The art of embalming: practice, evolution and materiality

Annual Egyptological Colloquium 2020
British Museum, London, 10-11 September 2020

The British Museum curates one of the largest collections of mummified remains from the Nile Valley outside Egypt and, over the past decade, they have been the focus of an intensive programme of bioarchaeological and Egyptological research. Using cutting edge CT scanning technology and 3D visualisation software, the Museum has shared some of this research through permanent displays and exhibitions held at the Museum and at international venues. These include Mummy the Inside story (2004), the virtual autopsy of Gebelein Man (Gallery 64), Ancient Lives, New Discoveries (2014) and Egyptian Mummies, Exploring Ancient Lives (2016-2020).

Despite an extensive body of research, many aspects of mummification remain relatively little-known, particularly how practices varied over time and by region, as well as their cultural and social significance. This colloquium aims to bring together the latest research on embalming, from religious beliefs to practical techniques, using ancient textual sources, scientific analyses and archaeological work.

The mummy of a Singer of Amun (British Museum EA 25258). From left to right: CT slice, visualisation and photography.
We invite contributions that explore the significance of embalming, as well as possible regional variations and chronological developments of the practice from the Early Dynastic period to the Byzantine era. Papers addressing new insights into the process of mummification are particularly sought and participants are also invited to submit papers on the following themes, using appropriate examples and case studies:

- Concepts underlying the practice of mummification in ancient Egypt
- Written sources for methods and beliefs
- Studies showing regional and/or temporal variations, as well as how the procedure might have varied according to economic and social level
- How bioarchaeological research can inform our understanding of embalming practices
- The materiality of embalming, from tools and objects used by the practitioners to amulets placed within the wrappings
- Research on natural and man-made products used in mummification, their composition, usage and significance
- Early development of embalming
- Contextualisation of the recent discoveries
- Embalming caches
- Use of new technologies and how these can inform research

We do not encourage contributions of case studies on individual mummies, except where wider research questions and implications are being addressed.

This call seeks submissions for papers (in English, 25min including time for questions) that consider the above themes. Submissions will be assessed by a colloquium committee (see below). In addition to papers, we also welcome submissions for posters on the same themes, or that present new research that would complement the presentations and discussions. The programme will include time dedicated to the presentation and discussion of these posters.

A keynote lecture will take place on the evening of 10 September: José Galan “The Lives of Others. Dra Abu el-Naga, a living necropolis”. The lecture will be followed by a reception.

This open call will close on 31 December 2019. Submissions should be emailed to mvandenbeusch@britishmuseum.org, with name, institutional affiliation, title, an abstract of 200 words and one image with caption. Applicants will be informed of the outcome in early 2020. Travel bursaries will be available to support some participants’ attendance. It is intended that the colloquium will result in a publication.

Colloquium committee
Marie Vandenbeusch, Project Curator, Department of Egypt and Sudan, British Museum
Daniel Antoine, Curator of Bioarchaeology, Department of Egypt and Sudan, British Museum
Salima Ikram, Distinguished University Professor of Egyptology, American University in Cairo
Susanne Töpfner, Curator, Museo Egizio, Turin
John Taylor, Assistant Keeper, Department of Egypt and Sudan, British Museum