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One Theban tomb: 1000 years of burial

A new exhibition at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, ‘The Tomb: Ancient Egyptian Burial’, explores changing funerary practices through the story of one Theban tomb, used and reused for over 1000 years, before it became the first to be systematically excavated and recorded 160 years ago, as curator Margaret Maitland explains.

In the early 19th century, Europe’s race to uncover ancient Egyptian treasures often amounted to little better than tomb looting. With no archaeological recording, there was limited understanding of burial practices and how they changed over time. One man set out to attempt to change that and discovered an extraordinary group of funerary objects that are the focus of a new exhibition at the National Museum of Scotland. Alexander Henry Rhind (1833–1863) had studied Scottish history at the University of Edinburgh and excavated several sites in Scotland before becoming the first experienced archaeologist to work in Egypt. He sought an intact tomb, hoping to gain a better understanding of Egyptian funerary customs and excavating a complete burial assemblage in context:

One of my chief designs here is to discover, if possible, tombs that have never been disturbed, and in which the deposits remain in situ. It appears to me that facts of considerable interest and even importance might be evolved from a precise comparison.

Rhind found the tomb he was looking for in the Theban Necropolis of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna in 1857. Although the tomb itself has been lost under modern houses, its approximate position is preserved in Rhind’s account. Rhind’s detailed recording, in the Museum’s archives and published in Thebes: Its Tombs and Their Tenants (1862), means that it has been possible to reconstruct much of the tomb’s history, from its New Kingdom construction, through reuse in the Third Intermediate Period, to its final intact Roman-era family burials, providing a unique insight into the development of funerary practices in ancient Egypt.

The tomb was originally constructed for a Chief of Police (Medjay) and his wife at the very end of the Eighteenth or beginning of the Nineteenth Dynasty. A beautiful pair statue of them is the only object from their burial that survives. The damaged inscription preserves his title, but unfortunately not their names. The exhibition includes objects similar to those that would have originally been placed in the tomb, including items used in daily life, as well as objects made specifically for burial. Most notable of these is a Book of the Dead of Useramun, a vizier under Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC), written in beautiful cursive hieroglyphs, as also found by Rhind nearby.

The tomb was huge, carved 38 m into the cliffs with a burial shaft sunk 6 m deep and several chambers. Its construction would have been extremely expensive, but the Chief of Police made use of the existing courtyard of an earlier tomb. Here, Rhind found the disturbed burial of a group of princesses, including daughters of Thutmose IV (1401–1391 or 1397–1388 BC), whose names were recorded on wooden labels. This tomb may have been the source of an exquisitely-crafted ebony and ivory box inscribed for Amenhotep II (1427–1401 or 1397 BC), decorated with a figure of Bes and royal iconography. The Museum has recently acquired and reunited two lost fragments of the box with the support of the Art Fund and National Museums Scotland Charitable Trust. This has revealed that the box was incorrectly restored in the 1950s and that the lower band originally featured a palace-façade motif. They will go on display for the first time in the exhibition.

While the Chief of Police would have been in charge of the security of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, he was not able to protect his own tomb, which was eventually robbed. When Rhind excavated the tomb, he found evidence of its reuse in the confused debris of broken coffins, rifled mummies, and scattered burial equipment dating to the Third Intermediate Period. Many items were brought back to the Museum, where they were amongst the earliest Egyptian objects to enter the collection. Their connection to the tomb was forgotten over time, but recent research using archival records has re-identified them, including objects that had been redistributed to Paisley Museum and the Durham University Oriental Museum.

Some of these hints at larger objects that have been lost, such as jackal and falcon figurines that would originally have been part of a gaww-coffin lid (image p. 46). Other objects attest to changes that were happening in burial practices. During the political and economic instability of the Third Intermediate Period, tomb looting and reuse had become widespread. As such, Egyptians worried that organs stored in canopic jars might become separated, so they began to be returned to the body. Dummy canopic jars found in the tomb were solid, made for tradition’s sake and symbolic protection.

The final reuse of the tomb before it was sealed intact can be dated specifically to 9 BC, as recorded on two bilingual funerary papyri in hieratic and demotic, personalised for their owners, Montsuef and his wife Tanuat. They were members of a prominent family from Arment, who served under the last pharaonic ruler Cleopatra VII (51–30 BC) and witnessed the Roman conquest of Egypt. The rich assemblage of objects from their burial demonstrates their creative navigation of the increasing complexities of identity during this period, incorporating external influences, but mostly reasserting, resurrecting, and reinventing age-old Egyptian traditions in their search for eternal life.

A unique painted wooden funerary canopy was probably used for Montsuef’s funeral procession. The form evokes a gaww-coffin (with four posts and a vaulted lid), while the façade is inspired by Ptolemaic temple architecture, and the diagonal pattern on the roof evokes amuletic bead-net shrouds. The canopy represents an innovative funerary object, but one that was firmly rooted in
Egyptian design and tradition. Ancient beliefs, such as the skin of the gods being made of gold, were reinterpreted: Montsuef’s upper body was gilded, symbolizing his divine transformation. He was buried wearing both a traditional gilded cartonnage mummy mask (right) and a gold wreath, a classical symbol of victory re-interpreted as a symbol of triumph over death.

The mummified body of a woman from the tomb has been CT scanned, revealing hidden items: a papyrus scroll and a winged scarab amulet on her head, 3D printed for the exhibition. With future advances in scanning technology, it will eventually be possible to read her name on the papyrus.

One of the most exciting research discoveries has been the rediscovery of several textiles belonging to the family, which had not been opened since they were stored away by the former curator Cyril Aldred in 1946. A fragmentary mummy bandage over 5 m in length is inscribed for Montsuef in hieroglyphs, rather than the more usual hieratic or demotic, perhaps invoking the sacred magic associated with a more ancient script. A remarkable painted linen mummy shroud depicts the deceased wearing a bead-net shroud, transformed into the god Osiris, a rare datable example of a transitional style between earlier Ptolemaic bead-net shrouds and later Roman shrouds. It is inscribed for the son of Montsuef and Tanuat, providing evidence of a previously unknown member of the family. Due to the shroud’s fragility, it will be on display only for the duration of the exhibition.

Eleven members of Montsuef’s family were buried in the tomb before it fell out of use and was left undisturbed for nearly 2000 years. Our exhibition reunites this burial assemblage, on display for the first time since it was originally shown in the former National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in the 1860s. It demonstrates the exciting research potential for reconstructing archaeological assemblages within historic museum collections.

The exhibition offers a unique opportunity to examine over a thousand years of Egyptian burial through the compelling story of a single tomb. Together this diverse collection of objects will hopefully broaden audiences’ understanding of the complex and changing funerary culture of ancient Egypt.