

Tjeby: Museum Victoria's Egyptian mummy

Tjeby is a mummy in the Melbourne Museum.

Who was Tjeby?

Tjeby was an Egyptian who lived on the east bank of the Nile, and was buried at a place called Naga ed-Deir, approximately 4000 years ago. He worked as an official in the government of that time, and was 35-40 years old when he died. He was approximately 178cm (5'10") tall, a little above average for the ancient Egyptian male. He was found in 1923, buried in a modest tomb with another man named Tjeby, probably his son, or brother. This man is now in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in America.



Tjeby in his coffin
Photographer: Rodney Start. Source: Museum Victoria

What was found inside the tomb?

There were no decorations and few offerings found inside the tomb. The two rectangular coffins are less elaborate than many Egyptian coffins, and have simple inscriptions on them, rather than ornate decorations. Indeed, these inscriptions have several spelling mistakes in them, suggesting a less than expert scribe. Some pottery, beads, a ring, three walking sticks, and what is probably a paint-brush, were the only other burial items found inside the tomb.

What was found inside the coffin?

Tjeby had been placed on his back, his arms outstretched, and his head turned to the east. He was wrapped in bandages, which were subsequently infused with resin. The remains of a funeral mask were also visible. A clay wig had disintegrated into many smaller pieces.

What was found inside the bandages?

Tjeby's bandages have not been removed, as this accelerates the deterioration of the mummy. Instead, the Museum has x-rayed Tjeby through his coffin, to find out what lies beneath the bandages. During the wrapping of mummies, amulets and sometimes precious jewels were often included in the different layers. Tjeby's modest burial did not include these magical items. The x-ray also revealed that his body has now deteriorated significantly, so many of the bones have been displaced and are in the wrong position. No soft tissue remains. Over time Tjeby's skull had become detached from his body. It was subsequently removed and examined, revealing severe dental problems.

What can we tell about Tjeby's life?

Much of what we know about the ancient Egyptians has come from the material found in tombs. This is partly because of the extraordinary preservation of this material in the dry conditions of the desert, and partly because the Egyptians had such elaborate burial rituals. These included painting and writing on the coffin and surrounding tomb walls, the inclusion of artefacts, and preservation of the body. Together, these things can tell us a lot about the deceased person and about ancient Egyptian culture generally.

In Tjeby's case we know from the inscriptions on his coffin that he worked as an official in the government of the time. His burial goods and tomb are not ornate, only the upper classes of Egypt could afford to be mummified in this way; the wealthier the individual, the more elaborate the tomb and mummification. Graves were frequently robbed in ancient Egypt because of the precious things they contained. Tjeby's tomb was sealed with mud plaster, mud bricks, and a dry stone wall.

We know only a little about Tjeby's physical condition. His most obvious complaint is suggested by his teeth, which are severely worn and show signs of many abscesses. Stone ground Egyptian wheat may have left impurities in the bread, which would result in wear on the teeth. Some of the remedies prescribed, such as honey mixed with ochre and

grinding stone powder which was pressed onto the painful teeth, could also have contributed. We cannot tell how Tjeby died.

What are the pictures on Tjeby's coffin and what do they mean?

The hieroglyphs (a form of ancient Egyptian writing based on pictures) are magical spells, to help Tjeby's progression into the afterlife. They invoke the gods Anubis and Osiris, associated with death and re-birth. They also ask that Tjeby receive a fitting burial, and that the offerings in his tomb will help him in the afterlife.

When Tjeby was placed inside his coffin, his head was turned to face the east, and to the painted eyes on the outside of his coffin. The eyes were a charm to ensure health and well-being in the afterlife. The deceased, it was believed, could look through these painted eyes to the outside world, and in this way observe the activities of the living and partake of the burial offerings. It was also believed that he could watch the daily rising of the sun, which represented the god Osiris, and resurrection.

How did the Museum reconstruct what Tjeby looked like?

Using his skull and the information we have about the dress, ethnic origins and customs of the ancient Egyptians, the Museum has reconstructed what Tjeby may have looked like. The depth of muscle and flesh on certain points of the skull has been calculated by scientists. By knowing these amounts, the face can be reconstructed from the skull. Features like eye and hair colour, have been deduced from what is known of the ethnic origins of the Egyptians in this period. Because there is no way of knowing the exact characteristics of many facial features, like the eyes, nose and lips, the art of facial reconstruction is still controversial and somewhat unreliable. Tjeby's anxious expression was chosen because of his poor dental health, which would have caused a lot of pain.

In 1925, the mummy and coffin of Tjeby the Elder arrived in Melbourne, having been donated by Alan Rowe in 1923. Tjeby was discovered in the cemetery of Sheikh Farag, in southern Egypt, in a small, undecorated tomb. His body was wrapped in linen, his chest covered with plaster painted with a floral collar, and his head covered with mud modelled to show his facial features and the wig he would have worn during life.

Tjeby lived during the second part of the 20th century BC to the early part of the 19th century BC; he is the oldest ancient Egyptian in Australia.

Following info from the Colin Hope book about Tjeby:

Note this is a old book so I will leave out notes on studying Tjeby because this has already been done

The sites at Naga ed-Deir where Tjeby was buried are located in what we call Upper Egypt after the ancient Egyptian name Shemau, 'The Upper Land'. This is the Nile Valley proper, extending from Cairo south to Aswan. The other part of Egypt is the Delta region or Lower Egypt, which starts at modern Cairo and extends to the Mediterranean Sea. It was called Ta-mehu, 'The Northern Land' by the Egyptians. There were several names for the whole country, the most common were Kemer, 'The Black Land; which refers to the black colour of the soil, and Ta-mery, 'The Beloved Land'. To the ancient Egyptians, Egypt proper consisted only of the land on either side of the river in Upper Egypt and Delta region.

Left side:

'An offering which the king gives, and Osiris, Lord of Busiris, Chief of the Westerners, Lord of Abydos, (for) a goodly burial in the western desert in his tomb of the necropolis, that funerary offerings go forth for the Count, the revered Tjeby.'

Right Side:

'An offering which the king gives, and Anubis, who is upon his mountain, who is in the Embalming Chamber, Lord of the Sacred Mountain, that invocation offerings go forth for the Count, Tjeby.'

The Lid:

'An offering which the king gives, and Anubis, Lord of Sepci, Who is before the Booth, the Great God, Lord of Heaven in the beautiful ... that invocation offerings go forth for the revered, the count Tjeby 'the Elder'.'

Foot End:

'The revered one with the Great God, Tjeby the Elder.' Head End:

'Mav invocation offerings go forth for the Revered, Tjeby.'

From these inscriptions we see that the ancient Egyptians believed all offerings to the dead were granted by the king, who as a god himself, intervened for mankind with the other gods. The importance of the food offerings is shown by the frequent reference to 'invocation offerings'. The gods called upon are Osiris and also Anubis. Anubis was the jackal-headed god who was patron of the embalmers and guardian of the cemeteries. He is mentioned on the right side of the coffin and the lid; the right side was placed facing west, wherein lay the land of the dead. The left side of the coffin faced to the east, and on this side of the coffin is painted a pair of eyes through which Tjeby could look out on the land of the living. Osiris is referred to on this side.

