

Mummified exotic animals found in Egyptian tomb

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In a necropolis south of Cairo, archaeologists have discovered a dazzling array of mummified animals, amulets, and other artifacts.

The most fantastic item that has been found is a pair of mummified lions clubs. Long heralded as a sacred animal, this is the first time that lion cubs have been discovered, which makes this find one unprecedented in modern archaeology.

The most impressive find was five mummified big-cats, which CT scans revealed to be lion cubs.

Lion cubs are quite unusual to be discovered inside tombs, namely because of their sacred status in ancient Egypt.

"For the first time, the complete mummy of a lion or a lion cub has been found in Egypt," said Mostafa Waziri, general secretary of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities.

The cubs are thought to be about 2,600 years old, and their small size suggests the big cats were not fully grown before they were mummified.

Markings on the mummified cubs indicate that they were entombed during the Late Period, 664 to 332 BCE.

Included in the excavation were 25 boxes decorated ornately with boxes and filled with mummified cats of all breeds, sizes, and ages. An additional 75 boxes full of wooden and bronze statues of cats were also discovered.

Two mummies of the ichneumon, a species of Egyptian mongoose, have also been discovered at the site.

Khaled El-Enany, Egypt's antiquities minister said, that the discovery could "fill a museum by itself."

A museum of its own

In addition to the surprising discovery of the big cats, the most recent excavation of Saqqara has also unveiled some other fascinating finds.

Statues depicting birds and animals ranging from bulls to mongoose and an ibis and a falcon have been unearthed at the site as well, making it one of the most important and prominent in modern Egyptian archaeology.

Archeologists have also discovered a large stone scarab and two small wooden and sandstone descriptions of Egypt's sacred beetle.

The scarab artifact is more than a foot in diameter, making it one the largest ever discovered and possibly giving clues as to what else remains to be found.

In addition to the animals discovered, the team unearthed 73 bronze statues of the god Osiris, the god of fruitfulness and life renewal.

The Egyptians of antiquity trusted that Osiris gave them the gift of barley, which was an essential food for survival. Eleven statues to the lioness goddess Sekhmet and a carved figure of the goddess Neith were huddled together in one of the tombs.

Strips of papyrus with dedications and prayers to the goddess Taweret show a hippopotamus with the tail of a crocodile.

Taweret was the goddess who was thought to protect women during pregnancy and childbirth. It is unusual to find any indication of Taweret inside a royal tomb since most ancient Egyptians worshiped this goddess in their own homes.

It is estimated that some of the items date to the 26th dynasty of King Psamtik I, which ruled Egypt between 601 and 664 BCE.

The big cats are not the first of their kind to be discovered in the Saqqara region.

In 2004, French archeologists discovered a part of an adult lion skeleton, which helped to underpin the animal's sacred status in ancient Egypt.

Of the new finds, Salima Ikram, an Egyptologist at the American University in Cairo, said: "It's one of the most exciting series of finds in the world of animal mummies ever."

Because ancient Egyptians believed that making devotional offerings as mummified animals were so essential, the lion cubs might reveal that the big cats were lured from the wild.



Egypt's Antiquities Minister Khaled el-Enany, flanked by the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities Mostafa Waziri (L), announces a new discovery carried out by an Egyptian archaeological team in Giza's Saqqara necropolis. (Photo by KHALED DESOUKI/AFP via Getty Images).

Ritualized animal sacrifice was a common practice in ancient Egypt, so much so that there was a real industry surrounding the practice.

Millions of cats and dogs were bred in captivity specifically to be ritually mummified.

A [recent study](#) on ibis mummies revealed that most of the known animals of ancient Egypt were mummified at some point.

Sally Wasef, a researcher from Australia's Griffith University, said: "Some were pets and in the same time gods like cats, dogs, falcons, monkeys. Some were just god's incarnations on earth, like snakes and crocodiles."

Inscriptions discovered in Saqqara suggest that the priest was once a prominent figure during the reign of King Nefer-Ir-Ka-Re.

King Nefer-Ir-Ka-Re's pyramid complex remained unfinished, and another king, Nyuserra, later incorporated its valley temple.

Finished or not, the remains of Re's complex have revealed that his records were written in ink and contain some of the earliest recorded remnants of an initial hieratic script -- the cursive form of hieroglyphics.

Wahtye is also thought to have been the king's supervisor and the person responsible for inspections of holy boats.

"The 'exceptionally well preserved' drawings south of Cairo show scenes depicting Wahtye with his family and his mother," said al-Anani.

Saqqara's treasures

Saqqara is a cat hot spot of sorts for archaeologists. Previous digs have uncovered extensive remains of cat mummies and a dazzling collection of cat statues.

Some experts believe the region was a place of worship for the Egyptian cat goddess Bastet and her son, the lion god, Miysis.

As archaeologists continue to work the site at Saqqara, head of the excavation Mostafa Waziri, remarked that there were plenty of drawings that showed "wine and pottery making, musical performances," and other activities.

Saqqara has also revealed several additional exciting discoveries, including the burial of a woman named Demetria.

Dating from the time the Romans ruled Egypt, this catacomb was magnificently decorated. It had carvings showing the buried woman wearing a glamorous dress and carrying grapes.

One of the most incredible finds at Saqqara — a mummy wearing a gold face mask — was unearthed last year, further proof that this site has so much to offer modern excavations.

The silver face mask was inlaid with gold and was found alongside a mummification workshop, mummies, and other sarcophagi. The eyes of this dazzling mask contain calcite, a black gemstone, and obsidian.

Ramadan Badry Hussein, head of the Egyptian-German team which discovered the mask said that the finding could be "called a sensation," since very few masks containing precious gemstones have ever been discovered.

The mask was found undisturbed on the face of a mummy, which was hidden inside a wooden coffin. Though the casket was in poor condition, Egyptologists have been able to determine that the man inside was a priest who served the goddess Mut.

On the outside of the coffin, a painting of Mut has withstood the test of time. Mut was the ancient Egyptian sky goddess, world mother, and the consort of Amun-Ra.

Among believers, she was considered the mother of all gods and Queen of all goddesses.

Saqqara contains so many different burial shafts, some of which extend more than 100 feet deep. This means that as technology and imaging continue to improve, so too will archeologists' chances to study the area.

In addition to the amazing lion cub discovery, Saqqara is also, where archeologists have found a mummification workshop area.

Experts believe it is a place where people were mummified before being buried deep in the tomb's shafts.

This workshop contains bowls and measuring cups with the names of chemicals and oils used in mummification.

Inside the working areas were two large basins that were most likely used to dry mummies and prepare bandages.

As the vast burial ground of Saqqara continues to give up its buried treasures, there is no telling what else remains to be found.

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