

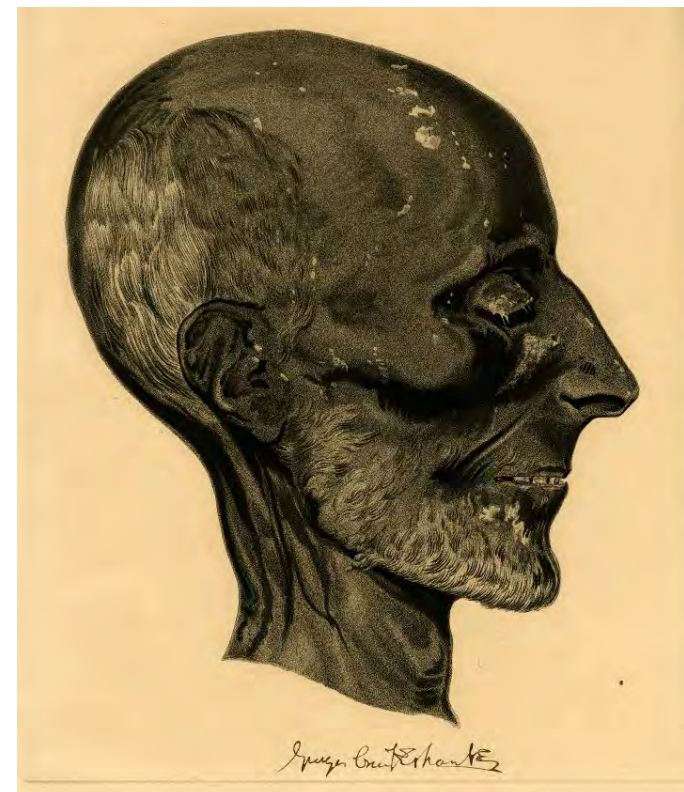
# MUMMIES UNWRAPPED

From medical dissections to public performances

Mummies are objects of wonder in museums worldwide, often made popular by films and books. Fascinated by the different perceptions of mummies in society, PhD student **Angela Stienne** investigates the multifaceted history of mummy collections, and their place in debates surrounding the exhibition of human remains in museums.



Examples of decorated coffins from the British Museum collection



Head of a mummy, in *A History of Egyptian Mummies* by T. G. A. Pettigrew (1834)

## The Egyptian mummy: An unusual museum object

Egyptian mummies are encountered in most museums with Egyptology collections around the world; in fact, the New Walk Museum in Leicester holds no less than four Egyptian mummies, currently on display. Mummies in museum collections attract considerable attention, triggering various responses in viewers such as curiosity, unease and sometimes even amusement. Despite this enduring popularity, they cannot be easily defined – are they collected objects or human remains? Popular culture and media have made the mummy strange, mysterious and exotic and it would be easy to condemn these for transforming the mummy into this strange and undefined specimen.

In fact, this stereotype does not satisfactorily represent the complexity and fluidity of the Egyptian mummy both as an object and a subject. Its mixed materiality and its various meanings and uses hark back to a few centuries ago, when ancient Egypt was still a rather mysterious and novel civilisation, and Egyptian material culture was brought to European museums and private collections. Can we map out the different engagements with Egyptian mummies in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries? What can this tell us about the changing identity of the mummy and the role of groups of individuals in shaping the mummy's reception? Can these findings illuminate our present-day understandings and concerns about Egyptian human remains, and their place in museums?

## Mummies as bodies

For my thesis project, I use a combination of archival sources with a theoretical framework based in material culture studies and in cultural history to map out the various physical and intellectual engagements with Egyptian mummies between 1754 and 1855. My current research seeks to situate Egyptian mummies within knowledge communities associated with the medical and natural

sciences, thus removing the mummy from conventional spaces of exhibition and display – especially, the private collection and the museum – to frame these engagements with Egyptian mummies as *bodies*.

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In 1764, mathematician John Hadley and surgeon John Hunter dissected an Egyptian mummy in Hadley's London house, in front of a small audience of medical practitioners. This produced the first detailed account of the dissection of an Egyptian mummy in a medical context. It raises the question: why did these individuals dissect mummies, and how did this affect the mediation and interpretation of the mummy?

One reason for dissections was an interest in the embalming techniques of the ancient Egyptians. Individuals attempted to reconstruct the mummification process: for example, Greek writer Herodotus (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) had attempted to recount the stages necessary to a successful mummification, and men of science used his account as a comparison. Guillaume-François Rouelle, a renowned French chemist who worked on the composition of salts, dissected mummies in order to apply his theories on salts to the use of natron, a substance used in the mummification process.

## Egyptian mummies and racial theories

Mummification, however, was not the only interest of the intellectual community. Experts also hoped that mummies would



Mummy foot dissected by John Hadley and John Hunter in *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (1764)





Description de l'Égypte by Benoît de Maillet',  
Bibliothèque nationale de France

help them answer fundamental questions regarding the order of nature and the origins of mankind. Of particular interest was the existence and qualities of different racial groups, a developing field of discourse established in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century in France and Britain. The provenance of Egyptian mummies in North Africa made them important subjects in this debate. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach became the first to dissect mummies to identify their origins, driven by the taxonomic impulse to define mankind's 'races'. He located four, and then five, racial categories but he rejected any connection between racial origins and intellectual or physical abilities.

The origin of Egyptian mummies soon became the cause of great torment. In 1787, Volney wrote "This race of black men, today our slave and the object of our scorn, is the very race to which we owe our arts, sciences, and even the use of speech!" Evidently, the fascination with the ancient Egyptians did not fit developing theories which validated colonialism and inequality between racial categories. This contradiction to the racial stereotype was resolved in 1825, when Dr Augustus Bozzi Granville presented the proceedings of a dissection he performed on a mummy, providing the most thorough medical examination of an Egyptian mummy, using his expertise to establish comprehensive reports and proposing a medical prognostic on the cause of death. In addition, Granville proposed that "the pelvis of our female mummy will be found to come nearer to the beau idéal of the Caucasian structure than does that of women of Europe in general".

### Performing the mummy: 19<sup>th</sup> century mummy unwrapping

In 1798, Napoleon led a French expedition to Egypt. This expedition, made up of a military force accompanied by a cultural enterprise of scholars and scientists searching Egyptian history,

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triggered the emergence of a more defined field of Egyptology that would eventually transform the reception of Egyptian material culture in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. French and British military, intellectual and collecting activity in the Middle East resulted in burgeoning public interest in ancient Egypt and the expansion of the Egyptian collection at the British Museum from 1801 and the creation of the first collection of Egyptian material culture at the Louvre in Paris in 1827. Egyptian mummies were to be found in these public collections but also entered the realm of popular entertainment with the introduction of the public unrolling and dissection of mummies.

In 1821, Giovanni Battista Belzoni, a circus strongman turned archaeologist, used the unrolling of a mummy to market his exhibition at the Egyptian Hall in London. For the first time, the opening of a mummy was treated as a public, rather than as a scientific, event. Thomas Joseph Pettigrew, a renowned surgeon and avid Egyptophile, inspired by his attendance at Belzoni's event, took the practice of mummy unrolling to the next level offering much publicised and sought-after, ticketed events to a wider public audience. Interestingly, Pettigrew managed to combine a serious level of medical inquiry with high-standard Egyptological research and with a sense of theatrical performance which included props, and the passing along of mummy parts. Thus, simultaneously, the mummy was a displayed object, a medical corpse, a geographical and racial representation of a civilisation, and subject of a performance.

**“The mummy was simultaneously a museum object, a medical corpse, a subject of fantasy – often dreamed of as a beautiful woman – and all of these combined in unwrapping spectacles”**

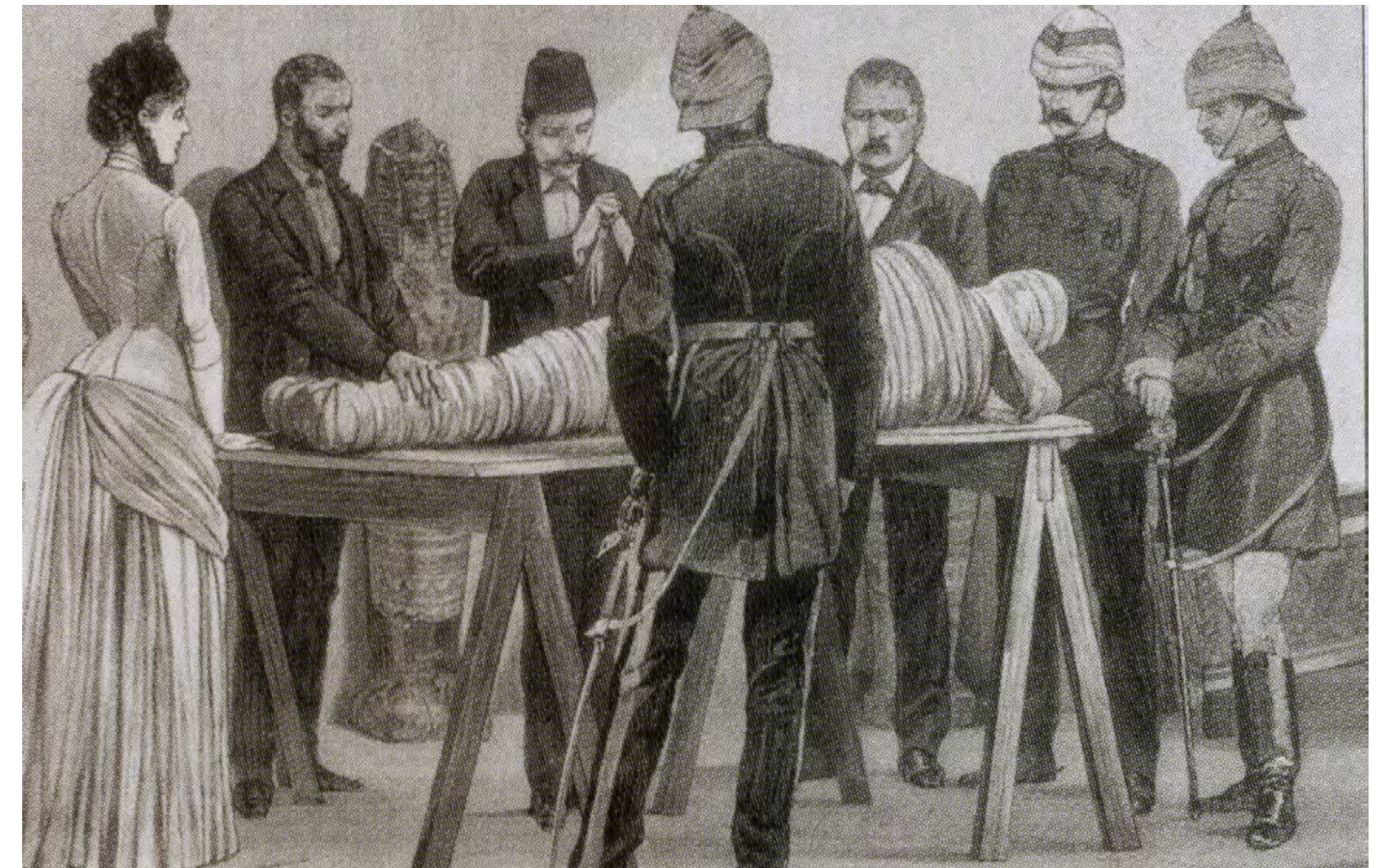
### Understanding engagements with Egyptian mummies between 1754 and 1855

The reception of the Egyptian mummy was shaped and defined in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by groups of individuals in the medical and natural sciences who shared questions concerning the preservation of the body and the nature of race. The reframing of Egyptian mummies within knowledge communities and disciplinary cultures which extended beyond collecting spaces in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries reveals relationships between individuals, and groups of individuals, who interacted with, and shaped the reception of Egyptian mummies.

The engagement with Egyptian mummies as collected objects in exhibition spaces was challenged by investigations into the mummy as a medical specimen – a corpse – which fitted in developing epistemological discourses. In particular, the conceptual underpinning of racial differentiation exacerbated the physicality of the mummy as a body which supposedly contained scientific evidences of racial origins of humankind. If there was a clear desire to fit the Egyptian mummy within a racial category, there was however no attempt to fit the mummy into a material category: the mummy was simultaneously a museum object, a medical corpse,

a subject of fantasy – often dreamed of as a beautiful woman – and, all of these combined in unwrapping spectacles. My project seeks to re-orientate the research on human remains looking at one specific type of human remains, the Egyptian mummy. It demonstrates that Egyptian mummies were – and remain – multi-layered museum objects which remain to be explored in museum collections and displays.

**“Giovanni Battista Belzoni, a circus strongman turned archaeologist, used the unrolling of a mummy to market his exhibition at the Egyptian Hall in London”**



Engraving from 1886 showcasing the impending unwrapping of an Egyptian mummy by French archaeologist Gaston Maspero – the unwrapping of Egyptian mummies in front of an audience became very popular in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and demonstrates the transformation of engagements with mummies, from medical dissections to public performances.