

CyberScribe 183 – November 2010

This month the CyberScribe wishes to begin with an odd little story of health and death in ancient Egypt. The item below (abbreviated) related the announcement that apparently no one in ancient Egypt died of cancer. Other ailments are well attested, but few cancer cases have shown up among the mummies examined.

Of course, the obvious answer may be the correct one. Few people in ancient Egypt lived long enough to express the kinds of cancers we know so well in our modern world. The article appeared in the CNN website (<http://tiny.cc/15yrf>) and tells us:

“Just imagine: a world without cancer. It's a tantalizing thought, recently floated by researchers at Manchester University in the UK. That world may well have existed, but in the distant past, according to their survey of hundreds of mummies from Egypt and South America. The researchers found that only one mummy had clearly identifiable signs of cancer. The study suggested that industrialization, pollution and the ills of modern life are to blame for the epidemic of cancer now seen sweeping around the globe.

“But top Egyptologist and head of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities Zahi Hawass, never at a loss for words, said the Manchester University study focused on non-royal mummies, and left out the people who lived the good life. "If you were a pharaoh," he told me, "you would get lots of diseases, because you ate well, you ate meat all the time, it's fat food, and you never took care of your health."

“He pointed to the desiccated mummy of the famed Queen Hatshepsut (ca 1508-1458 BC), who masqueraded as a male pharaoh due to popular prejudices at the time. Poor Queen Hatshepsut suffered from arthritis, diabetes and bad teeth, and is believed to have died of bone cancer.

“Cancer or no cancer, the Grim Reaper came often and came early in Ancient Egypt. Although the pharaohs and others at the top of Egypt's social pyramid tended to live longer, the average life expectancy for men was less than 40, and women tended to die even younger because of childbirth. The common folk survived on simple fare, said Zahi: "It was a good diet because they were eating bread and garlic and drinking beer, beer all the time."

“Salima Ikram, an Egyptologist at the American University in Cairo, points out, the lot of the ordinary Egyptian was hardly idyllic.

““They suffered from all kinds of parasitic diseases, including schistosomiasis (a water-borne disease still common in Egypt). And you can see it depicted in tomb decorations, because the men, particularly men who deal with water, particularly fishermen and collectors of reeds, you see them with distended bellies, and receding hair lines.”

““If you're working in a tomb, for example, all that dust is going to get to you, as you grind down limestone, as you carve statues, as you inhale the smoke either from cooking fires or little lamps that help illuminate your work as you build temples or decorate them,” says Dr Ikram. “So all these things were real killers for the ancient Egyptians.”

“Other hazards, she said, included venomous snakes and stampeding hippos, the latter reincarnated in the taxi drivers of modern Cairo who, I suspect, have a higher kill ratio than their four-legged antecedents.”

Remember that wonderful story where Prince Thutmose fell asleep beside the great Sphinx at Giza? He had a dream that the Sphinx spoke to him and asked the Prince to clear away the sand that had partially buried the statue. In return, the Sphinx would make him the next king of Egypt. The Prince said that he did as asked, and lo and behold...he became the next Pharaoh. He recorded all of this on the great ‘Dream Stele’ still standing between the paws of the Sphinx.

Well, some of what he did to protect the Sphinx has just been announced as a new discovery...a mud brick wall designed and erected to prevent new sand from flooding the enclosure around the base of the great statue.

The story appeared in a number of sources, but the best version was on Zahi Hawass’s own website (<http://tiny.cc/kacOf>). Abbreviated somewhat, his story appears below:

“An Egyptian archaeological mission directed by Dr. Zahi Hawass has discovered a large mud brick wall dating to the reign of King Thutmose IV (1400-1390 BCE). The wall was uncovered in the area located in front of King Khafre’s valley temple on the Giza plateau.



First section of the mud brick wall found in front of Khafre's valley temple at Giza (Photo: SCA)

“Dr. Hawass stated that the newly discovered wall consists of two parts: the first section is 75cm tall and stretches for 86m from north to south along the eastern side of Khafre’s valley temple and the Sphinx; the second part is 90cm tall and is located in the area north of Khafre’s valley temple. This section is 46m long and runs from east to west along the perimeter of the valley temple area. The two parts of the wall converge at the southeast corner of the excavation area.

“Hawass pointed out that archaeologists previously believed that the enclosure wall only existed on the Sphinx’s northern side because a 3m tall by 12 m long section had been found there. This theory has now been disproven thanks to the discovery of the two new wall sections along the eastern and southern sides of the Sphinx.



View of excavation trench in front of Khafre's valley temple (Photo: SCA)

“In addition to the two sections of the enclosure wall, the SCA team found a mud brick wall on the eastern side of Khafre’s valley temple. Hawass believes that this wall could be the remains of Khafre’s pyramid settlement, which was inhabited by priests and officials who oversaw the activities of the mortuary cult of Khafre. This cult began at the king’s death and continued until the eighth dynasty (ca. 2143-2134 BCE), which was the end of the Old Kingdom.”

Speak of ancient Egypt and images of golden objects come to mind. As is well known, Egypt had a number of gold sources, and while the majority of those mines are no longer in production, some may just be brought back on line...due to the current very high prices for gold. From time to time, the ancient gold mines have been reopened, but they always failed due to the low quality of the remaining ores. Now the world’s mania for gold has driven the prices to staggering heights, and some companies may be poised to try once again.

This very brief announcement has just appeared (<http://tiny.cc/ulv1j>), suggesting that such new mining activity may soon occur:

“Egypt is preparing new legislation that should facilitate investment in its mining sector, while the country plans to reopen gold mines known since ancient times and today in the Eastern Desert.

“The Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources has identified and established map of some 120 mines that were operated in the time of the Pharaohs for the production of gold. The output was used to make amulets, votive objects or precious masks or sarcophagi. Mr. Sameh Fahmy, Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, said a hundred foreign companies have already expressed interest in these mines, which represent a potentially lucrative source of gold, while world prices for gold are high.

““We believe that at least fifty international mining companies could come soon and settle in Egypt,” said Fahmy. The new legislation should shortly be ratified by the Egyptian Parliament. It is intended to encourage investment in the mining sector and prevent neglect of the country's resources, the ministry said. The exploitation of gold mines in Egypt has continued over the centuries, but has seen an eclipse in the second half of the 20th century, following a reduction in foreign investment. The mining code of Egypt had already undergone changes in 2008 which had encouraged foreign companies, such as Centamin Nuinsco and a Canadian company, to expand their operations in Egypt.”

When queried about potential problems that might impact their museums, curators would probably have ranked modern pagan groups as pretty low on the list. Today in England, some museums are starting to feel threatened and are pulling back, worried and wondering about what to do in response.

The item below from the ‘Daily Mail’ gives a good oversight of the problems raised by the new protesters (<http://tiny.cc/f7l17>). Polls show that almost no one protests when tastefully displayed ancient remains, including mummies, are displayed, but this highly vocal minority has gathered a lot of press space and attention.

Read the article (abbreviated below), and see where you stand:

“Museums are hiding away mummies and human remains for fear of offending pagans and other minority groups, it has been revealed. They are putting up warning signs, closing previously opened coffins and displaying exhibits in darkened cases. This is despite the fact that such displays are among the most popular attractions.



Covering up: Dr Rosalie David, keeper of Egyptology at Manchester Museum, pictured with the Mummy of Asru. Mummies at museums are being covered up to avoid offending faith groups

“The move is designed to give the skeletons and mummies ‘privacy’ and to avoid upsetting faith groups and even some museum staff, according to academic findings. Research shows how 17 museums have drafted policies on human remains, with most advocating that signs are put up to warn visitors of their presence.

“Manchester University Museum’s policy requires consultation before displaying human remains, particularly with what it calls ‘marginalized communities and faith groups’. It covered up the unwrapped mummy of Asru, the partially wrapped mummy of Khary, and a child mummy with sheets. The three mummies were uncovered only after a public protest.

“Meanwhile, the Egypt gallery at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery has changed its display of Egyptian human remains. Instead of the previous display of mummies in open coffins, it now exhibits them with half closed lids, which it considers more respectful.

“And the Royal Cornwall Museum, in Truro, does not show any images of human remains, other than wrapped mummies, in its online or publicity material. The trend towards political correctness in museums has been

highlighted by Dr Tiffany Jenkins, a sociologist who is a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

“But Dr Jenkins says that such appeals are not confined to once-colonized groups. British pagans formed Honoring the Ancient Dead in 2004 to campaign for reburial and respect for pre-Christian skeletons from the British Isles. Dr Jenkins said: ‘the profession is over-reacting to the claims of small minority groups – such as the Pagan organization, Honoring the Ancient Dead.

“Professor Piotr Bienkowski, who was deputy director of The Manchester Museum for six years until last year, said the museum previously held a consultation about how its mummies should be displayed. It experimented with different methods such as partially covered and covered, he said, but the majority of respondents wanted them uncovered.

“Dr Jenkins said: ‘This is not driven by public demand, but by professional insecurity. ‘Unfortunately, it will penalize the millions of people who enjoy learning from the display of human remains.’

“A recent opinion poll of 1,000 people commissioned by English Heritage found that 90 per cent were comfortable with keeping prehistoric human remains in museums.”

On a little lighter note, the next item discusses and describes one of the ‘must see’ sites in Cairo...the ‘Dr. Ragab’s Pharaonic Village’. Silly in many ways, it is visited via a boat ride around and through an island within the city. The trip is highlighted by a rather silly narrative, and the canal banks are dappled with what are said to be recreated scenes of public and private life in Pharaonic times.

Some of it is fun and well presented, while other parts fail badly. One of the times when the CyberScribe and his Chief Wife were visiting, our ‘royal barge’ caught the Pharaoh’s daughter and her entourage napping. She was supposed to have been casually sauntering down to the water’s edge and plucking young Moses from the bull rushes. When she spotted us, there was a mad, and undignified scramble by the ‘princess’ and her attendants to dash down to the water and drag the ill-clad plastic doll from the papyrus ‘boat’...and then cuddle it while the narrator gave his spiel.

A visit is worthwhile, but read below (abbreviated) from a source called Al-Masry Al-Youm (<http://tiny.cc/2m4iiavjwq>) where another writer gives her account of a recent visit:

“In 1984, a renowned papyrus maker, Hussam Ragab, opened the world’s first living museum, the Pharaonic Village on the island of Qorsaya, in Giza. His boundless ambition led him to research the lives of the Ancient Egyptians and their habitat to the smallest details in order to establish a living museum that would realistically depict the everyday lives of the Egyptians 4,000 years ago.

“Ragab already owned a part of the Island, where he was growing the world’s largest papyrus plantation. The iconic Egyptian plant had gradually disappeared during the industrial era, when new paper techniques invaded worldwide markets. His quest for papyrus seeds led him to Uganda and Ethiopia and the US, where he viewed an exhibition that retraced the lives of the first American settlers. The American exhibition gave him the idea for creating a museum on Ancient Egyptian history, but a living one, with actors in costumes operating in a typically Pharaonic environment. Wael Sammir, the general manager of the Pharaonic Village, explained that Ragab’s first step was to “plant 5,000 trees all around the island to create a natural screen to shield the village from the city noises and concrete view.” From his incessant trips to Africa, Ragab brought back rare trees and exotic animals that were common to Egypt 4,000 years ago, creating a rich and lavish environment for the future village.

““The second step was to research the lifestyles, habits and traditions of the ancient Egyptians, in order to be as close to the historical reality as possible,” added Sammir. The Village currently employs 280 people, including 65 actors who dress in colorful costumes and perform daily tasks in the Pharaonic fashion.

“Though the initial project was striking and ambitious, the actual living museum is deeply flawed. But, those flaws can be immensely funny.

“The visit started with a 30-minute ferry promenade that takes you along the island’s shore. After passing white statues of the major Egyptian gods planted into the water, the boat continued its smooth sailing past reenactors in tacky white or striped garments with wide golden collars and jet black wigs who plow, fish and make pottery. There seemed to be a strict no-eye contact policy with the visitors, with the actors performing their tasks undisturbed by either the smirks or the genuine smiles of the meager audience on the boat. But as soon as the boat drifted relatively far away, they halted their

activities, yawning and resuming playing the part of bored workers. A few whitewashed mannequins in costumes are also installed here and there, possibly to make up for a reduced staff, giving the impression that particularly sleepy actors have turned into pillars of salt.



“The ferry finally stalled and the viewers were invited to disembark before being rapidly ushered into a replica of the Karnak temple, guarded by a mean-looking priest covered in a shiny plastic purple leopard skin suit. An affable guide provided the audience with some interesting pieces of information, like how to read the Pharaonic calendar painted on the ceiling, or pointing at the scrolls contained in rows in the walls, which replicate ancient libraries.

“In the courtyard, a woman sat crushing wheat grains between two massive rocks to produce thin flour, while the man of the house started a fire using a wooden bar carved with rounded crevices filled with linen oil and grass. In order to create a spark, he spun a wooden stick in a crevice very quickly. In the Pharaonic Village, 2010, the linen oil and grass have been replaced by bits of matches in the crevice for an immediate, guaranteed result. The audience was mesmerized.

“The pride and joy of the museum is undoubtedly the perfect replica of Tut Ankh Amun’s tomb as it was discovered by Howard Carter in 1922. The visitors were invited to go down a narrow, barely-lit staircase, in order to

reach the chamber filled with the young king's treasures, including a golden chariot, a complexly carved armchair, and many statues and boats.

"Other museums focus on Egypt today, with a museum dedicated to each of these major political figures: Sadat, Nasser and Naguib. The exhibition space dedicated to Sadat showcases various items belonging to the late president, from his toothpaste and toothbrush to his nightgown and wedding photos. All these precious and rare items were donated by his widow, Jehan Sadat, and are exhibited on the walls and inside glass boxes.

"Nasser's museum, which, according to Sammir, is the only museum dedicated to the "Raiss" in Egypt, is filled to the ceilings with black and white photographs of the late president in the company of major politicians like Yasser Arafat and Fidel Castro, and boxer Mohamed Ali. A glass box contains Nasser's old radio and fragments of a moon rock immobilized in a plastic bubble and given to him as a present by America.

"What these former heads of state have in common with the ancient pharaohs, one can only guess."

And for the finale, something that isn't concerned with ancient Egypt, but is something that most of us always suspected...it's now official: Ozzy Osbourne really IS a Neanderthal. Ever since the famous bat incident in Des Moines...

Have you forgotten that one? On 20 January 1982, Osbourne bit the head off a bat he claimed that he thought was rubber while performing at the Veterans Memorial Auditorium in Des Moines, Iowa. Rolling Stone magazine in 2004 ranked this incident number two on its list of "Rock's Wildest Myths." While the Rolling Stone article stated the bat was alive, the teen who threw it onto the stage said it was brought to the show dead. According to Osbourne himself in the booklet to the 2002 edition of *Diary of a Madman*, the bat was not only alive but also managed to bite him, resulting in his having to take rabies shots.

Well, now the labs that are working on the Neanderthal genome tested Osbourne's blood...and guess what? An article in the 'Daily Mail' (<http://tiny.cc/ycgh4>) gives us the details (abbreviated somewhat):

“He claims his ‘superhuman’ genes have kept him healthy despite a lifetime of rock ’n’ roll excess. And now it seems science may back up Ozzy Osbourne’s theory that he has a particularly hardy family tree. Researchers studying his DNA have found that the singer is the descendant of a Neanderthal man.



Early man: Lifelike figure of a Neanderthal man in the Neanderthal Museum in Mettmann by Duesseldorf, Germany



Family album: Black Sabbath frontman Ozzy Osbourne, left, is the descendant of a Neanderthal man, according to researchers

“The 61-year-old hellraiser, who has survived years of drug abuse and alcohol addiction, joked that news of his Neanderthal heritage would not come ‘as much of a surprise’ to his wife Sharon or to police departments around the world. He famously bit the head off a bat while drunk on stage, broke his neck in a quad bike accident in 2003 and has admitted there’s ‘no plausible reason’ why he is still alive.

“Scientists made the discovery by taking a sample of the singer’s blood at his home in Buckinghamshire and sending it to a lab in New Jersey in the U.S. Using a state-of-the-art £12,000 test, they were able to unlock his genetic code, or genome.



Close family: It's unknown how children Kelly and Jack, and wife Sharon will respond after research revealed Ozzy is descended from a Neanderthal man

“Although the genetic results gave Osbourne some clues about his good health, –scientists also told him that he had his long-suffering wife to thank for still being alive for doing her best to curb the worst of his excesses.

“Neanderthals may have died out 30,000 years ago – but their genes live on in some modern humans. A study this year showed that ancestors of white Europeans and Asians bred with Neanderthals in the distant past, and their genes have been passed down ever since.

“Up to 4 per cent of the DNA of every living person of non-African descent can be traced back to the short, stocky cavemen, according to researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany.

“They mapped the genome of Neanderthal remains and compared it with that of homo sapiens. It is believed the two shared a common ancestor in Africa around 400,000 years ago. Early Neanderthals left Africa soon afterwards and headed for Europe and Asia, while our ancestors stayed behind and evolved into modern humans.

“Then, 100,000 years ago, they left Africa too. Before Neanderthals died out, the two species lived alongside each other in Europe and Asia, and the research suggests there was interbreeding during this period.”

In case it had crossed your mind to emulate Ozzie Osbourne and bit the head off of some hapless small mammal or bird, please don't. Unless, of course, you, too, are a Neanderthal.