

# All you want to know about mummies. Review of: *The handbook of mummy studies: New Frontiers in scientific and cultural perspectives*

By Dong Hoon Shin and Raffaella Bianucci, 2021.

Springer. 1186 pp. ISBN 9789811533532. (hardcover) \$449.99

For many thousands of years, the enigma of death has dominated human thoughts. We do not know exactly when, but we have signs that this agonizing dilemma has been expressed since at least the Middle Pleistocene, with the funerary ritualization of Neanderthals as the first possible signal of an idealization of the journey to the afterlife. For many people today and in the past, overcoming this dilemma has been entrusted to the fideistic construction of otherworldly places that at least ensure continuity and avert the torment of having to conceive of the mental category of nothingness. Very early, in addition to the consciousness of death, the practice of preserving a tangible memory of a loved one and possessing a memory in the form of a physical presence, occurred; converging in many human cultures.

The practice of manipulating deceased bodies in order to preserve a ritual, protective, totemic simulacrum, is very widespread in various cultures. It is a practice, if still used, which has had moments of particular diffusion. We certainly do not want to refer only to Egyptian artificial mummification, but we should consider, for example, the widespread practice of mummification and ritualization of death in Europe.

In addition to the complex exercise of preserving a body, for the purpose of ritualization (and therefore we are talking about preparation practices), it is also possible to come across, at different latitudes and for different ecological reasons, examples of natural preservation of bodies, clothes, wraps and shrouds, as well as funerary sets. These natural mummies offer a chance to reconstruct biological parameters and diagenetic phenomena that have been preserved, while the study of artificial mummies begins with the evidence that the body has been intensely manipulated, sometimes using substances and procedures that significantly alter the biological essence.

As a result, the field of “mummy” studies is very varied and involves numerous anthropological, cultural, and medical aspects, as well as purely methodological ones, that have sustained intense debates among specialists for a long time. The descriptions of the worlds of the preserved dead have fed over time an endless anecdotal and specialist literature. Today, although the anecdotal dimension obviously remains, it has also become a field of robust specialization that exploits advanced methodologies and feeds on an up-to-date

multidisciplinary scientific background. The scientific study of mummies, be they natural or artificial, has become the field of those biological anthropologists, archeologists, physicians, paleopathologists, and cultural anthropologists, who use this macrocosm of written evidence, multifaceted by ethnicity, geography, and different ecologies, to obtain information about our biological and cultural past.

In this tangle of evidence and documentation, concrete and well-structured help can come, to a young scholar as well as an experienced researcher, from “The Handbook of Mummy Studies. New Frontiers in Scientific and Cultural Perspectives,” which has been published by Springer Nature, under the skillful editorship of Dong Hoon Shin and Raffaella Bianucci. A comprehensive series of contributions that embrace the multitude of studies on “mummies” have been condensed into this significant work.

The Handbook is very interesting, readable, and substantial. The editorial organization is effective; each chapter is brought to the reader in a systematic way with useful references and suggestions to visit other parts of the book, for additional information and further discussions. The work consists of two volumes, organized into nine thematic parts and 50 chapters in total.

The first volume, starting from a history of mummy studies (Chapter 1, by Buikstra and Nystrom), focuses on methodological and related ethical issues in the context of current technological and methodological approaches for the investigation of mummified material, both human and animal. Particularly interesting are the contributions focused on isotopic studies (Chapter 10, by Takigami and Yoneda) and the discussion of the great impetus that image analysis has provided to the studies of mummified bodies. In particular the chapters on radiological and medical imaging application to examination of the technologies and methodologies (Chapter 11, by Beckett and Conlogue; Chapter 12, by Loynes and Bianucci), discussing the positive effects of these applications in terms of protection and conservation of the mummified material, as they limit the invasiveness of more conventional morphological analysis. There is also a general discussion on the application of paleogenomics for determining genetic and population information of mummies and for retrieving DNA for phenotypic reconstruction (Chapter 14, by Jeong and

Chapters 17 and 19, by Lee). Volume 1 also contains a very stimulating section on parasitology, either linked to the study of the diagenesis of mummified bodies, or to the identification of microorganisms that are markers of ecological and palaeopathological situations, or markers of subsistence. In particular, an intriguing contribution is represented by the study of archeoparasitology in Korean Mummies (Chapter 21, by Seo and Colleagues), that discusses historical parasitic infection patterns and their medical consequences in East Asia. It is also interesting to note how all contributions within this section dedicated to parasitology arouse a broader interpretation in the context of its connection to paleoecology and paleodemography, with the main scope of reconstructing the health status of past populations.

Volume two is dedicated to the description of the mummification techniques from all continents. The first section (Part V) is devoted to mummification in Ancient Egypt, including the most recent investigations carried out on individuals held in the British Museum Collections (Chapter 27, by Antoine and Vanderneusch); a contribution on animal mummification (Chapter 28, by Ikran) and a contribution dedicated to chemical and biomolecular characterization of the ancient Egyptian organic balms used in the embalming procedures (Chapter 29, by Evershed and Clark).

Part VI focuses on European mummies dating from prehistory to modern day. The life, diseases, and death of the “Neolithic Iceman” are addressed (Chapter 30, by Nerlich and Colleagues), and an overview of bog bodies is provided (Chapter 33, by Beckett). The reader is already introduced to the European cultural, religious and social milieu, from the Medieval period up until the early twentieth century (e.g., the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo), which formed the backdrop for the assemblage of mummified and embalmed bodies preserved in crypts and catacombs (Chapter 31, by Nerlich and Bianucci). These chapters allow the reader to enter the world of some of the most recent practices of ritual embalming, including the use of intra-arterial injections. Of particular relevance is the contribution on Hungarian Vác mummies (Donoghue and Colleagues in Chapter 32), whose molecular investigation has shed new light on the epidemiology of tuberculosis during the TB pandemic era. A fascinating chapter is dedicated to the figure of Vladimir Ilic Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, and to the reconstruction of the events which occurred after his death, and led to his “eternal” bodily preservation (Chapter 35, by

Bianucci and Colleagues). Lastly this section includes a contribution on an historical perspective of embalming in France (Chapter 38 by Charlier).

The most fascinating contributions are those focused on Asia, the Pacific islands, and the Americas, discussed in the parts VII and VIII of the volume. These chapters explore ethnographic accounts of mummification and the meaning of the conservation of physical memory.

The contribution focused on the smoked bodies of Papua reminds us that the Anga (Chapter 42 by Beckett) are the only known group that continues to practice a traditional form of anthropogenic mummification in present day. This ancient and unique, orally transmitted, mummification practice by smoke, and a following application of red ochre clay (for ritualization but with practical purposes of protection of the surfaces of the smoked bodies), is the way reaffirm their clan tradition and territorial identity.

To conclude, The Handbook of Mummy Studies represents the most up-to-date book on the mummies of the world published in recent decades. Not only does it explore the technical and ethical issues with precision, providing new insights into the scientific methodologies, and thus presenting itself as an efficacious tool in teaching, but it is also an excellent medium to explore the most intimate manifestation of memory in a constant attempt to overcome death.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Luca Sineo:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (lead).

Luca Sineo 

*Department of Biological, Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sciences and Technologies, LabHomo, Lab. of Anthropology, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy*

#### Correspondence

Luca Sineo, Department of Biological, Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sciences and Technologies, LabHomo, Lab. of Anthropology, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy.

Email: [luca.sineo@unipa.it](mailto:luca.sineo@unipa.it)

#### ORCID

Luca Sineo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8634-2295>