Curator Peter Lacovara (from left), mummy scholar Bob Brier and conservator Renee Stein, all of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, position the mummy on a CT scanner at Emory University Hospital.

Emory to display Egyptian mummy

Exhibit to be built around artifact.

Body bought in 1920 by theology professor dates to 2300 B.C.

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A rarely displayed Egyptian mummy, the oldest in the Western Hemisphere, will be the focus of an exhibit next year at Emory University, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has learned.

The mummy, which dates to 2300 B.C. and was purchased by Emory theology professor William A. Shelton during an excavation at the sacred site of Abydos in 1920, will be featured in “Life and Death in the Pyramid Age: The Emory Old Kingdom Mummy.” The exhibit will open Sept. 10 at the Michael C. Carlos Museum.

One of only a half-dozen mummies known to exist from the Old Kingdom (roughly between 2600 B.C. and 2100 B.C.), one of the earliest periods of Egyptian mummification practices, the male mummy is currently undergoing conservation.

The announcement follows recent news that the Metropolitan Museum of Art will return ancient objects to Egypt attributed to King Tut’s tomb.

While mummies have fascinated museum-goers for decades, little is known about the evolution of the process of mummification because of the rarity of early examples. The conservation team is being led by Carlos Museum conservator Renee Stein. Mummification experts including Salima Ikram of American University in Cairo and Bob Brier of New York’s Long Island University, along with Emory anthropologist George Armelagos, are examining the mummy for insights into techniques as well as what the remains reveal about the individual. Various labs will study the mummy’s linen wrappings, the body’s salts and resins, tissue samples and wood from the coffin.

The exhibit, which will include 75 objects illustrating daily life in the Old Kingdom, will not travel after its three-month run because of the mummy’s fragility. Pyramid-building, mumification and funerary customs will be covered in the exhibit, which also will chronicle the development of Abydos and current excavations in middle Egypt.

“Life and Death” is being curated by Peter Lacovara, the Carlos Museum’s senior curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art. Working with colleagues in Egypt, Lacovara helped bring the exhibit “Tutankhamun: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs” to Atlanta in 2008. Featuring more than 130 objects from the reign of Tut and the pharaohs who ruled the Nile, it included many artifacts never before seen in the U.S.

Thus Lacovara had keen interest in the Metropolitan Museum’s announcement Nov. 10 that it would return to Egypt 19 ancient small-scale objects, such as a three-quarter-inch-high bronze dog, held in its collection since early in the 20th century that have been attributed to Tutankhamun’s tomb. They will go on display at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo in June.

As a gesture of cultural cooperation, the Carlos in 2005 returned a mummy that acquired a decade earlier as part of a collection from the Niagara Museum and Daredevil Hall of Fame in Ontario, Canada, after it was identified as the ancient Egyptian king Ramesses I.

While the Carlos displays some objects from the reign of Tutankhamun, it holds no objects in its collection taken from his tomb, Lacovara said in a statement released to the AJC. By Egyptian law, all objects found in an intact tomb must stay in Egypt.

“There are a great number of objects depicting Tutankhamun or bearing his name that were not made for the tomb and legally exported from Egypt in the days when it was possible to do so,” the curator said. These pieces are included in collections at Paris’ Louvre, the British Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Carlos, among other museums. “These were all legally acquired, and there would be no reason that they would be returned to Egypt.”