While Ancient Egyptian mummies have fascinated museum visitors for ages, very little is known about the early evolution of this process. This gap in our knowledge comes from the rarity of early examples of mummification; only a handful of mummies from Egypt’s earliest dynasties are known to exist. One of these has gone unnoticed for nearly a century. It has resided in a dusty crate in storage at the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University, Atlanta — the only intact Old Kingdom mummy.

‘LIFE AND DEATH IN THE PYRAMID AGE’

The Emory Old Kingdom Mummy

by Peter Lacovara
Photos courtesy of the MCCM

Detail of the restored Old Kingdom mummy in the collection of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta.
in the Americas.

In 1919 Professor James Henry Breasted, founder of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, was planning a trip to the Middle East to assess the political conditions and the potential for future excavation and research, as well as to acquire objects for Chicago's Haskell Museum — later to be relocated and become the Oriental Institute Museum. The expedition was dubbed "The American Scientific Mission" and Breasted invited a number of colleagues to join him and a favorite former student, William Arthur Shelton. Shelton was by then, a professor of Semitic Languages and Literature at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Although he was thrilled at the prospect of going, he despaired of the costs involved. Luckily, a generous Atlanta businessman, John A. Manget, heard of his situation and donated not only enough money for his passage, but also additional funds to acquire artifacts that he would find useful in his teaching.

Shelton was thrilled, in particular to visit Egypt, as he noted in his entertaining account of the trip, Dust and Ashes of Empire, "[It was] a civilization which challenges our highest admiration and which teaches a lesson that a later one might do well to read." In order to fashion a picture of ancient Egypt for Atlanta, Shelton set about to accumulate objects that would tell the full story; he hoped to return to Atlanta with a series of coffins and mummies that would illustrate the development of ancient Egyptian funerary-practices, from earliest to its latest times.

While in Egypt Shelton purchased a coffin of the early Middle Kingdom, a mummy and coffin of the Late Period, and a Ptolemaic mummy, some directly from the Egyptian Muses-
um in Cairo. To complete the set, he wanted an early mummy and had his chance when the group visited Abydos. He recorded, "Thirty nine miles north of Luxor is the Ballano,... West of the city and on the edge of the desert is the oldest known city in the world, Abydos, whose main attraction is not the two fine temples, one of Seti I and one of Ramesses II, but its necropolis... The whole desert around this ancient city is filled with the graves of people who lived and died and were forgotten before the times when the first [pharaonic] Egyptians came to this most ancient city. Here in these graves are the bodies of these prehistoric peoples, preserved by the climate and the dry sands. Here they lie surrounded by jars... [and] other provisions for the long journey, and also flint weapons and instruments of that period long ago. One is impressed by the enormous amount of human bones, grinning skulls sticking out of the debris, and the great mounds of broken pottery. As we walked over the sands of this ancient place, we were conscious of a feeling of awe in the presence of a civilization so much older than recorded history."

Although Shelton had intended to obtain a naturally desiccated Predynastic "mummy," what he actually came away with was something much more important, a late Old Kingdom mummy. Only a few such mummies are known to have survived the ravages of time and tomb robbers, and perhaps less than half-a-dozen intact specimens have ever been found.

Abydos had been extensively excavated by Auguste Mariette in the 1860s, long before Shelton's visit. One of the French excavator's most important discoveries was in the Middle Cemetery situated on a bluff overlooking the Great Wadi — the processional way to Umm el-Ga'ab, site of the cemetery of the kings of the First Dynasty and mythic Tomb of Osiris. In the Middle Cemetery, he found the Tomb of Weni the Elder, governor of the area during the Sixth Dynasty, who recorded his expeditions to Nubia and the Sinai and his duties under three kings on a limestone block set into his large, mud-brick mastaba-tomb. Mariette sent the limestone slab containing
Wen's autobiography back to the Egyptian Museum, along with other blocks from the tomb.

When Shelton arrived in 1920, part of the Middle Cemetery, was being quarried away for mud bricks by the neighboring modern village — exposing new tombs and feeding the local antiquities-market. The mummy and its plain wooden coffin were packed up and later shipped back to Atlanta, along with all of the other objects accumulated on the rest of the dangerous trek through Iran, Iraq and Syria-Palestine. Over the years and the many moves of the collection, the coffin — except for its bottom board — was lost and the mummy, already in a precarious state before its long voyage to Georgia, deteriorated further. What remained of it was sealed in a crate and relegated to an offsite storage facility.

Recently, in discussing Shelton's trip and the wonderful exhibition, "Pioneer to the Past," that had been mounted by the Oriental Institute, Catherine Howett Smith, the Michael C. Carlos Museum's associate director suggested that the mummy which Shelton had brought back would make an interesting exhibit on its own.

Although it was in a frightful state, the Carlos's intrepid conservator, Renée Stein, decided to take up the Herculean challenge to try and stabilize the remains and restore the deteriorated parts. The head was detached — probably long ago, dislodged by tomb robbers looking for necklaces — and the hands and feet had disintegrated into piles of loose bones, dust and stray linen bandages.

We were able to undertake the task of resurrecting the mummy for display with the help of Dr. William Torres, professor of Radiology at Emory Hospital. Dr. Torres and his staff x-rayed and CT-scanned the uncomplaining patient, to provide a view of the internal condition of the mummy, so to be able to assess both its condition as an artifact, as well as to reveal details about the individual. Dr. Bob Brier also consulted on the examination, sharing his knowledge of ancient embalming techniques and paleopathology.

Emory's professor of Anthropology, George Armelagos, also lent his expertise in ancient Nilotics populations, interpreting the data from the examination. We discovered that our mummy was a young man when he died in his late twenties and had lived a rather privileged life, although the cause of his death remains a mystery. With the exception of a few stray tendons, the soft tissue had deteriorated and all that was left were the loosely wrapped bones. (text continues p. 82)
MUMMY
Old Kingdom, 6th Dynasty, 2345-2181 B.C.
From Abydos
Linen & Human remains
(recreated headrest)
& wooden coffin base
Acquired by William A. Shelton,
funded by John A. Manget
MCCM 1921.1

This mummy of a young man was wrapped in many yards of linen soaked in tree resin to stiffen the fabric & allow it to be modeled in the shape of the body beneath the wrappings. Such early attempts at mummification were more concerned with mimicking the outward appearance of the individual than preserving the body.

The deceased is shown lying on his side in a sleeping position, with his neck cradled on a headrest. It was not until after the Old Kingdom that mummies were uniformly buried in a supine position. The body was placed in a large, rectangular wooden box coffin, only the bottom of which now remains. The coffin may have been placed inside a larger limestone sarcophagus.

© Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. Photo by Kay Hinton
untroubled by the revolution going on around us, we catalogued and examined the fragments of linen. Sifting through hundreds of scraps of tattered textiles, we were able to piece together what the appearance of Emory’s mummy must have been when he had been buried at the site so very long ago.

Armed with this knowledge and the help of Margaret LeVeque, who has specialized in the conservation and care of many a shrouded cadaver, we were able to tackle the restoration of the mummy. Stein and LeVeque, along with the help of dedicated volunteers and Emory students, were able to reattach hands and feet and restore the wrappings, bringing the pile of rags and bones back to how it originally would have been.

The restored mummy will be the centerpiece of a new exhibition titled “Life and Death in the Pyramid Age: the Emory Old Kingdom Mummy,” which will showcase the findings from the recent examination and conservation of the mummy. The exhibit will be at the Michael C. Carlos Museum from September 8, 2011 to December 11, 2011 and will also place the mummy in context and explain the techniques of mummification and its role in Egyptian Funerary ritual. A number of important objects relating to the mummy and its time have been lent to the exhibition from institutions and collectors from the United States and Europe. Particularly thrilling will be a magnificent statuette of Pepi I from the Brooklyn Museum of Art and a large number of Old Kingdom objects from George Steindorff’s excavations at Giza, from the Egyptian Museum of Leipzig University.

Thanks to William Shelton’s foresight and John Manget’s generosity, we are still learning from their acquisitions made nearly a century ago for that very purpose.

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Still, before the restoration of the mummy could continue, many questions about the deteriorated wrappings and treatment of the body remained as an obstacle to our reconstruction. Fortunately, as luck would have it, the author had already worked in the Abydos Middle Cemetery with University of Michigan Egyptologist Dr. Janet Richards. In recent years an expedition of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology of the University of Michigan, under the direction of Richards, had reexcavated the site and rediscovered Weni’s tomb, among a number of other burials of the end of the Old Kingdom and later. Although they found only scattered mummy wrappings and a few disarticulated bones and intact mummies, still their discoveries proved invaluable in determining what Shelton’s mummy would have looked like.

This past winter I returned to study the mummified remains discovered at the site and, with the help of the expert eye of American University in Cairo’s Dr. Salima Ikram, working...