



## A NOTE ON WORKING WITH MUMMIES IN THE FIELD

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Some archaeologists revel in the discovery of human remains and mummies of humans and other animals, while others shudder at the complexity that they bring to the excavation, particularly if the work is being carried out where no cemetery was expected. In the former instance, it is more than probable that there will be someone on the team who will be able to address the issues of excavation, removal, storage, study, and publication of these artifacts. In the latter case, there is often a moment of panic. In an effort to lessen the consternation, recently a few works have appeared related to the practical aspects of dealing with mummies in the field and the information that can be derived from them,<sup>1</sup> which not only aim to help excavators faced with a new element in their work but also add to the body of literature devoted to mummy studies. Generally work on mummies focuses on the different types of analyses that can be carried out on both human and animal mummies and what can be learned from them.<sup>2</sup> More recently a body of work on the ethics of working with human remains has also emerged—the issues of animal mummies is yet to come.<sup>3</sup> This note serves as an addition to my publication of 2015 on the practical aspects of dealing with mummies on excavations, based on some recent experiences on excavations.

One of the problems of working with the more fragile mummies is moving them. In the past, as outlined in earlier works, they have been moved using flexible metal sheets, cloth and wood stretchers, wooden boards, and wooden

stretchers. Recently, while working on some very fragile mummies found in Thebes, we tried a new method: Mylar (polyester/plastic film) and acetate sheets. Projects, particularly those involved with epigraphy, often have large sheets of Mylar or acetate to hand. These can be cut and, with care, inserted beneath a mummy so that it can be moved with ease. The thinness of the sheet means that it does not damage the mummy, if manipulated with care, and goes underneath it relatively smoothly. This has proven successful in extracting bodies of humans and animals not only from the ground but also from within a coffin. Removing the material is also very easy, as it slips out with ease. In a pinch, plastic tablecloth material can be used, although it lacks the rigidity of the Mylar/acetate, which is ideal when manipulating the material beneath the body.

Ideally, the mummy should be stored in acid-free tissue. This remains difficult to obtain in Egypt, and any project working here should make an effort to bring some into Egypt, as this is a crucial element in preserving not only mummified remains but also many other objects found during the course of an excavation.

It is hoped that excavators, conservators, and those who work on mummies will continue to share information to ease the work in the field, so that we can all better preserve these precious remains for current and future generations.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> S. Ikram, "May They Live Forever: The Examination, Care, and Curation of Egyptian Mummies," in L. S. Owens and A. De Trafford (eds.), *Managing Egypt's Cultural Heritage: Proceedings of the First Egyptian Cultural Heritage Organisation Conference on: Egyptian Cultural Heritage Management*, (London: Golden House/Echo Publications, 2009), 258–265; S. Ikram, "Studying Egyptian Mummies in the Field," in S. Ikram, J. Kaiser and R. Walker (eds.), *Egyptian*

*Bioarchaeology: Humans, Animals, and the Environment* (Amsterdam: Sidestone, 2015), 67–76; Garcia, M., S. Ikram, S. Maekawa, and G. Lombardi, "From Rescuing to Exhibition: Conservation of Mummified Remains," in P. Pena, C. Rodriguez Martin, and M. Rodriguez (eds.), *Mummies and Science: World Mummies Research*, (Santa Cruz de Tererife: Academia Canaroa de la Historia, 2008) 693–699.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, A. Cockburn and E. Cockburn (eds.), *Mummies, Disease, and Ancient Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); A. R. David (ed), *The Manchester Museum Mummy Project*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979); L. H. Corcoran and M. Svoboda, *Herakleides: A Portrait Mummy from Roman Egypt* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010); S. Ikram, "Mummies and Mummification," in Roger S. Bagnall, Kai Brodersen, Craige B. Champion, Andrew Erskine, and Sabine R. Huebner (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (Oxford/New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 4615–4619, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah15287>; J. Taylor, J. 1995. *Unwrapping a Mummy: The Life, Death and Embalming of Horemkenesi* (London: British Museum Press, 1995); J. Taylor and D. Antoine, *Ancient Lives: New Discoveries: Eight Mummies, Eight Stories* (London: British Museum Press, 2014); E. Teeter and J. Johnson (eds), *The Life of*

*Meresamun, Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2009); A. C. Aufderheide, *The Scientific Study of Mummies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003); as well as articles spread throughout specialized journals beyond the realm of Egyptology.

<sup>3</sup> Aufderheide, 2–3; Swiss Mummy Project, "Code of Ethics," *University of Zurich: Swiss Mummy Project*, <http://www.swissmummyproject.uzh.ch/research-1/ethics/code.html>; J. Marchant, "Do Egyptian Mummies Have a Right to Privacy?" *New Scientist*, 8 September 2010, <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20727774.600-do-egyptian-mummies-have-a-right-to-privacy.html>, accessed 5 May 2014; I. M. Kaufmann and F. J. Rühli. 2010. "Without 'Informed Consent'? Ethics and Ancient Mummy Research," *Journal of Medical Ethics* doi:10.1136/jme.2010.036608 (2010), <http://jme.bmj.com/content/early/2010/07/29/jme.2010.036608.abstract>, accessed April 10, 2014.