

A Review of 'Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret'

Gwenllian Anthony - 1404702

The documentary 'Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret' is a Channel 4 programme first aired in 2011 that follows the mummification process of terminally ill Alan Billis (King's College London, no date). The project was undertaken by a team of researchers and Egyptologists seeking to replicate ancient Egyptian embalming methods to understand how mummified people have survived for millennia. The documentary serves as an educational resource for those interested in ancient Egypt, life after death, or general science. It does not, however, delve deeply enough into the details of mummification for it to serve as a resource for academic or higher-education purposes. It also only covers one experimental mummification, which doesn't represent the broad and complex funerary rituals of ancient Egyptians. It is clearly aimed at an amateur audience rather than academics and scholars, and could serve as a gateway for many to develop an interest in such subjects. It is clear that the documentary's main objective is to educate and inform about the ancient Egyptian process of mummification, but its lack of depth and narrow research sample make it a limited academic resource. However, the programme raises vital questions about experimental archaeology, ethics, and the interpretation of ancient Egyptian practises within the modern scientific world.

The documentary follows terminally ill taxi driver Alan Billis, who donates his body to an experiment after responding to a newspaper ad. It documents not only the mummification process but also explores his motivations through interviews with Alan and his wife before his death. The interviews with Alan and his wife before his passing add emotional depth to the documentary and set it apart from other scientific programmes. The exploration of his motivations and reflections humanises the process and encourages the viewer to reflect on their own mortality. The combination of emotional and scientific exploration might explain the lack of scholarly depth and the limited engagement with complex archaeological debates.

'Mummifying Alan' follows Alan's body through evisceration, natron soaking, drying, and linen wrapping, culminating in a successful mummification. The documentary introduces ancient Egyptian beliefs through interviews with scientists and Egyptologists, explaining that preservation allowed the spirit to return and receive sustenance from food offerings (David, R. 2009). It notes that elites were often elaborately embalmed for their afterlife journey and covers Herodotus' account of the mummification process. Unfortunately, the programme fails to cover any specific rituals, such as the 'opening of the mouth' ceremony or their wider beliefs of the afterlife. Ultimately, 'Mummifying Alan' prioritises narrative clarity over academic detail, resulting in a brief overview of mummification without broader cultural context.

A constant debate surrounds the ethics of excavating and studying mummified humans, mainly due to the lack of consent from the individual and invasive, tissue-destroying research methods (Kaufmann, I.M., and Ruhli, F.J. 2010). Accordingly, the documentary team wants to clarify that Alan Billis gave explicit permission to participate, as shown through several clips of him discussing what will happen to his body. Although he states his acceptance, questions remain about whether he was in the right frame of mind to make such a decision under the stress of terminal illness. Up to 77% of terminally ill patients experience delusion, depression, anxiety, and loss of will (Fine, R.L. 2001), so his choice may have been impulsive or affected by his condition. His decision could have

been affected by emotional distress or a need to create meaning in the final days of his life. As a result, the programme fails to address the complexities of ethics, and consent is seen as a straightforward solution to any ethical concerns. Unfortunately, the documentary does not raise or flag any concerns about Alan's decision, likely due to fear of backlash.

The director uses many graphics and images to explain key steps in the mummification process, such as organ removal, dehydration through natron absorption, and the preservation of soft tissue with oils and resins. These informative visuals detail processes without the gore of real footage, making the programme more accessible to people with anxiety around such images and to younger viewers. They also show human anatomy more effectively and educationally by simply and strikingly revealing its layers, with lights highlighting specific areas of interest. The visual aids allow the documentary to be watched and understood by a wide variety of people. Not only viewers who might find the material distressing, but also to an audience that is not scientific or has no knowledge of human anatomy or ancient Egypt. It also helps keep the programme engaging, aided by dramatic music and images of Egyptian landscapes and monuments.

Ultimately, 'Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret' is a captivating and interesting exploration of the ancient Egyptians' beliefs surrounding the afterlife. It successfully combines Alan Billis' story with scientific experimentation, providing a different perspective on the significance of investigative science to understand the past. The accessible images and visual aids allow the programme to be watched by a wide range of people, which is only positive. The production of the documentary, from the images to the music, keeps the programme engaging and exciting, keeping the viewers' attention until the very end. However, the programme fails to fully explore the mummification process and offers only a narrow overview of the funerary rituals of ancient Egyptians. As it covers only one sample of mummification, it misses a very broad range of funerary rituals, including those from other eras and social statuses. Although it succeeds as an educational introduction for a general audience, it could benefit from more depth and critical engagement to make it a fully comprehensive watch.

References

David, R. (2009) *Egyptian Mummies and Modern Science*.

Fine, R.L. (2001) *Depression, anxiety and delirium in the terminally ill patient*.

Kaufmann, I.M and Ruhli, F.J. (2010) *Without 'informed consent'? Ethics and ancient mummy research*.

King's College London (2011) *The Modern Mummy*. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/lsm/centre-for-education/museums/gordon-museum/the-modern-mummy>