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A SHREW MUMMY IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM[1]

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ABSTRACT: The extensive collection of animal mummies kept in the National Museum – Náprsek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures comprises specimens of various species. The latest examination by the means of computed tomography has confirmed that one of the mummified ball-shaped packages contained remains of a shrew. The present paper summarises in wider context the issue of the mummification of these insectivores, introduces the shrew mummy kept in the Náprstek Museum collections and its research history, and presents the results of its recent scientific re-examination.

KEYWORDS: shrew mummies – ancient Egyptian mummification – computed tomography

Introduction

Amongst the numerous animal mummies kept in the collections of the National Museum – Náprsek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, a mummy of a shrew (Inv. No. P 2499) was identified and recently examined by means of computed tomography as part of the *Atlas of Egyptian Mummies in the Czech Collections* project[3] initiated by the late professor Eugen Strouhal (1931–2016) and the present writer in 2009. The present article brings in the first results of the mummy's examination.

Shrews played an important role in the religion of ancient Egyptians. Mummies of shrews and the coffins used for their deposition made of wood, metal. or stone served as votive offerings to certain gods. Shrews were associated with the sun god – primarily certain forms of Horus (namely Horus Khenty-Khety) – and manifested his nocturnal aspect[4] in contrast with the diurnal aspect represented by falcons. Shrews were a part of the religions of ancient Egyptian from at least the New Kingdom if not earlier.[5]

Research into shrew mummies

The history of bioarchaeological research into remains of mummified shrews discovered in ancient Egyptian archaeological contexts began in 1826 when Joseph Passalacqua

1 It is with genuine gratitude and warm regard that the present author dedicates this paper to David Karásek. Without his help and patronage, the project of the *Atlas of Egyptian Mummies in the Czech Collections,* including the present study, would hardly materialize.

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3 Cf. Onderka et al. 2016.

4 Ikram 2005, p. 225.

5 Brunner-Traut 1965.

(1797–1865) brought a large collection of Egyptian mummies from his excavations in Thebes to Paris. There, the French zoologist Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1805–1861) examined some of the shrew mummies included in the Passalacqua collection and identified a new species that he coined the *sacred shrew (Crocidura religiosa).*[6]

Since then, specimens of seven more shrew species mummified by the ancient Egyptians have been recovered from and identified at various ancient Egyptian sites, namely *Crocidura floweri* (Flower's shrew), *Crocidura balsamifera* (embalmed shrew), *Crocidura olivieri* (African giant shrew), *Crocidura religiosa* (sacred shrew), *Crocidura fulvastra* (savanna shrew), *Crocidura pasha* (Sahelian tiny shrew), and most recently identified *Crocidura gueldenstaedtii* (Güldenstädt's shrew).[7]

Mummified shrews are attested from numerous cemeteries and tombs across Egypt. Ikram lists ten major sites, namely Abu Rawash, Abydos, Akhmim, Bubastis, Buto, Giza, Herakleopolis, Hermopolis, Letopolis, and Thebes.[8] The vast majority of provenanced mummified individuals currently kept in European and American collections originate either from Thebes or Abydos.

Several substantial discoveries relating to mummified shrews have been made in the past two decades. Recently, the shrews from the Passalacqua collection, now kept in the Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection in Berlin, were re-examined. Amongst specimens of *Crocidura religiosa*, examples of *Crocidura olivieri*, and *Crocidura pasha* were identified.[9]

At the archaeological site of Quesna, where there is an avian cemetery, dated to the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, is associated with ancient Athribis, remains of at least 33 individuals belonging to four shrew species were discovered. A new species, *Crociduara queldenstaedtii*, was identified among these individuals.[10]

The Spanish team working at Dra Abu en-Naga in Western Thebes discovered at least 175 individuals belonging to four shrew species and two rodent species.[11] The discovery was made in a group of New Kingdom funerary monuments which were re-used as sacred depositories for votive mummies, above all avian, during the Ptolemaic Period. An interesting aspect of the find is the inclusion of small rodents, namely *Acomys cahirinus* (Cairo/common spiny mouse) and *Arvicanthis niloticus* (African grass rat).[12] Rodents represented only 8 % of individuals discovered amongst the set. *Acomys cahirinus* has been identified in other contexts connected with shrews, namely at Dra Abu en-Naga, Tuna el-Gebel, Quesna, and Abu Rawash.[13] However, none of the archaeological contexts show an abundance of rodent species. Species other than shrews may thus represent a foreign material included in the set as an available substitute to shrews. Ancient Egyptians interpreted shrews[14] and

6 Woodman 2015.

7 Woodman et al. 2021.

8 Ikram 2005, pp. xviii–xx.

9 Woodman et al. 2017.

10 Woodman et al. 2021; for a detailed discussion on the determination of species see Woodman et al. 2017.

11 Woodman and Ikram 2021.

12 Woodman and Ikram 2021, Tab. 1.

13 Woodman and Ikram 2021.

14 Brunner-Traut 1965.

rodents, particularly mice,[15] in clearly distinctive terms, although they were both associated with a solar cult.

Typology of shrew mummies

Mummies of shrews appear in two basic forms – individually and collectively wrapped. Mummies of individually wrapped shrews either copy the shape of the dead animal's body [1] or they are wrapped into the form of linen balls [2].

[1] The former group was treated in a way similar to small crocodiles or small fish. Their bodies are wrapped spirally and their heads tended to be decorated (usually eyes are accentuated). An illustrious example of a mummified large shrew may be found in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum (Inv. No. 14.653).[16] The object, discovered by the Egypt Exploration Fund in Abydos, is dated to the Early Roman Period (1st to 2nd century CE). The mummy contains the remains of a specimen belonging to an unspecified large shrew species. The mummy is spirally wrapped in brown bandages. The eyes are marked with a pair of small linen balls placed in respective places. Its total length is 22.7 cm.

[2] In the latter group, shrew mummies were packed into a ball-shaped package stuffed with linen and covered with a fine piece of linen and fastened around by a linen band. The shape may reflect the solar associations of shrews.[17] An example of this ball-shaped object may be found in the collections of the Mediterranean Museum in Stockholm, under Inv. No. MM 13884.[18] This Stockholm mummy was X-rayed and more recently examined through phase-contrast X-ray imaging which confirmed the presence of a shrew's remains inside.[19] Details concerning its provenience are not known. The shrew mummy kept in the Náprstek Museum belongs to this type.

The last type of shrew mummies is characterised by variously shaped bundles with numerous mummies usually wrapped first individually. These shrew bundles have their analogies in bundles with small crocodiles and fish. A mummy bundle with dimensions of 15.5 × 11.5 × 7.0 cm from Abydos, now kept in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Inv. No. 13.186.10) contains approximately twelve shrews.[20] The bundle was discovered by the Egypt Exploration Fund at the Ibis Cemetery at Abydos.[21]

A shrew mummy in the collections of the Náprstek Museum (Inv. No. P 2499) [Pl. 1]

The shrew mummy was most likely donated to the National Museum by the German Egyptologist Ludwig Keimer (1892–1957) who was closely linked with Egyptologists based in the city of Prague. In 1930, Keimer received his habilitation from the German

15 See e.g. Cessna 2017.

16 Shrew Mummy, *undated*.

17 Brunner-Traut 1965.

18 MM 13884: Mummy, Shrew [?], Vole [?], 2009.

19 Sofia Hägmann, *personal communication*, June 2022.

20 Sacred animal mummy bundle containing shrews, *undated*.

21 For another example of a package of mummified shrews from Abydos see Ikram 2004, p. 48; Ikram 2005, p. 225.

University in Prague and between 1930 and 1940, he lectured Egyptology at the university. In 1938, he even adopted Czechoslovak citizenship as a reaction to the political development in his home country.[22]

In 1938, Keimer – while staying in Upper Egypt, most likely Luxor – sent a private collection of artifacts as a donation to the National Museum. The nature of the Keimer collection fully corresponded with his specific interests in the field of Egyptology, namely the flora and fauna of ancient Egypt. It included several animal mummies and products of nature coming from ancient Egyptian contexts. Due to the outbreak of World War II, the collection was not properly inventoried and thus individual items are ascribed to it, albeit with uncertainty, based on the descriptions of the pieces.

On 11 November 1968, the shrew mummy, along with other animal mummies, was transferred to the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures (another division of the National Museum in Prague). There, it was integrated into the Ancient Near East and African Department, newly established by the Náprstek Museum's director, Erich Herold (1928–1988) and the Department's first head, the archaeologist and palaeopathologist Eugen Strouhal (1931–2016).

The very first scientific project Strouhal carried out after the Department had been established, was the radiological examination of all ancient Egyptian mummified material kept in the public collections of former Czechoslovakia. Strouhal's closest collaborator was the radiologist Luboš Vyhnánek (1928–1999). The radiological examination also included Inv. No. P 2499. In their publication Egyptian Mummies in Czechoslovak Collections, Strouhal and Vyhnánek ranked the object amongst 'Varieties and Fakes'. They described it in following terms:

> A formation of an oval outline, on one surface gently flattened [...] Over the greatest circumference, a winding of ochre finely woven linen is placed, holding together one deeper-lying piece of linen of the same texture over the flattened basis. On the arched dorsal side of the formation, a patch of very fine linen is pasted with the help of resin, which causes black spots. [...] Length (i.e., diameter) 8.5 cm [...] It is a matter of entangled linen without any visible formation inside. [...] Fake, most probably recently performed.[23]

The original X-Ray image could not be consulted as the 1970s research archives, kept at the Radiological Clinic of the First Medical Faculty of the Charles University in Prague, were allegedly discarded shortly after the passing of Luboš Vyhnánek in 1999.[24]

Recent radiological examination of the object

On 21 June 2022, Inv. No. P 2499 [Pl. 2] was examined again by means of computed tomography in the Affidea Praha facilities (formerly Mediscan Group), the Náprstek Museum's partner in the long-term project of the Atlas of Egyptian Mummies in Czechoslovak Collections.[25] The object was examined under the

22 E.g. Brier 2012, pp. 291–292; Oerter 2002.

23 Strouhal and Vyhnánek 1979, p. 154.

24 Eugen Strouhal, *personal communication*, 2009.

25 Cf. Onderka et al. 2016.

supervision of Jakub Nekula, né Pečený, and Markéta Konrádová on the General Electric Revolution GSI engine.

While Strouhal's external descriptions of the object are close to perfect, modern technology enabled to re-evaluate its contents. The CT examination indicated the presence of an inner ovoid formation of a different density than the rest of the package around the animal remains. This may indicate two layers of bandages. The skeleton of the shrew was then identified on the bottom of this inner oval formation. The examination through computed tomography confirmed the presence of animal skeletal remains with all bodily parts in the package. The animal was placed into the inner package resting on its side. The legs and the tail are stretched similarly to mummified shrews known from different contexts. The opacity of its bones is extremely low which is either caused by decalcification resulting from the mummification process or by the simple fact that the skeleton of the shrew lies beyond the detection limits of an engine designed for human tomography. The remains were tentatively identified as those of a shrew (in the word's wider sense); however, the CT scan does not allow us to precisely determine the shrew species.

Conclusion

The CT examination of a linen bundle which was most likely donated to the National Museum in Prague by the German Egyptologist Ludwig Keimer in 1938 and now forms part of the collections of the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, proved that it represents a mummy of a shrew of an unspecified species.

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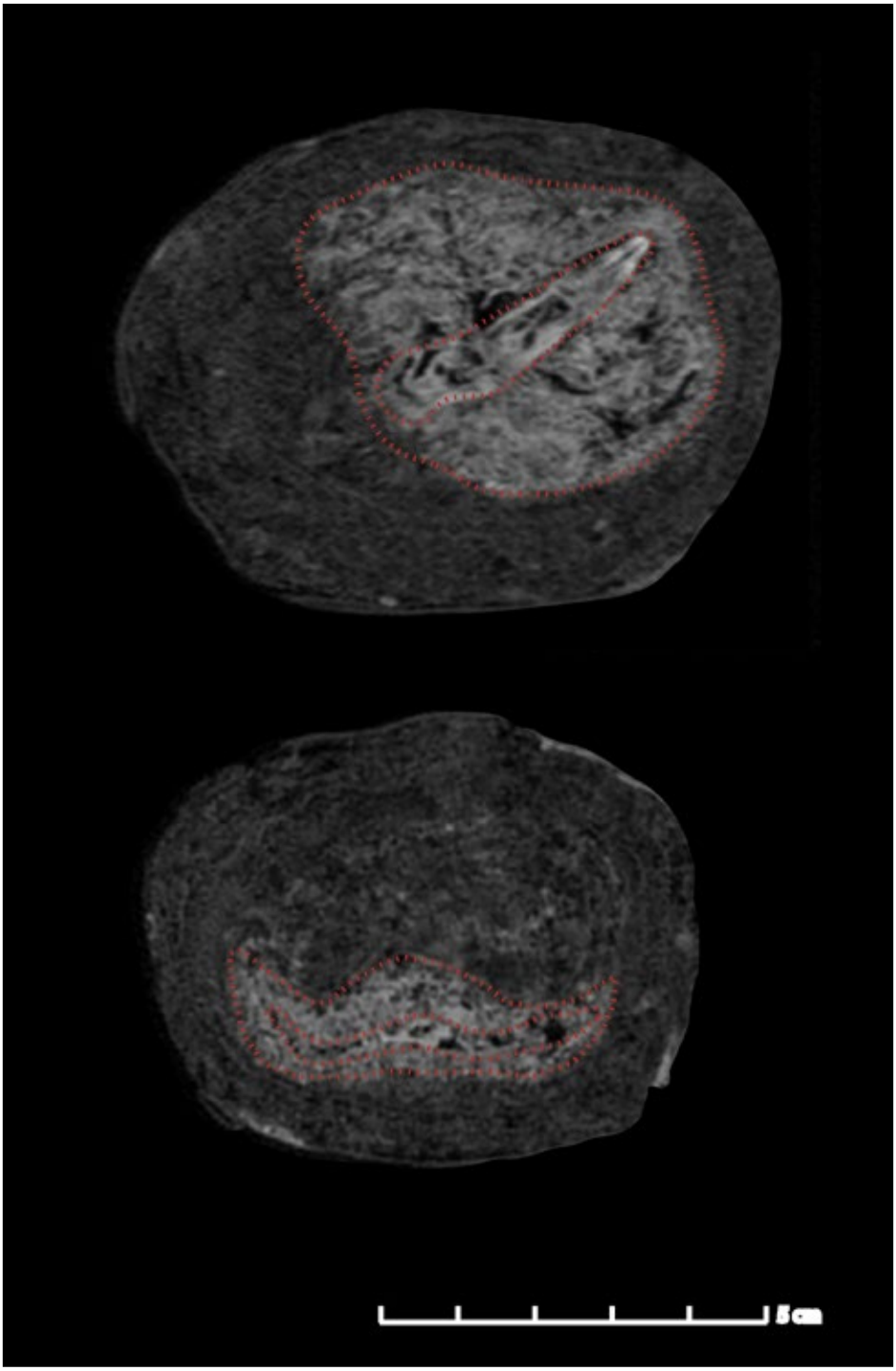
Pl. 1. Shrew mummy from the collections of the Náprstek Museum, Inv. No. P 2499 (Photo: Jiří Vaněk).



Pl. 2. CT scans of the shrew mummy from the collections of the Náprstek Museum, Inv. No. P 2499 (Visualisation: Jakub Nekula, Markéta Konrádová).