

New York University

Excavations at Amheida 2010

Brief Preliminary Report on the Bird Coffins and Their Contents from Amheida

A preliminary study of the contents of a ceramic coffin found in the area of the Thoth Temple (area 4.1) was carried out on 16 February 2010 in order to get a sense of the contents and what might be needed for a thorough study of bird burials in coffins. The dating of the coffin is uncertain—it has tentatively been dated to the Late Period, but this covers a significant period of time. Perhaps future ceramic analysis, together with the study of the coffin contents, will help to narrow the dating.

Deposits of mummified animals are commonly found at sacred sites from the Late Period through the Roman era (at least through the 4th century AD). At temples, the majority of animals found are votive offerings, while in some instances these might be sacred creatures.¹ Presumably the Dakhla group are of ex votos. Other animal mummies found at various sites in Dakhla include Ovicaprid and ibis remains, many of which can be viewed in the Kharga Museum.

I examined one deposit that consisted of two large plastic bags from coffin A08/4.1/120/13256, (Field number 31), from Square AR50.

Three bones found in the bone bags were of mammals, probably one Ovicaprid and two fragments from cattle. The remaining bones were from birds.

Methodology

Due to the limited time available I decided to determine the minimum number of individuals present in the entire deposit, and to get a sense of the different species, so I sorted by element. For comparison I only had the skeleton of a Sacred Ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*), some images of bones of a buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) and a Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), and the volume, *A Manual for the Identification of Bird Bones from Archaeological Sites*,² therefore specific identification of species were not possible for the majority of the bones.

¹ See S. Ikram, 'Divine Creatures : Animal Mummies', *Divine Creatures : Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt*, S. Ikram, ed. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press : 5-9, and S. Ikram and N. Iskander. 2002. *Catalogue General of the Non-Human Mummies in the Egyptian Museum* : Introduction, for a discussion of the different sorts of animal mummies, with examples.

² A. Cohen and D. Serjeantson. 1986. *A Manual for the Identification of Bird Bones from Archaeological Sites*. London : Archetype.

Results

Based on counts of anatomical elements, a minimum of 35 birds were interred in coffin A08/4.1/120/13256, (see Tables 1 and 2).

The coffin seemed to have contained a preponderance of raptors and very few ibises. Both Sacred (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*) and Glossy (*Plegadis falcinellus*) ibises appear to be present. The skeletons of these birds are morphologically very similar, with the prime difference being size. From amongst the identified bones, 6 ibises were securely identified, with probably 4 of the former type and 2 of the latter.

Amongst the raptors at least 7 buzzards *Buteo* sp. were identified, as well as, possibly, one eagle *Aquila* sp. Based on morphology, the vast majority of the remaining bones belonged to raptors. Raptor mummies are very common in ancient Egypt.³ Quite probably both males and females went into the deposit, as well as a range of ages, from adult to juvenile. The smaller raptors might well be forms of kestrels (*Falco* sp.), or kites (*Milvus* sp.).

Anatomical Element	Left	Right	Ibis	Hawk
Humerus	29	35	6	7
Femur	29	22	N	N
Coracoid	19	18	N	2
Ulna	34	26	N	N
Tibiotarsus	27	23	N	N

Table 1: Count of Anatomical Elements

Anatomical Element	Ibis	Raptor	Total
Skull	2?	9?	16
Beak	1	5	6

Table 2: Count of Heads

³ C. L. Lortet, and C. Gaillard. 1903-09. *La faune momifiée de l'ancienne Egypte*. Lyon: Archives du Muséum Histoire Naturelle de Lyon VIII: 2, IX: 2, X: 2. Lyon; C. Gaillard, and G. Daressy. 1905. *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: La Faune Momifiée de l'Antique Égypte*. Cairo; P. Houlihan and S. M. Goodman. 1986. *The Birds of Ancient Egypt*. Cairo : 140.

Discussion

As the Amheida temple is dedicated to Thoth, the discovery of ibis bones comes as no surprise. Finding raptor burials, generally associated with Horus and Re Horakhte, in the same receptacle as those of ibises is also not unusual, but indicates that the temple might have also had a shrine to Horus, Re, or other solar divinities. Examples of such joint burials are found at Abu Rawash,⁴ Tuna el-Gebel,⁵ and Abydos,⁶ and it is very common for these birds to share cemeteries, as is seen at the Sacred Animal Necropolis at Saqqara,⁷ the tombs of Djehuty and Khety (TT11, TT12), to name but two other instances. Finding other types of raptors (all possibly grouped together taxonomically by the ancient Egyptians) mixed in is also common.⁸

Presumably these mass-burials are of votive offerings to Thoth and Horus; if these were sacred creatures one might expect single burials in each coffin.⁹ Thoth and Horus were, particularly in the Late Period, grouped together. Frequently they are shown in association with the *sema-tawy*, and are related to the strength of rule of the king. Both gods were also further tied to kingship, Horus, as son of Osiris and the quintessential divine ruler, more directly than Thoth. They are also paired as Thoth gave Horus the healed *wedjat* eye and restored his sight, as well as mediating in Horus's favour when he fought with Seth. In the Pyramid Texts (PT 594–96), the king ascends to heaven on Thoth's wings, thus strengthening the connection between Thoth and divine kingship.

The two gods were also shown in parallel as Thoth was associated with the moon, the night-time counterpart of the sun, and referred to as the 'silver Aten' in the Late Period¹⁰, while Horus, particularly as Re-Horakhte, was associated with the sun. Thus, these two deities controlled the heavens both during the day and the night.

⁴ S. Ikram and A. Charron. 2008. 'The Animal Mummies of Abu Rawash', *Kmt: A Modern Journal of Egyptology* 19.2 : 34-41.

⁵ D. Kessler and Abd el-Halim Nur ed-Din, 2005. 'Millions of Ibises and Other Animals', in *Divine Creatures : Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt*, S. Ikram, ed. Cairo: 120-63; D. Kessler, 1989. *Die Heiligen Tiere und Der Konig, I*; D. Kessler, 1998: *Tuna el-Gebel II. Die Paviankultkammer G-C-C-2*. Hildesheim.

⁶ S. Ikram, 'Animals in the Ritual Landscape at Abydos : A Synopsis', *The Archaeology and Art of Ancient Egypt: Essays in honor of David B. O'Connor*, Z. Hawass and J. Richards, eds. Cairo: 417-32.

⁷ P. Nicholson, 2005. 'The Sacred Animal Necropolis at North Saqqara : the Cults and their Catacombs', *Divine Creatures : Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt*, S. Ikram, ed. Cairo: 44-71.

⁸ L. Lortet et C. Gaillard, *La faune momifiée de l'ancienne Egypte I*, Lyon, 1903, 114-166 ; Personal Observations.

⁹ S. Ikram, 2005. 'Protecting Pets and Cleaning Crocodile : the Animal Mummy Project', in *Divine Creatures : Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt*, S. Ikram, ed. Cairo: 207-227.

¹⁰ R. Wilkinson. 2003. *The Complete Gods of Ancient Egypt*, London : 216 ; D. Kurth 1986. 'Tierkult' *LdA VI*: 498-509.

Thoth has other connections to solar deities. He is sometimes called the ‘soul’ or ‘heart’ of Re. Thoth himself is sometimes dubbed the son of Re, although there is another story of his origins (in the ‘Contendings of Horus and Seth’) where he is the son of Horus, emerging from the forehead of Seth, all reasons for the pairing of the gods.

If the bird cemetery is of a significant size, it would indicate active cults to Thoth, Horus, Re, and perhaps also Osiris and other divinities that were connected to Thoth and Horus. They also suggest a possible association with a kingship cult,¹¹ which might have persisted and evolved into an imperial cult during the later periods of Roman occupation.

Votive animal mummies are often considered as a manifestation of active pilgrimage sites. If this were the case at Amheida, this would have religious implications as to the type of temple it was, and the diverse cult activities that were practiced there. The animal burials would also have social and economic ramifications for the study of the temple and the site as a whole. The question of breeding these creatures and their upkeep,¹² supporting pilgrims, and possibly producing mummies (further examination of the other coffins might yield more information) all relate to the economic life of the temple and town, as well as to its spiritual life. Further work on this important deposit, together with relevant texts from the period and the site will provide a new understanding of the Thoth Temple and its importance in Amheida and its environs in the Late Period and beyond.

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¹¹ See notes 5 and 6.

¹² J. D. Ray. 1976. *Archive of Hor*. London.