

Is Pa-Ib actually Ma-Ib?
BY DANIEL B. ENGLAND

It turns out that a mummy, long assumed to be a male, named Pa-Ib, who for over 2500 years had been knocking around the world until it finally found its way to the Barnum Museum in Bridgeport may have been a woman. And a once-pregnant woman at that. With perhaps a mummified falcon in her body cavity. Yikes!

As each of these surprising possibilities were revealed last week in the imaging offices of Advanced Radiology in Fairfield, frequent cries of "Wow!" went up from mesmerized scientists. Gerald Conlogue and Ron Beckett, Quinnipiac University professors and hosts of the National Geographic Channel's "Mummy Road Show" watched as computer driven images from the very, very latest CT scan machine begin to appear. Reporters and interested museum officials – even an undertaker to add atmosphere – watched with fascination as the giant machine in the next room scanned the sheet-wrapped mummy unraveling its secrets. While even non-scientists could identify the outlines of a skull, teeth and – there! -- a tongue, to trained eyes of the experts the razor sharp images were like the unfolding identity of a serial killer on CSI.

They lingered long over the skull, pointing out the hole where the Egyptians had removed the brain (an unimportant organ to their way of thinking) and replaced it with resin, a tar-like material. This particular mummy had temporarily lost its head once due to careless handling but was now back with the body.

It was when the CT scan moved on to the torso, however, that everyone leaned in closer to the images. Rubin Kier, chairman of the board of Advanced Radiology and an M.D. pointed to the pelvic area. "This is what looks like arthritis in the pelvic bone, which occurs with women who are pregnant." Word spread fast and Kathy Maher, the museum's executive director and curator (wearing pink), soon burst into the room. "It's a female?" she asked with an expression on her face usually reserved for people who have just won the lottery. No one could say for sure but the evidence of the arthritic bone, the rounded rather than angular pelvic structure and the lack of external genitalia all led to the conclusion that Pa-Ib perhaps should be referred to with the pronoun "her."

Museum officials had long referred to the well-preserved mummy as a male, perhaps reflecting more the male bias of the 19th century when Barnum acquired it from his second wife in 1892 than Egyptian times, when the honor of mummification extended to women. Indeed, the fact that the mummy's arms were crossed over her chest suggests she was a person of some distinction. Female mummies are quite rare.

The next dramatic moment came when Ron Beckett spotted something in the mysterious “packet” in the body cavity that they’d found in an earlier physical examination. As the CT scan probed through the layers of wrapping, Beckett sat up even further and tapped at the screen. It was a moment when years of study and experience intersected with intuition. What he thought he saw was a feather. “The Egyptians used to mummify falcons,” he said, recalling correctly that falcons represented the god Horus. He’d seen many such mummified birds but to find one in the body cavity... “It’s really quite something if that’s what it is. They could have put it in there for protection in the next world. It could be a mummified organ which they wrapped but I thought I saw thin lines, like feather bones. Of course, we’ll have to study it much more closely.”

After the initial excitement in the lab, each participant agreed that much more careful examination would be needed. But their early pronouncement sent the Barnum Museum people into curator heaven. Said an obviously pleased Kathy Maher, “This is only the beginning. This could be the start of our learning much more about Egyptian culture. As early as next week we’re going to x-ray the coffin. It could be there are objects embedded in there that we haven’t seen before.”

The event was unique because the Toshiba Aquilion 8 32 slice CT Multi-Detection machine is technology that is only about a year old and few radiology units have them. The technicians also did an MRI on the mummy, but MRIs work on finding water and certain hydrogens. After 2500 years, there was apparently not much of either in Pa-lb. In the MRI machine, the 5’3” mummy was invisible.

The examination did not reveal any trauma that would indicate a violent death and indeed she could have been a priest, and, in any case, was probably wealthy. It was fitting then that she was transported in style on the Post Road to her home in the Barnum Museum in a shiny black SUV courtesy of Parente-Lauro Funeral Home of Bridgeport. She even got a police escort. Celebrities do, you know. Especially female ones.