

## What's in store? (number 2 of a planned series) by Dulcie Engel

### 2. Mummified arm EC307



#### ***Description of object***

This is a mummified human left arm with a section of bone missing (see below), and with traces of gold leaf, which could indicate finger-stalls were originally attached, as happened with high-ranking mummies in the 26<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasties. And indeed this arm dates from the Late Period, 747-332 BC. There are no longer any bandages on the arm (see below). It is 41 cm long and 10 cm wide.

It was conserved in 2000 by Bob Childs of the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff. A condition report from 2008 notes a lot of flaking, and that it is not to be taken out of its box.

A brief visual examination in June 2016 shows that there is little trace of the gold leaf now.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of lack of evidence to the contrary, it is assumed to be part of the original Wellcome Trust donation, but this particular object had a rather exciting history in the early 1990s.

#### ***Stealing, mystery, murder, denials, court cases??!***

This is the evidence we have from the object file, in chronological order, where known:

- A small black and white photograph of a fully bandaged arm (no date), which seems to match our arm.

*\*\*\* 3 newspaper articles from the archives of the South Wales Evening Post, held on microfilm in the Central Library, Swansea. Copied and deposited in the object file by the author in June 2016.<sup>2</sup> These are:*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Carolyn for taking me to the storeroom and showing me this artefact and other mummified remains. Furthermore, I would like to thank her for her detailed comments and clarifications on an earlier version of this paper.

a) Article dated 4/11/92 'Severed arm found in garden': 'A major investigation was today underway in Swansea after the discovery of a severed human forearm in an Uplands back garden. A large team of detectives is now carrying out inquiries to see if a murder investigation will have to be launched. The bandaged arm, thought to be that of a woman, was found in a garden at Gwydr Crescent yesterday. Initial tests at a Cardiff hospital indicate it may be of recent origin.'

b) Article dated 5/11/92 'Severed arm may have been on sale': '...The latest theory is that the bandaged limb may have been on sale at a shop in the city and is part of an Egyptology collection...the arm was discovered by a tenant ...as he cleared up the back garden...some bones, thought to be animal remains, were also found nearby. The arm was today due to undergo further tests and X-rays. It will be examined by an expert in Egyptology at University College Swansea...Meanwhile, detectives are continuing inquiries in the Essex area...They wish to interview a former Swansea tenant'

c) Article dated 6/11/92 'Arm for British Museum': 'A severed forearm discovered in a Swansea back garden was today being taken to the British Museum in London for more expert examination. As yet there is no firm conclusion as to the age of the limb...police are still considering the theory that it is part of an Egyptology collection. They are keeping an open mind until it has been further examined in London, along with other relics, thought to be animal bones, found near the scene' \*\*\*

- A black and white photograph (unattributed), dated 13<sup>th</sup> November 1992, of Kate Bosse-Griffiths(KBG) holding the arm; the gold leaf on the fingers is very clear.
- A note from Professor Alan Lloyd (AL) to KBG, dated December 1992, saying the police had returned the arm and that he had put it in the storeroom.
- A report from the Western Mail, dated April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1993, saying a Swansea University student ended up in police custody last November (i.e. Nov. 1992) after a severed arm was found in his lodgings in the Uplands. The student said he had found the arm, along with old axe heads and flints, on a Gower beach. He sold off the other objects to an antiques dealer, but not the arm, which was later

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Syd for suggesting I take a look at the Evening Post archive.

discovered and reported to the police. He was arrested and held for two days. His girlfriend left him, thinking he was a killer. It was soon established that the arm was not from a recent corpse, and the student was released. The arm was taken to the British Museum. The article describes the arm as covered in bandages with the remains of finger bones protruding.<sup>3</sup> The reason for the April article was that the student's solicitor was asking for the arm to be returned to her client from Swansea University, where they believed it now was, although this was strongly denied in the article by the registrar at the time.

- An e-mail from Carolyn in 2004, summarising the story, and explaining a few loose ends. Carolyn was told in November 2004 by Joyce Filer of the British Museum that she was the person asked to identify the arm in 1992. Carolyn also explains that the arm is in the Egypt Centre as it was assumed it was stolen, and we already had an Egyptian collection.

The note from AL, and the small photo of the bandaged arm might suggest that this arm was originally part of our collection, stolen from a cupboard (as other items were), possibly as part of a student prank, and then perhaps dumped on a local beach, where it was found by the unlucky student suspected of murder... We do not know what happened to his claim, but assume that it was quietly dropped as there is no material about a court case, and the arm is still here... minus a chunk and minus its bandages! We also do not know what happened to the animal bones mentioned in the Evening Post articles, nor where the other artefacts the student claimed to have sold ended up. And we have not yet established the source of the photo of KBG with the arm, though it is likely to have been taken by the Swansea University arts photographer, Roger Davies, as it bears a strong resemblance to others taken by him.

However, there are alternative possibilities. For example, the arm may have simply been dumped by a previous owner. This could be because they no longer wanted human remains in the house. Alternatively the items could have been stolen from outside the Swansea area and the human remains dumped on the beach. Given that there is no proof of the existence of the arm prior to this story (it was not catalogued) this remains a possibility.

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<sup>3</sup> We assume that the missing section was a piece removed for dating analysis by the police or the museum; and somewhere on its journey, the bandages got lost.

## ***Mummymania***

*'When I first came through the doors of the British Museum in 1954, at the age of eight, I began with the mummies...What fascinated me then were the mummies themselves, the thrilling, gruesome thought of the dead bodies'* (MacGregor, 2012: 3)

The above quotation from the former director of the British Museum sums up the fascination many have with mummies. And local people over a certain age in Swansea often mention their childhood memories of rubbing the toe of the mummy in Swansea Museum (before it was conserved and placed under glass in 1993).

Mummies have been used and abused for thousands of years, starting in the Ancient Egyptian era and continuing into the twentieth century (if not the twenty-first, depending on your ethical standpoint).

Brier (1996: 92) quotes from a papyrus containing a tomb robber's confession:

*'We opened it and smashed up its mummy, and we left it there in the tomb. But we took the inner coffin and his shell and stripped off his gold'*

Similarly, Dunand & Lichtenberg (1994: 104-5) quote from the statement of another tomb robber:

*'We collected the gold we found on the noble mummy of this god (King Sekhemre), together with his amulets and jewels...we collected all that we found on her (Queen Nubkhaas)...and set fire to their coffins'*

Brier (1996: 93) points out that this desecration (if the mummy itself was not destroyed) enabled embalmers of later periods to inspect the work of earlier ones and improve their techniques, reaching their apotheosis in the 21<sup>st</sup> dynasty.

At a later period, (from the late medieval period to the 19<sup>th</sup> century), 'mummiā' was prized as a medicine in Europe. This arose out of a semantic confusion: the word 'mummiā' means 'bitumen' in Persian, and was adapted into Arabic to describe mummies, as the dark resin on the bandages resembled bitumen. However, Persian bitumen was believed to have healing properties, and as it was quite rare, Egyptian mummies became the main source of this medicine (Brier 1996: 149). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'mummy brown' became a

popular paint colour, made from crushed mummy; and an American company used mummy wrappings to make brown paper sold as a food wrapping (Booth 2011: 161).



In the House of Death body coverings case, EC951 is part of a mummy cloth which was 'unwound at Lordship Lane Hall about the year 1896', according to its original label. Mummy unrolling parties became popular with the rise of the Grand Tour in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when travellers would bring mummies home as souvenirs. Pieces of wrapping, or even amulets and jewellery found within the bandages were given to guests. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a more 'scientific' approach was developed: autopsies were carried out, and the first X-rays of mummies were taken in 1896, just 1 year after the invention of this technique. However, early X-rays were not powerful enough to do more than capture the extremities of the body. As X-ray techniques improved, they were used more and more on mummies (Dunand & Lichtenberg 1994: 78-81). This was a significant development: mummy unwrapping was no longer as important.

Various mummies in the Egypt Centre have been x-rayed: in the cases of the snake and the human foetus, the X rays did not prove conclusive (see below). The crocodile (W985) and the bird (W535) have also been X-rayed.

Nowadays many additional techniques are applied to study mummies. In particular, CT scanning is widely used, and as shown in the British Museum's 2014 'Ancient Lives' exhibition, the 3D images allow layers to be separated, and they can also be cut virtually to show cross sections (Taylor & Antoine 2014: 18-20).

Endoscopy (the introduction of a tube with a camera inside the body), histology (the study of organic tissue) and dental analysis are also applied to mummies. A range of techniques have been used, for example, by the Manchester Mummy Project, established by Rosalie David in 1973 ( see David & Tapp 1992, David & Archbold 2000). The Engineering Department at Swansea University was one of the pioneers of micro-CT scanning which has been used on the Egypt Centre's artefacts (Swansea University 2015).

The Egypt Centre has a mummy (EC308) which was X-rayed and shown to contain a snake. In 2014 it underwent micro CT scanning which showed a great deal of detail, including the fact that the snake could be identified as a cobra, and a 3D printout was produced. Furthermore, a tiny mummy case (W1013) was confirmed by a CT scan in 2014 to contain a foetus aged 12-16 weeks. Other EC mummies have also been scanned (see details and photos in Rogers 2014).

Indeed, mummies have fascinated and scared us for years, and are an important part of popular culture, as evidenced in literature and film, as well as in museum visits (see Booth 2011: 160-184).

### ***Conservation issues***

We know that our mummified arm 'went through the wars' in the 1990s, and as far as we know was not properly conserved until 2000. Indeed, before a purpose-built museum housed the collection in 1998, the display and storage facilities for the collection were not ideal, as suggested by some of the documents in the object file. They remain far from ideal to this day!

Deterioration is a particular problem for organic matter such as human remains, which are particularly susceptible to environmental conditions. Remedial conservation, refers to direct actions on fragile or deteriorating artefacts which might be lost without that treatment.

In their account of caring for an Egyptian mummy and coffin, Phillips and Roundhill (2007: 273) note that the human remains require an oxygen-free environment, achieved through placing the mummy and an oxygen scavenger<sup>4</sup> in a large polyethylene bag, which is then heat sealed.

### ***Ethical issues***

23 non-human remains are listed in the Egypt Centre catalogue (mainly cats, and birds), and 11 partial human remains, plus a baby (not including the foetus inside a mummy case). The only animal mummies displayed are those listed above (snake, crocodile, bird) and a cat (W530). No human remains are shown, although the mummy case containing the foetus (discussed above) is on display. Two of the mummies displayed are in coffin cases (the foetus and the bird); three are fully bandaged, but no longer in their coffins (the cat, snake and crocodile).

In March 2015, The Friends of the Egypt Centre presented 'The Mummy Trial': a fictional scenario in the form of a court case designed to raise awareness of issues surrounding the display of human remains. Both sides argued persuasively for showing or hiding human remains. The display of mummies has educational value, brings in visitors, and can be complemented by modern technology. However, for many people, it is offensive to display human bodies as if they were any other archaeological or historical find and the educational value of displaying remains is debateable. They should be treated with respect. This extends to photographic representations of mummies and other human remains:

'Manchester Museum sells a postcard showing an unwrapped mummified body and elaborate painted coffin lid, dating from about 2650BC, with the following description : 'Wooden coffin and remains belonging to Asru, chantress of Amun' ...the language here appears to depersonalize her, favouring her coffin above her individual identity' (Brooks & Rumsey 2007: 264).

Some communities request the return of human remains from museums, for example the Museum of New Zealand has a repatriation programme for ancestral Maori remains. So far it has repatriated 240, with an estimated 650 still held overseas, mainly in European museums (Stephens 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> A chemical compound which combines with oxygen to remove it from the package. Often used in the food and pharmaceutical industries.

The Museums Association issues guidelines on artefact retention and display. Additionally, the government issues guidelines to museums, which take into account these ethical considerations. The guide (DCMS 2005) has sections on the legal and ethical framework; the curation, care and use of human remains; and claims for the return of remains. The Egypt Centre follows these guidelines:<sup>5</sup>

‘As the museum (...) holds human remains which are over 100 years old, it follows the procedures in the ‘Guidance for the care of human remains in museums’ issued by DCMS in 2005. Moreover the museum does not display any unwrapped human remains’ (Egypt Centre 2015).

Furthermore: ‘The museum’s governing body, acting on the advice of the museum’s professional staff, if any, may take a decision to return human remains (unless covered by the ‘Guidance for the care of human remains in museums’ issued by DCMS in 2005), objects or specimens to a country or people of origin. The museum will take such decisions on a case by case basis; within its legal position and taking into account all ethical implications and available guidance’ (Egypt Centre 2015).

### ***Conclusion***

Research into this object has raised many interesting points to do with our centuries-old fascination for Egyptian mummies, and more generally: museum ethics, conservation, security, scientific and technological developments.

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Carolyn for providing me with a copy of the Egypt Centre Collections Development Policy.

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