

## Mummy wheat: notes on the history of a myth

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Sample of 'mummy wheat'

In August 1848 Thomas Pettigrew unrolled an Egyptian mummy from Thebes at the British Archaeological Association's annual congress in Worcester. He began the performance, as was his habit, with a lecture on the history of mummies, including a section on the then-highly popular mummy wheat. (Dunkin 1851, and see Dawson 1934, Moshenska forthcoming).

the lecturer went on to speak of mummy wheat. It was an error to suppose that wheat was found in the mummies themselves. The wheat from which this country had been supplied came in a vase which was sent over with some mummies from Egypt, given by sir George Wilkinson [sic] to the British nation. They were taken to the British Museum, where he (the lecturer,) sir George Wilkinson, and Mr. Davison, opened the cases. The vase was hermetically sealed and filled with corn, but in its transit the vase was broken and the corn fell out. He took a handful, and kept it as a

specimen for two or three years, after which he gave some of the corn to his friends, and endeavored to grow some himself. The seed, having been steeped in an acid solution, showed a dispensation to germinate, but was immediately destroyed by small insects; one only succeeded; and he exhibited the ear of wheat which had been produced therefrom. Two ears were produced the next year, and these he also showed, but it took three years before the nature of the plant was fully developed, (specimens of which he likewise exhibited.) ... The lecturer now proceeded to open the mummy, and the most intense excitement prevailed throughout the audience. (Dunkin 1851:325-326).



**Thomas Pettigrew**

The myth of mummy wheat germinating after millennia spent sealed in tombs was a popular and pervasive one in Victorian Britain, where it was alleged to provide incredible yields when propagated. The mania for cultivating mummy wheat and discussions of its origins and authenticity drew together a curious collection of people including prominent figures in the worlds of science, Egyptology, agricultural improvement and the arts. The story of mummy wheat, alongside the slightly less well-known mummy peas and mummy bulbs, offers an intriguing view into popular perceptions of Egypt in Victorian Britain, as well as insights into the scholarly and social networks through which information and materials circulated. My aim in this short paper is to examine the views and understandings of mummy wheat in mid-nineteenth-century Britain through the correspondence and writings of some of those involved, to shed light on the

intellectual, social and cultural contexts within which the myth emerged. The sources in question are often confused and contradictory, and the question of who if anyone was behind the hoax – if hoax it was – remains open.

### **Mummy wheat emerges**

The precise details of the introduction of mummy wheat into Britain in the mid-1800s remain unclear, with several conflicting accounts that may simply describe multiple points of origin. Day describes an 1843 advertisement for wheat “bred from a bag of seeds found in the hand of an Egyptian mummy recently unrolled in London” (2008:623), as well as wheat brought from Luxor by Sir William Symonds and cultivated in Ireland. Pettigrew’s account in his lecture to the British Archaeological Association was designed in part, as he mentions at the outset, to dispel the widely held belief that mummy wheat derived from seeds that he himself had found in the winding cloths of a mummy. This belief was widely held, not least by Pettigrew’s friends and correspondents, as his letters show. One Nathan Davis of Hollywood, Gloucestershire, wrote to Pettigrew in 1852 for his account of the discovery:

My dear sir ... The Revd. Mr Montague of this neighborhood gave me last spring two plants of the bearded wheat in question, which were placed in my garden, & produced each of them five ears or spikes, several of which were treble ... My neighbour Mr Miles, M.P. for Somerset, who procured some of the corn, & collected about 1200 grains, which he has drilled carefully, with the expectation of an abundant crop. Both Mr Miles and myself are anxious to acquire all the information in our power respecting the discovery of this corn in a mummy coffin, and as I think I have traced that discovery to yourself, we shall feel particularly obliged by your giving us the circumstances as they occurred. (Davis 1852)

Davis’ account of cultivating the wheat highlights a number of interesting themes. First is the mechanism by which mummy wheat was spread, that is, between acquaintances: in this case Davis received his wheat from Montague, and in turn passed a sample on to Miles. Sir William Miles MP is a particularly interesting character to have taken an interest in mummy wheat: as a gentleman farmer he took a great interest in agricultural science and innovation, and was one of the principal movers behind the foundation of the Royal Agricultural Society in 1838, which he served as a council member and later as a Vice-President. The interest in mummy wheat amongst agriculturalists came at a time of intense interest in agricultural ‘improvement’, with a growing interest in scientific approaches to cultivation and animal husbandry, as well as the introduction of new technologies. This culture of science and experiment is reflected in some of the more language used to discuss the mummy wheat:

When you were so kind as to shew me the Egyptian wheat Barley – some of which you had succeeded in making vegetate you were so obliging as to offer me a few grains to make trial of – I had as I mentioned, myself not at present the facilities to make the assay but if you will entrust a few of the grains to me, Colonel Northcliffe who has a place in Yorkshire, will give the experiment every attention (Willich 1840)

Perhaps the most significant and best-known experiments with mummy wheat were those conducted at Albury, Surrey, by the writer Martin Farquhar Tupper (Nightingale 1849).

### **Martin Tupper's mummy wheat**

Martin Tupper is best remembered for his *Proverbial Philosophy*, a collection of appallingly trite aphorisms which appeared in multiple volumes and sold over a million copies worldwide during the mid-nineteenth century. For the next half-century before he slipped into well-earned literary obscurity Tupper and his works were the butt of innumerable parodies and vicious criticisms. Perhaps the most unlikely of these is found in the pages of Marx's *Capital*:

this prejudice was first established as a dogma by the arch-Philistine, Jeremy Bentham, that insipid, pedantic, leathertongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence of the 19th century. Bentham is among philosophers what Martin Tupper is among poets. Both could only have been manufactured in England. (Marx 1887:420)

Alongside his writing Tupper was a keen antiquarian. His grandson reflected on growing up in a house, where “the Roman relics of Farley Heath were there in the Sheraton cabinet and the mummy wheat had its niche on the right of the secretaire” (Tupper 1949:x). This interest in antiquities led to his association with archaeologists such as John Yonge Akerman and Thomas Pettigrew.

Tupper's cultivation of mummy wheat at his home in Albury, Surrey, is probably the best attested account of its kind. Tupper received twelve grains of mummy wheat in 1838, “seeds given to me by Mr. Pettigrew out of an Amenti vase taken from a mummy pit by Sir Gardiner Wilkinson” (Tupper 1886). In 1840 he planted the wheat in flowerpots, taking care to sift the soil carefully and divide his grains between four pots. Only one of these twelve germinated, and Tupper transferred it from his sitting room to a flowerbed, where it yielded two ears and a total of twenty-seven grains. In 1841 he replanted these grains which yielded more than a hundred ears (Hudson 1949:80-81).



Bust of Martin Farquhar Tupper

Tupper enthusiastically spread the word of his apparent success in cultivating mummy wheat, writing letters to the *Times* and sending notices to a number of prominent publications. He had an account of his experiments printed privately which he sent, together with samples of the mummy wheat, to prominent members of the land-owning aristocracy and others. He presented the finest example of his wheat to Prince Albert, the Queen Consort and an agricultural experimenter himself. According to Hudson, Tupper was informed that “The Prince is much obliged for this curious specimen, and proposes to raise more seed from it” (Hudson 1949:80). Another recipient was the noted scientist Michael Faraday, Professor at the Royal Institution. Faraday wrote to Tupper to express his appreciation:

MY DEAR SIR, - Your note was a very pleasant event in my day of yesterday, and I thank you heartily for it, and rejoice with you at the success of the crop. It so happened that yesterday evening was the last of our meetings, and I had to speak in the lecture-room. The subject was Lithotint: but I placed the one ear in the library under a glass case, and after my first subject was over read the principal part of your letter – all that related to the wheat: and the information was received with great interest by about

700 persons. Our President, Lord Prudhoe, was in the chair, and greatly desirous of knowing the age of the wheat. You know he is learned in Egyptian matters, and was anxious about the label or inscription accompanying the corn ... Ever your obliged servant, M. FARADAY. (Tupper 1886)

Faraday had previously conducted chemical analyses of samples of tissue and residues that Pettigrew had extracted from Egyptian mummies (Moshenska forthcoming).

Given the scepticism about mummy wheat both at the time and later, it is interesting to see how Tupper's achievement was received. The authenticity of the wheat rested in part on the authority of those who had curated it: it had been seen to emerge from a sealed vessel, and passed directly from Gardner Wilkinson to Pettigrew, and thence to Tupper. The botanist John Lindley wrote to Tupper that "It is curious ... that of all the so-called instances of Mummial wheat yours should be the only one to which credence can be safely given. Many are no doubt Arab frauds" (Hudson 1949:81). This general sense of scepticism can also be seen in the discussion of Tupper's work in a letter from the botanist John Stevens Henslow to his friend Charles Darwin:

My dear Darwin,

I was very glad to see your handwriting & trust you are steadily progressing - The only doubt that crosses my mind, is the possibility of Sir. G. Wilkinson having been cheated by the Arabs - A case is on record of a quantity of wheat taken from a Catacomb in Egypt having been eaten by modern rats, which shows it had kept well, as far as the flavor is concerned - There is a picture in Trinity of a man with a bulb of a Scilla in his hand, which he has just taken from a mummy, & the scilla is sprouting - I certain nothing impossible in Mr Tupper's statement, but it is precisely one of those cases which need more than one experiment to authenticate the fact - I have no doubt whatever that the seeds grew, but I think it not impossible that Sir. G. W. may have been deceived - If I knew Sir G. W's address I would write to him & beg a few grains - Whewell has been here for a week lately - Col. LeCouteur came to talk about the Wheat-Museum of the Agricl Socy - & I have had my annual display of fireworks - so that my time has been completely occupied ... (Henslow 1840)

There are several accounts of the revivification of bulbs and other plants found in or alongside mummies, some of which may have inspired one of Martin Tupper's poems entitled *On A Bulbous Root (Which Blossomed, After Having Lain For Ages In The Hand Of An Egyptian Mummy)* (Tupper 1850:369-373), a poem both long and dreadful.

## **Mummy Peas**

The interest in mummified bulbs and other flowers – discussed by Day (2008) in relation to early mummy’s curse fiction – extended well beyond the more scientific interest in mummy wheat. Alongside the mummy wheat phenomenon was the related but less well publicised cultivation of mummy peas (Henderson 2005). The origins of mummy peas is identical to that claimed for mummy wheat, as Henderson notes: they were alleged to have emerged around 1838 when Thomas Pettigrew broke a sealed vase brought to the British Museum by Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, with the dried peas found alongside the wheat (Henderson 2005). Pettigrew and his friends attempted without success to revive the peas, but three samples retained by Pettigrew were later passed to the herbalist William Grimstone, an inventor of patent medicines. Grimstone claimed to have successfully revived and cultivated the mummy peas, which he marketed under the name Grimstone’s Egyptian Peas. In publicising his miracle peas he sought the help of William Plate, Secretary of the Syro-Egyptian Society, who gave a lecture on the subject which was widely reported in 1848-9 (Henderson 2005). This enterprise was not enough to save Grimstone, who in 1850 was declared bankrupt and held in a debtor’s prison with the court report describing him as “Cultivator of and Dealer in Grimstone’s Egyptian Peas” (Anon 1850:1903).

The publicity surrounding the mummy peas and mummy wheat was a source of interest to the man who might have been expected to know more about them than anyone: Sir John Gardner Wilkinson himself. In an undated letter to Pettigrew he sought clarification of the issue:

My Dear Pettigrew

Can you give me any account of the Pea which according to an account in one of the newspapers has been grown from one I gave you out of a jar brought by me from an Egyptian tomb at Thebes. They say there are two kinds of Peas, a large one & a dwarf, both from seeds I gave you when unpacking the things I brought to the British Museum in 1833 or 1834. The subject has excited ... interest & I am anxious to get the best information from an authentic source. Of course the fact of their growing must rest with the person who planted them the first time, whose name I should like to know also. You can tell me if they are the same I gave you & whether there were two seeds or how many. Do you know of anyone who has grown the wheat from seeds taken from Egyptian jars found in the tombs? (Wilkinson n.d.)



Sir John Gardner Wilkinson

## Discussion

The mummy wheat phenomenon is a historical curiosity, not least in light of later research that has conclusively proven the impossibility of revivifying dessicated seeds of such antiquity (e.g. Youngman 1951). J.H. Turner of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew reflected on the scientific analyses of mummy wheat carried out in the early twentieth century:

There is no authenticated evidence that wheat taken from undisturbed Egyptian tombs will germinate. An experiment was made at Kew some thirty years ago with grain from a model granary, found in a tomb of the 19th dynasty and brought to England by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge. Samples were tested under various conditions and the effect of coloured glass was tried in the effort to induce germination, but after three months the grain had turned to dust ... although Egyptian wheat and barley often have an exterior appearance of good preservation, the embryo has undergone a marked chemical change and is no longer viable. This change shows that the dormant life of the grain has been long extinct. (Turner 1931:266)

Given its inauthenticity it is worth asking why the belief in mummy wheat was so widespread. Day's analysis suggests that "gullibility and horticultural ignorance" along with "rudimentary Egyptological knowledge and Christian fervour", noting the tensions between Egyptian and Christian notions of resurrection, as well as the biblical account of unusually rich yields of wheat in Pharaoh's dream, as interpreted by Joseph (Day 2008:624). This is supported by one of Pettigrew's correspondents, John Poynder, who enquired about the origins and meaning of mummy wheat:

May I take this opportunity of asking whether you have ever satisfied yourself as to the wheat found in the mummies which you need not be told yet vegetates on being sown – I am growing it this summer. The higher theory, & that which is deeply interesting, is that the Egyptians would have intended (at least the better taught) an emblem of their conviction that the body would rise again, & that the argument of the Apostle 1 Cor. XV. 35 is literally founded upon the custom so commonly observed at Thebes. This is so delightful a theory that I myself am unwilling to adopt the meaner view that this wheat was the supposed provision for the departed as we know the food found in other depositories of the ancients, & even of the moderns was – including the Peter's penny of that foul apostasy - Popery. But what say you? "How readest thou?" (Poynder 1847)

The mummy wheat phenomenon sheds light on a number of subjects, principally the widespread popular fascination with Egypt and Egyptology in mid-nineteenth century Britain. Mummy wheat was found in private collections, displayed in museums and moved amongst networks of friends and scholars, as well as grown in fields, flowerbeds and homes. It was presented at the Royal Institution by Faraday, discussed by Darwin and cultivated by Prince Albert, and yet the entire enterprise rested on a mistake: true mummy wheat could not have been cultivated. E.A. Wallis Budge suggested that Egyptian tombs might have been used as granaries in the more recent past, with modern wheat becoming mixed up with ancient artefacts or even used as a packing material (Turner 1931). Whatever the source, antiquity and authenticity of the wheat, its circulation amongst Egyptologists, agriculturalists and other enthusiasts sheds light on a period of intense popular and scholarly interest in Ancient Egypt in mid-nineteenth century Britain.

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