

Documentary review of *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*

The documentary *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*, aired in 2011 by Channel 4, follows the experiment undertaken by a team of researchers in their attempt to replicate the process Ancient Egyptians used to preserve their dead¹. Using the body of donor Alan Billis and research into 18th dynasty mummies by Dr Stephen Buckley and Professor Joann Fletcher, the documentary shows the majority of steps used to recreate the likely journey taken by the mummies in tomb KV35 in the Valley of the Kings. It begins with a presentation into the research and experimentation done by Buckley whilst attempting to discover what has been dubbed by the creators of the documentary as “Egypt's Last Secret.”² Following from this, the viewer meets Alan in an interview given before his death and the subsequent donation of his body to the experiment, where he discusses having seen the advertisement from Channel 4 for a volunteer with a terminal illness to donate their body to be mummified. Throughout the documentary, clips of the interview with Alan appear, as well as input from his wife, Jan. The documentary proceeds to give an overview of the 18th dynasty of Pharaonic Egypt, as some mummies from this period, primarily that of Queen Tiye from KV35, were the focus of the research into mummification due to differences in the process used for their mummification, found by x-raying the bodies³. Salt crystals were discovered under the skin, leading Buckley to believe they must have been submerged in a bath of a natron solution as part of the process, rather than dried with dry natron.

Continuing forward, the experiment quickly starts upon the death of Alan having to temporarily put the body in temporary storage. Alan's organs are removed by a team of pathologists, Professor Peter Vanezis and Maxine Coe, through a small incision within the abdomen, as done by Ancient Egyptians. The heart is left within the body, also as done by the Ancient Egyptians as part of their ritual practices⁴, and the brain is also left, in contrast to common belief that the brain was always removed through the nose. Evidence of the 18th dynasty mummies suggest their brains remained but had collapsed to the back of the skull⁵. Before being submerged in the natron bath, Alan is covered in a mixture of oils and beeswax to help prevent bleaching of the skin caused by the high pH of the natron bath. Once submerged, Alan was left for 35 days. Once removed, the natron bath had turned red due to the haemoglobin from the muscle tissue moving into it. Some bleaching, from where Alan had been held in the bath with linen, and bloating

¹ (*Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*, 2011)

² (*Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*, 2011)

³ (*Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*, 2011, 11:30)

⁴ (Carelli, 2011)

⁵ (*Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*, 2011, 25:40)

had occurred, though the bloating reduced after the body was dried for 14 days. Once dried, the body was wrapped in linen, creating the well-known look of an Ancient Egyptian mummy. Alan was left for a further 42 days, allowing the process of mummification to continue. After which, an x-ray was taken, the aim of which being to prove crystals of salt were forming under the skin, and that this was the method used to mummify the 18th dynasty bodies. It was found to be a success. Areas of the body were also unwrapped to observe if decomposition had been slowed to the point necessary for mummification and was also found to be a success.

Such a documentary serves a few purposes. First, for education of the general public through an 'entertaining' media, showing them the 18th dynasty of Pharaonic Egypt and potentially challenging their existing understanding of the process of mummification. It exposes them to the scientific method, as it mentions throughout how temperature, humidity, and other factors were controlled to ensure an environment and process as close to that undertaken by the Ancient Egyptians as possible. Additionally, it exposes people to the concept of donating their body to science and shows the type of experiment that could be expected with such a donation. This is helpful to the institutions that need donated bodies, as viewers can observe Alan's story of preservation and continuation, especially in the years following stories of bodies not being used for their intended purpose, such as from the US in 2013⁶. Though later than Alan, the story travelled through online space, making a visual documentary of a body being used for its intended purpose all the more important, settling ethical concerns a viewer considering the donation of their body may have. Using a documentary for the purposes of education is likely more 'entertaining,' as it is an easier media to consume for the general public. A visual display of the events also allows the viewer to resonate with the donor, Alan, more, and appreciate his and his family's donation to science more, giving a face to go with a name. Secondly, the documentary acts to spread the results of the experiment. A report is not available to the public, and, as the experiment gained traction on the news, results on the outcome might be expected. Finally, it also serves as a memoriam to Alan.

An edited, shorter version of the documentary exists online⁷. The premise remains the same, but the production changes significantly. Sections such as the research undertaken to arrive at the conclusions needed to perform the experiment are cut down, resulting in the online documentary taking around 9 minutes to begin the experiment, rather than around 14 (accounting for the separated parts). Additionally, the shorter version is far more dramatized, with a different narrator, loud music, and repetitive sound effects. This shorter version was released online 14 years after the original airing of the documentary and could be argued to cater to an audience that

⁶ (Shiffman, 2016)

⁷ (Odyssey - Ancient History Documentaries & Timeline - World History Documentaries, 2025)

interacts with visual media far differently to the audience of the original release. The benefit of an online release on YouTube is the comment section, allowing the viewer to share thoughts and opinions of the documentary. Most are positive, referring to Alan as a “legend,”⁸ a “lovely individual,”⁹ and Jan as “an absolute gem,”¹⁰ with one commenter mentioning it was rather a “documentary about an ordinary extraordinary man and the people who love him.”¹¹ Some comments refer to wanting to do through a similar process, with some asking how to donate¹², displaying that the documentary had a positive effect on the reception of donation to research. However, the presence of a comment section invited both positive and negative reception, with some commenters talking of the researchers “first mistake,”¹³ or that they learned how mummification was performed “over 60 years ago.”¹⁴ This highlights the potential issues with the shorter documentary, as the research process and method were far more in depth within the longer documentary, and the missing information may have resulted in a more informed comment section.

The documentary is an interesting perspective into a process most people may believe they already understand. The longer documentary is an interesting watch, with appropriate edits of Ancient Egyptian archaeology throughout, and insightful interviews with Alan and Jan. It handles the topic of death well and handles the fact the subject of the documentary was a real, living person carefully, referring to him as Alan throughout, rather than a term that may feel more dehumanising. The editing feels smooth and well put together, and all together is an enjoyable, educational, and thoughtful experience. It is well worth watching for anyone interested in Ancient Egypt, but also for those interesting in donating part of, or all, of their body to science.

Bibliography

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⁸ (MikeHawkOfc, n.d)

⁹ (yawzheek6722, n.d)

¹⁰ (baronroaster404, n.d)

¹¹ (larsvddwerf, n.d)

¹² (aerofool66, n.d)

¹³ (Patriot1777, n.d)

¹⁴ (MissJ-l5k, n.d)

Odyssey - Ancient History Documentaries. (2025, December 11). *Mummifying A Man For The First Time In 3,000 Years*. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYxUsVOTerQ>

Shiffman, J. (2016, December 23). *How a great-grandmother's body came to be used in an Army blast test*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-bodybrokers-industry/>

Timeline - World History Documentaries. (2025, December 10). *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH_LNTgfv1s

YouTube comments

Due to the nature of YouTube comments, being that they are dated using “3 months ago” and the time this essay was written, it cannot be determined if these comments were written in 2025 or 2026.

aerofool66. (n.d). *I want to go through this myself. How would I go about reaching out to these people to donate my...* [Comment made on the video *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH_LNTgfv1s

baronroaster404. (n.d). *His wife is an absolute gem. “Well I never did...” love it. “Your lordship”. She’s got a kind heart and...* [Comment on the video *Mummifying A Man For The First Time In 3,000 Years*]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYxUsVOTerQ>

larsvdwerf. (n.d). *This is not a documentary about mummification. This is a documentary about an ordinary extraordinary man and the people who...* [Comment on the video *Mummifying A Man For The First Time In 3,000 Years*]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYxUsVOTerQ>

MissJ-l5k. (n.d). *I don’t know how ‘secret’ it is. I learned how they did it and compounds they used to do it...* [Comment on the video *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*].

YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH_LNTgfv1s

MikeHawkOfc. (n.d). *They need to make a sarcophagus and a tomb for Alan. What a legend.* [Comment on the video *Mummifying A Man For The First Time In 3,000 Years*].

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYxUsVOTerQ>

Patriot1777. (n.d). *First mistake , shouldn’t have sealed the body cavity for salt bath, the resin should have been placed on after...* [Comment on the video *Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret*]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH_LNTgfv1s

yawzcheek6722. (n.d). *Alan seemed like a lovely individual.* [Comment on the video *Mummifying A Man For The First Time In 3,000 Years*]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYxUsVOTerQ>

