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COME WITH ME TO THE EERIE WORLD OF MUMMIES

The Mummy Congress - Science, Obsession, and the everlasting dead *1st Edition, 2001 by* Heather Pringle
Theia Books, An imprint of Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10023-6298: 368 Pages: ISBN 0-7868-6551-2: Price $23.95

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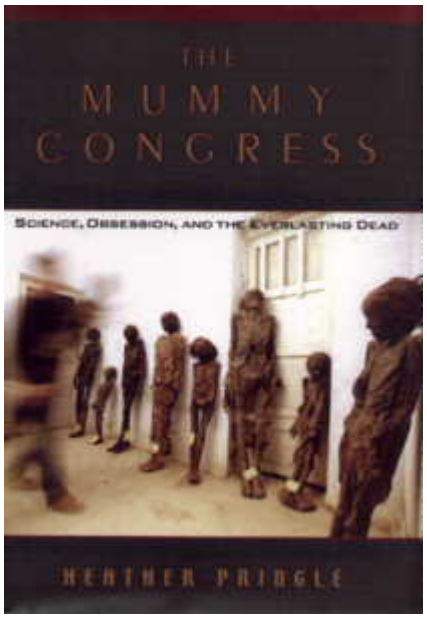

Heather Pringle



Heather Pringle, the author, is a journalist and writer who has written on archaeology and ancient cultures in numerous magazines including *Discover, National Geographic Traveler, New Scientist, Science* and *Geo*. She is also the author of two books, including *In Search of Ancient North America*. In 1998, she attended the Third World Congress in Mummy Studies, in Arica, Chile, one of the remotest and most inaccessible parts of this globe. So interested did she become in Mummies after that, that it resulted in this highly readable book. She is the winner of a National Magazine Award, Canadian Science Writers' Association Award and two Canadian Archaeological Awards. She lives in Vancouver, Canada.

During my younger days, I once read the true story of an eighteenth century eccentric Martin Van Butchell, a London dentist, who turned his wife Mary into a mummy after she died on January 14, 1775. Not only did he embalm her, but put her as an exhibit for all and sundry to see. He remarried sometime later, and not surprisingly, his second wife Elizabeth, insisted that Mary's mummy be removed from the house. Reluctantly, the dentist gave the mummy to one John Hunter for his museum (incidentally, it was his brother Dr. William Hunter, who had turned her into a mummy). By about a century later, the mummy had disintegrated into a "repulsive looking object". But it was only in 1941 - 166 years after her death - that she was finally laid to rest. How? By a German incendiary bomb, which fell on the museum, and turned everything into ashes!

View this book on Amazon

I am not sure, why memories of this story are still etched on my mind, but I suspect, part of the fascination was my astonishment at the creation of a mummy out of a person who once was as

much living as all of us are, and keeping that "object" with oneself as a "possession". Mummies interest us because they were once very much like us; they ate like us, they played, made love, felt joy, anger, hate and envy like all of us. Perhaps we see in them our own picture of how we would look after death.

A two-thousand-year-old mummy grimaces in South America's Atacama Desert. Perhaps the most arid place on earth, the Atacama is littered with the ancient preserved dead - a superb setting for a mummy congress. Pringle found herself here, at a place called Arica in Chile, in May 1998.



Heather Pringle, the author of this highly readable book, is a science journalist for the prestigious *Discover* magazine. She usually writes on archaeology. But once when her editor at *Discover* asked her "to keep an eye open for new research on the preserved dead", she earnestly began hunting for good stories on mummies. But to her surprise, not many people were ready to talk about mummies; not many actually knew about the subject. Part of this ignorance was the result of a recently passed Act in the US, the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA), passed in 1990. The Act protected native graves and in fact ordered many museums to return bones and mummies to native bands. This actually corrected some of the earlier wrongs (too many native cemeteries had earlier been plundered by anthropologists and archaeologists in search of mummies), but at the same time put a virtual stop on further studies on mummies - at least in North America.

"As a result," Pringle writes on page 9, "I didn't encounter many researchers who openly professed an interest in mummies." But finally she did meet someone who not only knew about mummies, but told her about something she had never heard of before - Third World Congress on Mummy Studies, to be held from May 18 till May 22, 1998. She went to the Congress, and so much did she enjoy it, she hated to see the congress come to an end.

What was so special about the Congress? The mysterious people? The lonely faraway place? The arcane subject? The fresh and exotic experience? Perhaps it was all of these mixed together. And when Pringle writes about the Congress, she explains everything so vividly, you feel you are actually with her attending the Congress. Mummy Congress is held every three years. I have been told that the next Congress - the IV World Congress on Mummy Studies has taken place recently on September 4-10, 2001, at the Greenland National Museum and Archives in Nuuk, Greenland. If she ever decides to write about this Congress, I would probably be the first one to buy this book.

With a light touch, pathologist Art Aufderheide prepares to photograph, then autopsy a mummy at Kellis. One of the world's foremost experts on mummies, Aufderheide collects ancient tissue for leading-edge research on parasites, infectious diseases, and mummification methods.



The Congress was held in a place called Arica in Chile, about a thousand miles north of Santiago. Having a population of just 180,000, it perches on the frontier of the famous Atacama desert. Deserts and mummies are so intricately linked together that it seemed a perfect place for a Congress on Mummies. Most mummy experts who attended the Congress with her - about 180 of them - spent their own money, and their own vacations to attend the Congress. And they came from all over the Globe - From all over North America, Europe, South America, and the Middle East.

To attend this Congress, she took a plane from Santiago, sharing the flight with one of the most colorful of the Congress' attendants, Larry Cartmell. He is a pathologist in his early fifties from Ada, Oklahoma, who assumes the position of a host, the moment he reaches Arica - a day before the start of the Congress. Among the several other colorful personalities Pringle meets in the Congress are Karl Reinhard, a lean man in his mid-forties, who teaches anthropology and palynology (study of pollen) in Lincoln, Nebraska; his wife Debbie Meier, a museum conservator; Bob Brier, a philosophy professor from Long Island; Art Aufderheide, a white haired Minnesota pathologist; Guido Lombardi, a young Peruvian physician, and Guita Hourani, a slim, vivacious Lebanese historian. They are all masters in their own fields, and all queer in some way or the other. The one common denominator among all of them is that they all love mummies. And they all love the company of one another.

...Larry Cartmell, a pathologist in his early fifties from Ada, Oklahoma, formed an impromptu one-man welcoming committee, at the Third World Congress on Mummy Studies. The whole place reeked of mummies. There was even a restaurant called "The Restaurant of the Dead", located just across the street from a local cemetery. Cartmell loved this local hangout. "This whole place," he told Pringle, beaming from ear to ear,"is built on mummies...

But by the time the Congress comes to an end, Pringle discovers a strange sense of antagonism between these mummy experts. One of the main causes of this hostility is everybody's eagerness to lay claim to newly discovered mummies. Researching and writing on mummies can mean big money. Pringle tells us that during the early 1990s, the German publishing house Bertelsmann paid a $400,000 advance to publish the story of Europe's famous frozen mummy, the Iceman. These funds are helpful to the otherwise cash-starved mummy experts to carry on their researches. After all, not every mummy expert is as fortunate as Howard Carter to have a rich Lord Carnarvon as his patron. So strong is the desire to lay claim on newly discovered mummies, that in one case, an expert went as far as accusing a female colleague of sleeping with a high ranking official in order to obtain control over a major mummy find! p class="double" align="justify">This is not the only bone of contention between the mummy experts. Another issue divides them; the issue of whether mummies should be allowed to be dissected or not. On this issue almost all experts have taken one of the two major lines. The conservationists - the younger of the lot - want that the mummies should be left as such. This group includes museum directors and curators, archaeologists and cultural anthropologists. The other major group is the so-called dissectionists.

These are mainly pathologists who believe that mummies carry lot of important and interesting medical data, which must be gleaned and used for the benefit of the living. After the Congress comes to an end, Pringle circles the globe and meets several major experts in order to explore mummies further. She goes to Denmark to see the famous Tollund Man, to Egypt to see pathologists dissect mummies, to China to talk to experts on whether there were contacts between the Chinese and the European as far back as 12th Century B.C. or not, and what had mummies to say about it and to several other places.

Surprisingly, hair is one of the most durable parts of the body, often outlasting flesh, as is evident from this macabre photograph appearing in this book. Researchers now use such locks to detect drug use in the ancient world. One of the foremost experts in the world in this field is Svetlana Balabanova, whom Pringle tracks down in Germany for an interview.



Each chapter begins with a little story - a kind of prologue for that chapter - which poses a set of questions before the reader. And then Pringle goes on to tell how she discovers the answers to those questions. Which new country does she visit to do so, which new experts she meets and interviews, and so on. In chapter four entitled "Drug Barons", for example, Pringle starts with the story of how her neighbor Neil lends her several horror movies - involving mummies - for her to watch. She watches several of them on alternate nights, all curled up on her sofa, and discovers that Hollywood screenwriters had a rather skewed view of mummies.

Mummies are shown to be dependent on tana leaves for their survival. They need three tana leaves to keep their hearts beating and nine to animate the rest of their body! Though this certainly is

fictitious, this reminded Pringle of a new branch of mummy research - discovering narcotic drugs in fine hairs of mummies. This could settle once and for all, if ancient people took such drugs as morphine or cocaine or not. Several of their art forms, potteries, and other artifacts from that period do show narcotic plants, but this does not necessarily mean the ancients were addicted to them. Only finding the narcotics in their hair would prove it. She goes and talks to Svetlana Balabanova, one of Germany's foremost specialists in hair testing.

Yde Girl, whose mummy was found in one of the peat bogs, was hauntingly beautiful.



Or take chapter five entitled "Crime Stories", an extremely interesting chapter, in which she starts with the story of how she hurriedly reached the small Danish town of Silkeborg to see the Tollund man, threw her bags in her hotel, and showed up just twenty minutes before the museum was about to close. And though the room was empty, had a strange sensation that someone was watching her. It was a surveillance camera as Christian Fischer, the museum director tells her the next day. Tollund man is one of the several mummies found in peat bogs. One other famous mummy is that of the hauntingly beautiful Yde Girl, who had existed at least 2,000 years ago, and then somebody strangulated this young girl, with a 7 foot long band, wrapping it three times around her neck.

...What is the secret alchemy of the bog? How does a peat bog convert a dead man into a mummy? It is now suggested that the answer lies in the complex chemical changes caused by the death of sphagnum moss, the chief vegetation in a bog. When sphagnum dies, it releases an unstable substance known as sphagnan, which is slowly converted by several chemical steps into humic acid. Sphagnan, humic acid and all intermediate compounds turn human flesh into a mummy!...

There are theories that these peat people were criminals. Some think they were victims of sacrifice. Could modern science solve the riddle of these bog mummies, Pringle asks? And to find answers to these questions she travels to Netherlands, meets the Dutch researcher Wijnand van der Sanden, and keeps him engaged the whole Saturday. So much so that his wife and son come to him three times to request him for an outing, and each time he politely refuses. Pringle says, she felt guilty at having ruined his family's day, but she immediately rationalizes by imagining that "these kinds of things happened fairly often".

This shows how involved Pringle is in finding out about mummies. She does not hesitate in traveling to far away and little known places, and interviewing little known experts, if it means additional information on mummies. And whatever she has gleaned through her painstaking effort, she has shared with her readers. Throughout the book, we can feel quite palpably her almost

morbid interest in mummies. And through her vivid descriptions she takes the readers to her own levels of interest.

When American researcher Victor Mair first laid eyes on Cherchen Man, he was greatly taken aback. The corpse closely resembled his own brother Dave!



In chapter six entitled "Invaders from the West", she introduces us to a new controversy - whether there was any contact between the Chinese and the Europeans before the second century B.C. or not. Nationalists in China like to believe there wasn't any. They like to believe that their civilization flourished without any inputs from the West. But there were pieces of evidences that this belief was not correct. Several Chinese words seemed to have been borrowed from European languages, Chinese silk had been recovered from tombs dating to 11th Century B.C. in Egypt, and to 6th Century B.C. in Greece and Austria. But the strongest proof came in the form of a mummy!

...Victor Mair repeatedly argued the case for early trade and contact between China and the West - as early as the Bronze age. But people would laugh at him and say,"Oh yeah? Interesting, but prove it." Mair finally found the proof - where else - in a mummy!...

Victor Mair, a professor of Chinese in the department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, visited a small museum in Ürümchi, the provincial capital of China's remote northwesternmost province Xinjiang, and among the several mummies there, found one which looked exactly like a Caucasian. To him, instead of appearing Chinese like, it appeared like his brother Dave sleeping there. He was called Cherchen Man, after the county in which he was found. Radiocarbon dating established that he existed as early as 11th Century B.C. What does this mean? Europeans had contacted the Chinese as early as that period.

There are more stories which I would like to describe in this review. But there are so many more of them in this book, that it is not possible to describe them all in this short review. It would make far more sense to buy this book, and read these stories in the original.

It's a very well written book, and I can heartily recommend it to all, whether they are interested in mummies or not. If they are - fine, but if they are not, they would become mummy addicts after reading this one.

Order *The Mummy Congress* by Clicking here

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Heather Pringle has her own website at www.heatherpringle.com. She can be approached via E-mail at hpringle@telus.net. This journal approached her for an online interview, and she graciously agreed. The interview appears in this very issue. Readers wanting to read this interview may want to the linked page (pringle).