COMPARISON OF TWO FALCONID MUMMIES FROM THE LATE PERIOD OF ANCIENT EGYPT USING NONINVASIVE TECHNIQUES

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To the ancient Egyptians, life on Earth was merely a precursor to the afterlife, the immortal world following the transient present one. Burial ceremony and mummification procedures were essential components for achieving a happy afterlife. Animals, including falcons, were also mummified for various reasons. Animal mummies can be divided into four main categories: beloved household pets (often interred with their owners); votive mummies (food offerings for humans in the afterlife); sacred animals (worshipped during their lifetimes and often buried with great ceremony); and votive mummies (dedicated as offerings to the specific gods to whom these animals were sacred; Ikram 2005).

Pets were often mummified because the ancient Egyptians, like modern people, frequently developed close emotional attachments to them. One of the graves in a cemetery in Mostagedda, dated prior to 4000 BC, contained the bones of a man, a gazelle, and a cat. The bones of the gazelle may have been a votual offering for the dead man’s voyage in the afterlife, whereas the cat, which was found at the man’s feet, may have been his pet (Malek 1993). Tomb reliefs from burials during the Old Kingdom (ca. 2649-2150 BC) depict scenes of owners with their animal companions, including cats, dogs, monkeys, and birds.

Votive mummies consisted of joints of meat, wild game, or birds intended for human consumption. Meat was not usually placed in the tomb as a whole carcass, but was jointed and butchered as in preparation for cooking. Several species of birds were found in King Tutankhamun’s tomb and were intended to serve as food for the Boy King’s voyage to and sojourn in the afterlife (Houlihan and Goodman 1986).

Sacred animals were worshiped in many parts of Egypt. In early Egyptian eras, sacred animals were considered to be the living incarnations of gods on earth and were worshipped as such throughout their lifetimes. In later eras, the divinity of animals took on more metaphoric subtleties, but the animals were still enshrined and were considered to contain elements of divinity or to act as intermediaries between people and the gods. Sacred falcons, like ibises (Threskiornis aethiopicus), were raised by and cared for by temple priests. A number of Egyptian gods appeared in falcon form (Houlihan and Goodman 1986). Only the temple priests had the authority and sanctity to dispatch these sacred animals, usually by breaking their necks. Sacred animals were mummified and buried with great ceremony.

A complete industry surrounded these animal cults, with animal keepers, animal embalmers, priests tending to pilgrims, and laborers building the cemeteries and catacombs (Ikram 2005). Pilgrims to various temple sites could purchase animals that had been specially bred at these cult centers. Falcons’ eggs may have been artificially incubated in ovens and the hatchlings raised by hand (Houlihan 1996). These creatures would then be killed, mummified, and placed in a catacomb as votive gifts to the resident god. Votive mummies were by far the most commonly mummified animals. At various sites, the species of animal sacred to that particular geographic region’s local god were sacrificed. Although votive animal burials are found at all periods throughout Egyptian history, the systemic productions of animal mummies for sale and subsequent burial as votive objects began in earnest in the Late Period (ca. 664–332 BC). Birds were especially popular votive offerings because they were associated with many gods. Birds were frequently represented in Egyptian art. Egypt lies along a major migratory route for birds of the Palearctic region; thus, great numbers and diverse species passed through the country.

At least 54 different species of birds have been identified from mummified remains dating from the New Kingdom to the Greco-Roman Period (Houlihan and Goodman 1986). At Saqqara, complexes were built for falcons. These animals were bred for the purpose of dedication (Wilkinson 2000). Mummified by priests and paid for by pilgrims,