



Publikationen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts

Vera Rondano

Egypt. Symbolism and Social Value of Mummy Nets in the Late Period. Research Work Undertaken from October to December 2024

e-Forschungsberichte Faszikel 2 (2025) 1–13 (§)

<https://doi.org/10.34780/mrvmw360>

Herausgebende Institution / Publisher:
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

Copyright (Digital Edition) © 2025 Deutsches Archäologisches Institut
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Zentrale, Podbielskiallee 69–71, 14195 Berlin, Tel: +49 30 187711-0
Email: info@dainst.de | Web: <https://www.dainst.org>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Mit dem Herunterladen erkennen Sie die [Nutzungsbedingungen](#) von iDAI.publications an. Sofern in dem Dokument nichts anderes ausdrücklich vermerkt ist, gelten folgende Nutzungsbedingungen: Die Nutzung der Inhalte ist ausschließlich privaten Nutzerinnen / Nutzern für den eigenen wissenschaftlichen und sonstigen privaten Gebrauch gestattet. Sämtliche Texte, Bilder und sonstige Inhalte in diesem Dokument unterliegen dem Schutz des Urheberrechts gemäß dem Urheberrechtsgesetz der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Die Inhalte können von Ihnen nur dann genutzt und vervielfältigt werden, wenn Ihnen dies im Einzelfall durch den Rechteinhaber oder die Schrankenregelungen des Urheberrechts gestattet ist. Jede Art der Nutzung zu gewerblichen Zwecken ist untersagt. Zu den Möglichkeiten einer Lizenzierung von Nutzungsrechten wenden Sie sich bitte direkt an die verantwortlichen Herausgeber*innen der jeweiligen Publikationsorgane oder an die Online-Redaktion des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts (info@dainst.de). Etwaige davon abweichende Lizenzbedingungen sind im Abbildungsnachweis vermerkt.

Terms of use:

By downloading you accept the [terms of use](#) of iDAI.publications. Unless otherwise stated in the document, the following terms of use are applicable: All materials including texts, articles, images and other content contained in this document are subject to the German copyright. The contents are for personal use only and may only be reproduced or made accessible to third parties if you have gained permission from the copyright owner. Any form of commercial use is expressly prohibited. When seeking the granting of licenses of use or permission to reproduce any kind of material please contact the responsible editors of the publications or contact the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (info@dainst.de). Any deviating terms of use are indicated in the credits.



Egypt

Symbolism and Social Value of Mummy Nets in the Late Period

Research Work Undertaken from October to December 2024

VERA RONDANO

Cairo Department of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI)

e-FORSCHUNGSBERICHTE DES DAI 2025 · Faszikel 2



COOPERATION PARTNERS

Fondazione Museo delle Antichità Egizie di Torino

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

DAI Research Scholarship 2024 (also known as the »Luxor Scholarship«)

HEAD OF PROJECT

V. Rondano

TEAM

S. Aicardi, M. Terzoli, V. Turina

ABSTRACT

This report outlines the research work undertaken by the recipient of the DAI Research Scholarship (also known as the »Luxor Scholarship«) at the German House in Qurna (Egypt) between October and December 2024. The author investigated the social value and symbolism of specific funerary objects known as »mummy nets«, which Egyptologists believe made their first appearance at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC in Upper Egypt. The outcome of this inquiry is three-fold. First, mummy nets were employed in different media, though in identical contexts, since the Second Intermediate Period. Second, mummy nets in the Late Period were not assigned indiscriminately to the vast majority of those who were mummified and buried in decorated coffins, but were assigned to selected individuals. Third, further investigation of the identity of those who were buried with mummy nets could shed light on the symbolism and purpose of these otherwise mysterious objects.

KEYWORDS

Iron Age, Faience, African Archaeology, Egyptology



Fig. 1: Museo Egizio, Torino (Italy). S. 05291: Mummy net decorated with faience amulets retrieved from tombs QV 43 and QV 44 by Ernesto Schiaparelli and Francesco Ballerini in 1903

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der vorliegende Bericht gibt einen Überblick über die Forschungsarbeit, die die Stipendiatin des DAI Forschungsstipendiums der Abteilung Kairo (auch bekannt als »Luxor-Stipendium«) zwischen Oktober und Dezember 2024 im Deutschen Haus in Qurna (Ägypten) durchgeführt hat. Die Autorin untersuchte den sozialen Wert und die Symbolik bestimmter Grabbeigaben, die als »Mumiennetze« bekannt sind und von denen Ägyptologen annehmen, dass sie erstmals zu Beginn des 1. Jahrtausends v. Chr. in Oberägypten auftauchten. Die Ergebnisse dieser Untersuchung lassen sich in drei Teile unterteilen. Erstens wurden Mumiennetze seit der Zweiten Zwischenzeit in verschiedenen Medien, jedoch in identischen Kontexten, verwendet. Zweitens wurden Mumiennetze in der Spätzeit nicht wahllos der großen Mehrheit der Mumifizierten und in verzierten Särgen Bestatteten zugeordnet, sondern ausgewählten Personen. Drittens könnte eine weitere Untersuchung der Identität derjenigen, die mit Mumiennetzen bestattet wurden, Aufschluss über die Symbolik und den Zweck dieser ansonsten rätselhaften Objekte geben.

SCHLAGWORTE

Eisenzeit, Fayence, Afrikanische Archäologie, Ägyptologie

Introduction: What Are Mummy Nets and Why Are They Difficult to Assess?

1 The term »mummy net« is used in Egyptology to identify objects made of yarn and faience beads assembled to look like nets and laid on top of mummies before they were placed inside their coffins and buried, starting from the 25th Dynasty (747–656 BC)¹. Decorative elements were usually added to mummy nets, either in the form of amulets (Fig. 1), or as decorations made of beadwork (Fig. 2). Few scholars have attempted to investigate the symbolism and meaning of these objects². A thorough assessment of these objects is indeed made difficult by the fact that few

1 Aston 2009, 293.

2 For a cross-cultural perspective on mummy nets see Arnst 2004. For a typological assessment of mummy nets from Late Period Egypt see Silvano 1980.



Fig. 2: Museo Egizio, Torino (Italy). S. 05290: Upper part of a mummy net with beadwork decorations retrieved from tombs QV 43 and QV 44 by Ernesto Schiaparelli and Francesco Ballerini in 1903

of the extant examples have their original yarn preserved and the ones that do are in a fragmentary state of conservation. In addition, few of the extant examples are published and, among those, very few come from a secure archaeological context. Therefore, issues of provenance, preservation and documentation make it difficult to assess the symbolism and value of mummy nets in ancient Egyptian society.

Old Material and New Research

2 Given the issues presented above, the unpublished set of mummy nets retrieved by Ernesto Schiaparelli and Francesco Ballerini at the beginning of the 20th century in the [Valley of the Queens](#) (QV 43 and QV 44) provides a valuable source of information about the social value of mummy nets. This is the largest set of extant mummy nets with original yarn preserved from a known and documented archaeological context. The whole set is now stored at the Museo Egizio in [Turin \(Italy\)](#) and will be the topic of this author's forthcoming monograph, which will include the results of the research work undertaken as an M.Phil. student at the University of Oxford, and as a Luxor Scholar at the German House in [Qurna \(Egypt\)](#), where she focused on an assessment of the symbolism and socio-cultural context in which mummy nets were used. As a result of this work, the author was able to challenge the assumption that the introduction of mummy nets was an innovation found in elite burials of the 25th Dynasty (747–656 BC) and beyond.

Mummy Nets Were Not an Innovation of the 25th Dynasty

3 While mummy nets as three-dimensional objects have thus far only been found in burials dated to the Late Period (664–332 BC) and later, they had been painted on coffins since the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1650–1550), and were seemingly treated in much the same way as their counterparts of the Late Period. In his monograph on *rishi* coffins, Gianluca Miniaci explains that the

decorative scheme on this kind of coffin from the Second Intermediate Period is a two-dimensional rendition of a layered structure, the outermost layer of which would be the body and wings of a bird that is virtually embracing the body of the deceased³. In a few cases, a bead net decoration that looks like a mummy net is visible just below the bird's feathers on the coffin's footboard, virtually occupying the space in between the bird's body and the mummified body of the deceased. Therefore, the bead nets that were painted on *rishi* coffins were virtually placed on top of the mummified body of the deceased, much like mummy nets in the Late Period. Although the reason for applying a bead net pattern on some *rishi* coffins remains unclear, the location of this pattern within the decorative scheme suggests that at least the idea of mummy nets already existed in the Second Intermediate Period.

4 A similar use of painted mummy nets can be found in coffin sets of the Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 BC). After a break during the New Kingdom, mummy nets make their appearance in the archaeological record again in coffin sets of the Third Intermediate Period. As with coffins of the Second Intermediate Period, the painted bead net pattern occupies the mummy board, which is physically the innermost layer of a coffin set, placed directly on top of the mummified body. The consistency seen in the placement of bead net patterns within the decorative scheme of individual coffins in the Second Intermediate Period and coffin sets in the Third Intermediate Period suggests that these were precursors of the three-dimensional mummy nets that were later introduced in funerary practices of the Late Period.

5 Finally, the equivalence that has been established between painted beadwork patterns in different periods of Egyptian history has enabled a more detailed diachronic assessment, which might inform our understanding of three-dimensional mummy nets in the Late Period. A preliminary analysis of the distribution of bead net patterns in burials of the Second Intermediate Period and the Third Intermediate Period shows remarkable consistency. Among the 119 *rishi* coffins assessed by Miniaci, only three display this decorative pattern⁴, and 14 mummy boards out of over 400 coffin sets assessed by Andrzej Niwiński had a bead net painted on

them⁵. Thus, in both periods of Egyptian history, bidimensional mummy nets were applied in approximately three cases out of 100. It seems reasonable to infer that the application of this pattern in burials before the Late Period was contingent on very specific conditions, which are currently unknown. However, the limited use of painted mummy nets in earlier periods is instrumental to our understanding of the use of three-dimensional mummy nets in the Late Period.

Mummy Nets Were Not for Everybody

6 Mummy nets became so ubiquitous at the beginning of the Late Period that Egyptologists have assumed that these objects were a new, common feature of high status burials. A closer look at the evidence suggests that this was not the case. The paper presented by Anna Consonni and Tommaso Quirino at the conference held in [Luxor](#) »Thebes in the First Millennium BC« in November 2024, showed how three burials dated to the beginning of the Late Period and located near the [Ramesseum](#) showed three completely different treatments of the bodies of the deceased: one belonged to a woman of high status, and included four finely crafted canopic jars, but no mummy net; the identity of the owner of the second one is unknown, but included a mummy net and no canopic jars; the third belonged to an individual who was not even embalmed. Therefore, while the location of the three burials next to the Ramesseum suggests that all the people buried there would share the same status, and would therefore be treated in a similar fashion, the extant evidence shows that this was not the case.

7 More specifically, evidence shows that mummy nets were employed only in specific circumstances, which do not seem to be correlated with the status of the deceased. For example, mummy nets were not always present in burials of people who held the highest social positions. During a private tour of the South Asasif necropolis kindly given by Elena Pischikova to the author of this contribution, it became clear that Karabasken, who was Mayor of [Thebes](#) and Fourth Priest of Amun in the 25th Dynasty, and had his own temple-tomb built in

3 Miniaci 2011, 36.

4 Miniaci (2011, 212–213, 230–231, 314) identified three instances of such decorative pattern, but there is certainly at least one more instance on display at the Luxor Museum, the owner of which is unknown.

5 Niwiński 1988, 82.

the necropolis⁶, was probably not buried with a mummy net. However, some of the intrusive burials found inside the tomb of Karabasken himself and the neighbouring tomb of the high official Karakhamun did include mummy nets⁷. This suggests that status and wealth alone did not entitle a person to being buried with a mummy net.

8 Furthermore, the research work performed on the archaeological context of the mummy nets found inside QV 43 and QV 44 by Schiaparelli and Ballerini revealed that, in some cases, being buried with a mummy net was considered more important than having a decorated coffin. Although the two tombs were plundered in antiquity and subsequently heavily damaged by floods and fire, it has been possible to roughly estimate the number of mummy nets that were originally present inside, on the basis of the number of faience scarabs that were retrieved (»more than 50«, according to Schiaparelli's report)⁸. Considering that »over 90 coffins« were retrieved from QV 44 alone, of which only 42 were inscribed⁹, and a few of these were coffin sets¹⁰, it is highly probable that quite a few of the people buried in those tombs were not buried with a mummy net, although they belonged to the same family. Therefore, the inclusion of mummy nets in burials of the Late Period does not seem to be correlated with the idea of kinship, or with the use of decorated coffins.

9 Unfortunately, poor preservation of the archaeological context makes it difficult to perform a detailed assessment of distribution of mummy nets in the Late Period. As mentioned above, the vast majority of mummy nets with a secure provenance were retrieved from heavily disturbed contexts. Most burials were plundered in antiquity, when nets became detached from their mummies, and all the burial equipment was disassembled, thus making it impossible to reconstruct each individual assemblage, unless the objects had the name of their owner written on them. The fact that mummy nets never bore the name of the

deceased makes it impossible to reassign each piece to its coffin, or to make a more detailed assessment of its owner's identity, or draw inferences about who was entitled to a mummy net.

10 However, given that three-dimensional mummy nets of the Late Period and bidimensional bead net patterns on mummy boards of the Third Intermediate Period seem to have carried a similar function within the funerary context, it is reasonable to use earlier evidence to fill in the gaps left in the archaeological record of the Late Period. Mummy boards of the Third Intermediate Period provide more information about their owners, as they tend to have the name and titles of the deceased written on them. This has enabled a preliminary assessment of the correlation between the identity of the deceased and the occurrence of the painted bead net pattern. Yet, from the data provided by Niwinski, there seems to be no correlation among the 14 mummy boards which display a bead net pattern, in terms of chronology, gender, or titles of the individuals to whom they belonged. This lack of correlation probably applies to the evidence from the Late Period as well. In conclusion, from the research work performed thus far, it seems clear that the inclusion of mummy nets in burials of the Late Period was not determined by social status, kinship, or gender of the deceased, and was, in some cases, considered more important than having a decorated coffin. Therefore, it remains to be determined what the meaning of mummy nets was.

Preliminary Investigation of the Symbolism of Mummy Nets

11 The scope of this investigation was originally limited to an assessment of the potential correlation between the use of mummy nets in burials and »netting spells« in the Book of the Dead¹¹, and »fishing and fowling« scenes in tomb decoration¹². But it soon became clear that the symbolism of mummy nets probably has its roots in the Predynastic Period (4000–2686 BC), when

11 On netting spells see Bidoli 1976 and Lüscher 2024.

12 On fishing and fowling scenes in Ancient Egyptian tomb paintings see Hartwig 2004.

6 See the blog post »[Tomb of the Mayor of Thebes and Fourth Priest of Amun Karabasken \(TT 391\)](#)« on the South Asasif Conservation Project blog.

7 Pischikova 2021, 63–74.

8 Schiaparelli 1924, 129.

9 Schiaparelli 1924, 128.

10 The sets of coffins that are now stored in the Museo Egizio have been reassembled by Edoardo Guzzon and will be published in his forthcoming monograph (Guzzon, forthcoming).

cross-hatching was used to denote textiles or woven materials in scenes painted on pottery retrieved from different sites in [Upper Egypt](#)¹³. Moreover, the same net-like pattern was employed in bidimensional renditions of huts and shrines since the Predynastic Period¹⁴, and it is clearly designed to reflect the structure of domestic architecture that is still visible in Egyptian villages today¹⁵. Therefore, the focus of this inquiry inevitably shifted towards an assessment of the potential correlation between mummy nets and the architectural features of domestic structures.

12 Evidence from the Third Intermediate and Late Periods supports the idea that mummy nets were meant to evoke the structure of a shelter. For example, the ceiling of the tomb of Karakhamun (TT 391)¹⁶ was decorated with a painted motif identical to the bidimensional rendition of mummy nets on earlier mummy boards¹⁷, as well as on mummy shrouds and coffins later in Egyptian history¹⁸. More specifically, this painted motif closely resembles the cross-hatching used since the Predynastic Period to represent the roofs of domestic architecture¹⁹. The fact that this motif was applied only to the ceiling of Tomb TT 391, but not to the side walls, and that bidimensional and three-dimensional mummy nets only covered the »front« of the mummified body, which was virtually looking upward, but were never found wrapped around the body, confirms the idea that mummy nets were regarded as some sort of »roof« for the deceased. Still, it remains unclear who was entitled to this specific kind of protection in the afterlife.

Future Perspectives

13 The research work undertaken by the author during the Luxor Scholarship has revealed that a diachronic approach to the investigation of mummy nets is indispensable to reach a reliable reconstruction of their symbolism and social value. The fact that mummified bodies from as late as the end of the first millennium AD (hence, well into the Coptic Period) continue to be found in Egypt with some version of a mummy net²⁰, suggests that the meaning of these objects is not strictly religious. Their symbolic meaning could be recovered by investigating the social role of the deceased during their lifetime. This can be done with further investigation of the extant evidence from the Second Intermediate Period and Third Intermediate Period, but also with the aid of ethnographic work that has already been done in modern Egypt, in which practices similar to ancient embalming rituals have been recorded²¹.

13 For an overview of Predynastic pottery see Craig Patch 2011, 21–81.

14 Badawy 1948, 8–10. 17–20. 46–51.

15 Henein 2010, 387–399.

16 See the [blog post on the 2023 season of the South Asasif Conservation Project](#).

17 My gratitude goes to Kara Cooney for sharing her photos of Third Intermediate Period mummy boards with me.

18 Jimenez 2014.

19 Badawy 1948, 8–10.

20 Sigl – Tatz 2022, 193–194.

21 El-Shohoumi 2004.

References

- Arnst 2004** C.-B. Arnst, Vernetzung: zur Symbolik des Mumienetzes, in: M. Fitzenreiter – C. E. Loeben (eds.), *Die ägyptische Mumie. Ein Phänomen der Kulturgeschichte. Beiträge eines Kolloquiums am Seminar für Sudanarchäologie und Ägyptologie der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* (25. und 26. April 1998), *Internet-Beiträge zur Ägyptologie und Sudanarchäologie* 1 (London 2004) 79–93
- Aston 2009** D. A. Aston, *Burial Assemblages of Dynasty 21–25. Chronology, Typology, Developments*, *Denkschriften der Gesamtkademie* 54 = *Contributions to the Chronology of the Eastern Mediterranean* 21 (Vienna 2009)
- Badawy 1948** A. Badawy, *Le Dessin Architectural chez les Anciens Égyptiens: Étude Comparative des Représentations Égyptiennes de Constructions* (Le Caire 1948)
- Bidoli 1976** D. Bidoli, *Die Sprüche der Fangnetze in den altägyptischen Sargtexten*, *Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo* 9 (Glückstadt 1976)
- Craig Patch 2011** D. Craig Patch, *Dawn of Egyptian Art* (New York City 2011)
- El-Shohoumi 2004** N. El-Shohoumi, *Der Tod im Leben. Eine vergleichende Analyse altägyptischer und rezenter ägyptischer Totenbräuche. Eine Phänomenologische Studie*, *Denkschriften der Gesamtkademie* 27 = *Untersuchungen der Zweigstelle Kairo des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes* 22 (Wien 2004)
- Guzzon, forthcoming** E. Guzzon, *I sarcofagi dei »Coltivatori di Loto«: un corpus di sarcofagi lignei del Museo Egizio di Torino rinvenuto da Schiaparelli nelle tombe VdR 43 e 44*. *Studi del Museo Egizio* 7 (forthcoming)
- Hartwig 2004** M. K. Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes: 1419–1372 BCE* (Turnhout 2004)
- Henein 2010** N. H. Henein, *Pêche et Chasse au Lac Manzala: Delta du Nil* (Le Caire 2010)
- Jimenez 2014** L. M. Jimenez, *Transfiguring the Dead: The Iconography, Commemorative Use, and Materiality of Mummy Shrouds from Roman Egypt* (Diss. University of California, Berkeley 2014), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3t476270>
- Lüscher 2024** B. Lüscher, *Die Fangnetzsprüche: (Tb 153A Und B), Totenbuchttexte* 13 (Basel 2024)
- Miniaci 2011** G. Miniaci, *Rishi Coffins and the Funerary Culture of Second Intermediate Period Egypt*, *Egyptology* (London, England) 17 (London 2011)
- Niwiński 1988** A. Niwiński, *21st Dynasty Coffins from Thebes: Chronological and Typological Studies*, *Theben* 5 (Mainz am Rhein 1988)
- Pischikova 2021** E. Pischikova, *Bead Net Elements from SACP 1*, in E. Pischikova – K. Blakeney – A. Mohamed Ali (eds.), *South Asasif Necropolis. Journey through Time. Exhibition Catalogue* (Cairo 2021) 63–74
- Schiaparelli 1924** E. Schiaparelli, *Relazione sui Lavori della Missione Archeologica Italiana in Egitto (Anni 1903–1920)* 1. *Esplorazione della »Valle Delle Regine« nella Necropoli di Tebe* (Torino 1924)
- Sigl – Tatz 2022** J. Sigl – S. Tatz, *Dra‘ Abu El-Naga. Webstühle und Textilien. Das Kloster Deir el-Bachît*, *Archäologische Veröffentlichungen. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo* 130 (Wiesbaden 2022)
- Silvano 1980** F. Silvano, *Le Reticelle Funerarie nell’Antico Egitto: Proposte di Interpretazione*, *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 3, 1980, 83–97



ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Fig. 1: Museo Egizio, Torino, Nicola Dell'Aquila

Fig. 2: Museo Egizio, Torino, photographer unknown

CONTACT

Dr. Vera Rondano

vrondano@ucla.edu

ORCID-iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8783-4359>



METADATA

Titel/*Title*: Egypt. Symbolism and Social Value of Mummy Nets in the Late Period.
Research Work Undertaken from October to December 2024

Band/*Issue*: e-Forschungsberichte des DAI 2025-2

Bitte zitieren Sie diesen Beitrag folgenderweise/*Please cite the article as follows*:
V. Rondano, Egypt. Symbolism and Social Value of Mummy Nets in the Late Period.
Research Work Undertaken from October to December 2024, eDAI-F 2025-2,
§ 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.34780/mrvmw360>

Copyright: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34780/mrvmw360>