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'To turn round a dead': Engagements with Egyptian Mummies in London at the Turn of the Nineteenth CenturyAngela Stienne^{1,*}

How to cite: Stienne, A. "To turn round a dead': Engagements with Egyptian Mummies in London at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century'. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 2019, 28(1): pp. 1–28. DOI: [10.14324/111.2041-9015.005](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2041-9015.005)

Published: 18/06/2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind review.

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RESEARCH PAPER

‘To turn round a dead’: Engagements with Egyptian Mummies in London at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

Angela Stienne

Abstract: Starting with observations on a coffin that was brought from Egypt in 1722 and displayed at the British Museum from the first day of its opening — coffin EA6695 — this paper explores physical engagements with Egyptian mummies in London at the turn of the 19th century. It argues that it is through physical engagements — including investigations and destructions — that the Egyptian mummy was used to construct knowledge, not only about ancient Egypt, but about the body, race and the modern world. Using a number of sources from a range of individual reports, this paper sheds light on the cultural practices that surrounded and shaped engagements with Egyptian human remains, and reappraises the value of looking at destructive investigations as cultural interventions that can explain later practices, including the public mummy unrolling.

Keywords: Egyptian mummies, human remains, medical dissections, mummy unrolling, Egyptology.

Introduction

An unpublished script for a theatre play dated from 1767 and attributed to Reverend Weedon Butler includes a passage which takes place at the British Museum and reads:

Nothing easier. Do you observe the small spring-handle there? It is the easiest thing in the world, believe me, to turn round a dead – ay, or a living mummy, if you can but find out, and touch and twirl the proper Spring (Butler 1767).

The idea that a mummy was turned around via the use of an apparatus in a museum setting — the British Museum — is quite disconcerting to our modern eye, so concerned with preservation. It would be rather easy, therefore, to dismiss this source of information, which after all is a work of fiction, a theatre play. However, this document is corroborated by another one in the British Museum archives, dated to 1783, *The Surveyors and Workmen’s Estimates vol. II*, in which a line concerns an

operation ‘to refix the Machinery for turning one of the mummies’ (Caygill 2003: 25). It is also substantiated by observation conducted on the coffin that remains on public display at the Museum.

What can we learn from the ‘rotating mummy’ at the British Museum? First, that it was not a mummy that rotated, it is now assumed, but rather a coffin that was put on display at the Museum with an apparatus to make it rotate. Second, that the performance of the Egyptian mummy, on this occasion a rotating mummy in a theatre play located in a museum, was explored almost 70 years before Thomas Joseph Pettigrew would unwrap Egyptian mummies in London (Pettigrew 1834) or, later, Auguste Mariette would rotate a mummy on a table to unroll it in public during the French Exposition Universelle of 1867 (Goncourt 1867).

Coffin EA6695, today relegated to the darkness of a shelf in the Enlightenment gallery at the British Museum, is riddled with holes at its top and bottom, souvenir of a time when it was exhibited at the Museum in a horizontal display, so as to show it in its entirety. The first coffin to enter the Museum, it is now missing its rotating mummy, although there is no evidence the body was ever on display in the coffin. An unusual object in the Museum, the coffin had not been recently examined, until the summer of 2017. And yet, this damaged object, together with the opening quote from the theatre play, are revealing of physical engagements with material culture that were intrusive and often destructive, now considered odd practices. These very practices are in fact revealing of cultural engagements of a certain time in the history of collecting and scientific research. As Knell notes, ‘what we consider rigorous or appropriate at the moment is rather different from how things seemed in the past.’ (Knell 2007a: 17).

This paper places the study and interactions with Egyptian mummies in London at the turn of the 19th century in their cultural contexts, asking questions of knowledge construction and materiality. My approach to these questions is that of a cultural historian, looking at the ways engagements are shaped and constructed through cultural interactions with objects that were curious and strange at times, but also

meaningful to the people who studied them, at a time of changing consciousness about the world, health, the body and race.

Significant research has been conducted on Egyptian mummies in museums in recent years (see Moser 2006 on the development of the Egyptian rooms at the British Museum; Luckhurst 2012 on curse narratives and engagements outside the museum; Riggs 2014 and 2016 on unwrapping and racial studies of mummies). However, recent works on the histories of archaeology, Egyptology and museums in general, point towards a need to re-evaluate ways in which museum collections and displays have been explored, and to step outside disciplinary structures and thinking that blinkers past understandings (Carruthers 2014). This was resolved in part with Moshenska's research on mummy unwrapping and scientific studies of mummies that have helped locate research on performances of mummies within scientific communities (Moshenska 2013; 2014; 2015).

In its focus on knowledge construction, meaning-making and the material object that is the Egyptian mummy, this paper can be aligned with research into knowledge construction of scientific and medical objects, studies that focus on the constructed nature of objects and communities of knowledge. Knell's study of geological objects in 19th century Britain (Knell 2000; 2006; 2007b; 2009) and Alberti's study of medical collections (Alberti 2005; 2011; 2013) helped me develop a set of questions that summarize my main concerns in this paper:

1. How was knowledge constructed around the Egyptian mummy at the turn of the 19th century?
2. What did the Egyptian mummy as a *body* of evidence mean to individuals in scientific communities?
3. How did physical interactions (openings, dissections and unrolling) shape engagements with the Egyptian mummy as a cultural object, and preface the mummy unrolling?

The value of these questions lies in the multi-layered meanings they presuppose for the Egyptian mummy as an object of investigation. The place of scientific communities in the construction of knowledge around bodies is understood as being

a crucial research focus in framing the Egyptian mummy as much more than a mere object on display. In appraising the existing research on collecting and display, this paper focuses on engagements that physically transformed the Egyptian mummy as an object, especially the openings and dissections of Egyptian mummies, within specific scientific contexts. What mention there is of the opening of Egyptian mummies in scholarly research appears only as a brief introduction to the mummy unrolling, or as a strange marginal practice. This contrasts with the existing compendium of studies on dissections of other bodies, especially the criminal body, in the same timeframe (Harren 2016; Cunningham 1997; Sawday 1995). The assumption that the openings of Egyptian mummies are merely to be understood as the destruction of material culture has led scholars to overlook the cultural and intellectual importance of these interventions to contemporary actors.

This paper explores the different roles of Egyptian mummies in the period that precedes, and leads to, what is known as public mummy unrollings between the 1820s and 1880s. The first section explores the display of Egyptian mummies in the early years of the British Museum, looking at the approaches taken by the Museum in terms of display and engagement. The second section explores engagements beyond museum curating and situates the Egyptian mummy as a commodity used by men in the medical sciences to answer questions of preservation of the body. If the body was at the centre of medical investigations at the turn of the 19th century, section three demonstrates that questions of the racial origins of the mummies were fundamental concerns that led individuals to dissect and destroy Egyptian human remains. Finally, the last section of this paper explores how these interrogations on the physicality of the mummy, but also its destruction, organically led to the short-lived practice of public mummy unrolling, a practice which requires reinterpretation. As this paper will demonstrate, the mummy — as complete body, body parts, or even a coffin — gave actors useful insights into the ancient Egyptian civilisation, but also, and perhaps more importantly so, into the world in which these actors lived.

The Rotating Coffin

At the opening of the British Museum galleries in 1759, a selected London public was exposed to a history that presented a much deeper past. On display were ancient

Egyptian artefacts from a time when individuals were mummifying their dead. However, the task of understanding the ancient Egyptian civilisation remained unfinished when the galleries opened. For example, members of the Egyptian Society in London had been trying to establish ancient Egyptian settlements in Ireland only a few years prior opening (Dawson 1937; Haycock 2002: 174) and visits to Egypt remained perilous.

The display of Egyptian mummies in collections was not a novel thing. In Britain, but also in France and Italy, Egyptian mummies had been collected for centuries to form part of private cabinets and other collections (Pollès 2001: 11–80). What is evident from these collecting activities, is that the Egyptian mummy was primarily placed within anatomy collections. In most cases, the Egyptian mummy was placed with human remains despite the presence of archaeological objects. The collection of Sir Hans Sloane is an example of such practice. It is all the more illustrative when considering the extensive assemblage of antiquities in Sloane's collection (MacGregor 1994). The mummy, a collected object, was in fact an anatomical object. The opening of the British Museum changed this dynamic in the identification of the Egyptian mummy: the mummy was then integrated into a collection of Egyptian material culture.

Possessing a unique collection, the British Museum was presenting a series of objects that had been collected somewhat arbitrarily (MacGregor 1994: 177). Among these objects were a coffin and an Egyptian mummy. Both items arrived in England in 1722 and were later donated by Colonel William Lethieullier to the British Museum in 1756. Lethieullier's will states: 'I give to the Public Museum at Montagu House my Egyptian mummy, with everything thereunto appertaining, with the rest of my Egyptian antiquities' (Moser 2006: 245). The coffin was engraved by George Vertue in 1724 for the London Society of Antiquaries and a second time by the antiquarian Alexander Gordon in 1737 (**Figure 1**). Gordon wrote on the circumstances of the discovery of the mummy that:

This singular Monument of Egyptian Antiquity was found by some Arabs, in one of the ancient Cryptae, or Catacombs of the Dead, in the field of SAKARA, about three leagues from Cairo, in the year 1721,

while his present possessor William Lethieullier was in Egypt, to whose assiduity in promoting matters of antiquity and curiosity the learned world owes this noble remain, and who afterwards at Alexandria shipped it on board the Dove Gallery for England, where it arrived in the year 1722 (Gordon 1737: 1).



Figure 1: The Lethieullier coffin (sides) in *An Essay Towards Explaining the Hieroglyphical Figures on the Coffin of the Ancient Mummy belonging to Capt. William Lethieullier*. (Gordon 1737: 28).

The mummy was listed in the Museum's collection in 1756 with 'the skull of a mummy', 'two feet and a hand, seemingly of a mummy' (Bequest 1756). The *Synopsis of the Museum* mentions the Lethieullier family 'who so early as the year 1756, began their benefactions, and continued them for several years, thereby materially increasing the collection of Egyptian antiquities, to which they added two mummies, and a great number of idols, utensils and other implements' (Synopsis 1808).

What can we learn from the display of the Lethieullier mummy and its coffin — now coffin EA6695 — at the turn of the 19th century? Moser noted that ‘museum displays should be recognized as a distinctive genre of communication because they do not simply transmit knowledge, but rather, create it.’ (Moser 2006: 2) This is even more important, Moser notes, in the context of the turn of the 19th century, at a time when the field of Egyptology is not yet formally established (Moser 2006: 7). There is no visual evidence of the display of Egyptian mummies at the British Museum until the 1830s, and therefore it is necessary to rely on visitor accounts (a timeline of the acquisition of Egyptian mummies at the British Museum can be found in Taylor 2014 and Stienne 2018: 274-275). At the opening of the British Museum, the collection contained two small Egyptian mummies from Sloane’s collection — which were fake mummies, in that they did not contain human remains — the Lethieullier mummy with its coffin, as well as another Egyptian mummy donated by Pitt Lethieullier, today EA6694. In the later part of the 18th century, the collection was augmented with two additional small mummies and a large one.

On the 3rd of June 1808, the Townley Gallery was opened and two of the thirteen rooms were dedicated to Egyptian material culture, but the new exhibition of 1808 did not show any more recently acquired mummies (Synopsis 1808). In 1823, the British Museum acquired the collection of Henry Salt. The catalogue emphasised the exceptional number of papyri, tablets and mummies in Salt’s third collection (Sotheby 1835). Other substantial collections of Egyptian material were also collected in the 1830s, including that of Giovanni d’Athanasia and Joseph Sams. The latter’s collection included over two thousand objects and six Egyptian mummies (Moser 2006: 136). To accommodate the new additions to the collection, a new Egyptian gallery was opened in 1837 (Moser 2006: 125-170; Penny Magazine 1838: 436-437). On 10 November 1838, the *Penny Magazine* reserved a large section for a review of this new space, entitled ‘New Egyptian room, British Museum’ (Penny Magazine 1838: 436-437). On the new gallery, the article noted that ‘it is situated at the northern portion of the building, immediately over the Egyptian Saloon, through which we pass to gain the staircase leading to the new apartment.’ (**Figure 2**) It was within this space that the new mummies were displayed, with coffin EA6695 fixed with pivots to allow its rotation. The article continues:

In the centre of the room are two glass cases, containing in the lower portions the outer cases or coffins of two mummies, which may be seen in other parts of the room. These coffins are covered within and without with paintings and hieroglyphics having reference to the deceased; and, being upon pivots at the ends, are so placed that both the interior and the whole of the exterior may be seen. In the glass-cases, seen in the cut, on either side of the central cases, are arranged mummies, showing the different stages of the process: some are merely covered with the first layer of cloth; others are more extensively bandaged and covered with bituminous matter; some are seen enclosed in the first pasteboard or thin wooden case, and others show this first covering enclosed in another of similar construction; while in adjoining cases are shown the outer boxes or coffins in which the body was conveyed to the tomb (Penny Magazine 1838: 437).

It is clear that these displays were strongly didactic, showing all the stages of mummification and burial from body to sarcophagus; this didactic intention was clear in the display of coffin EA6695. There is no mention of accompanying labels, but the explanatory intention of the display is evident. Therefore, these objects were not just collected curiosities, but rather they were evidential and educational.



Figure 2: 'New Egyptian Room, looking South' (Anon 1838: 436)

By 1840, the *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum* listed over thirty Egyptian mummies displayed in the galleries (Synopsis 1840), and the extent of the collection is visible in an engraving from *The Illustrated London News* of 13 February 1847 (Illustrated News 1847) (**Figure 3**). This engraving presented another view of the Egyptian Room, showing that very little change, other than an Egyptianising frieze, had taken place over the course of the previous decade.

What is evident from the early years of the Museum is that individuals were actively thinking about the role of the mummy in representations of ancient Egypt, and ways to display it (from an upright position, to a rotating mummy, and displays showing different stages of mummification). If mummies had an important role in the collection of Egyptian material culture at the British Museum, and the display — in particular the rotating coffin — offers some interesting glimpses into attitudes towards Egyptian mummies, it would be wrong to assume that these accounts provide a full picture of engagements with Egyptian mummies at the time. In fact, display practices were only a small and limited kind of engagement with Egyptian mummies. In medical and scientific circles, in England but also in France, the Egyptian mummy was greatly discussed and physically studied with interest.



Figure 3: ‘Egyptian Room’ (Anon 1847: 108)

Egyptian Mummies as Commodities

When confronted with an object such as coffin EA6695 that was intentionally damaged through perforation to install an apparatus, it is tempting to look at these destructive engagements as pure destruction of material culture. Similar conclusions could be drawn from the opening and dissection of Egyptian mummies. In fact, it is evident that at the turn of the 19th century, it is precisely through destructive interventions that the Egyptian mummy was investigated. Furthermore, the opening of mummies fitted into an intellectual context of investigation of the human body in London that was being reappraised.

The *London Evening Post* of 1746 reported that:

On Monday the 1st of February, at 5 in the afternoon, will begin a course of anatomical lectures. To which will be added, the Operations of Surgery, with the application of Bandages. By William Hunter, Surgeon. Gentlemen may have an opportunity of learning the Art of Dissecting, during the whole winter Season, in the same manner as in Paris (Fox 1901: 21).

The custom was to have lectures at a private physician's house, where operations of surgery and application of bandages were presented to a selected group. Apart from a few exceptions, the anatomical lectures in Britain did not belong to the lecture theatre but rather to the private home in the second half of the 18th century.

It is in a private home that the first detailed record of the dissection of an Egyptian mummy in Britain took place, and in the presence of the two Hunter brothers: William, named above, and John. The home was that of John Hadley, and the event took place on 16 December 1763 in the presence of 'Dr Wollaston, Dr Blanshard, Dr Hunter, Dr Petit, the Rev. Mr Egerton Leigh, and Mr Hunter' (Hadley 1764: 1). This particular dissection was fundamental in identifying the mummy as an anatomical specimen that could offer clues on the mummification process and it is important to understand why men of science considered the Egyptian mummy worthy of examination.

The mummy had been lent to Hadley by the Royal Society for him to 'examine the manner, in which this piece of antiquity has been put together' and to compare the findings with the texts of Herodotus, Didorus Sicilus and Pliny (Hadley 1764: 1). The mummy had already been described in Nehemiah Grew's *Musaeum Regalis Societatis* with the following description: 'An Egyptian mummy given by the illustrious Prince

Henry duke of Norfolk. It is an entire one taken out of the Royal Pyramids. In length five feet and $\frac{1}{2}$ ' (Grew 1681: 1). Grew's comments on mummification in this report were all but fictitious, and fitted a mythology that had developed around ancient Egyptian funerary practices. For example, he noted that:

The way of embalming amongst the Egyptians, was by boiling the Body (in a long Cauldron like a fish kettle) in some kind of liquid Balsam [...] much after the same manner, as the sugar doth, in the conditioning of pears, quinces, and the like (Grew 1681: 2).

Grew noted that the mummy was complete when it was acquired, but Hadley received it with the head and feet detached from the body and some missing bones (Hadley 1764: 3). Precisely what had happened to the mummy is unclear, and although poor care might be one reason, it could also have been the result of prior physical investigations of the specimen. This would explain Hadley's observation that 'the wrappers, with which they [the head and the rest of the body] had been united, having been destroyed, the cavity of the thorax was found open towards the neck' (Hadley 1764: 3).

Hadley's dissection of the mummy did not produce significant new findings on mummification itself. He concluded his report stating that apart from a bulbous root found on the foot, of which he made a detailed drawing, none of the organs of the mummy remained (**Figure 4**). That foot however, is of much interest as there are few depictions of a bulb having remained on a mummy foot. Hadley speculated that 'in all probability, we have not made any new discoveries' (Hadley 1764: 2), but in fact, this detailed step-by-step account of the dissection of a mummy places him as an instigator of rigorous medical dissections of mummies.

Hadley's dissection may be the first detailed published account of a mummy dissection, but it certainly did not exist in a vacuum. The dissection of bodies in Europe and elsewhere already had a long history. References to the opening of Egyptian mummies are found as far back as the Middle Ages, when Egyptian mummies were collected to produce the *mumia*, or mummies studied, dismembered, and body parts collected for various apothecary and naturalist purposes (Aufrère

1990; Dannenfeldt 1985; Pollès 2001). Certainly, it demonstrates that the Egyptian mummy was first and foremost a body of investigation.

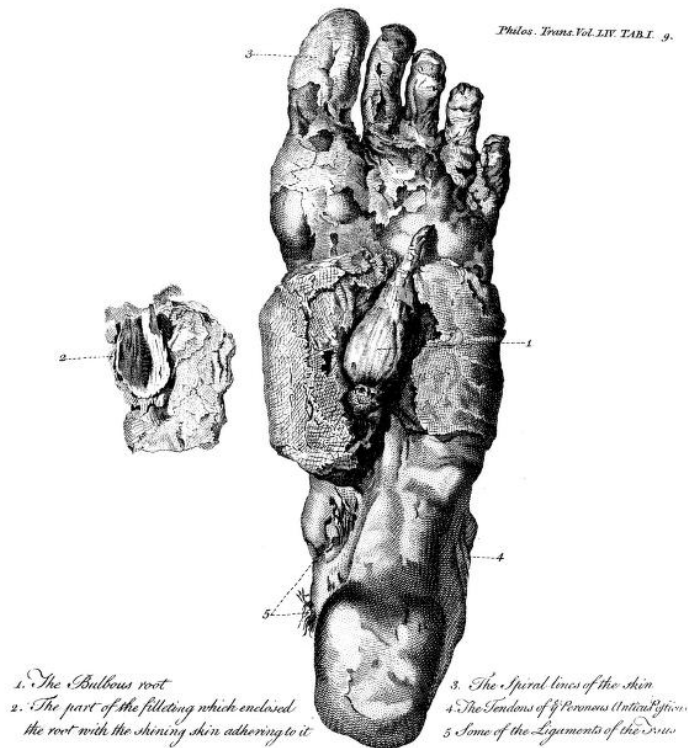


Figure 4: ‘Mummy foot’ in *An Account of a Mummy*, inspected at London 1763. (Hadley 1764: 1-14)

At the turn of the 19th century, the Egyptian mummy was located in the context of ever evolving understanding of the bodies, in a changing attitude towards medical corpses. William and John Hunter — mentioned above as participants in the dissection of the mummy at Hadley’s — were fundamental in the framing of medical dissections of corpses, and their presence at mummy openings was therefore not accidental (Brock 2008; Chaplin 2009; 2012; Porter 1985: 7–34). Riggs noted that:

[...] the Enlightenment separation of theology and knowledge meant that anatomists held their own sacred grounds. Medical thinking had reconceptualised the interior of the body as the location of disease, making rigorous dissections paramount for training doctors (Riggs 2014: 48).

Corpses, of the recently deceased and ancient bodies, could therefore offer clues on the modern body. There were however concerns at the turn of the 19th century on the provenance of medical corpses — prompted by such incidents as body snatchings — and the Murder Act of 1752 was eventually replaced by the Anatomy Act of 1832 (Mitchell 2012; Richardson 2000; Rosner 2010; Wise 2004). What these complex events and anxieties reveal is that the dissections of Egyptian mummies were embedded within wider intellectual contexts which provide a meaningful background to consider the Egyptian mummy, in a setting of deep reconsiderations of what the body meant to certain groups of individuals.

The motivations to open Egyptian mummies were multiple: curiosity for mummification and its related ancient mortuary customs, interest in the chemical properties of the substances used in the preservation of the bodies, and medical interest in the mummy as a cadaver that could help uncover some clues about the human body, in the context of complex discourses and demands regarding the use of corpses for medical studies. Therefore, the Egyptian mummy was shaped by individuals with specific interests who came across the mummy as a *commodity*. The term is important because unlike collectors or museums who tried to retain their specimens intact, medical practitioners and natural scientists often used the mummy for a short period of time. Although they were certainly captivated by their specimens, these were simply one category of object in a series of bodies or materials that helped them shape the intellectual and physical world around them.

Bodies of Evidence

Through dissections in a medical context, the Egyptian mummy was framed as evidence of a scientific practice — the mummification — that could explain some principles of preservation of the body through time, and some morphological aspects, both being of interest to contemporaries in the medical and natural sciences. It was also possible to see the Egyptian mummy as a body of evidence for a contemporary intellectual dilemma: the racial origin of the ancient Egyptians, at a time when ancient Egypt was considered the cradle of civilisation. Exploring this problem was all the more pressing in a developing colonial context. It was not art and literature that were investigated, but rather, once more, the body as a source of

evidence. To formulate an answer to this dilemma, a number of men physically investigated the Egyptian mummy, in and out of the museum.

In James Boswell's seminal work, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, a conversation is reported which mentions the race of a mummy:

I mentioned Lord Monboddo's notion that the ancient Egyptians, with all their learning, and all their arts, were not only black, but woolly-haired. Mr Palmer asked how it did appear upon examining the mummies? Dr Johnson approved of this test (Boswell 1791).

Lord Monboddo — James Burnett — was one of a number of scholars at the time interested in the concept of evolution, and ancient Egypt was at the core of his interests. The conversation reported is the first mention of the use of a physical intervention to answer the question of the racial origin of Egyptian mummies.

The location of these engagements, both in time, as the country underwent political and cultural changes, as well as in space, especially in museums, is revealing of the importance of contemporary concerns of ethnicity and the place of mankind in the world (Augstein 2000; Bancel et al 2014; Baum 2006; Volney 1788; 1792). Therefore, it is revealing that the British Museum invited Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a comparative anatomist, to dissect Egyptian mummies in its collection (Blumenbach 1794: 179). Between 1792 and 1794, Blumenbach conducted a series of examinations of Egyptian mummies in private settings and at the British Museum. Blumenbach's interventions are the first evident link between mummy dissections and investigations into the classification of race. Blumenbach was also the first and only individual to conduct dissections of mummies inside the British Museum, which did not authorise the practice thereafter, to the great sorrow of Thomas Joseph Pettigrew a few decades later, who thought this refusal unreasonable (Pettigrew 1834: xix).

Prior to his intervention at the British Museum, Blumenbach had already opened an Egyptian mummy at the University of Göttingen on 8 October 1781, during a convention of the *Königliche Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, the Royal Society of the Sciences (Anon 1781: 985-992). The investigation was undertaken by Göttingen

professor of medicine and chemistry Johann Friedrich Gmelin, Blumenbach, and Heinrich August Wrisberg.

Blumenbach's first mummy dissection in London occurred on 21 January 1792 at the house of Blumenbach's friend, Scottish physician Dr Maxwell Garthshore, a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians, a Fellow of the Royal Society, and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. Garthshore had his own collection of Egyptian antiquities which included a small, one-foot long mummy, which Blumenbach dissected in front of a select audience (Blumenbach 1794: 177). The mummy was cut open at the side for inspection but 'the outward integuments were glued so fast upon each other that it was found necessary to use a saw.' (Blumenbach 1794: 178). Blumenbach mentioned in his *Observations* a second, similar mummy he found in the collection of Dr John C. Lettsom which he opened at the latter's house on 29 January 1792. The mummy appeared to contain no human remains but, instead, the skeleton of an ibis.

Blumenbach approached the British Museum, having found the museum holding three similar small mummies. He wrote:

I felt an irresistible impulse to apply to the President of the Royal Society, as one of the curators of the Museum, for his interference towards obtaining permission to open one of the three in order to have an opportunity for some further comparison (Blumenbach 1794: 179).

Blumenbach was allowed

[...] not only to open one of these little mummies, but also to choose among the four large ones that are in the noble repository, the one that should appear to me the most likely to afford some material information on the subject (Blumenbach 1794: 179).

The dissection of the mummies occurred on 18 February 1792 at the British Museum. The precise location in the Museum is unknown, but Blumenbach pointed out that the dissection was done 'in the presence of a numerous and respectable meeting' (Blumenbach 1794: 180). He gives a detailed account of the dissection, pointing out their complete destruction during the process. It was on the occasion

of this specific event that Blumenbach introduced comments on the racial origin of mummies. He noted the presence of the maxillae, which he pointed out was ‘sensibly prominent, but by no means so much as in a true Guinea face; and not more so than is often seen on handsome negroes, and not seldom on European countenances’ (Blumenbach 1794: 180). Blumenbach conducted other mummy investigations, outside the British Museum. On 17 March 1794, he examined another mummy at the house of a Fellow of the Royal Society, Charles Francis Greville. The mummy belonged to John Symmons and had already been opened on 29 March 1788 by John Hunter (Anon 1788: 220). This was another investigation conducted up to the stage of complete destruction (Blumenbach 1794: 184).

On the race of Egyptian mummies, Blumenbach noted that the Egyptians ‘will find their place between the Caucasian and the Ethiopian’ group (Blumenbach 1794: 193). He wrote on the physiognomy of Egyptian mummies that he located three varieties, but insisted that:

[...] like all the varieties in the human species, [they] are no doubt often blended together, so as to produce various shades, but from which the true, if I may so call it, ideal archetype may however be distinguished, by unequivocal properties (Blumenbach 1794: 193).

The three varieties he identified in Egyptian mummies were: 1. the Aethiopian, 2. The Hindoo and 3. The ‘mixed’ (Blumenbach 1794: 193). Blumenbach emphasised the disconnection between race and ability, thus detaching his research from other contemporary racial theories. Blumenbach was not alone in these studies. At the turn of the 19th century, Georges Cuvier became the most important figure in natural history in Europe, and was responsible for developing a highly influential classification of the natural world. He too applied his taxonomic approach to the study of Egyptian animal mummies and human skulls in order to confirm both his classification system and his racial theories (Stienne 2018: 164-168; Taquet 2006).

On 14 April 1825, Augustus Bozzi Granville presented a paper on the results of the dissection of a mummy, which he reported in the *Philosophical Transactions*, in what was a synthesis of contemporary anatomical interventions on mummies and

intellectual thinking on the origin of the ancient Egyptians (Granville 1825: 269-316). This episode in the history of racially-motivated investigations of Egyptian mummies has been thoroughly studied by Riggs (2016: 107-133). Granville had received the mummy of a woman and its coffin from one of his patients, Sir Archibald Edmonstone, 3rd Baronet, who had travelled to Egypt in 1819. *The London Medical Repository and Review* reported:

Sir Archibald Edmonstone having presented Dr. G. with a mummy, which he had purchased at Gournou, on the 24th of March, 1819, from one of the inhabitants of the sepulchral excavations on the side of the mountain, at the back of which are the celebrated tombs of the kings of Thebes, Dr. Granville proceeded to a minute examination (Copland, Darwall & Conolly 1825: 372).

Granville's unrolling was carried out in two stages: first the unwrapping which took an hour, and then, the meticulous dissection of the body, which took place at his house over the course of six weeks. The proceedings of these operations were recorded in Granville's *An Essay on Egyptian Mummies* (Granville 1825: 269-316).

The results of these physical investigations varied greatly, and while Blumenbach suggested a mixed origin, individuals such as Cuvier and Granville concluded a strict Caucasian origin, which was needed to support concepts of superiority of races. These interventions illustrate that, at the turn of the 19th century, openings of mummies to understand mummification, and to advance medical knowledge, were paralleled by much deeper intellectual investigations. These varied engagements demonstrate that the opening of Egyptian mummies was not an anomaly in Britain at this time, and that invasive investigations had occurred in different contexts and with varied purposes. This is important to understanding contemporary engagements, including mummy unrolling.

The Mummy Unrolling

The public mummy unrolling was produced as a natural development of the varied and multi-layered history of physical engagements with Egyptian mummies in Britain at the turn of the 19th century. By excluding the long history of physical engagements that used the Egyptian mummy as a commodity and a body of evidence to answer a

number of fundamental questions, an incomplete picture is drawn which leads to misinterpretation. For example, Pearce wrote that:

[...]the fascination of the audience of that time was, inevitably, shot through with morbid, erotic pleasure, granted an aura of respectability by the scientific and archaeological discourses in which the exhibition took place. Given this, it is not surprising that the viewable consumption of mummies developed into a public spectacle as the fashion for unwrapping and dissection took hold (Pearce 2002: 58)

Pearce calls the mummy unrolling ‘a narcissistic experience’, ‘a carnival for London audiences where the fragment of their [the mummies] own stories written on the coffins and bandages were used as historical titillation, rather than history’ (Pearce 2002: 58). However, mummy unrolling should be seen as another format of physical engagement, one that was open to the public.

Two individuals were fundamental in shaping the format of mummy unrolling in the first half of the 19th century: Giovanni Battista Belzoni and Thomas Joseph Pettigrew. Belzoni’s opening of an Egyptian mummy in London as an introduction to his exhibition of a reconstructed Egyptian tomb inspired Pettigrew, a medical practitioner, to acquire, study and unroll Egyptian mummies. Recent studies have reappraised these two individuals, and are important in the much-needed rethinking of performances of bodies and their cultural contexts (on Belzoni: Hume 2011; Mayes 2008, on Pettigrew: Moshenska 2013; 2014).

In 1821, Belzoni opened an exhibition of the reconstruction of two rooms from Seti I’s tomb at the Egyptian Hall in London. It also included a 15-metre-long model of the entire tomb, in addition to a number of archaeological objects and Egyptian mummies (Pearce 2000: 109-125; Pearce 2007: 15-27). The exhibition curated by Belzoni in 1821 coincided by a few years with the opening of the Louvre’s first Egyptian galleries — and those events were paralleled by great excitement surrounding the decipherment of the hieroglyphs. To promote the exhibition to a select audience, Belzoni organised a mummy unrolling in private, which was attended by medical practitioners including Pettigrew (Pettigrew 1840: 31). The unwrapped

mummy was then put on display during the exhibition (Pearce 2000: 123). Pettigrew recalled of this event that:

My attention had been directed to this curious subject of inquiry from an intimacy with the celebrated traveller Belzoni. With him I had the opportunity of examining three Egyptian mummies, and although the state of their preservations was not of the best description their condition was sufficient to awake my curiosity (Pettigrew 1840: 31).

Pettigrew's first attempt at mummy unrolling took place in 1823 at his home, but it was ten years later that Pettigrew developed his series of unrollings that fundamentally reframed interactions with Egyptian mummies, and especially with the public. These interventions are greatly explained in Pettigrew's own publications (Pettigrew 1834; Pettigrew 1836), and later in Dawson's (1934) and Moshenska's works (2013; 2014). What is important to note, is that even though these mummy unrollings took place with a different audience (the public) and setting (the theatre hall), Pettigrew was a medical scientist, and therefore the unrolling was not a rupture in practice, but rather a progression. One that was transformed by Pettigrew's need for funds, but also his ability to grasp contemporary public interests and expectations. The unrollings developed by Pettigrew became highly codified and theatrical, but they were grounded in practices related to the medical study of bodies. Moshenska noted that:

[...] as a form of performance they [the unrollings] allude to a range of apparently related practices in the histories of science, medicine and archaeology. The body on the dissecting table harks forward in time to the medico-legal autopsy and the museum laboratory, while the prurient fascination of the audience harks back to the anatomy theatre of Renaissance Europe (Moshenska 2013: 2).

This is important in setting mummy unrolling in its intellectual and cultural context, and especially, in highlighting that the viewing of dead bodies was not, then, an anomaly. Indeed, at the turn of the 19th century, mortality was very high, especially among children, and epidemics were not rare (Knell 2000: 313-320). The viewing of the dead was therefore not uncommon. In addition, the London public could observe dissected corpses and preparations of specimens kept in collections. For

example, in 1799, the British government purchased 13,000 preparations from John Hunter's personal collection which were given to the Company of Surgeons in London. The latter routinely advertised anatomy lectures and the viewing of human remains in newspapers as well as in guides to London (Chaplin 2012: 99). The dissections, although conducted in private, were made accessible to the public by turning the corpses into preparations ready for display. For example, John Hunter's collection had been displayed in a purpose-built structure in his own anatomy school in Leicester Square since 1785. In 1788, the *General Evening Post* reported: 'One day last week, Mr John Hunter opened his very curious, extensive and valuable museum at his house in Leicester-fields.' (Chaplin 2008: 135). Hunter retained the bulbous foot of the mummy he dissected at Hadley's house for his collection of anatomical preparations. In addition, the proceedings of dissections were available to the public in publications and newspapers. Therefore, in the first half of the 19th century, exposure to the dead was not necessarily a normality but it had certainly become accessible to the inquisitive visitor.

Additionally, the mummy unrolling must be situated in the exhibitionary context of the time that continued through the rest of the century. Alberti noted the transition to an exhibitionary complex in the 19th century which 'brought objects and bodies – dead and alive – into increasingly public spaces for display' (Alberti 2011: 19). Bodies were the centre of freak shows, fairs and other exhibitions (Altick 1978; Wood 1967). A striking example is Julia Pastrana, a woman exhibited as a 'hairy woman' in the mid-19th century. At her death, her body was displayed to the public at 191 Piccadilly, advertised as a 'new and unparalleled discovery in the art of embalming, whereby the original form of the natural expression of life are retained' (Durbach 2014: 38-39). Although Egyptian mummies were not included in these shows, they were central to the Great Exhibitions in both Britain and France. The most striking example is possibly the Exposition Universelle de Paris in 1867 during which the unrolling of a mummy took centre stage. Of this specific event, the de Goncourt brothers, Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, made a comment on the oddity of such entertainment which had not yet been publicly practiced in Paris, a comment that echoes the opening theatre play on the rotating coffin:

For a while, to speed things up and hurry the endless unwrapping, the mummy is placed on its feet, which make a noise akin to wooden legs, and one can see turning, spinning, dancing appallingly, in the hurried arms of the helpers, the standing package: Death in a bundle (Goncourt 1867).

It is evident that the presence of the Egyptian mummy at national exhibitions in the second half of the 19th century was of a different nature from the medical and naturalist dissections that first motivated the physical engagements with Egyptian mummies, although they are revealing once more of changing attitudes. Certainly, the Egyptian mummy would remain an object of interest to situate the body in a changing world.

Conclusion

On the morning of 6 June 2017, coffin EA6695 was taken out of its case at the British Museum so as to confirm the existence of a rotating apparatus. Cross-referencing of documents, and slides from the 1990s, had suggested its presence, but curiosity arose as to its shape and form. Observation of the upper lid of the coffin confirmed indisputably the existence of a rotating system, as evidenced by the presence of a number of holes at the top and base of the coffin, as well as the mark of a metallic plaque to support it (**Figure 5** and **Figure 6**) Coffin EA6695 had, indeed, been *a rotating coffin*. The apparatus itself has disappeared and it is unclear when this happened. During the observation, there was slight dismay and discomfort in the audience at the idea of a hole going through the entire coffin. However, from a didactic point of view, this display strategy was interesting because it actively engaged the visitor in the observation of the specimen on display; it also contributed to the feeling of the mummy coming to life. Today, coffin EA6695 is displayed in the Enlightenment gallery vertically, unlike other Egyptian coffins in the Egyptian galleries on the first floor of the Museum, possibly a call back to early displays of Egyptian coffins in private collections and early museum displays. However, it would be wrong to assume that physical engagements with coffins or Egyptian mummies have disappeared. From elevation, to the use of mirrors, or the recent uses of 3D scans and virtual unwrapping, curatorial emphasis remains on audience engagement.



Figures 5 and 6: Photograph of the holes at the top and bottom of coffin EA6695. Photograph taken by the author at the British Museum, 6 June 2017.

The case of EA6695 at the turn of the 19th century confirms that the Egyptian mummy — or its coffin, as there was little distinction in texts at the time — was not necessarily an object to be preserved intact, but rather that it was an object to be physically engaged with. In this paper, the study of Egyptian mummies in London at the turn of the 19th century has been revealed as multifaceted, exposing several motivations that led individuals to physically engage with mummified specimens or coffins. My aim has been to examine more specifically the physical engagements with mummies through openings, dissections and unrollings and to ground these practices intellectually. This is important in approaching the variously nuanced approaches to the Egyptian mummy as an object of investigation. The recent studies of practices such as mummy unrollings have enabled a reappraisal of engagements with Egyptian mummies, no longer limited to collecting, and display practices.

Questions of medical knowledge, body and race explored in this paper and in a number of recent publications have shed light on a crucial aspect: the Egyptian mummy was not a politically or religiously neutral body. Instead, the study of

interactions with Egyptian mummies at the turn of the 19th century and in the following decades paints a picture of intellectual change, when mummies became political, not just in terms of collecting. The situatedness of mummies, in and out of the museum space, within medical and naturalist circles, is crucial: it is by stepping outside of the museum that a full picture of what the mummy meant can be drawn, one that is entangled with very crucial questions of origins, practices, and importantly, race. From one circle to another, the mummy was to be reinvented as a multi-potential source of examination that could offer clues on the ancient world and its practices, but also on the modern world and its dilemmas.

What is evident from the number of sources explored in this paper is that the Egyptian mummy has been wholly underestimated as an object of study, and that research has heavily focused on traditional archaeological circles, looking at collecting and display of Egyptian human remains in a narrow way, purely as objects of antiquarian, aesthetic, and then archaeological interests. The studies of Riggs, Moshenska and Luckhurst in particular have brought an avenue for reflection on what the mummy was and what it meant. Research into the scientific communities involved with the study of Egyptian mummies, and in particular research located prior to the Victorian era — which has received much attention, as have the following centuries — remain avenues of exploration. It is believed that by looking at Egyptian mummies as *bodies* of evidence rather than collected artefacts, a greater understanding of the cultural practices that surrounded and shaped engagements with Egyptian mummies will be revealed. This will in turn illuminate later engagements with Egyptian mummies, bringing about a much more nuanced and multi-layered understanding of what the ancient Egyptian mummy meant then and what it means now.

Competing Interests: The author declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the research, authorship, and/or the publication of this paper.

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Figures: All figures provided by the author unless otherwise stated.
