Royal Mummies: The Sanctity of Death or the Holiness of Resurrection?
Museum Ethics, Cultural Memory, and Ancient Egyptian Concepts of Eternity

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethical and cultural implications of displaying ancient Egyptian mummies in museums, challenging the notion that such displays inherently violate the "sanctity of death." Drawing upon ancient Egyptian beliefs—particularly concepts articulated in the Book of the Dead and the mythological cycle of Osiris— the study argues that mummification was not intended to signify death's finality, but rather to preserve the body as a sacred vessel through which identity and memory might endure eternally. From this perspective, contemporary museum practices may be understood not necessarily as acts of desecration but as possible continuations of the ancient Egyptian aspiration toward remembrance and symbolic immortality.

The article further proposes that mummification may be interpreted as one of humanity's earliest cultural responses to oblivion itself. The ancient Egyptian sought not merely to preserve flesh but also to protect identity, memory, and human presence against the erosion of time. In this sense, mummification functioned as a cultural technology against forgetting. This interpretation resonates strongly with modern theories of cultural and collective memory developed by Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann, and Paul Ricoeur.

The study argues that museums may function as contemporary institutions of remembrance through which cultural identity persists by means of preservation, narration, and public memory. Technologies such as CT scanning, 3D reconstruction, AR, and VR may therefore be understood as modern extensions of ancient restorative rituals that symbolically recover presence, voice, and historical identity.

Through a critical analysis of funerary traditions, theories of memory, museum ethics, and contemporary conservation practices, the paper proposes that respectful and culturally sensitive exhibition strategies—including contextual interpretation, limited exposure, and collaboration with Egyptian scholars and local communities—can honor the "holiness of resurrection" while preserving cultural heritage.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, Mummification, Resurrection, Museum ethics, Cultural preservation
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تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية الأبعاد الأخلاقية والثقافية لعرض المومياوات المصرية القديمة في المتاحف، مُعيدةً النظر في الفرضية القائلة بأن هذا العرض يُعدّ بالضرورة انتهاكًا لـ«حرمة الموت». واستنادًا إلى المعتقدات المصرية القديمة، ولا سيما المفاهيم الواردة في كتاب الموتى والدورة الأسطورية للإله أوزيريس، تنطلق الدراسة من فرضية مفادها أن التحنيط لم يكن يُقصد به التعبير عن نهائية الموت، بل كان يهدف إلى حفظ الجسد بوصفه وعاءً مقدسًا يمكن من خلاله للهوية والذاكرة أن تستمرا إلى الأبد. ومن هذا المنظور، يمكن فهم الممارسات المتحفية المعاصرة ليس بوصفها أعمال تدنيس أو انتهاك للحرمة، بل باعتبارها امتدادًا محتملًا للتطلع المصري القديم نحو التذكّر والخلود الرمزي.

وتقترح الدراسة كذلك أن التحنيط يمكن تفسيره باعتباره أحد أقدم الاستجابات الثقافية الإنسانية لمواجهة النسيان ذاته. فالمصري القديم لم يسعَ إلى حفظ الجسد فحسب، بل إلى صون الهوية والذاكرة والحضور الإنساني من التآكل بفعل الزمن. وبهذا المعنى، مثّل التحنيط تقنية ثقافية لمقاومة النسيان. ويتوافق هذا التفسير بصورة وثيقة مع النظريات الحديثة للذاكرة الثقافية والجمعية التي طورها موريس هالبفاكس، ويان أسمان، وبول ريكور.

وتذهب الدراسة إلى أن المتاحف يمكن أن تؤدي دور مؤسسات معاصرة للذاكرة، تُسهم من خلالها عمليات الحفظ والسرد والذاكرة العامة في استمرارية الهوية الثقافية. ومن ثمّ، يمكن فهم تقنيات مثل التصوير المقطعي المحوسب(CT) ، وإعادة البناء ثلاثية الأبعاد، والواقع المعزز(AR) ، والواقع الافتراضي (VR)، بوصفها امتدادات حديثة للطقوس الاستعادية القديمة التي كانت تهدف رمزيًا إلى استعادة الحضور والصوت والهوية التاريخية.

ومن خلال تحليل نقدي للتقاليد الجنائزية، ونظريات الذاكرة، وأخلاقيات المتاحف، وممارسات الحفظ المعاصرة، تقترح الدراسة أن استراتيجيات العرض القائمة على الاحترام والحساسية الثقافية — بما في ذلك التفسير السياقي، والحد من التعرض المباشر، والتعاون مع الباحثين المصريين والمجتمعات المحلية — يمكن أن تكرّم «قدسية البعث» مع الحفاظ في الوقت ذاته على التراث الثقافي.

الكلمات الافتتاحية: مصر القديمة، التحنيط، البعث، أخلاقيات المتاحف، صون التراث الثقافي.

1. Introduction

In ancient Egyptian belief, the deceased remained connected to the world of the living through ritual remembrance and the continual recitation of the name. The dead required not only bodily preservation but also the survival of memory itself. Within the theological framework of the Book of the Dead, death was not conceived as annihilation, but rather as a process of transformation and regeneration. The deceased sought not merely survival after death but continued participation within cosmic order and collective remembrance (Faulkner, 1985, pp. 40, 68, 84, 98–101, 117–126; Taylor, 2010, pp. 239–241).

For the ancient Egyptians, oblivion constituted a "second death." Spell 25 of the Book of the Dead explicitly emphasizes the preservation of the deceased's name, since the continuation of identity depended on remembrance within both divine and human consciousness (Faulkner, 1985, p. 52; Taylor, 2010, pp. 161–164). The deepest existential fear was therefore not death itself, but erasure: the disappearance of one's identity, memory, and social presence from the world.

Within this intellectual and religious framework, mummification emerged not merely as a funerary procedure but also as a cultural and theological strategy intended to resist oblivion and preserve human continuity against the destructive effects of time (Ikram & Dodson, 1998, pp. 28–45; Assmann, 2005, pp. 32–41; Teeter, 2011, pp. 71–79).

From this perspective, tombs, mortuary rituals, funerary inscriptions, and even modern museums may all be understood as mechanisms of cultural memory through which identity and remembrance are sustained across generations. Museums, therefore, can be interpreted as contemporary extensions of the ancient Egyptian discourse of remembrance, through which the deceased continue to remain present within cultural consciousness. In this sense, modern societies symbolically reenact the ancient ideal of "Going Forth by Day," as reflected in Spells 25 and 64 of the Book of the Dead (Faulkner, 1985, p. 52; Taylor, 2010, pp. 163–164, 186–194).

Contemporary preservation and visualization technologies may likewise be viewed as extensions of this enduring human aspiration to maintain continuity and remembrance across time. Nevertheless, the public display of ancient Egyptian mummies continues to generate significant ethical debate. Critics argue that the exhibition of human remains transforms sacred bodies into museum objects, thereby violating the sanctity associated with death and reducing individuals embedded within sacred funerary systems into artifacts of display.

Postcolonial and indigenous critiques further argue that many museum collections emerged through colonial systems of acquisition that often disregarded cultural consent and local authority. Contemporary debates concerning repatriation, descendant rights, and the ethics of displaying human remains therefore raise important questions concerning ownership, dignity, and historical responsibility.

This study proposes an alternative interpretation. It argues that the respectful and carefully contextualized display of mummies may, under appropriate ethical and museological conditions, accord with the ancient Egyptian ideal of resurrection and eternal remembrance. Preservation was not intended to conceal the dead from view, but to ensure continuity of existence within both divine and human memory.

By examining funerary evidence, historical practices, theories of cultural memory, and contemporary museum ethics, this study seeks to reconcile modern ethical concerns regarding the display of mummies with the theological and cultural principles that informed ancient Egyptian funerary traditions.

2. Mummification and the Belief in Resurrection

Ancient Egyptian mummification was not a mere preservation technique but a ritual process rooted in the belief that the body must endure for the soul —comprising the *kꜣ* and *bꜣ*—to reunite in the afterlife (Ikram &Dodson, 1998, pp. 50–63; Hornung, 1999, pp. 15–24; Teeter, 2011, pp. 81–94; Smith, 2023, pp. 65–80). Texts such as the Book of the Dead (e.g., Papyrus of Ani) and the Pyramid Texts emphasize that immortality depended on both bodily integrity and the continued utterance of the deceased's name (Jones, 2024, pp. 78–94). This distinction is crucial: preserving the body was never the ultimate objective, but rather the means through which identity could endure. The body preserved the name, and the name preserved the soul (Faulkner, 1985, Spell 25, p. 52; Assmann, 2001, pp. 56–61; Assmann, 2005, pp. 26–35).

Paul Ricoeur's reflections on memory, forgetting, and narrative identity further illuminate this idea. He argues that identity is sustained through continuity of remembrance and narrative reconstruction rather than through physical permanence alone (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 68–75, 80–86). In this sense, the mummy was not simply a preserved corpse, but a material anchor for memory itself (Ikram & Dodson, 1998, pp. 89–101; Assmann, 2011, pp. 36–56). This understanding resonates strongly with modern theories of cultural and collective memory developed by Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann. Halbwachs argues that memory is continually reconstructed within social frameworks that allow communities to preserve and transmit shared identities across generations (Halbwachs, 1992, pp. 38–53). Assmann further develops this concept through his theory of cultural memory, emphasizing that civilizations sustain continuity through texts, rituals, monuments, and institutional practices that preserve the past beyond the limits of living memory (Assmann, 2011, pp. 36–56).

Within this framework, remembrance becomes not merely an act of recollection but also a cultural process through which societies preserve meaning, identity, and historical continuity across time.

Historical evidence further supports this interpretation. The relocation of royal mummies to caches such as Deir el-Bahri demonstrates that ancient priests prioritized preservation and continuity over static burial conditions (Taylor, 2015, pp. 360-372). The movement of mummies from one funerary context to another did not necessarily invalidate their spiritual significance; rather, preservation itself remained paramount.

One of the clearest metaphysical representations of this belief appears in the mythological cycle of Horus and Osiris. (Pinch, 2004, pp. 91–107; Assmann, 2005, pp. 123–129). The living king embodied Horus upon earth, while in death he became identified with Osiris, the eternally renewed ruler of the afterlife. Egyptian kingship, therefore, articulated a cyclical conception of existence in which death marked not annihilation but transformation and regeneration (Hornung, 1996, pp. 88–92; Assmann, 2005, pp. 23–27). Osiris consequently emerged as a central symbol of continuity, resurrection, and eternal renewal (Allen, 2005, Utterances 606–667), embodying the triumph of ordered existence over decay and oblivion (Baines, 1987, p. 471; Assmann, 2001, pp. 56–61).

In this worldview, death represented not disappearance but the transformation of presence. The ancient Egyptians preserved their dead because they believed that identity, memory, and meaning could transcend mortality itself. From this perspective, the display of mummies in modern museums need not automatically be interpreted as a violation of the dead. Rather, museums may represent contemporary extensions of symbolic functions once performed by tombs and mortuary temples, through which remembrance and continuity were sustained.

This raises an important ethical question for the modern world: if mummies are removed from their original tombs and placed within museums, what responsibilities accompany such acts of preservation and display?

One possible response is that museums should approach mummified remains with reverence and historical sensitivity—not merely toward the dead themselves but also toward the ancient concept of resurrection and continuity that these remains embodied.

Museums are, therefore, not simply places where the dead are exhibited; they are institutions that may resist collective forgetting. In many respects, the modern museum performs a symbolic role once fulfilled by the ancient Egyptian tomb: preserving identity, continuity, and remembrance through narration, conservation, and public memory.

3. Museums as Institutions of Cultural Memory and Reverence

Contemporary museology has increasingly evolved to address concerns regarding the ethical treatment of human remains. Museums today often adopt ethical frameworks intended to preserve dignity while balancing educational, cultural, and scientific responsibilities (International Council of Museums [ICOM], 2021). Institutions such as the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization employ carefully controlled display environments characterized by subdued lighting, spatial separation, and contextual interpretation intended to emphasize

reverence rather than spectacle (Khan, 2023, pp. 33-48).

Educational and scientific considerations further support such practices. Visitor studies indicate that approximately 78% of museum visitors report a deeper appreciation of ancient Egyptian civilization after attending mummy exhibitions, suggesting that such displays can enhance public engagement with questions of memory, mortality, and cultural continuity (Lee & Patel, 2024, pp. 22–35). In addition, mummies continue to contribute significantly to archaeological and medical research. Modern technologies such as CT scanning have provided important insights into ancient diseases, dietary habits, hereditary conditions, and patterns of health and mortality (Brown, 2022, pp. 112–125).

Museums, therefore, perform functions extending beyond education alone. They also function as institutions of cultural memory that preserve historical continuity across generations. Jan Assmann describes cultural memory as the process through which societies preserve meaning over long spans of historical time. Museums may therefore be understood as contemporary spaces where the ancient Egyptian aspiration for eternal remembrance continues through preservation, interpretation, and public narration (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 68–86; Assmann, 2005, pp. 23–28).

In this sense, museums today function not merely as repositories of ancient artifacts but also as contemporary spaces of remembrance in which the Egyptian ideal of *s3ḫw*—the transfigured and glorified state of the blessed dead—is preserved, interpreted, and symbolically reanimated within modern cultural consciousness (Hornung, 1999, pp. 33–37; Assmann, 2005, pp. 23–28, 124–129; (Allen, 2005, pp. 86–89; Teeter, 2011, pp. 103–109). By honoring ancient spiritual beliefs while simultaneously advancing historical and scientific scholarship, museums become liminal spaces situated between memory and materiality, where the dead remain neither absent nor fully lost to time.

In this sense, museums function not merely as repositories of artifacts but also as spaces in which the Egyptian ideal of *s3ḫw*, the transfigured and glorified dead (Assmann, 2005, pp. 23–28, 124–129; Hornung, 1999, pp. 33–37; Allen, 2005, pp. 86–89), may be symbolically preserved within modern cultural consciousness.

By honoring ancient spiritual beliefs while simultaneously advancing historical and scientific scholarship, museums become liminal spaces situated between memory and materiality, where the dead remain neither absent nor fully lost to time.

3.1 Temples of Memory: The Symbolic Role of Museums

In ancient Egypt, tombs and mortuary temples were spaces associated with ritual transformation and remembrance. Modern museums consciously echo aspects of this symbolic role through practices of preservation, exhibition, and interpretation.

The careful conservation of mummies reflects the ancient Egyptian belief that bodily preservation was essential for eternal existence, while contemporary technologies such as CT scanning and 3D reconstruction recover elements of individual identity, historical presence, and biography (Ikram & Dodson, 1998, pp. 28–63; Assmann, 2005, pp. 32–41).

At the same time, museum display environments function as modern counterparts to sacred shrines (naoi), presenting mummies within culturally sensitive settings rather than as objects of curiosity. Institutions such as the Egyptian Museum in Cairo employ subdued lighting and spatial arrangements reminiscent of tomb chambers, emphasizing reverence and continuity with ancient funerary traditions. Furthermore, exhibition labels, audio guides, digital reconstructions, and AR experiences serve as interpretive mechanisms through which cultural memory is transmitted, paralleling the ritual and narrative functions once performed by priests through funerary recitations and sacred texts (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 84–92; Assmann, 2011, pp. 36–56).

Museum display environments likewise function as modern counterparts to sacred spaces, presenting mummies within culturally sensitive settings rather than as objects of curiosity. Exhibition labels, audio guides, digital reconstructions, and AR experiences transmit cultural memory in ways that parallel the narrative and commemorative functions once performed by funerary inscriptions, ritual recitations, and sacred texts.

Just as the tomb once protected the deceased against oblivion, museums today preserve cultural memory against historical disappearance. The museum, therefore, becomes not only a scientific institution but also a modern architecture of remembrance.

3.2 Temples of Memory: The Symbolic Role of Museums

The ancient Egyptian concept of "coming forth by day," which associated survival with continued remembrance (Faulkner, 1985, Spell 64, pp. 98–101; Taylor, 2010, pp. 186–194), finds a modern parallel in the educational and interpretive functions of museums.

Scientific technologies such as DNA analysis, CT imaging, and digital facial reconstruction provide new insights into the lives of ancient individuals, revealing information about health conditions, ancestry, and physical appearance. Scientific investigation thereby becomes a means of recovering aspects of historical identity that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

At the same time, museum exhibitions increasingly address ethical issues surrounding colonial collecting practices, repatriation debates, and the display of human remains. Such discussions encourage visitors to engage critically with questions of dignity, ownership, and historical responsibility.

Digital archives and virtual exhibitions further extend cultural preservation by making ancient materials accessible beyond the physical museum space. Even in cases where mummies may eventually be repatriated or reburied, their educational and historical significance can continue through digital documentation and scholarly interpretation.

These developments challenge the assumption that the museum display of human remains necessarily constitutes desecration. Instead, museums may function as contemporary spaces of remembrance, preservation, and cultural continuity that resonate with ancient Egyptian ideals of eternal memory.

4. Ethical Considerations and Contemporary Conservation

Although the display of mummies offers important educational and cultural benefits, ethical concerns remain regarding the removal of human remains from their original funerary contexts and their public exhibition. Critics argue that museums may unintentionally commodify the dead by transforming sacred remains into spectacles for public consumption. Others emphasize that ancient Egyptians themselves did not consent to modern exhibition practices and that colonial histories continue to shape many museum collections.

These critiques are significant and should not be dismissed. Ethical museology requires acknowledging the historical realities of colonial acquisition practices while simultaneously considering how preservation, scholarship, and respectful public interpretation may contribute to cultural continuity rather than cultural erasure. One possible approach is the development of "active reverence" exhibition strategies in which mummies are displayed within carefully controlled conditions, rotated periodically to minimize physical stress, and supplemented by digital technologies that contextualize funerary avoiding unnecessary physical exposure (Garcia, 2023, pp. 89–102).

Collaboration with Egyptian scholars, conservators, and local communities is likewise essential for ensuring culturally sensitive forms of representation and interpretation. A significant example of this approach may be seen in the Royal Mummies Hall at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC), where advanced humidified nitrogen preservation technology is employed to protect the mummies from oxidation, microbial deterioration, and environmental fluctuations (Ahmed, 2024, pp. 45–60).

Beyond its technical function, this system reflects a modern continuation of the ancient Egyptian concern with preserving the body against decay. By relying on stable environmental regulation rather than invasive chemical intervention, the method minimizes physical interference with the remains and supports the ethical principle of preserving human integrity with the least possible harm.

This conservation strategy also illustrates conceptual continuity between ancient and modern practices of preservation. Whereas ancient embalmers relied upon ritual procedures to secure bodily continuity after death, contemporary museums employ scientific conservation techniques to preserve both material remains and the cultural memory associated with them.

Nevertheless, technological preservation alone cannot fully resolve ongoing ethical questions concerning consent, cultural sensitivity, and the public display of the dead. Such methods instead demonstrate that when exhibition occurs, it can be conducted within frameworks that prioritize dignity, reverence, and responsible stewardship.

Conclusion

This study reframes the debate surrounding Egyptian mummies not as a conflict between museum display and the "sanctity of death," but rather as a dialogue with the ancient Egyptian ideal of the "holiness of resurrection."

Within the worldview of ancient Egypt, preservation was never an end in itself; it

was a means of ensuring continuity, remembrance, and enduring presence.

Mummification, therefore, represented more than a funerary practice. It was one of humanity's earliest and most profound attempts to resist oblivion and protect identity from disappearance (Ikram & Dodson, 1998, pp. 89–101; Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 68–86; Assmann, 2005, pp. 32–41). The ancient Egyptian sought not merely to preserve the physical body but also to preserve the name, memory, and human presence across time.

By aligning museum practices with these ancient beliefs, modern institutions can move beyond the perception of mummies as inert objects of display. Museums become spaces of remembrance that preserve not only physical remains but also cultural memory itself.

In this sense, the modern museum fulfills a symbolic role remarkably similar to that of the ancient Egyptian tomb: safeguarding identity, continuity, and the enduring presence of the deceased within human consciousness.

Technological advancements—including CT scanning, 3D reconstruction, and advanced nitrogen preservation systems—demonstrate that contemporary conservation may be understood as a modern extension of the ancient desire to protect the body against decay and disappearance.

At the same time, ethical questions concerning the display of human remains remain essential. Respect for cultural sensitivity, careful curatorial practices, and continued dialogue with Egyptian scholars and local communities must remain central to museum ethics.

Ultimately, museums can transcend their role as educational institutions alone. They become temples of memory, where the past remains present, where names continue to be spoken, and where remembrance itself becomes a symbolic form of resurrection.

The immortality sought by the ancient Egyptians was not simply the survival of the body, but the survival of meaning in the face of the silence of forgetting.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The research was conducted independently without any financial or commercial relationships. The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policies of ICOM Egypt or Sohag University.

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