

## **Curating the sacred and sacralised. A comparative study on animal mummies from Asyut (Egypt) and museum collections in Berlin and Lyon**

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This research project will explore the complex relationship between ancient Egyptian religious practices and animal care through the study of animal mummies and remains. From 2025 to 2028, comprehensive studies of mummy collections in Egypt, Berlin and Lyon will seek to resolve an intriguing puzzle: why did sacred or sacralised animals show signs of poor health during their lives, despite their religious importance? This question challenges our current understanding of ancient Egyptian attitudes towards religious animals and their practices.

Several key animal types will form the focus of the research team's work. Detailed examinations will cover dog-like wild animals found in Egypt, which recent discoveries have shown to be more closely related to grey wolves than jackals as previously thought. The evolutionary history of these canids may present fascinating questions about ancient Egyptian animal selection processes. Cat remains will undergo thorough analysis to better understand wild and domestic felid interactions, including reproduction patterns and domestication processes that shaped ancient Egyptian society. Meanwhile, studies of crocodile remains will track different species' distribution in ancient Egypt, offering insights into regional variations in religious practices. Careful observations of mummification methods will reveal variations across different locations and time periods, potentially uncovering local traditions and technological developments.

Modern scientific techniques will enable unprecedented understanding of these ancient practises. Detailed bone examinations will determine the animals' age, sex and physical characteristics, whilst also revealing any signs of disease or malnutrition. Advanced technology like micro-CT scanning will enable internal examination of the mummies without unwrapping them, preserving these precious artefacts for future generations. Sophisticated DNA analysis from both ancient and modern animals will reveal relationships and breeding patterns, whilst chemical trace studies can illuminate dietary habits, living environments, and possibly even seasonal variations in animal care practices. These cutting-edge methods promise to revolutionise our understanding of ancient Egyptian human-animal interactions.

The ambitious work will take place across four main locations: the archaeological site of Gebel Asyut al-gharbi in Egypt, where new excavations may uncover additional specimens, two museums in Berlin (Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung and Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin), Germany and a museum in Lyon (Musée des Confluences in Lyon), France. Each location houses unique collections that will contribute different pieces to this archaeological puzzle.

By integrating specialists across archaeology, zoology, genetics and Egyptology, this groundbreaking project seeks to uncover how ancient Egyptians navigated the intersection of faith and animal keeping. Through meticulous analysis and collaboration, the research team will explore the complex relationship between religious rituals, veterinary practices and the animal mummification in antiquity.