyptian mythology
- **Isis**—wife and sister of Osiris, goddess of motherhood and fertility
- **Geb**—father of Osiris, god of the earth
- **Nut**—mother of Osiris, goddess of the skies
- **Seth**—(Set) brother of Osiris, god of the desert, storms, darkness, and chaos
- **Nephtys**—sister of Osiris, nursemaid and guardian goddess who symbolizes the transitional death experience
- **Horus the elder**—brother of Osiris, god of light
- **Mythology** - the body of stories associated with a culture.

**Teacher Preparation**
Printout and photocopy enough worksheets for each student. Each student will also need a pen or pencil.

**Procedure**
Pass out the worksheets and pencils to each student. Have the students read The Story of Osiris and Isis individually, in groups, or as a class. Use the question worksheet to discuss the story.

**Assessment and Extension**
- Explore more of ancient Egypt's past by researching myths about other gods and goddesses. Are any of these stories reflected in the mummification process?
- Investigate other cultures and their myths to discover ways their stories become a part of their traditional practices.
- Create your own mythical story using an event from your life.
The Story of Osiris and Isis

During the program, you learned about the mummies of ancient Egypt. The process of mummification was an essential part of the culture, where an individual transitions, or moves, from the world of the living to the world of the dead, or underworld. One aspect that wasn’t touched upon was why did the Egyptians believe this? Where did this idea come from? With many cultures, most traditions start with stories. If the tradition is part of the belief system, often times the stories will be about those gods and how they shaped the world that the present living people know. The process of mummification comes from one of these stories: the story of Osiris and Isis.

Why would this story have been told by these people? (Did it have a purpose or was it just a great story to tell?)

What parts of the story remind you of the mummification process? (Think about the linens, a secret burial place, and becoming King of the underworld)

- Does the story follow the same steps as the mummification process?

Osiris is also known as the god of earth and vegetation, which is why he is shown with a green face. How could he be both the god of the underworld and the god of vegetation too?

- What did they believe about life after death?
- Is this similar in any way to vegetation that you see in your world around you? (Think about trees and how they change during the year)
- Can you think of something in your life that Osiris could represent?
The Story of Osiris and Isis

The god of the earth, Geb, and the goddess of the skies, Nut, had five children. From eldest to youngest these children were Osiris, Horus the Elder, Seth, Isis and Nephtys. As the eldest son, Osiris inherited the throne from his father, and became the very first king of Egypt. This did not please his brother Seth, who was constantly jealous of Osiris' popularity and power. When he was crowned he took his sister, Isis, as his wife. As king, Osiris taught the Egyptians to be civilized, how to plant crops and domesticate animals, gave them laws to govern themselves, and taught them how to worship the gods. He ruled through kindness and persuasion, and was well loved by all of his subjects.

In honor of the god-king Osiris, Seth throws a feast, complete with acrobats, dancers, musicians, and food and drink for all. At the height of the party, when Osiris is most content, Seth brings in a chest made of fine woods and inlaid with ivory, gold and silver.

"I will give this chest to whomever fits in it most exactly," cries Seth. One by one the party guests climb inside, but none fit exactly – they were either too tall or too short, too fat or too thin. The final person to try the chest is Osiris, and eagerly he climbs into the chest. He fits perfectly, just as Seth had planned.

"I fit exactly, and the chest is mine!" Osiris exclaims, happily.

“It is yours indeed, and shall be so forever,” says Seth, as he slammed the lid on the chest. Quickly he nailed the lid shut and sealed every crack. With no air to breathe, Osiris dies inside of the chest. Along with his helpers, Seth takes the chest to the river Nile and casts it into the water. It makes its way up the river to the sea, and comes to rest in a tree on the shores of a far away land called Phoenicia.

The tree grows branches that slowly surround the chest. Soon the chest can no longer be seen and the only clues to what lays inside the trunk are the blossoms and the sweet smells that come from the tree. Eventually, a nearby king hear of the sweet smelling tree and orders it cut down so that he may put it in his palace as a pillar.

Hearing of her husband's death, Isis is grief stricken and fears for her husband. Without the proper burial rites, chants, and rituals, he will not be able to cross over into the land of the spirits. She goes on a search for the chest, and travels a long time with not so much as a clue to aid her in her search. Then, one day, she passes a group of children playing by the river. They tell her that they saw the chest float by them, and show her which direction it went. Following the sweet scent given off by the tree, Isis reaches the palace and retrieves the chest from the pillar. Boarding a ship, she makes her way back to the river delta of the Nile.

Isis carries the chest into the high reeds of the delta, and opens the chest to reveal the lifeless body of Osiris. She embraces him and weeps, shedding her tears on his face. Hiding the chest, she continues through the delta to find a hidden burial spot for her husband.

While hunting with his dogs at night, Seth stumbles upon the chest at night. He opens the chest and tears apart the body of Osiris into 14 pieces, scattering the sections all over Egypt. The next day, Isis returns to find the casket empty. With the help of her sister, Nephtys, they recover all but one of the pieces. Isis carefully puts the pieces back together, binding them together with linen strips. She breathes life back into Osiris and buries him where only she knows the location. He dies again, and assumes the throne as king of the underworld.