



DOGS AND CATS AND BIRDS, OH MY!

The Penn Museum's Egyptian Animal Mummies

BY CHRISTINA GRIFFITH

WHILE MOST VISITORS TO THE MUSEUM ARE DRAWN TO THE MUMMIFIED PEOPLE FROM ANCIENT EGYPT, HUMANS ARE NOT ALONE IN THE AFTERLIFE: DOZENS OF ANIMAL MUMMIES ARE ALSO PART OF THE MUSEUM'S EGYPTIAN COLLECTION.

WE HAVE AMASSED a variety of birds (Ibis, falcon, and hawk), a shrew, small crocodiles, cats, bundles of lizards and snakes, and a famous canine companion to a man named Hapimen, known around the Museum as Hapi-puppy. Many of our animal mummies were excavated in the late 1800s by Sir Flinders Petrie and the Egypt Exploration Society. Some were purchased from collectors in the early 20th century.

In 1978, selected mummies were imaged at the Penn Veterinary School for the *Secrets and Science* exhibition. In 2016, the first phase of the new Ancient Egypt & Nubia Galleries project involved re-housing our animal mummies, which provided a perfect opportunity for conservators Molly Gleeson and Alexis North to image

and examine them. The new West Wing Conservation and Teaching Labs in the Museum, built in 2014, are equipped with an x-ray unit, and a CT scan of one falcon mummy was performed at the GE Inspection Technologies facility in Lewistown, PA.



OPPOSITE: The x-rays and bound mummy of an ibis from the Museum's Egyptian collection. Ibis are associated with Thoth, the god of wisdom, magic, and writing. PM object E12443. ABOVE: A mummified shrew. PM object E12435.



ABOVE: Museum conservator Alexis North treats an ibis mummy in the Artifact Lab. Mummy conservation involves as little interaction as possible.

The Artifact Lab works carefully in conserving these artifacts, the goal being as little interaction or intervention as possible. Previously, the mummies in storage were wrapped in tissue and placed inside plastic bags. They were taken out of the bags and moved to viewing boxes lined with archival foam, tissue, or Tyvek to protect the delicate surfaces and drastically reduce handling. Gloves are a necessity during study, but masks are not needed. The public is often surprised that ancient pathogens are not a risk to conservators. Mummies are examined on a clean, padded surface. With the exception of ibises dipped in pitch, all are wrapped in linen, some with dyed strips that are woven to create intricate patterns. After thousands of years, the linen wrapping is often powdery, with any dyed sections mostly deteriorated. Only minor surface cleaning is completed, and any damaged linen is addressed with a mesh netting material or Japanese tissue paper and adhesive.

At no time are the mummies ever unwrapped. Imaging—x-rays and scans—produces what the conservators call a “virtual unwrapping,” telling them everything they need to know about what is inside without destroying the artifact.

Why Mummify Animals?

A common assumption is that animal mummies are pets, meant to join their human counterpart in the afterlife. This is but one of several purposes they served. All kinds

of animals were mummified in Egypt, from cats and dogs to baboons, fish, deer, bulls, and goats. Animal mummies could also be food offerings for the afterlife, a religious offering to the gods, or a divine animal that represented a god.

The significance of an animal mummy find is determined by its context, upon which anthropologists base their interpretations. Dr. Kate Moore, Mainwaring Teaching Specialist for Archaeozoology in CAAM, recognizes these artifacts as a “potent piece of information about peoples’ relationships with animals.” Mummies meant as a religious offering—votive mummies—were meant to gain favor with the god that the animal represented. For example, dogs were associated with the temple of Anubis at Saqqara, while cats were representative of the goddess of house and home, Bastet.

Different Mummies, Different Questions

Some of the mummies the Artifact Lab has examined do not include animals inside the wrappings. The presumption that these are “fakes” is inaccurate. The empty mummies are carefully wrapped and prepared, each one taking time and craftsmanship. Faces are sometimes rendered on the empty cat mummies. This is an important religious ritual, and the mummifier and the mummy have a social relationship. This intricate work implies that it is the *representation* of the animal that may be most important for some offerings.

Partial mummies and multiple animals wrapped inside the same mummy are found in the collection as well. Is just a portion of the animal enough to satisfy the gods? Were multiple mummies made from the parts of a single creature? Examples of animal mummies consisting of a single bone or just a portion of the animal indicates that this is a possibility. As Dr. Moore explains, “Texts and records do not mention simple animal mummies that were offered by ordinary people. Perhaps this was all some people could afford.”

You can see some of the Penn Museum’s animal mummies in the Artifact Lab and the *Secrets and Science* exhibition on the third floor. Some are being conserved now, in anticipation of the opening of our new Ancient Egypt & Nubia Galleries. •

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