

VICTUAL, RITUAL OR BOTH? FOOD OFFERINGS FROM THE FUNERARY ASSEMBLAGE OF ISETEMKHEB

FROM the Predynastic onward tombs have been found to contain desiccated joints of meat or bones that were meant for the nourishment of the deceased's *ka*. By the New Kingdom these evolve into a new type of food offering, a "victual mummy" that is prepared in virtually the same way as are human mummies.¹ In addition to providing food for the deceased, it is possible that these mummies might play an additional symbolic role in the funerary assemblage. They are also a significant source of information for the jointing, processing, preservation and consumption of meat (mammalian, avian or piscian flesh) in ancient Egypt. This article will focus on a specific group of "victual mummies" that come from the Twenty-first Dynasty funerary assemblage of Isetemkheb D found in Tomb 320 at Deir el-Bahari,² and now kept in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

The burial of Isetemkheb D, the wife of Pinudjem II, was one of the five primary Twenty-first Dynasty burials in the Deir el-Bahari cache excavated in 1881. Part of her funerary equipment consisted of twenty-one victual mummies (meats and birds) as funerary offerings. These victual mummies are identical to those of the Eighteenth Dynasty in that they consist of joints of meat or entire birds that are wrapped in linen bandages and given as offerings to the deceased, although these Twenty-first Dynasty examples were not placed in individual wooden coffins as were so many of their earlier counterparts. Instead, they were carefully placed in baskets made of reed and/or papyrus.

1. See S. IKRAM, *Choice Cuts: Meat Production in Ancient Egypt*, Appendix II, Leuven 1995, and S. GOODMAN, *Victual Egyptian Bird Mummies from a Presumed Late 17th or Early 18th Dynasty Tomb*, «JSSEA» 17/3 (1987), pp. 67-77.

2. For the most up-to-date examination of these mummies, see S. IKRAM, N. ISKANDER, *Catalogue Général of Non-human Mummies*, Cairo 2002, pp. 28-33. This supersedes IKRAM, *Choice Cuts* cit., as the 2002 publication contains the results of x-ray examinations.

THE MUMMIES

The mummies were prepared by being desiccated in dry natron, possibly of a quality that had a higher salt content (NaCl) than a more refined type that would have been used for higher status human burials.³ The meat mummies, consisting of joints of meat from a calf, were jointed and skinned prior to preservation, while the poultry mummies were plucked, eviscerated, and had their wing-tips and feet removed, just as one would prepare them for eating (see note 1). After this they were wrapped in linen bandages which were knotted to keep them in place. Unlike other victual mummies that have been studied, no obvious traces of oil or resin seem to have been used in the preparation of these mummies, save for one example (29857). Only one other group of victual mummies, that belonging to Maherpri (KV 36, Dynasty XVIII), was prepared in a similar manner.⁴ All the typical types of fowl that were eaten (duck, goose, pigeon) are represented. The meat remains are beef.

Meat Mummies

1. Calf's head (JE 46868, CG 29841); L (ear to nose): 27.5, W: (ear to ear) 19

This calf's (*Bos taurus*) head is spirally wrapped in coarse linen that is knotted in place. The animal's coat is visible, and was a pale brown. The calf was quite young, not more than six to eight months old, as can be determined by the teeth that are visible in

3. Some scholars (L. LORTET, C. GAILLARD, *La Faune Momifiée de l'Ancienne Egypte*, Lyon 1907, p. 307) have suggested that these mummies were made by immersion in resinous natron, but research carried out by the author does not support this view (S. IKRAM, *Did the Ancient Egyptians Eat Biltong?*, «Cambridge Journal of Archaeology» 5/2, 1995, pp. 283-89).

4. It is possible that the victual mummies of Henutmehyt (ca. 1250 BC), found in a black-painted wooden box, and now at the British Museum are also similarly prepared.

the x-ray: the deciduous teeth are all in place, and the first molar is erupting. The cranium contains something that might be portions of desiccated brain matter, but could be soil or resin as the brain could easily have been extracted from the foramen magnum and the hole used to fill the cranium with other substances.

2. Vertebrae and ribs (CG 29843, JE 46879); L: 25, W: 24

An oddly shaped package that has linen tightly wrapped around it spirally and knotted in place. The linen is loosely woven and of a finer quality than that found on other mummies from this tomb. Its edge is adorned with a series of blue lines of varying thickness; the same linen was used to wrap other objects found in the tomb. The package contains six lumbar vertebrae of a calf, and at least twelve ribs. The ribs are not in an anatomically correct position, but are placed together, vertical to the vertebrae, and wrapped for convenience rather than anatomical exactitude.

3. Vertebrae (CG 29844, JE 46893); L: 15, W: 11/6.5

A well wrapped linen package containing six vertebrae of a ruminant: five cervical vertebrae and one thoracic vertebra. The linen is quite coarse and loosely woven, and is wound spirally around the vertebrae and knotted into position with a final diagonal positioning.

4. Vertebrae (CG 29849, JE 46899); L: 27.1, W: 9.4

A well wrapped package filled with twelve thoracic vertebrae of a ruminant. The epiphyses are not fused. It is possible that these come from a calf. Relatively coarsely woven linen is used for the bandages which are quite wide and are knotted into place.

5. Vertebrae (CG 29856, JE 46906); L: 30, W: 7 (Pl. 1)

Coarse linen bandages are spirally wound around a long package and secured by being tied in a knot. This mummy contains the caudal vertebrae (at least eighteen) from the tail of a calf. Certainly oxtail soup could have been on the menu in the Afterlife.

6. Ribs (CG 29855, JE 46905); L: 28, W: 19

A package of ten ribs, probably of a calf, but possibly of a sheep or goat, wrapped in coarse linen that is knotted to keep it in place.

7. Meat (CG 29848, JE 46897); L: 12, W: 7

A salted piece of meat, probably from a calf (*B. taurus*), that is unwrapped. Experimental work has shown that salted meat, after only four years, takes on this dry and brittle appearance, as well as the pale yellow colour of this piece.

8. Meat (CG 29850, JE 46898); L: 15, W: 8.4

An unwrapped chunk of meat, probably from a cow, that still has natron adhering to it.

9. Meat (CG 29857, JE 46907); L: 21, W: 12

An untidily wrapped chunk of meat that has natron, and what appears to be oil or some other dark substance, adhering to it.

10. Meat? (CG 29858, JE 46908); L: 15, W: 4.6

A package that is tightly wrapped with coarse bandages in a spiral pattern, and knotted in place. It might contain some soft tissue or it might be empty, save for linen. No bones are visible in the radiograph.

11. Sternum (CG 29852, JE 46902); L: 38, W: 7.2

A portion of the sternum (six sections) with costal fragments attached to it. This probably comes from a calf. It is wrapped in broad bandages that go around it in a spiral.

12. Foreleg (CG 29853, JE 46903); L: 47.2, W: 18.7

A left foreleg (from the scapula to the third phalanges) of a ruminant, probably a calf, that was less than nine months old when it died: the scapula's bicipital tuberosity is only partially fused. The joint is wrapped using broad linen bandages that are torn from a larger piece of cloth. The bandages are wound around the limb, criss-crossing at the join of the scapular and humerus, and are knotted into place.

13. Hind-leg (CG 29854, JE 46904); L: 40, W: 19
Left half of the pelvis and hindleg (femur,

tibia, calcaneum, astragalus, patella, and flesh) of a ruminant, probably a calf. Epiphysial fusion and the size suggest that it was under ten months old at death. It is unwrapped.

14. Hind-leg (CG 29851, JE 46900); L: 42, W: 21/6

A package that is spirally wrapped in coarse linen bandages that are knotted into place. It contains the right portion of the pelvis, the femur, tibia, calcaneus and astragalus of what is probably a calf. The epiphysial fusion suggests that the animal was well under ten months old at the time of its death.

15. Entrails? (CG 29845, JE 46894); L: 29, W: 9.2

A piece of meat, or even possibly entrails, wrapped in very wide coarse linen bandages that are tightly wound around the meat spirally and knotted to keep them in place.

16. Lungs & Windpipe (CG 29846, JE 46895); L: 21, W: 14 (Pl. II)

The package contains the lungs and windpipe of what is most probably a calf (*B. taurus*). The package is carelessly wrapped in very wide coarse linen bandages that are knotted into place.

Poultry Mummies

17. Goose (CG 29840A, JE 26263 [box]); L: 29, W: 14.5.

A goose (*Anser* sp.) with its head severed just where the neck ends. The wingtips and feet have been removed, and the bird is eviscerated and plucked. The body of the goose is filled with sandy soil with a high halite content that obscures the majority of the bones in the radiograph

18. Pigeon/Dove (CG 29840B, JE 26263 [box]); L: 12.2, W: 7.4

A dove/pigeon (*Columba* sp. or *Streptopelia*). It retains its head, although the wingtips and feet removed, and it is eviscerated and

plucked. The pigeons' feet were tied together with coarse linen thread.

19. Pigeon/Dove (CG 29840C, JE 26263 [box]); L: 12.4, W: 7.2

A dove/pigeon (*Columba* sp. or *Streptopelia*) with its head, wingtips, feet, feathers, and internal organs removed.

20. Duck (CG 29842, JE 46875); L: 29, W: 16

A duck package with many of the bones missing or broken, thereby making a completely positive identification impossible. The duck is packed with sandy soil, which contains a large amount of halite that no doubt helped to preserve it. The linen bandages that enfold the duck are coarse and are knotted into place.

21. Duck (CG 29847, JE 46896); L: 21, W: 10.5

A duck (*Anas acuta*?), prepared in the usual fashion (wing-tips, feet, head, and viscera removed), but filled with sand. Its left leg is broken. The duck is wrapped first in very fine linen bandages, and then coarse linen bandages that are decorated with a fringe.

DISCUSSION

This assemblage of victual offerings is unique as, until now, it is the only group of what might be considered royal food-offerings from the Twenty-first Dynasty. Only one animal, a calf, was offered, in addition to a goose, two pigeons, and two ducks. The poultry mummies were fairly standard in terms of other assemblages of food offerings, whether they were mummified or not. However, the beef offerings show some curious features that are unique to this assemblage, and might have added ritual significance in addition to the conventional one of continued sustenance for the deceased.

Beef victual mummies from the Eighteenth Dynasty,⁵ as well as food offerings of cattle from earlier periods⁶ tend to be from animals that are between fourteen and twenty-eight months of age. This offering of such a young calf is unusual, and possibly unique

5. The Nineteenth Dynasty victual mummies of Henutmehyt are not taken into consideration here as they have not been studied by the author.

6. See IKRAM, *Choice Cuts* cit. for lists of offerings; the

author has also examined offerings from sites in Egypt from the Old to the New Kingdom, and found this age distribution to hold true for virtually all cattle offerings that she has examined thus far.

in the known corpus of food offerings from ancient Egypt. The presence, as well as the absence, of certain elements also serve to make this funerary assemblage unique.

The entire calf appears to be present, save for its right foreleg.⁷ The right foreleg is traditionally given as an offering to the deceased, possibly at the tomb-entrance, as it is associated with the Opening-of-the-Mouth ritual, and as such might have been used when the ritual was actually performed, and then burnt or passed on to the funerary priests. The severing of this limb is frequently depicted in the vignette associated with Chapter 1 of the Book of the Dead, although the text does not seem to go with the illustration. Perhaps this served to activate the funerary texts associated with the burial?⁸ It is certainly noticeable by its absence.

The incorporation of the head (number 1, above) amongst the offerings is also unusual. To date, no other assemblage of victual mummies that has been studied has contained the head of a cow/calf, although heads are known from foundation deposits, and are standard features on offering tables from all periods of Egyptian history. Certainly on offering tables a cow/ox's head serves to symbolize not just one, but several of these animals.

The inclusion of the tail (number 5, above) is also unique in the corpus of funerary food offerings. One should remember that a bull's tail was part of a king's regalia, and as this mummy was found as part of a semi royal burial, it is possible that royal iconography was being alluded to with the inclusion of the tail.

Of all the components of the food remains, the most unusual are surely the lungs and windpipe of the calf (number 16, above). Although these portions are edible (and still consumed in a soup in Egypt) they were not regarded as highly prestigious and nutritious as the liver (which appears to be missing; perhaps it was consumed by the priests or one of the chunks identified as meat is actu-

ally liver), and have not featured in any other assemblage of victual mummies. Perhaps these, like the tail, had an additional symbolic value in this assemblage? The lungs and windpipe are the central portion of the *sema-tawy*, and can be identified with the Nile Valley and the Delta. This portion of the animal might have been included not only as a food offering, but also as a symbol of united rulership of the country.

Certainly the beef portion of this funerary food assemblage is unusual in its components, both those present (especially the lungs/windpipe and the tail), as well as the absent foreleg, which was doubtless used as part of the funerary ritual of revivification. Perhaps the inclusion of the lungs and windpipe and the tail served to underline the royal iconographic aspects of this offering? This assemblage might have been intended for Pinudjem II, who was also buried in DB320, rather than for Isetemkheb, and as such, might have underlined royal iconography. Due to the way in which the grave goods were deposited it is difficult to confidently assign unlabeled objects to their owners.⁹ Although the idea that these funerary offerings might go beyond symbolizing sustenance, and allude to ideas of rulership is mere supposition, it is still useful to speculate on the nature of the items that the Egyptians chose to include in their funerary assemblages, and to see if their significance changed over time. This is especially the case when those offerings are (as yet) unique in the corpus of victual mummies. Thus, although we cannot be sure if these victual offerings were intended to go beyond their primary function as food for the Afterlife in serving a ritual purpose of underlining royal command over a unified land, we can speculate as to the matter, thus re-evaluating and exploring our understanding of ancient Egyptian funerary practices.

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7. See IKRAM, *Choice Cuts* cit., pp. 129-31 for a discussion of forelegs.

8. A. H. GORDON, C. W. SCHWABE, 'Live Flesh' and 'Opening-of-the-Mouth': Biomedical, Ethnolocial, and Egyptological Aspects, in C. J. EYRE (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists*, Leu-

ven 1998, pp. 461-69, and P. MONTET, *Les Scènes de Boucherie dans les Tombes de l'Ancien Empire*, «BIFAO» 7 (1910), pp. 56-7.

9. See Part 2 in N. REEVES, *Valley of the Kings*, London 1990, for a thorough discussion of the cache and its contents.



PL. I. CG 29856.



Pl. II. CG 29846.