

# I

## Mummy of Hornedjitef

*Wooden mummy case, from Thebes (near Luxor), Egypt*

ABOUT 240 BC



When I first came through the doors of the British Museum in 1954, at the age of eight, I began with the mummies, and I think that's still where most people begin when they first visit. What fascinated me then were the mummies themselves, the thrilling, gruesome thought of the dead bodies. Today, when I cross the Great Court or climb the front steps, I still see groups of excited children heading for the Egyptian galleries to brave the terror and the mystery of the mummies. Now I am much more interested in the mummy cases and, although this one is by no means the oldest object in the Museum, it seems a good place to begin this history through objects. Our chronological story begins in Chapter 2, with the earliest objects that we know were intentionally made by humans just under two million years ago, so it may seem slightly perverse to begin some way into the story. But I start here because mummies and their cases remain some of the Museum's most potent artefacts and demonstrate some of the ways in which this history will ask – and occasionally answer – different kinds of questions about objects. I've chosen this particular mummy case – made in around 240 BC for a high-ranking Egyptian priest called

Hornedjitef, and one of the most impressive in the Museum – because it is still, remarkably, yielding new information and sending us messages through time.

If we come back to a museum that we visited as a child, most of us have the sense that we have changed enormously while the things have remained serenely the same. But they haven't: thanks to continuing research and new scientific techniques, what we know about them is constantly growing. The mummy of Hornedjitef is housed in a massive black outer coffin in the shape of a human body, an elaborately decorated inner case, and then the mummy itself, carefully embalmed and wrapped up with amulets and talismans. Everything we know about Hornedjitef we know from this group of objects. In a sense, he is his own document, and one that continues to give up its secrets.

Hornedjitef arrived at the Museum in 1835, ten years or so after the mummy was excavated. Egyptian hieroglyphic script had just been deciphered, so the first step was to read all the inscriptions on his coffins, which told us who he was, what his job was, and something about his religious beliefs. We know Hornedjitef's name because it is written on his inner coffin, along with the fact that he was a priest in the Temple of Amun at Karnak during the reign of Ptolemy III – that is, between 246 and 222 BC.

The inner coffin has a fine gilded face – the gold indicates divine status, as Egyptian gods were said to have flesh of gold. Below the face is an image of the sun god as a winged scarab beetle, symbol of spontaneous life, flanked by baboons who worship the rising sun. Like all Egyptians, Hornedjitef believed that if his body was preserved he would live beyond death, but before reaching the afterlife he would have to undertake a hazardous journey for which he needed to prepare with the utmost care. So he took with him charms and spells for every eventuality. The underside of the lid of the coffin is decorated with inscriptions of spells, images showing gods, who act as protectors, and constellations of stars. Their position on the lid suggests the heavens stretched out above him, turning the whole coffin interior into a miniature cosmos: Hornedjitef has commissioned his own personal star map and time machine. Paradoxically, his meticulous preparation for the future now allows us to travel in the opposite direction, back to him and his world. And beside the numerous inscriptions, we can now

begin to decipher the thing itself – the mummy, its case and the objects it contains.

Thanks to advances in scientific research, we can learn much more about Hornedjitef today than was possible in 1835. Especially in the last twenty years, there have been huge steps forward in ways of gathering information from objects without damaging them in the process. Scientific techniques allow us to fill in many gaps which the inscriptions don't touch on – the details of everyday life, how old people were, what kind of food they ate, the state of their health, how they died and also how they were mummified. For example, until recently we have never been able to investigate inside the linen wrappings of the mummy, because unwinding the wrappings risks damaging them and the body. But now, with CT scanning techniques that are used on living people, we are able to see beneath the surface of the linen to the objects wrapped inside the cloth and to the body beneath.

John Taylor, Curator of our Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan, has been researching the mummies in the British Museum for more than two decades, and in recent years he has taken a few of them to London hospitals for special scans. These non-invasive, non-destructive examinations have yielded great insights:

We can now say that Hornedjitef was middle aged to elderly when he died, and that he was mummified according to the best methods available at the time. We know that his internal organs were taken out, carefully packaged up and then put back inside him; we can see them there, deep inside. We can see that they've poured resins – expensive oils – into his body to preserve him, and we can also detect amulets, rings and jewellery and little charms placed on him beneath the wrappings, to protect him on his journey to the afterlife. If you unwrap a mummy it's a very destructive process, and the amulets, which are very small, can move out of place; the positioning of them was absolutely crucial to their magical function, and by scanning the mummy we see them all exactly in position in the same relationships to each other that they had when they were placed there thousands of years ago, so that is a huge gain in knowledge. We can also examine the teeth in great detail, establishing the wear and the dental disease that they suffered from; we can look at the bones, and have seen that Hornedjitef had arthritis in his back, which must have been very painful.

Recent scientific advances have allowed us to find out about a great deal more than Hornedjitef's bad back. Being able to read the words on his coffin tells us about his place in society and what that society believed about life after death, but the new techniques enable us to analyse the materials with which mummies were prepared and coffins made, which helps us understand how Egypt was economically connected to the world round about it. Mummies may for us be quintessentially Egyptian, but it turns out that it took far more than the resources of Egypt alone to make them.

By isolating and testing the materials involved in mummification we can compare their chemical make-up with substances found in different parts of the eastern Mediterranean and begin to reconstruct the trading networks that supplied materials to Egypt. For instance, some mummy cases have black, tarry bitumen on their surface, which it is possible, by chemical analysis, to track to its source – the Dead Sea, many hundreds of miles to the north, in an area not normally under direct Egyptian control. This bitumen must have been traded. Some coffins are made of expensive cedar wood, bought in large and costly quantities from the Lebanon; when we tally such luxury wood with the titles and rank of the people whose coffins are made of it, we begin to get a sense of the ancient Egyptian economic background. The range of coffin woods, local or imported, high or low cost, as well as the quality of the woodwork, the fittings and the level of artistry of the paintings on coffins, all reflect social income and class. Putting individuals like Hornedjitef in these wider contexts, seeing them not just as single survivors from a distant past but as parts of a complete society, is helping us to write fuller histories of ancient Egypt than those which have been possible in the past.

Most of the material that Hornedjitef had with him in his coffin was designed to guide him through the great journey to the afterlife, and to help him overcome all foreseeable difficulties. The one thing his star map certainly did not predict was that he would ultimately wind up in London, at the British Museum. Is that as it should be? Should Hornedjitef and his possessions be here at all? Questions like this come up frequently. Where do things from the past belong now? Where are they best shown? Should everything be exhibited where it was originally made? They are important, and I will return to them at

various points in the book. I asked the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif how she felt about seeing so many Egyptian antiquities so far from home, here in London:

Ultimately it's probably no bad thing to have Egyptian obelisks and stones and statues sprinkled all over the world. It reminds us of ages of colonialism, yes, but it also reminds the world of our common heritage.

In the Museum, Hornedjitef's story, like that of all the other objects housed there, continues. Their journeys are not yet finished and neither is our research, which is carried out with colleagues all over the world and which contributes all the time to our shared and growing understanding of the global past – our common heritage.

## 2

# Olduvai Stone Chopping Tool

*Tool found in Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania*

1.8–2 MILLION YEARS OLD



This chopping tool is one of the earliest things that humans ever consciously made, and holding it puts us directly in touch with those who made it. In this history of the world told through things, this chipped stone from Africa – from modern Tanzania – is where it all begins.

If, as I said in the introduction, one of the points of any museum is to allow us to travel through time, our understanding of just how much time there is to travel through has expanded dramatically since the British Museum first opened its doors, in 1759. At that point, most of the visitors would probably have agreed that the world had begun in 4004 BC, to be precise at nightfall preceding Sunday 23rd October that year. This astonishingly exact date had been calculated in 1650 by Archbishop Ussher of Armagh, who preached in Lincoln's Inn, close to the British Museum, and who carefully trawled the Bible totting up the lifespans of everyone descended from Adam and Eve, then combining that with other data to reach his date. But in the past couple of centuries, archaeologists, geologists and museum curators have steadily been pushing back the chronology of human history from Archbishop Ussher's 6,000 years to an almost unimaginable two million.

So if the beginning of human time was not in the Garden of Eden in 4004 BC, when was it, and where? There were many suggestions, but no conclusive answers and certainly no reliable date until 1931, when a young archaeologist called Louis Leakey set off on a British Museum-sponsored expedition bound for Africa.

Leakey's goal was Olduvai Gorge, a deep cleft in the flat savannah of northern Tanzania, not far from the border with Kenya. It is part of the East African Rift Valley, a massive tear in the Earth's surface thousands of miles long. It was at Olduvai that Leakey examined exposed layers of rocks that act like a series of time capsules. As Leakey studied the rocks shaped by the sun, the wind and the rain on the savannahs, he reached a layer where the rocks were also shaped by something else – human hands. They were found next to bones, and it was clear that these stones had been shaped into butchering tools to strip meat and break into the bones of animals killed on the savannah. Geological evidence subsequently established beyond doubt that the layer where the tools were found was roughly two million years old. This was archaeological dynamite.

Leakey's excavations produced the oldest known humanly made things anywhere in the world at that time, and they demonstrated that not only human beings but also human culture had begun in Africa. This stone chopping tool was one of those that Leakey found. The great naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough expresses something of the excitement that Leakey must have felt:

Holding this, I can feel what it was like to be out on the African savannahs, needing to cut flesh, for example, to cut into a carcass, in order to get a meal.

Picking it up, your first reaction is it's very heavy, and if it's heavy of course it gives power behind your blow. The second is that it fits without any compromise into the palm of the hand, and in a position where there is a sharp edge running from my forefinger to my wrist. So I have in my hand now a sharp knife. And what is more, it's got a bulge on it so I can get a firm grip on the edge, which has been chipped specially and is sharp . . . I could perfectly effectively cut meat with this. That's the sensation I have that links me with the man who actually laboriously chipped it once, twice, three times, four times, five times on one side and three

times on the other . . . so eight specific actions by him, knocking it with another stone to take off a flake, and to leave this almost straight line, which is a sharp edge.

We have recently made a new chopping tool using the techniques that would have been used in Olduvai Gorge. Holding the new one in my hand, it becomes very clear how well you can use it as an implement to strike meat off a carcass. I have tried using it on a bit of roast chicken. The chopping tool is quick and effective at stripping the meat off the bone, and then, with one blow, I can break the bone and get to the marrow. But you could also use a tool like this to strip bark off trees or to peel roots, so that you could eat them as well. This is, in fact, a very versatile kitchen implement. Lots of animals, particularly apes, use objects; but what sets us apart from them is that we make tools before we need them, and once we have used them we keep them to use again. This chipped stone from Olduvai Gorge is the beginning of the toolbox.

The early humans who used chopping tools like this were probably not hunters themselves, but they were brilliant opportunists – they waited until lions, leopards or other beasts had killed their prey and then they moved in with their chopping tools, secured the meat and the marrow, and hit the protein jackpot. Marrow fat doesn't sound tremendously appetizing, but it is hugely nutritious – fuel not just for physical strength but also for a large brain. The brain is an extremely power-hungry mechanism. Although it accounts for only 2 per cent of our body weight, it consumes 20 per cent of our entire energy intake, and it requires constant nourishment. Our ancestors of nearly two million years ago secured their future by giving it the food it needed to grow. When stronger, faster, fiercer predators had killed their prey and were at rest out of the heat, early humans were able to look for food. Using tools like this one to obtain bone marrow, the most nutritious part of a carcass, they set in train an ancient virtuous circle. This food for body and mind meant that the more cunning, larger-brained individuals would survive to breed larger-brained children, capable in their turn of making ever more complex tools. You and I are just the latest product of this continuing process.

The human brain carried on evolving over millions of years. One



of the most important developments was that it started to become asymmetrical as it got to grips with a whole range of different functions – logic, language, the coordinated movement needed for tool-making, imagination and creative thought. The left and right hemispheres of the human brain have adapted to specialize in different skills and tasks – quite unlike the ape’s brain, which remains not only smaller but symmetrical. This chopping tool represents the moment at which we became distinctly smarter, with an impulse not just to make things but to imagine how we could make things ‘better’. As Sir David Attenborough says:

This object sits at the base of a process which has become almost obsessive among human beings. It is something created from a natural substance for a particular purpose, and in a particular way, with a notion in the maker’s mind of what he needed it for. Is it more complex than was needed to actually serve the function which he used it for? I think you could almost say it is. Did he really need to do one, two, three, four, five chips on one side and three on the other? Could he have got away with two? I think he might have done so. I think the man or woman who held this made it just for that particular job and perhaps got some satisfaction from knowing that it was going to do it very effectively, very economically and very neatly. In time, you would say he’d done it beautifully, but maybe not yet. It was the start of a journey.

Those extra chips on the edge of the chopping tool tell us that right from the beginning, we – unlike other animals – have felt the urge to make things more sophisticated than they need to be. Objects carry powerful messages about their makers, and the chopping tool is the beginning of a relationship between humans and the things they create which is both a love affair and a dependency.

From the point where our ancestors started making tools like this, people have been unable to survive without the things they make; in this sense, it is making things that makes us human. Leakey’s discoveries in the warm earth of the Rift Valley did more than push humans back in time: they made it clear that all of us descend from those African ancestors, that every one of us is part of a huge African diaspora – we all have Africa in our DNA and all our culture began there.

Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Peace Prize-winner, assesses the implications:

The information we have tells us that we came from somewhere in eastern Africa. Because we are so used to being divided along ethnic lines, along racial lines, and we look all the time for reasons to be different from each other, it must be surprising to some of us to realize that what differentiates us is usually very superficial, like the colour of our skin or the colour of our eyes or the texture of our hair, but that essentially we are all from the same stem, the same origin. So, I think that as we continue to understand ourselves and to appreciate each other – especially when we get to understand that we all come from the same origin – we will shed a lot of the prejudices that we have harboured in the past.

Listening to the news on the radio, or watching it on television, it is easy to see the world as divided into rival tribes and competing civilizations. So it's good, in fact it's essential, to be reminded that the idea of our common humanity is not just an Enlightenment dream, but a genetic and cultural reality. It is something we'll see again and again in this book.