

## EGYPTIAN TATTOOS

**Anne Austin** – This is a story about a mummy. I work as the osteologist for the mission at the Institut français d'archéologie orientale à Deir el Medina, and this is a unique place, it's the village of the workmen who cut and decorated the New Kingdom Royal tombs. Now, as I was working with a group of commingled human remains, I noticed a torso that was still partially mummified. The skin was so well dehydrated from the mummification process that the torso was very light and fragile. And when I settled down to take my notes, I saw these markings at the neck. When I looked closer, I realized these were clear tattoos. We could see symbols like the Wadjet eye or the Nefer hieroglyph, a sign representing beauty and goodness. And as I began to pay more attention to the rest of her body I began to see dozens of tattoos visually emerge from behind the resins left from mummification.

The Director of research Cédric Gobeil worked with me to document all of the tattoos on this mummy. Using special software, Cédric was able to manipulate photos of her skin in order to virtually uncover the tattoos. He stretched the images as if stretching her skin back to life. And clear images began to emerge. We realized one tattoo, for example, was two Hathor's cows, standing across from each other, with sacred Menat necklaces of the goddess around their necks. There's almost no evidence of tattooing in Pharaonic Egyptian history. Only three mummies found near each other and dating to the Middle Kingdom have ever shown evidence of tattoos and these are geometric patterns, so they are very difficult to understand what they mean. So as we uncovered these tattoos on this very unique mummy, we realized that their symbols were so much more than simply tattoos on her skin. We looked on wherever they were placed on her body, along her arms, her shoulders, her neck; they were put in public places that would have been highly visible in a dress. And we looked at what they represented, symbols of the goddess Hathor, one of the most important deities in ancient Egypt. We realized that this woman was closely associated with the divine. She really embodied the goddess Hathor, and placing these ritual symbols along her arms means that with every movement, every dance, she was also moving the goddess; she was also enacting the divine. As she stared forward, the divine Wadjet eyes stared with her.

Even though in Deir el Medina we get texts that tell us all about daily life, we have relatively little information about women's role in religion. Women are often only described as chantresses or dancers and in the past many Egyptologists have interpreted these roles as either subsidiary or passive, ascribing women very little agency in the practice of their own religion. But here, we see a woman who didn't need temporary titles, or closed indicates of religious importance, it was inscribed on her skin permanently. After we

discovered this mummy, we started to think: what have we been missing? Maybe we haven't found tattoos simply because we weren't looking for them. So we went back and we looked at the human remains of at Deir el Medina again, with a closer eye, and the second time around, we actually found three more mummies that have tattoos!

**04min 3sec**