Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections

On the Human Remains Contained in Count Aleksander Branicki's Egyptian Coffin

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Abstract

We report on the scientific and historical study of a mummy associated with an Egyptian coffin once belonging to Count Aleksander Branicki, an important Polish collector who took part in two private expeditions to Egypt during the mid-nineteenth century. Recently the object was submitted for radiological investigation, as well as radiocarbon dating, in order to obtain a clearer picture of the biohistory and chronology of the body contained within the coffin. Furthermore, new documentary evidence was recovered that illustrates the colorful journey of the artifact and its contents from Egypt to Europe.

Count Aleksander Branicki (1821–1877), a traveler, collector, and entomologist from Byla Tserkva, Ukraine, officially donated the first Egyptian coffin containing a mummy to the then Museum of Antiquities of Vilnius, Lithuania (Fig. 1).[1] In November 1860 the newspaper *Kurjer Wileński* published on the gift presented to the museum.[2] By January 1861 the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities had already received the shipment,[3] and during a meeting of the Archaeological Commission, Professor Adam Ferdynand Adamowicz (1802–1881) informed the participants that the donated coffin dated to the reign of Ramses III and contained the body of a female.[4] In all likelihood, the item depicted by artist Albert Żamett (1821–1876) in a chromolithograph included in *Album de Wilna*—published in Paris on behalf of Doctor Jan Kazimierz Wilczyński (1806–1885)—corresponded to Branicki's Egyptian coffin. This exotic object was subsequently included in the museum catalogues of 1879 and 1885,[5] where it was stated that this coffin, together with its mummy and cover, originated from Thebes. In 1899 Russian Egyptologist Boris Turayev (1869–1920) published information on the Egyptian collection of the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities. [6] He wrote that the inscriptions on the coffin are "ignorant and even senseless," and as an analogy he cited a coffin in the Berlin Museum.[7] In 1933, Polish archaeologist and ethnographer Władysław Hołubowicz (1906–1962) indicated that the deceased was a housewife and a singer of Amon–Ra.[8] More recently, Russian Egyptologists Oleg Berlev (1933–2000) and Svetlana Hodjash (1924–2008) dated the coffin to the end of the Twenty-first Dynasty rather than the Ramesside era. However, they questioned the association of the lid with the coffin.[9]

Figure 1: Detail of mummy 6285.

Lately, within the framework of the Lithuanian Mummy Project, there was renewed interest in the item, and further scientific and historical research was carried out. In 2013 the coffin and its contents were CT-scanned at the Vilnius Medea Clinic in order to learn about the mummy's biohistory.[10] The CT scan was carried out using a Philips Brilliance 16 slice CT scanner, and the protocol adopted included a slice thickness of 1 mm, a tube voltage of 120 kVp, and a tube current of 210 mAs. Furthermore, the Hounsfield Unit (HU) scale was used to measure radiodensity, while post-processing was carried out via OsiriX v6.0 64–bit on a 27-inch iMac with Intel core i7, running OS X Yosemite v. 10.10.3. Based on the observed skeletal features, including the shape of the frontal bone, the mandible, the mastoid processes, and the nuchal crest, as well as the greater sciatic notch and the pubis, the mummy's sex was confirmed as female. The age at death was estimated as that of an old adult (c. 50+ years), relying upon the cranial suture closure and the changes observed on the pubic symphysis and the auricular surface of the ilium. [11] The total length of the mummy was 149 cm (Fig. 2). The head was unwrapped, bent forward and tilted slightly to the right. The body and extremities were all wrapped together, and not individually (Fig. 3). The arms of the mummy extended down along the sides of the body, with the hands covering the symphysis (Fig. 4). No postmortem fractures were observed. High- and low-density debris was noted in the coffin under the partially wrapped mummy, possibly sand and mud. The brain was absent. Dependent debris was seen in the skull. If excerebration had been attempted, this must have been done through the foramen magnum, as the head was separated from the spine, and there was no nasal defect and no nasal tampon present. The frontal sinuses were clear, as was the left maxillary sinus. Opacity observed in a few of the ethmoid and sphenoid air cells appears to be consistent with resin,

FIGURE 2: Mummy 6285 in coffin.

FIGURE 3: Detail of external wrapping

Figure 4: Hands covering symphysis.

which could have leaked into these areas during the embalming process.

The skeleton had suffered during its many voyages, however. The lateral walls of both orbits and both zygomatic arches were missing, as was the right maxillary process and right maxillary sinus. The mandible was disarticulated from the skull. No eye prostheses were seen. The individual was edentulous, with most teeth lost during life. The torso had no soft tissue or internal organs. The absence of the former precludes information concerning an embalming incision. Shoulders, elbows and pelvis were disarticulated, and the spine was complete but disrupted (Figs. 5 and 6). The ribs were scattered and many were broken. The right patella was rotated and interposed between the right femur and tibia (Fig. 7). The feet were flexed at the mid-foot, with metatarsals and phalanges pointing downward (Fig. 8). The first, second, and third metatarsals and associated phalanges were missing on the right foot and the second metatarsal and associated phalanges were missing on the left foot (Fig. 9). This is compatible with the damage observed in the wrappings, which correlates with the loss of some bone elements of the feet, probably due to age, handling, and the weakness of the linen.

Some pathological conditions were also noted.[12] These included osteoarthritis, probable osteoporosis, consistent with the subject's age and sex, as well as lesions of unknown etiology in some of the vertebrae, and a type 5 sacral spina bifida occulta (Fig. 6), with S1 lacking its crest but with closure of the sacral hiatus. [13] This defect is usually incidental, with no clinical consequence to the patient. [14]

Dating of the damaged and broken bandages was carried out at the Poznan Radiocarbon Laboratory, Poland,[15] in order to obtain confirmation of the dating, bearing in mind that textiles can be reused on mummies, and that their date might be earlier than that of the

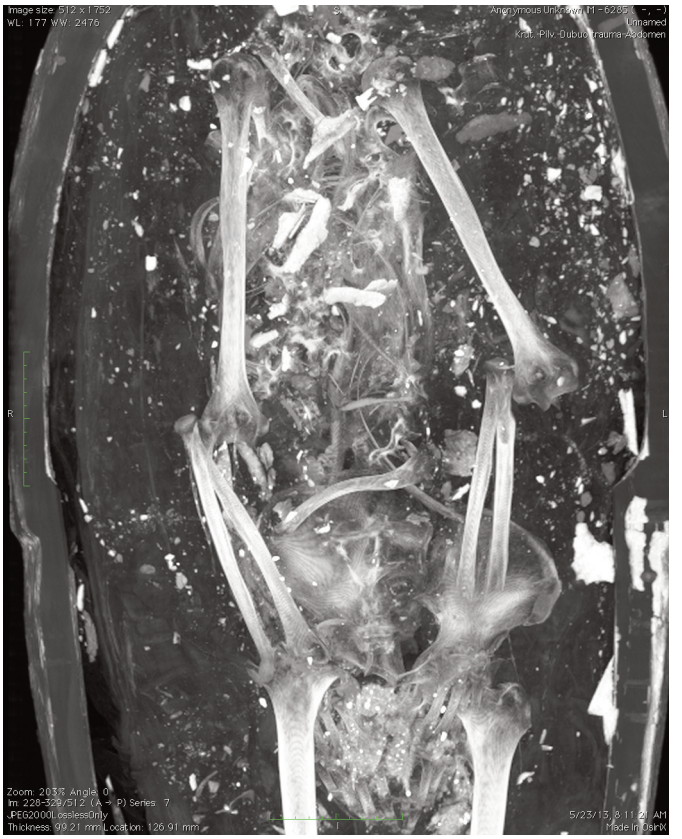

Figure 5: Disarticulated shoulders, elbows, pelvis, spine.

Figure 6: Spine of mummy 6285.

Figure 7: Right patella rotated and interposed between femur and tibia.

Figure 8: Sagittal view, feet flexed at mid–foot.

mummy. Analysis indicates an age of 2760±30 years, which calibrates to 929–844 BCE (68.2%) and 980–830 BCE (94.9%), thus confirming the late Twenty-first Dynasty date,[16] which is in keeping with the coffin (Fig. 10). It should be noted, however, that the mummification features of the subject appear different from the standard descriptions of bodies prepared during this period.[17] Although we were unable to find clear evidence of embalming incisions, one possibility is that the body was wrapped when it was already in an advanced stage of decomposition that would explain the lack of soft tissue and internal organs. Alternatively, the mummy might have possibly been damaged by grave robbers and later re-wrapped, as occurred in this and other eras.[18] Finally, the body might have been eviscerated anally: this method can also result in soft tissue loss.[19]

As part of the study, the coffin's history was also re-examined. The precise date of Branicki's visit to Thebes was unknown until 2013, when Cecylia Zofia Gałczyńska, a Polish scholar, managed to establish that the Count first visited Egypt in 1858. [20] Aleksander Branicki, together with Franciszek Kandyd Nowakowski (1813–1881), traveled to Upper Egypt, most likely to Luxor, where they conducted amateur archaeological excavations.

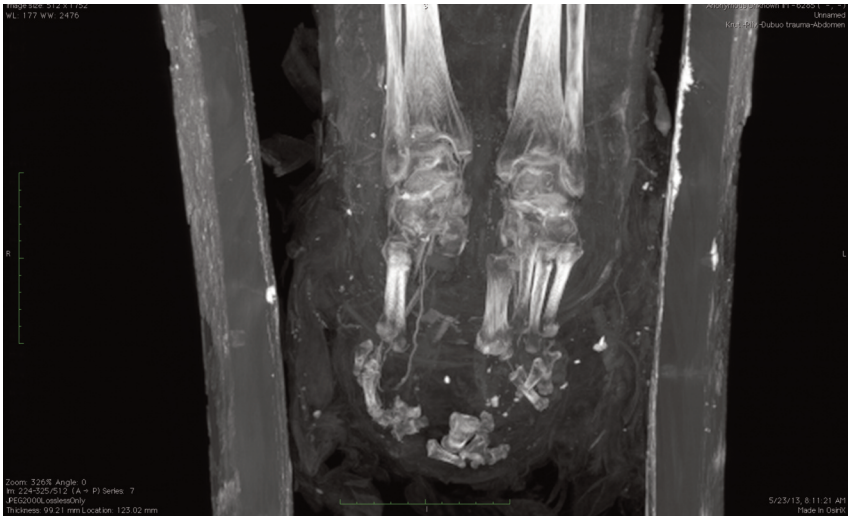

Figure 9: Coronal view, several missing bones of both feet.

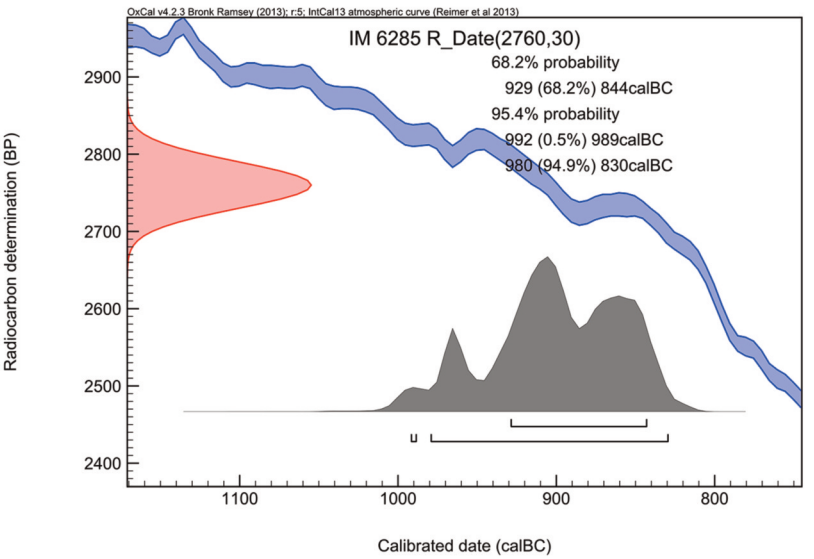

Figure 10: Radiocarbon dating of mummy 6285.

However, it is not known whether the Count purchased the coffin in Thebes or whether it was discovered during the excavations. According to Gałczyńska, during Branicki's 1858 trip, he bought as many as three coffins in "Alexandria," although their proper provenance as well as the name of the dealer are unknown. It is possible that the coffin under study is one of these, rather than one that he acquired directly in Thebes, as no paperwork survives for any of these acquisitions. All his purchases were shipped through the Mediterranean and Black Seas to Odessa. There they were stored in the depository of his brother Władysław (1826–1884) for the winter, because navigating the Danube would have been impossible at that time of year. In spring, the coffins were finally shipped via the Danube to Vienna, and thence by train to Krakow.[21] In 1859 Branicki donated one of the three coffins, containing a mummy and a cover, to the Krakow Scholarly Society,[22] with the actual physical transfer taking place in May 1860. The remaining coffins continued their journey to Ukraine. In November 1860, the Count shipped a second coffin containing a mummy and a cover from Byla Tserkva, Ukraine, to the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities[23] as a donation. As of today, the fate of the third coffin remains unknown.

1 We are most grateful to Birutė Kulnytė, director of the National Museum of Lithuania, for advocating and supporting this project, as well as to Tadas Šėma, head of the History Department, for his assistance during this research. We are also grateful to science reporter Daumantas Liekis, for his logistical support, and to James Schanandore for his professional advice. Aldona Snitkuvienė, *Lietuva ir senovės Egyptas* (Kaunas: Nacionalinis M.K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2011), 133–135.

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[23] Now National Museum of Lithuania, Inv. Nr. IM 6285.