

A corner of the excavations at Meydum, showing how late comers burrowed intrusive graves into the solid masonry of a great mastabah.



Group of Mummies Found in Mastabah

Archæology

SPIDERWEBS 2000 years old form the delicate but authentic seal testifying to the genuineness of one of the greatest finds of mummy coffins ever made in Egypt. The coffins, according to a cablegram from Alan Rowe, field director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum expedition, do not constitute a regular burial, but are stacked up like boxes or crates in a series of five rooms within a mastabah or flat-topped tomb structure. Their inscriptions show that they date all the way from 2000 B. C. to almost the beginning of the Christian era.

The discovery was made at Meydum, the great national burying ground of the royalty and aristocracy of ancient Egypt. Why these ancient Egyptians should have hustled a troop of still more ancient dead into such unceremonious storage is not known as yet. It is however quite possible that the mummies were evicted from their proper rooms because other and later mummified comers wanted to sleep there. Egyptians had a bad habit of doing that; tomb curses, such as the one causing the present wave of superstition about Tut-Ankh-Amon's coffin, were a fairly common attempt at precaution against such usurpations of other men's graves.

Another bad habit that a lower class of ancient Egyptians had was the outright looting of the tombs. Fortunately, grave-robbers never found this cache of coffins, as the unbroken cobwebs show. None of the coffins has been robbed, though some of them are broken by falls of stone from the ceilings. As yet very little has been done toward the examination of the contents of the

coffins, but a promise of what may be expected is given by a splendid head-net of gold worn by one mummy, over which is a golden flying scarab and a gilded mask. Many rare amulets and pendants, together with great quantities of beads, have already been recovered.

The coffins are not those of royalty, but rather those of well-to-do people of the times and their investigation will doubtless add greatly to our knowledge of Egyptian gentleness and prosperous middle-class people.

The find is declared to be one of the greatest groups of coffins ever unearthed at one time in Egypt, and the greatest collection of Ptolemaic mummies ever found in one tomb. Ptolemaic times in Egypt were of comparatively late date, when the land was ruled by the successors of the Macedonian ruler who followed Alexander the Great, and just prior to the day when Rome swallowed up the country as a province of its empire. Cleopatra was the last of the Ptolemies.

"Our first view of the great cache was through a small hole in the rock which suddenly appeared in the side of a more or less empty chamber of the pit," cabled Mr. Rowe. "Looking through the hole by means of a flashlight numberless coffins were seen stacked to the top of the chambers. The sight, in fact, was one of those rare ones which comes to the excavator perhaps once in his lifetime. Suspended from the ceiling were even the ancient cobwebs made by the spiders of twenty centuries ago."

So important is the new discovery in the opinion of Museum officials that Director Horace H. F. Jayne decided to advance the date of his departure for Egypt and sailed on March 1 in order to inspect the material as soon as possible. The pit is being guarded day and night pending his arrival and the further exploration of the chambers where the coffins were found.

Mr. Jayne will inspect the work of the Museum expedition which is clearing the great pyramid attributed to King Snefru who ruled Egypt about 2900 B. C., as well as the mastabah where the relatives of the king and nobles of the period are believed to be buried.

The owner of this mastabah was a clever individual, determined to outwit intruders. He had the Egyptian laborers who built the tomb cut an opening in the wall and constructed a brick stairway, such as might well lead down into the burial chambers. At the foot of the stairs came a drop of six feet, and beyond this surprise came a tunnel, with a blockade about midway of its length. And at the end of the tunnel—blank wall.

The clues all indicate that the tomb will eventually prove to be that of a royal person closely connected with the Pharaoh Snefru whose pyramid is nearby, the report explains. The tomb is in the form of a mastabah, a construction with sloping sides and flat top. The only mastabah at Meydum larger than that now being excavated belonged to the oldest son of Snefru.

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