

Title: “A Disjointed Muddle of Bones?” Deliberate Disseveration in Egyptian Mummification

Authors: Alexandra R. Klales^{1,2} and Jonathan P. Elias³

Affiliations:

¹ Department of Anthropology, University of Manitoba

² Anthropology Department, Dickinson College

³ Akhmim Mummy Studies Consortium, Carlisle, PA

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Abstract:

Petrie’s work at Deshasheh in 1897 is most famous for producing one of the first x-ray images of ancient Egyptian physical remains. What is not widely remembered is that this x-ray was not of a mummy in the usual sense, with desiccated soft tissue intentionally preserved through the infusion of resinous substances. It was of a rather different type of body, one which Petrie termed “dissevered.” Disseveration, a deliberate treatment in which skeletal elements of the body are separated and repositioned, necessarily results in a certain amount of disarticulation. Historically this has led to the erroneous conclusion that these bodies have been taphonomically disturbed.

While Petrie had identified the practice in Old Kingdom bodies only, disseveration was not confined to that remote time period. An examination of five individuals in the Akhmim Mummy Studies Consortium (AMSC) database reveals that intentional modification and repositioning of skeletal elements is evident among mummies of the First Intermediate, Kushite, Saite, and Late Periods. The most prevalent pattern we have noticed in this sample, is a disarticulation of the thoracic skeleton and near avoidance of the appendages, which in such cases remain close to their expected anatomical configurations. Study of published photographs shows that similar disseveration was sometimes practiced during the New Kingdom as well. In addition to describing these cases, we will attempt to identify the cultural significance of this enduring pattern of mortuary preparation found in ancient Egypt.

Key Words: Akhmim, Disarticulation, Computed Tomography, Mummy Bundle, Wrapped Skeleton