



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2008

### H117 The eBay® Mummy: A Case of a Scottish Mummy From Maryland for Sale in Michigan

*Kristin E. Homer, MA\*, Department of Anthropology, Michigan State University, 354 Baker Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824*

After attending this presentation, attendees will be familiar with the characteristics of medical mummies, specifically those from the Burns Collection, and why the ability to recognize these mummies is important in medicolegal investigations.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by raising awareness about a little-known, but historically significant, collection of medical mummies, with the possibility of restoring lost or stolen samples to the collection. This case highlights the importance of communication between state, federal, and international agencies. Human remains of historical significance can travel surprisingly long distances and turn up in unexpected places. It is important for forensic anthropologists to be cognizant of this when presented with an unusual specimen.

In October 2006, a woman in Port Huron, Michigan, put a mummy up for sale on the internet auction site eBay®. The mummy was recovered by police and transported to the St. Claire County Medical Examiner's Office for examination. On October 16, the mummy was transported to the Michigan State University Forensic Anthropology Lab for further analysis. It was at this point that the mummy was recognized as being a member of the Burns Collection of medical mummies housed at the Maryland College of Medicine.

The Burns Collection originated in Glasgow, Scotland in the early 1800s. Allen Burns was a Scottish anatomist and talented dissector who prepared many preserved anatomical specimens. Upon his death in 1813, the collection went to his protégé, Andrew Russell, who shortly thereafter sold his share in the collection to Granville Sharpe Pattison. Pattison brought the collection to the U.S. and sold it to the Medical School in 1820. Since 1820 the collection, which may have originally numbered in the 100s, has suffered from neglect and theft.

The Burns Collection is a varied set of anatomical specimens, but all are preserved in a similar manner and most are dissected with a strong emphasis on the cardiovascular system. The specimens have a characteristic medium to dark brown coloring, often with injection of the arteries with a red substance. The dissection style is similar throughout the collection, with nerves, muscles, and ligaments being distracted from their original anatomical position to be separated from surrounding structures. Great care has been taken in the dissection of all of the specimens to show anatomical structures clearly and in great detail. Adult cadavers in the collection are cut up, whereas children often appear as complete specimens.

Radiographs of the specimen were used to evaluate age at death. CT scans were also helpful in this case because the radiopaque material used to inject the arteries prevented an unobstructed view of the bones and teeth. Age at death estimation was based primarily on dental development and eruption as assessed on radiographs and CT scans. This estimate was supplemented with epiphyseal closure data obtained from radiographs.

The eBay® mummy is a juvenile, aged 6-9 years at death. Sex and ancestry are undetermined. The mummy is very well preserved, although it has suffered some damage over time. The dissection focuses on the circulatory system in the trunk region, with the removal of all abdominal and pelvic organs. The heart was likely preserved in the thorax at one time, but has since been lost. The specimen shows a medium to dark brown coloration throughout. The arteries are injected with a solid, reddish, radiopaque substance.

The eBay® mummy presents the coloration, artery injection, and dissection style that are characteristic of the Burns Collection. There are several juvenile specimens in the Burns Collection that are very similar to the individual in question. There is little doubt this specimen was removed in the past from the Burns Collection.

#### **Medical Mummy, Anatomical Specimen, Burns Collection**