

The Mummy of Wah Unwrapped

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The digging in Egypt was about over in March 1920, and we had already made the surprising discovery of the funerary models of Meketra (discussed in the preceding article) when our men, clearing up the ruined portico of his big tomb, unexpectedly struck the buried entrance of a little tomb which had been under it. Rough steps going down had been successfully hidden with shale chips, and the little tomb door was still blocked with a stout brick wall, but once that had been removed we found ourselves in a narrow, rock-cut room which no one had seen for nearly forty centuries. At the back there was a coffin bearing the name of a certain Wah, and in it, under a pile of laundered bed linen, lay a mummy with wrappings still as fresh as the day it had been buried.

The meal of beer and bread and meat beside the coffin was so simple, and so were the few objects in the coffin, that there seemed little likelihood of there being anything of value inside Wah's bandages. Furthermore, we had found his title written in ink on some of the bed sheets and knew that he was simply an "Overseer of a Storehouse," and since this was not the sort of person who might be expected to be buried with jewels, so far as our experience went, it was decided not to unwrap him but to show his mummy in the Museum, just as it was found.

For fifteen years the mummy of Wah had been on exhibition alongside the funerary models of his employer Meketra, when it was used in some experiments with an x-ray apparatus.



The first photograph gave us a sudden surprise. From Wah's neck, down over his chest, and about his wrists crossed in front, there was a whole series of objects clear enough in the x-ray to be easily identified. We could recognize strings of beads around his neck, a broad bead collar over his breast, bracelets and anklets on his arms and legs, and extraordinarily large scarabs near his wrists.

Naturally, we wanted to put this jewelry on exhibition, but at the same time we wanted to preserve the mummy, and so it was finally decided to take careful notes and detailed photographs before it was unwrapped, and then to make a faithful replica with its own mask and bandages after we had removed the jewelry.

The outermost piece of linen on Wah's mummy (Figure 1) was a shawl, wrapped kilt-like about him, with its fringed edge around his waist tucked in in front. It had often been to the laundry; it is pink now but had doubtless once been a henna red; and down the front are two very washed-out lines of hieroglyphs, written in black, which read: "Linen of the temple protecting Nytankhsekhmet, the justified." What temple was meant, or who the person Nytankhsekhmet may have been, we probably shall never know, for she is not mentioned on anything else we ever found.

After we had taken off the kilt we unwound a dozen bandages spiraling

1. The mummy of Wah before it was unwrapped

up and down the mummy, each about as wide as one's hand and several nearly forty feet long. Then came sheets wrapped around, or big pieces of linen folded as pads and laid on to fill the mummy out until it was practically a cylinder. Later we came to a layer of bandages streaked with the very thin dregs of a pot of resin, probably smeared on with incantations for Wah's continued existence, for its purpose must have been magic – it could have had no preservative effect. A score more of sheets and pads were then unwrapped, and Wah, from having been a very stout party, was becoming more and more slender, and the face which had been peeking out of thick folds of linen now appeared as part of a stucco mask extending down to his waist (Figure 2).

The pinched little face was gilded, and on it were painted a thin moustache and, around the jowls, scant whiskers. A highly conventionalized wig, striped light blue and dark green, covered the head, and a crudely painted broad collar with red, blue, and green rows of beads was shown suspended on the brown chest. It was a barbarous-looking affair, but after all, Thebes was still a rather countrified, Upper Egyptian town when Wah died, and this mask was clearly bought from one of the more old-fashioned of the local artisans.

When we had taken off the mask and ten more sheets and pads, we came to another layer of resin, thick and black this time, poured all over the front of the body except the head and face (Figure 3). It had been practically dry when the pads had been



laid on it, perhaps because it had been put on at the end of one day's work and had become hard by morning, when the next wrappings had been wound on. When we had removed it, the bandages it had penetrated, and another dozen sheets and pads, we came to the first of Wah's jewelry (Figure 6).

There were four bead necklaces, each with its cords tied behind the nape of his neck (Figure 5). There was a string of 11 big, hollow, silver spheroid beads separated by little cylinders, and another string of 28 smaller ones of gold. A third string was of 48 blue faience ball beads, and a fourth of 28 cylindrical and oval beads of carnelian, amethyst, moss agate, milky quartz, black and white porphyry, and green glazed steatite. The dents in the hollow metal beads and the fraying of the cords of the silver and of the faience necklaces show that at least three of these strings had actually been worn by Wah or by some of his family.

Half a dozen more bandages and pads and then we came to more jewelry. Another string of 45 deep blue faience ball beads had simply been bundled together and laid on the mummy's chest, and over his crossed arms there had been placed four large scarabs. One was of plain blue faience, without any inscription or other device, and strung simply on a short hank of linen threads. The other three are among the surprises of our Egyptian work.

2. After many layers of wrappings were taken off, Wah's stucco mask was uncovered

3 (left). Thick, black resin had been poured over this layer of Wah's wrappings

4 (right). The larger silver scarab: the head had been deliberately damaged

5 (below). Wah's necklaces



Two are of massive silver and the third of lapis lazuli. The larger silver scarab (Figure 4) is 1½ inches long and the smaller, 1⅜ inches; each was made up of separate pieces, molded and chased and then soldered together. The lapis lazuli scarab is 1⅞ inches long and perfectly plain, but on the bases of the two silver ones there are graceful, meandering scrolls interspersed with hieroglyphs which made easily recognizable seal devices. Both silver scarabs were oxidized, and when we began to clean the larger one we found hieroglyphs skillfully inlaid on its back in pale gold, those on the one wing reading, "The Nobleman Meketra," and on the other, "The Overseer of a Storehouse Wah" – the names of the owner of the scarab and the noble for whom he worked. The scratches and dents on the polished surfaces of this silver seal scarab and its smaller mate, and the wear in their gold string-holes showed that they had seen real use. But it was surprising to find that just before they had been put on the

mummy the faces of both the silver scarabs and of the lapis lazuli one had been purposely and methodically hammered and pecked as though to blind them. Then, after the blinding, each scarab was strung on a stout linen cord with one barrel-shaped and one cylindrical bead, which obviously made them into amulets to protect Wah against some of the many perils of the life to come. But against what? This is another of our unanswered riddles. Such amulets have never been found before, and they are shown in the painted friezes inside only two of the many coffins of Wah's time, unfortunately in neither case named or explained.

Next we unwrapped half a dozen large bandages and twice as many pads and sheets, each one more stained with resin than the last. Clearly the linen we were now taking off had been put over a third resin layer while it was still soft, and when we got down to it we found stuck fast in it a broad collar (Figures 7, 8) of green-



6. The mummy showing the first of Wah's jewelry: necklaces made of silver, gold, faience, and semiprecious stones (also illustrated as the four lower necklaces in Figure 5)

ish blue beads on Wah's chest and matching bracelets on his wrists and ankles. All were stiff with the resin which saturated them, and tight bandaging had crumpled up the collar, but soaking in alcohol made them all pliable once more, and their stringing needed very little reinforcement before they were ready for exhibition.

What we had found so far had seen actual use in Wah's lifetime. Here we had objects made expressly for the tomb and in the style of centuries long gone by even in Wah's day, and perhaps this explains why they had been put on the body in a perfunctory and careless way. The cords of the broad collar had only been twisted together behind the nape of the neck, and not tied, and there had been a good deal of confusion over the bracelets. There were eight of these last. Two were tied on each ankle, and then, by some mistake which no one noticed, a third was put on the right ankle. Thus, when the undertakers began putting bracelets on the wrists, they had only three left, and the last of these they simply dropped on the body in the soft resin and went on with their bandaging.

We still had quantities of bandages and sheets to take off, but there was only one more object to remove. We had thought from the x-ray that an oval seal was on a finger of the left hand, but what we actually found there was an oval *seweret* bead of red carnelian such as was usually put on the throat of a mummy. Why this one was laid in Wah's palm is still another puzzle.

While we were unwrapping the mummy we had it up on two carpenter's sawhorses; the Egyptians who wrapped it probably had it up on blocks of wood while they squatted beside it on a wide wooden platform. Alongside they had great heaps of old linen bed sheets, which they tore as they needed into pieces about nine feet long or into strips of bandage of



whatever width they required at the moment. Nearby was the resin pot, and sometimes the resin got splashed on the heap of linen and sometimes it was wiped from sticky fingers on the pile of sheets, but the embalmers were very careful not to get any on the bandages that were going to show or any pitchy fingerprints on the part of the mask that was not going to be covered up. A dead mouse and linen resin swabs were dropped on the mummy's knees and hidden under the next bandages. What we had taken for another mouse was much less distinct in the x-ray: it turned out to be a little house lizard, of a kind still common in Egypt, and a cricket was in the same pitch layer beside the broad bead collar.

Linen was costly and was an important form of wealth: in all we unwound 375 square meters of linen from the mummy, and, if we add the sheets we found in the coffin and two pieces which had covered it in the funeral procession, the total from the tomb of Wah comes to 845 square meters – about 1,010 square yards. Much of it had been torn up to make convenient-sized wrappings, but there were still some complete sheets which varied from a fringed shawl 100 inches long to a bed covering 84 feet long. They probably had shrunk in repeated washings, for this was old household linen, shawls and bed coverings saved for the day of need, or procured from friends and relatives or perhaps even bought of strangers for the occasion.

In the corners of at least sixty of these sheets there had been written in ink a hieroglyphic sign or two which told its quality, and often in the opposite corner, the owner's name. For some reason there seems to have been an objection to letting linen go to the tomb so marked, and therefore most of the little labels had been torn out. This was done during the actual wrapping of the mummy, but so care-

7. Another layer of resin-soaked wrappings on Wah's mummy, with a broad collar of greenish blue beads (shown in Figure 8) and matching bracelets on his wrists and ankles

8. The faience broad collar



lessly that three of the torn-out corners got rolled on the mummy with the bandages, and one-third of the marks were entirely overlooked and not torn out at all. Half a dozen gave the names of various people for whom they had originally been woven, and eleven sheets bore the name of Wah himself. One was marked with his name only. Two were marked with his name and the date "Year 2." Then come three sheets of "Year 5," three of "Year 6," and two others without any year, all marked "The Overseer of a Storehouse Wah." It looks as though it had been between the second and fifth years of Seankhkara that Wah got the job of manager of Meketra's storehouses, and as there are no higher dates than the sixth year, he probably died in

the second half of the king's twelve-year reign, or about 2002 B.C.

It only remained to find out what we could from the body of Wah himself, and in this we had the co-operation of Dr. Harry L. Shapiro of the American Museum of Natural History. Wah turned out to be a youngish man about thirty years old, who had undergone a primitive mummification. His brain was probably left in place, and the embalmers seem to have left his viscera intact above the diaphragm. Below that level they appear to have removed them, apparently through an incision in his lower abdomen. The more or less prolonged soaking had made Wah's flesh so soft that too tight a bandaging made a very narrow bundle of his body.

