Man's best friend for eternity: dog and human burials in ancient Egypt

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ABSTRACT
There is a long history of animal burials, both ritual and pet, in Egypt. Among the many animals buried in Egypt, dogs are amongst the most commonly found. In the cases of ritual (votive) deposits, the dogs (*Canis lupus familaris*) are buried in groups together, far from any human remains. A handful of pet burials indicate that dogs were buried near their owners. However, recent excavations in the Fayum and Baharia Oases have yielded a hitherto unknown type of deposit, containing both dog and human remains. This paper will explore, in a preliminary study, the phenomenon of joint human and canid burials in Graeco-Roman Egypt and try to understand the precise meaning and nature of these assemblages.

KEY WORDS
Dog,
Egypt,
burial,
mummies,
votive offerings,
animal cult,
pets,
Hecate,
Anubis,
canine.

RÉSUMÉ
Le meilleur ami de l'homme pour l'éternité: des chiens et des sépultures humaines en Egypte ancienne.
De nombreux cas de tombes d'animaux sont attestés en Egypte ancienne. Les chiens (*Canis lupus familaris*) y sont les plus fréquemment observés. Dans la majorité des cas, ils sont inhumés loin des restes humains. Une poignée de sépultures animales est cependant observée près de tombes humaines, mais de récentes fouilles dans le Fayoum et l'oasis Baharia ont mis au jour un type inconnu jusqu'alors de dépôt, contenant à la fois des chiens et des restes humains. Cet article explore, dans le cadre d'une étude préliminaire, ce phénomène et essaye de comprendre le sens de ces assemblages.

MOTS CLÉ
Chien,
Egypte,
tombe,
momies,
offrandes votives,
culte d'animaux,
Hécate,
Anubis.

Fig. 1. — The dog (CG 29836) found in the Valley of the Kings that was probably a royal pet, deserving of his own tomb. Photo, Anna-Marie Kellen.

Animal burials are well attested in ancient Egypt. Many different varieties of animals were interred, with dogs being amongst the first to be afforded this sort of care and respect. This article presents a very brief overview of the different types of dog burials found in Egypt, emphasizing some unusual burial types that have come to light in the last few years that are currently under study.

Dogs (*Canis lupus familaris*) played an important role throughout Egyptian history, acting as guards, hunting aids, and companions. They also held a key position in Egyptian religion, being closely associated with the gods Anubis and Wepwawet, deities related to travel, whether it was through the desert, or between this world and the next. Additionally, Anubis was associated with mummification, perhaps a further cause for his having a particularly large and active cult throughout Egyptian history, particularly in the Late and Graeco-Roman periods (DuQuesne 2005; 2007) when mummification was widely available to people of varying social classes. Part of the cultic activity during these periods consisted of pilgrims offering votive gifts to the god. These might take the form of stelae, statuary, or even a mummified canine that would convey the donor's prayers/requests to the god throughout eternity. Actual animals might have to been considered the most effective and direct path to the god's ear as they had once been living, breathing emissaries of the god on earth, and consequently more worthy of immediate attention as opposed to objects made of stone, mud, metal or wood.

The earliest examples of animal cemeteries date to the Predynastic Period (Flores 2003; Van Neer 2004), and generally consist of simple burials of animals in oval or roughly rectangular pits sometimes marked by a tumulus. Dogs are found interred in

these; however, it is unclear as to the whether these were pets or some sort of sacred/totemic animals. Pet burials generally occur within the context of a human's tomb, whether in its owner's coffin, in a coffin of its own, buried in either the burial chamber or some other chamber in the tomb or its environs (Ikram 2005, Chapter 1). Votive mummies, the most commonly found type of dog burials, are found in massive quantities in catacombs, pits, or reused tombs, sometimes located close to, or associated with, temples of Anubis. Most of these have been loosely dated from the Late Period through the Roman era (c. 664 BC-AD 350) (Ikram 2005; Dunand 2005; Charron 2001; Kessler 1986). Both pet and votive mummy burials have been found in Pharaonic Egypt; this practice of burying dogs in both non-religious and religious contexts continued well into the Ptolemaic/Roman period, as is attested by the recent discovery at Berenike (Marta Osypinska and Iwona Zych, pers. comms.), and the active continuation of animal cults into the Roman Period.

Although pet dog burials exist, relatively few have been found intact—of course, more might have been found in the early days of excavation, but not properly recorded. In some cases, such as that of Hapimen (Tomb G61 at Abydos; Petrie 1902: 39-42), a mummified dog was placed in the same coffin as his master—quite possibly he pined away after his master died and was interred with him. Other dogs merely share their master's tomb (Chaix & Olive 1986), or were buried nearby, as was the case with the dogs belonging to the kings of Dynasty I (3050-2813 BC) who were buried at Abydos with each grave marked by a stela (Dreyer *et al.* 1993: 59). One extremely well preserved dog found in tomb 50 of the Valley of the Kings might have belonged to one of the kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty buried nearby (Amenhotep II (1424-1398 BC) or Horemheb [1328-1298 BC]) and might well have been his favoured hunting hound (Ikram and Iskander 2002: 26-8 ; Fig. 1) In any case, the idea was that the animals and their masters could spend eternity together.

The most commonly found type of dog burials consist of votive mummies and date from the sixth century BC to (probably) the fourth century AD (Fig. 2). Canine cemeteries of different sizes are found throughout Egypt, including at the sites of Hardai/Cynopolis, Saqqara, Asyut, Sheikh Fadl, Abydos, Badari, Stabl Antar, Gebel Abu Feda, Sheikh Fadl, Gerzeh, Hu, Kharga, Lahun, Medinet Gurab, Koptos, Manfalut, Meidum, Qaw, el-Amarna, Sharuna, and Thebes (Fig. 3, see Kessler 1986: 579-80 for lists and Ikram 2005: xvii). Millions of dogs of all ages have been interred in these cemeteries, all with varying qualities of mummification. They are thought to have been offered by pilgrims and kept in the temples until specific festivals when they were interred in the associated catacombs or tombs (Ikram 2005: Chapter 1; Ikram in press b; Ikram 2013; Charron 2001; Ikram 2013 ; Fig. 4)

FIG. 2. — A mummified dog (CG29641) that was a votive offering. Photo, Anna-Marie Kellen.

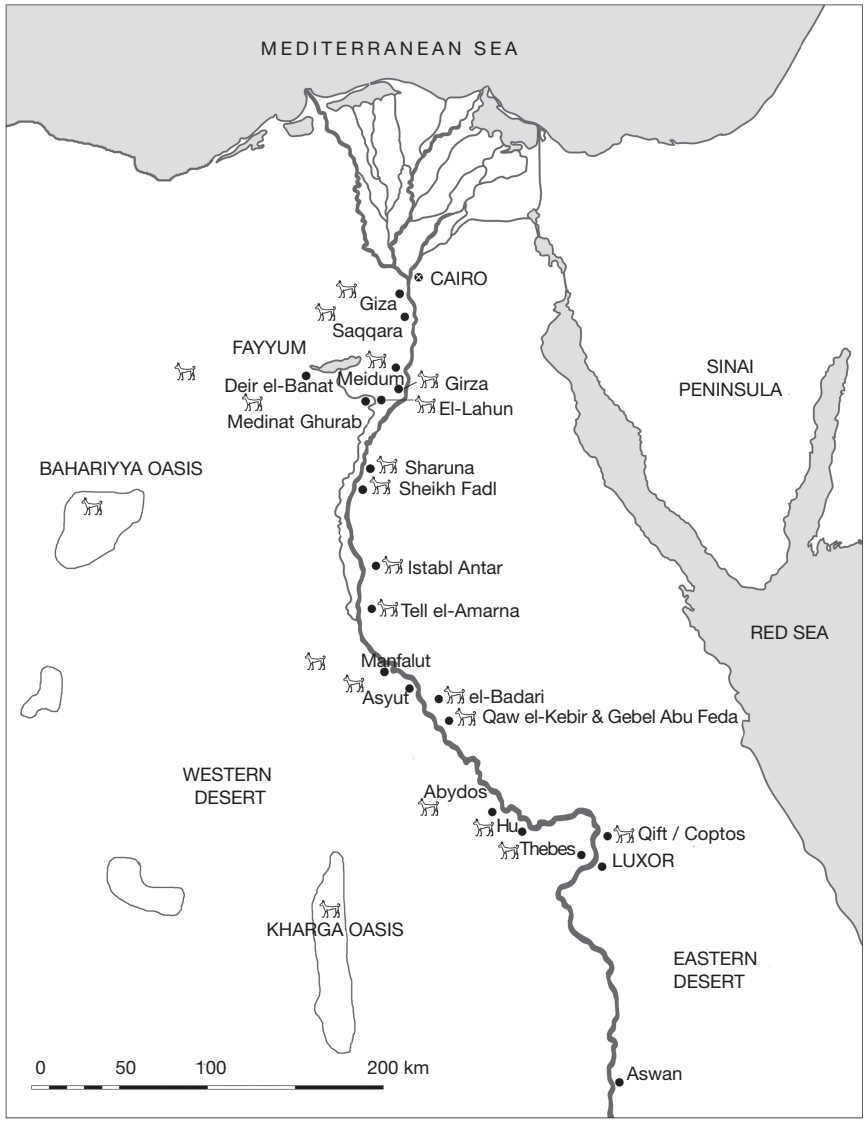

Fig. 3. — A map showing the major canine cemeteries in Egypt. Drawing, Nicholas Warner.

A few canine burials do not fit into the above two categories. The first of these is unique and was noted in the burial chamber of a tomb at Thebes in the 19th century by Henry Rhind. "At the head of the sarcophagus four curious objects were placed upon the floor. First came a figure about eighteen inches long, being the body of a dog very nearly of the shape and size of a small Italian greyhound, imperfectly preserved with natron, and swathed in osiers. Then followed a mummied ibis; a copy of a small hawk perched on a pedestal, considerably decayed, but apparently constructed of folds of linen cloth gummed together; and an oblate ball of bitumen from three to four inches in diameter"

(Rhind 1862, 99), which might have contained a snake. Rhind interpreted the dog as Anubis, leading the deceased to the Judgement Hall of Osiris where his eternal fate would be decided, and the ibis symbolizing the god Thoth who recorded Osiris' judgement. Thus, according to Rhind the actual ibis and dog were being used instead of statues of the gods. He neither comments on why no real raptor was used to represent Horus and the role that he would have played in the funerary proceedings, nor on the role of the snake. It is possible that as raptors are hard to breed and not easy to find, a facsimile was used instead of a real animal; however, Horus rarely plays a part in the Hall of Judgement, so why place it there? The relevance of the snake is also problematic as, although there are many snake deities, none is present in the Judgement scene. Perhaps both the snake and the raptor were emblematic of the sun god Ra who was reborn daily, and thus their presence helped guarantee the deceased a place in the hereafter.

The second type of canine burials that neither fits into the pet nor the votive group has only come to light since 2005. Excavations at Saqqara, Giza, and Baharia Oasis have yielded burials containing both dog and human remains.[1] All of these date from the 26th Dynasty or later. In a recent paper these have been identified as 'amuletic' animal mummies found in conjunction with human burials (Hartley 2011),[2] based primarily on the work of the authors on a deposit of dogs dating to the Roman period in Saqqara's Teti Cemetery. While some of the deposits they examined were clearly votive deposits, one group was clearly different. It consisted of human burials with no grave goods, but with associated dogs; one such burial was found in a subterranean constructed structure, while the other seven were found in the sand and gravel deposited in the area. In their Tomb 2 one dog was placed near the entry

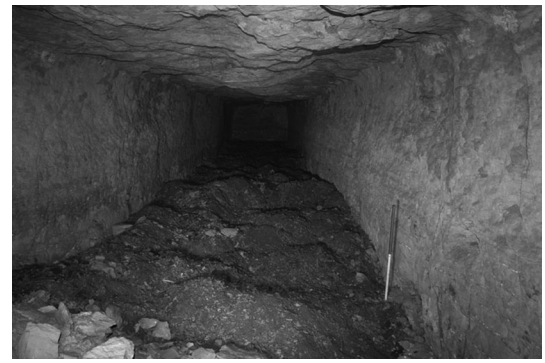

Fig. 4. — The dog catacombs at Saqqara where an estimated eight million animals were interred. Photo, Paul Nicholson.

into a chamber filled with human bodies, as if it were guarding them. The sand and gravel burials took two forms: the first with humans placed in wooden coffins buried with one or more dogs at the north side at the foot end of the coffin, and the second where the body of the human was placed directly into a shallow pit in the sand matrix with several dogs placed nearby at the edge of the burial pit, a transitional zone between this world and the next through which Anubis would guide the deceased. Both the humans and the animals were of various ages and both sexes. The authors conclude, most persuasively, "that as Egyptian culture evolved, the physical dog was considered to be either an adequate replacement for, or a valuable complement to the Anubis amulet [placed on the deceased's body] to ensure the continuing and unbroken assistance of Anubis for the deceased" (Hartley 2011). They also point out that the dog mummies have the added benefit of being cheap and unattractive to grave robbers: although the human mummies had been disturbed, the dogs had not. A pity the amulet failed to protect the bodies!

The article identifies another amuletic mummy in the nearby Gisr el-Mudir in southwest Saqqara. Here, a burial chamber is reported to have contained a niche within which lay four human bodies with a dog at their heads (Hawass 2010). Generally pet mummies have been found associated with only one human burial; it is unusual to have a group of people with an animal guarding their heads. The

1. I am grateful to Jessica Kaiser (Giza), Boyo Okinga and Susanne Binder (Saqqara), and Frédéric Colin (Baharia Oasis); Galina Belova, Alexei Krol, and Arkady Savinetsky (Deir el-Banat) for their invitations to visit their sites and work on the zooarchaeological material.

2. My thanks to Susanne Binder for graciously sending me a pre-publication copy of the article.

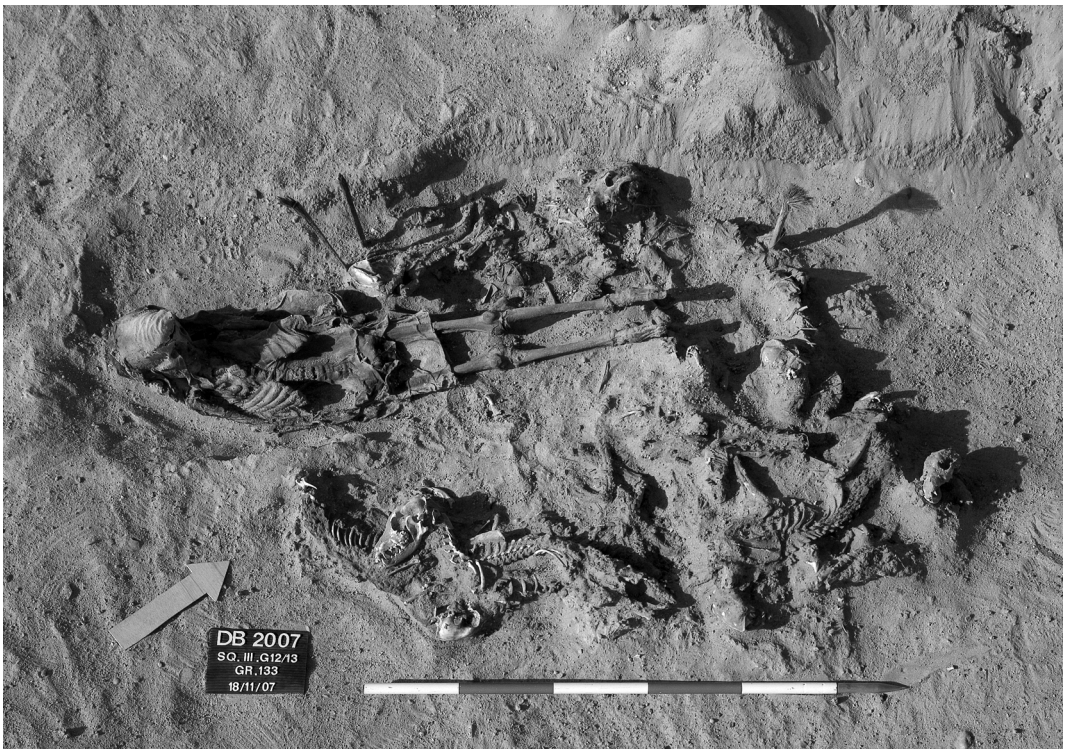

Fig. 5. — The child buried with a group of dogs at the site of Deir el-Banat. Photo: A. Savinetsky.

arrangement in this tomb is similar to the arrangement found in Tomb 2 in the Teti cemetery and one could argue in favour of this being an amuletic mummy; however, an alternative interpretation is also possible: that this was a favoured household pet that took up his position of guardianship of the entire family in death as he had in life. The multiple burials argue for additions of humans and animals to a burial chamber.

At Giza eight dogs, four (young) adults and four puppies had been very basically mummified and were buried above a group of humans that had not been mummified at all. It is unclear if the dogs and the humans were interred as a deliberate group or whether the dogs represent a later phase of activity in the cemetery; this latter idea seems to be more favoured by the excavators as the burial of the humans seem to have been significantly earlier than that of the dogs (Kaiser 2009). In this scenario the dogs might fall under the rubric of votive animals whose purpose would be to safeguard its giver in this world and the next. However, if it is the former, then maybe the dogs were placed as guardians or guides for the deceased so that they reached the Afterworld safely, and could be thought of as amuletic burials.

In Deir el-Banat (Fayum) a Russian team's excavations in the Graeco-Roman cemetery revealed a young child, under 14 years of age, lying in a shallow depression at the edge of the cemetery. There was little evidence for mummification; the body's preservation seemed a result of natural desiccation. A piece of linen was placed over the face and covered the area down to mid-thigh. The body lay on the north-western edge of a group of crudely mummified dogs (Belov and Savinetsky, in preparation) that had been buried in a shallow pit in the sand (Fig.5). The animals were of all ages, with the majority being mature and had been kept in a seated position using papyrus

Fig. 6. — A dog and child burial in a niche in Baharia. Photo, Salima Ikram.

pith as binding, rather than being wrapped in the more usual linen cloth. This juxtaposition of human and dog burial is very curious and does not fit in with the idea of amuletic burials. It is possible that the child had been a caretaker of dogs raised to be votive offerings and when it died it was honoured by being placed with its charges—certainly occasional human burials have been found in animal catacombs, although the degree of their relatedness is still disputed.[3] This would be a case of mutual benefit as the dogs would be guaranteed care, and the child would be assured an eternal existence, the goal of every Egyptian.

The most curious group of human and dog burials comes from Qasr 'Allam (Bahariya Oasis) and is yet to be fully excavated and studied[4]. The date of the deposit remains to be established; it could be from the middle of the 26th Dynasty through to the early Roman era. Here, in the casemates a large mudbrick construction, excavators found several dog and human burials in the sand that had collected here, as well as carefully placed in some niches that had been cut into the walls (Colin and Adam, conference presentation; Colin and Adam in preparation; Pantalacci & Denoix 2009). None of the bodies (both human and canine) showed traces of mummification and were skeletonized. The majority of human burials were of infants, with a few teenagers and almost no adults. A preliminary examination indicates that the dogs were of all ages, although as they have yet to be processed there is no data on age distribution currently available. Colin and Adam report that in some cases a dog had been

3. A human burial was placed atop the thousands of dogs in one of the galleries in the Anubeion at Saqqara (pers. observation, together with P. Nicholson).

4. I am grateful to Frédéric Colin and Frédéric Adam for generously sharing their information and reports.

put in a niche; then the niche had been usurped for an infant—however, instead of throwing out the dog from the niche, it was gently moved aside, its articulation only slightly compromised (was this because it was not yet skeletonized?), and the baby placed in its stead (Fig. 6). This also occurred in the burials on the floor of the casemates; in a few cases it seems as if humans had made way for the dogs, indicating that both four and two legged creatures were being treated with equal respect. In other cases, baby and dog were nestled together. This deposit is extremely curious and fits into none of the categories of animal mummies—it is possible that it reflects a local custom unique to the region, or might even have some magico-religious function derived from both Egyptian and foreign traditions that mingled in the oasis, or from a foreign one alone, such as the practice of sacrificing a dog or puppy in conjunction with the setting of Sirius the Dog Star at the festival of Robigalia (Pliny Natural History Book XVIII: 69). Pliny also mentions that puppies were thought to absorb illness and that they could 'take on/away' disease. Maybe the burials here were the results of failures of such a practice.

It should also be noted that in the Graeco-Roman traditions, dogs were also frequently sacrificed to Hecate, a chthonic divinity associated with magic as well as doorways and crossroads—i.e., areas of transition. Perhaps the deposits from Graeco-Roman sites with combined human and animal burials are examples where animals were sacrificed and interred with humans to appease and invoke both Hecate and Anubis as gods of the afterworld, travel, and liminal areas, thus ensuring the safety of the deceased in his travels to the Afterworld.

These mixed human and dog burials clearly need further research. Perhaps new examples will be found that will elucidate this type of deposit further. One thing, however, remains clear: in death, as in life, dogs played a highly significant role in Egyptian culture and religion.

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