

Lucy Mack Smith on Mummies and Papyri

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VISITORS TO NAUVOO, ILLINOIS

Henry Caswall in 1842

Henry Caswall saw the mummies and records on April 18, 1842:

Accordingly he [Joseph Smith] led the way to a small house, the residence of the prophet's mother. On entering the dwelling, I was introduced to this eminent personage as a traveller from England, desirous of seeing the wonders of Nauvoo. . . . She [Lucy Mack Smith] then directed me up a steep flight of stairs into a chamber, and slowly crept up after me. She showed me a wretched cabinet, in which were four naked mummies frightfully disfigured, and in fact, most disgusting relics of mortality. One she said was a king of Egypt whom she named, two were his wives, and the remaining one was the daughter of another king. I asked her by what means she became acquainted with the names and histories of these mummies. She replied that her son had obtained this knowledge through the mighty power of God. She accounted for the disfigured condition of the mummies, by a circumstance rather illustrative of the back-woods. Some difficulty having been found in unrolling the papyrus which enveloped them, an axe was applied, by which the unfortunate mummies were literally chopped open.¹

Comment: Caswall mentioned seeing four mummies: one a king of Egypt and three females.

Charlotte Haven in February 1843

Charlotte Haven in early 1843 viewed the mummies and writings:

She [Lucy Mack Smith] received a little pittance by exhibiting The Mummies to strangers. When we asked to see them, she lit a candle and conducted us up a short, narrow stairway to a low, dark room under the roof. On one side were standing half a dozen mummies, to whom she introduced is, King Onitus and his royal household, — one she did not know. Then she took up what seemed to be a club wrapped in a dark cloth, and said "This is the leg of Pharaoh's daughter, the one that saved Moses." Repressing a smile, I looked from the mummies to the old lady, but could detect nothing but earnestness and sincerity on her countenance.

¹ Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons; or, Three days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (London: Printed for J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1842), 26, 28.

Then she turned to a long table, set her candle-stick down, and opened a long roll of manuscript, saying it was "the writings of Abraham and Isaac, written in Hebrew and Sanscrit," and she read several minutes from it as if it were English. . . . Then in the same way she interpreted to us hieroglyphics from another roll. One was Mother Eve being tempted by the serpent, who — the serpent, I mean — was standing on the tip of his tail, which was his two legs formed a tripod, and had his head in Eve's ear. I said, "But serpents don't have legs." "They did before the fall," she asserted with perfect confidence.²

Comment: The mention of "half a dozen mummies" should be four mummies. The "long roll of manuscript" had evidently been cut into shorter pieces to preserve it and make it easier to handle. One of the rolls had been placed under glass by the fall of 1840. The mummies were represented to be "King Onitus and his royal household." That Lucy Smith said the manuscript/papyrus was "written in Hebrew and Sanscrit" appears to be in error as the characters on the papyrus were written in Egyptian.

Adiel Sherwood in 1843

Report of Rev. Adiel Sherwood:

In Smith's house, are three *mummies*, and the writings and hieroglyphics which were found rolled up in the breast of one, are shown to strangers by the prophet's mother, for a small fee; and she explains the meaning of them as she supposes: that is, she says they represent Abraham and other patriarchs, and their conversation to the people of that distant age. "Though Joseph had told me," says Mr[s]. S., "the mummies were some 4,000 years old,["] the old lady talked of St. Paul and his exhortations to the people as a part of the writings disclosed; but this might be *lapsus linguae* or ignorance of history.³

Comment: Three mummies should be four mummies.

LaFayette Knight in December 1843

Letter of LaFayette Knight, December 21, 1843:

I went into his [Joseph Smith's] house and had a comfortable chat with him, and then examined the four mummies one of which his Mother told me was King Onitus, on whose breast was found the writing of Abr[a]ham It being as they say, the astronomy taught by him.⁴

² Charlotte Haven to "My dear Mother," February 19, 1843 in *Overland Monthly* 16 (Dec. 1890), 623-24, San Francisco, California.

³ "Nauvoo and Joseph Smith," *New-York Observer*, October 14, 1843.

⁴ LaFayette Knight to James H. and Sharon Fellows, December 21, 1843, MS 2362, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. This is an extract from the letter with this note: "The

Comment: This is the second reference to Lucy Mack Smith saying that one of the mummies was king Onitus.

Spring 1844

Ancient Records – Egyptian Mummies

Nauvoo, April 25th, 1844.

THE MORMONS. – One of the first things which arrests the eye, Mr. Editor, on approaching the “Mansion House” of General Joseph Smith, is a large sign board, on the left side of the door, on which in large characters is painted – “Ancient Records” – “Egyptian Mummies.” What this singular announcement might chance to mean, I at first could not divine; and, although prepared to be amazed at nothing I might behold within the corporate limits of the New Jerusalem, and especially within the precincts of the Prophet’s own abode, I must confess myself to have been not a little posed. My curiosity was still alive on the matter, when, after a conversation of some length with the Prophet, I casually alluded to what I had seen, and inquired its meaning. On this inquiry I was immediately conducted by mine host into an apartment opposite the public parlor, in which we found several females variously engaged. Two of these were young and had some pretensions to personal comeliness – or at least to gracefulness of figure; while, to another, who seemed well stricken in years, I was presented, as the Prophet’s mother. A single syllable touching “the antiquities” started off the old lady in a strain of volubility quite marvelous to hear from one so old. – This, with her was plainly a favorite topic, if it was not the only one on which she had expended time or thought, or either had an opinion, or could express one. Throwing open the doors of a piece of furniture somewhat like a Press, or Wardrobe, which stood in a corner of the room, what should I behold but the blackened and ghastly relics of four Egyptian Mummies, from which emanated that aroma peculiar to embalment, but which is hardly so agreeable as the frankincense and the myrrh, and all manner of secret drugs, through the agency of which, the process which rendered “mortality immortal,” was performed. There they stood – the dry and shriveled tabernacles of those, who, perhaps four thousand years ago walked about on the sands of Egypt – dwellers of the ancient cities of the Nile! Two of these are quite perfect in the preservation they have retained; the other two are badly mutilated. One has the skull fractured, and the other has a portion of the chest torn away. The cause of these injuries was this: The remains were sent to an illiterate man in New York city by a relative who was a soldier in the East. On receiving the box, the consignee thought he should be compensated by its contents, at least for the charges he had paid; but on opening it, and finding nothing but the shriveled and blackened carcasses of human beings, he was so

foregoing is a copy of part of a letter written by my Father[’s] uncle La Fayette Knight, to his sister and husband and of Sharen Wastemaw Co. (P. O. Manchester,) and dated Carthage, Hancock Co. Ill. Dec. 21st 1843. James H. Fellows, youngest Brother of Albert G."

enraged, that, in his wrath, he would have utterly demolished them from head to heel, had not his violence been arrested by one who better understood their value. How they fell into the hands of the Mormon Prophet, or how they reached their present location, I do not well know. I think, however, that they were sent to the erudite author of the Book of Mormon, in order that he might translate the hieroglyphics on the bundles of papyri which were found, as [usual], to accompany the mummies. And translate them, he verily did! At all events, his venerable old mother – poor woman – exhibits half a dozen sheets of papyri, and from a large octavo, of which her [prophet] son is author, reads an interpretation, so called, of the mysterious hieroglyphics, which those ancient records are declared to contain! Important and highly interesting incidents in the lives of Patriarchs of Israel and the monarchs of Hebrew History are read from these “Egyptian records” – the absurdity of such chronicles being deposited with the Pharaohs for safe keeping, never seeming to have occurred to any concerned. – Of course all this is an imposture of the rankest kind; but there is no Champollion, or Denon among the Mormons of Nauvoo to convict their Prophet of fraud, and this wild and ridiculous tale has its thousands of undoubting believers!⁵

May 15, 1844

Charles Adams recorded in his diary:

He [Joseph Smith] then took us down into his mother's chamber and showed us four Egyptian mummies stripped and then undertook to explain the contents of a chart or manuscript which he said had been taken from the bosom of one of them. The cool impudence of this imposture amused me very much. "This," said he, "was written by the hand of Abraham and means so and so. If anyone denies it, let him prove the contrary. I say it." Of course, we were too polite to prove the negative, against a man fortified by revelation. His mother looked on with attention and aided in the explanation whenever the prophet hesitated, from which I inferred that she was usually the exponent of the writings to strangers. At the close, he notified us that for this instruction, his mother was in the habit of receiving a quarter of a dollar a piece from them, which sum we paid forthwith.⁶

Comment: It appears that Joseph Smith showed some papyri to Charles Adams and Josiah Quincy and that he indicated that it was in the handwriting of Abraham. Henry Halkett wrote

⁵ "The Mormons," *Buffalo Daily Courier and Economist* 3 (June 15, 1844). Also published in the *Evening Gazette*, May 16, 1844, St. Louis, Missouri. No copy of the *Evening Gazette* has been located at the present time.

⁶ Charles Francis Adams Journal, May 15, 1844, emphasis retained, Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. In 1952 a journal extract was published in Henry Adams, "Charles Francis Adams Visits the Mormons in 1844," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 68 (1952:285). Charles Adams had accompanied Josiah Quincy on his trip to Nauvoo. Joseph Smith's Journal kept by Willard Richards recorded under the date of May 15: "A son of John Quincy Adams, Mr. Quincy and Dr. Goforth visited at the Mansion."

some notes of Quincy's visit. Joseph Smith said some papyri were in "the handwriting of Abraham, that one is Moses." Henry Halkett's notes of Josiah Quincy's visit to Nauvoo made about 1845, as cited in Jay M. Todd, *Saga of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 257. Quincy's recollections were published in 1881: "Some parchments inscribed with hieroglyphics were then offered us. They were preserved under glass and handled with great respect. 'That is the handwriting of Abraham, the Father of the Faithful,' said the prophet. 'This is the autograph of Moses, and these lines were written by his brother Aaron. Here we have the earliest account of the Creation, from which Moses composed the First Book of Genesis.'" From "Leaves from Old Journals," *Independent* 33 (December 29, 1881):4-5. Reprinted in Josiah Quincy, posthumously published in *Figures of the Past, From the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 386.

Pharaoh's daughter, June 1844

"One afternoon it was raining very hard, and your uncle proposed that we should go down to the basement and see some mummies, the notice saying that one of them was that of Pharaoh's daughter. The exhibition was kept by Joe Smith's mother, who received us kindly and explained the history of the long dead laid out for inspection. I did not feel so solemn as one would have expected, for the old woman was all the time committing murder (of the King's English). The principal mummy had lost most of her fingers and toes, as they had been stolen for relics. I asked what had become of the gold plates which had the account of their inspired (?) writings. She replied, 'O, they's took care of. You see they might have been stolen, and so they was give back to the one they got 'em of.' When we had seen and heard enough, we prepared to go. We had bought a Mormon Bible and I had thanked Madam Smith for showing the relics, when your uncle unexpectedly inquired the charge, and paid the old lady for her polite attentions. I forget how much he paid, but I was sorry to have wasted my politeness in thanks."

(*Family Memories* by Mary Ann Hubbard November 2, 1820-July 19, 1909 [Chicago:] R. R. Donnelley and Sons Company, 1912], pp. 100-101)

1845

The mother of the deceased prophet is quite another sort of woman. The old lady is the keeper of the Egyptian mummies, and various relics and curiosities, which she exhibits to the public at two bits per head. While exhibiting the traps, the old lady gives an account of the manner of her son Joe's finding the golden plates, and also informs the spectator that her deceased son interpreted the hieroglyphics upon the mummy cases, which figures corroborated perfectly every thing Joe had ever said, and confirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt his divine mission. She tells the same things to every visitor, and if she weeps as much with every one as she did while relating her stories to me, she would be invaluable in Broadway on a dusty day.⁷

⁷ Correspondence of the Albany Atlas reprinted in *The Cleveland Herald* 11 (September 13,

After we had obtained all the information we could at the Temple, we visited the Mother of the Prophet, (a respectable looking old lady) who has four Mummies for exhibition, who (she says) were a King and Queen, and their Son and Daughter, and gives the names of each. She produced a black looking roll (which she told us was papyrus) found upon the breast of the King, part of which the Prophet had unrolled and read; and she had pasted the deciphered sheets on the leaves of a book which she showed us. The roll was as dark as the bones of the Mummies, and bore very much the same appearance; but the opened sheets were exceedingly like thin parchment, and of quite a light color. There were birds, fishes, and fantastic looking people, interspersed amidst hieroglyphics; but the old lady explained the meaning of them all, as Joseph had interpreted them to her.

The stories appeared to be more particular accounts than our Bible gives us, of Noah, the Ark and the flood—of Abraham and Melchizedec—of Joseph and Pharaoh—and of various other distinguished characters. She said, that when Joseph was reading the papyrus, he closed his eyes, and held a hat over his face, and that the revelation came to him; and that where the papyrus was torn, he could read the parts that were destroyed equally as well as those that were there; and that scribes sat by him writing, as he expounded. She showed us a large book where these things were printed, which of course sealed their truth to Mormon eyes and minds; but we had not time to read them.⁸

Comment: If this account is correct Lucy Smith told her visitor there were two males and two females.

Later recollections

Visited Nauvoo in 1843

One little incident occurred while we were at his [Joseph Smith's] house, which proved conclusively that the Prophet appreciated fully the importance of turning everything to personal account. We had not been seated more than half an hour when his mother entered the room, and informed us that in the next apartment there were some very interesting ancient records which she would be glad to show us. We accepted her invitation when we were introduced to some half a dozen Egyptian mummies, who, we were informed, constituted the family of Pharaoh. We were then shown a large number of framed sheets of papyrus covered with hieroglyphics, which had been taken from the bandages about the mummies, and these were the "interesting records," which the old lady had invited us to see, and which—Gideon like—she undertook to explain to us. We soon found that the

1845).

⁸ Correspondence dated September 1846 in the *Friends' Weekly Intelligencer* 3 (October 3, 1846), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

thread of her discourse was simply a rehearsal of the bible history of the creation and the end of man, the deluge, and the subsequent history of the Israelites. As we were all more or less familiar with this, we soon wearied of the discourse, and, to our great scandal in the good woman's estimation, begged her to excuse us from hearing more. Just as we were on the point of retiring, however, our eyes fell upon a placard, inscribed as follows: "EGYPTIAN MUMMIES AND ANCIENT RECORDS TO BE SEEN HERE—PRICE 24 CENTS." Of course we paid the score without a word, and bowed ourselves out of the residence of the Prophet.⁹

Comment: Half a dozen mummies should be four mummies. Twenty-four cents is probably a typographical error as others paid twenty-five cents to see the mummies and papyri.

April 1846

“Miss F. J. ‘Visit to Nauvoo,’” *The Ladies’ Magazine and Casket of Literature* (Boston, Massachusetts: A. H. Davis, 1848), as cited in Ronald E. Romig, ed., *Lucy’s Nauvoo* (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2009), 67-68.

The next object of curiosity was Joe’s mother (it seemed to us an intrusion to visit his wife,) We found a pleasant looking old lady, of seventy, or thereabouts, and to our question, Are you the mother of the Prophet?” the mother of Washington could not have replied with greater dignity, or a prouder air. “Yes! ladies, I am the mother of the Prophet.” Her curiosities consisted of two mummy kings and their queens, who lived long before Pharaoh; also the foot of Pharaoh’s daughter, and a number of sheets of hieroglyphics, which she commenced to explain. I, being seated in front of the old lady, her remarks were principally directed to me, and I sat looking into her clear, blue eyes, and wondering whether she really believed what she told us, or was conscious of her imposture. “Many years ago,” she said, “a gentleman brought these hieroglyphics and mummies from Egypt. He carried the hieroglyphics to many learned men; but no one could translate them. A length, some wise professor in New York said, ‘Carry them to Joe Smith, who lives at the West. He is a wise man, inspired by God. He can translate them.’ And Joe did so, and found that they corresponded in every respect, with the ‘Book of Mormons.’”

We asked her how the Prophet received his inspiration. He was an earnest man, she said, and prayed God, night and day, to make known to him what was the true religion. One night, there was a bright-light in his chamber, which shone through the curtains of his bed, and there in his room stood the Angel of God. He told him, that the Methodist religion was no religion at all, but that if he would dig under a certain tree, he would find something that would teach him. Joe digged [sic] there, and found a number of plates of gold. “Did you see those plates?” I asked quickly. “No!” she answered quietly, and severely, “but I’ve hefted them.”

⁹ "The Mormons," *New York Daily Times*, September 28, 1852, as cited in Mark L. McConkie, *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 39-40.

It was sacrilege, it seemed, for any but the Prophet's eyes to look upon them. But Joe was not yet in a fit state to read the hieroglyphics engraved thereon, but after he had prayed for light, a long time, inspiration came. He translated them, and the Book of Mormon was published. "What did your son do then, with the plates?" I asked. "Oh! he buried them under the tree again, and the angel came, and took them." She went on, explaining the hieroglyphics, until we were quite weary. Reason and good sense rebelled too strongly against such imposture, to make her narrations agreeable. We remunerated her for her trouble, and bade her good morning.

Additional undated statements

Robert Horne

Robert Horne (born circa 1814) recalled years later of his seeing the four mummies and papyrus:

"Oh, here is the Pearl of Great Price," said Brother Horne, picking up that book. "I've seen these records with my own eyes," referring to the Book of Abraham, "and handled them with these hands.[“] Mother Lucy (Joseph's mother) showed them to me. You know Joseph had purchased four mummies. They were one of the Egyptian Pharaohs, his wife, sister and daughter. I took hold of the breastbone of one of them. The records which I saw were some kind of parchment or papyrus, and it contained writing in red and black. Mother Lucy told me that one was the writings of Abraham and the other the writings of Joseph, who was sold in Egypt.¹⁰

John Stout White

John Stout White (born February 15, 1818):

My mother was personally acquainted with the Prophet Joseph Smith, and all his people, in fact they were neighbors. She used to deliver milk to Mother Smith as they called the Prophet's mother. She saw the Egyptian mummies including Pharaoh's daughter, the same that rescued Moses in the rushes. Mother Smith had a large cupboard or sideboard. She had the mummies in a row in the sideboard. They were cured with spices. My mother begged Mother Smith to show her the urim and thummim. Mother Smith told her she was only a little girl and wouldn't remember. She showed her the peep stone.¹¹

¹⁰ "Reminiscences of the Church in Nauvoo," *Millennial Star* 55 (September 4, 1893):585. William Appleby in his recollection stated that there were one male and three female mummies: "Viewed four Mummies, one male and three females" (William I. Appleby Journal, LDS Church History Library).

¹¹ "A Pioneer Story told by a Pioneer (Mrs. J. H. Hess)," as cited in McConkie, *Remembering Joseph*

Benjamin Ashby

Benjamin Ashby (born December 19, 1828), visit circa 1843-1844:

One day with my mother I visited his house. He was not in, but we spent an interesting time with his mother. She exhibited the mummies from which the Book of Abraham was taken as well as the original papyrus on which it is written.¹²

Aroet Lucius Hale

Aroet Lucius Hale (1828-1911) recalled years later:

I used to See. Mother Smith Often & was well acquainted with her She used to Visit <my> Grandmother Boynton She was about her age. They were verry fond of each Other. She Loosing her Husband and was feeling Sorrow the Prophet Joseph used to take her in his buggy & bring her to Grandmothr Boyntons at Our House Father and Mother Boynton at that time was Living in a Part of Our House. Mother Smith used to take us Children to the Mansion & Show us Some Egyption Mummys & Other things that Joseph had gave her. among Other things was a Quilt that I never have herd Spoken of in eny [any] of the writings of the Church this Quilt that I speak of. Joseph took with him to the Hill Comorora [sic]. at this time Joseph was permitted to handle the plates took them out of the Ston[e] Box Lade them on this Quilt The thought pas[s]ed through his Mind that he had them Safe. they pas[s]ed through the Quilt – Out of Site Making a Squair [Square] hole about 16 or 18 inches Squair [Square]. I have Seen the Quilt & had it Explained to Me when a boy it Seamed to me that the Lord wished to Show Joseph how Easy the Plates Could be taken from him.¹³

Endocia Baldwin Marsh

Endocia Baldwin Marsh (born in 1829), she was 15 years old when Joseph and Hyrum Smith were killed. She, recalled:

We dined at the Mansion House Smiths large Hotel. After dinner we were told that in an adjoining room some Egyptian Mummies were exhibited for a small sum—Some of the party expressing a wish to see them, we were ushered into the room where we found them presided over by the mother of the Prophet, a trim looking old lady in black silk gown and white cap and kerchief.— — With a long wand she pointed out to us the old King Pharioh of the Exodus himself, with wife and daughter and gave us a detailed account of their lives and doings three

CD-ROM (with book).

¹² Benjamin Ashby Autobiography as cited in McConkie, *Remembering Joseph* CD-ROM (with book).

¹³ Aroet Lucius Hale Journal, MS 1509, 24-25, LDS Church History Library. Hale's account written circa 1882. Spelling in original retained.

thousand years before.— Upon my asking her how she obtained all this information—she replied in a severely virtuose tone and manner calculated to repress all doubt and further question—"My Son Joseph Smith has recently received a revelation from the Lord in regard to these people and times—and he has told all these things to me"— — We left the house without faith in these revelations—neither did we believe in the old ladies faith in them which seemed hard on the mother of the "Prophet"— —¹⁴

William Andrew Bills

William Andrew Bills (born August 5, 1835):

His mother once showed me the mummies; they were in appearance as natural as any other person would be after being dried up as they were. They were the color of cork sole leather, common size, five in number, if I recollect all right.¹⁵

Comment: Five in number should be four.

Bill of Sale of Joseph Smith Egyptian Mummies and records, May 26, 1856

Nauvoo City May 26th/56

This certifies that we have sold to; Mr. A. Combs four Egyptian Mummies with the records of them Thes Mummies were obtained from the catacoms of Egypt sixty feet below the surface of the Earth, by the antiquarian society of Paris & forwarded to New York & purchased by the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith at the price of twenty four hundred dollars in the year Eighteen hundred thirty five they were highly prized by Mr Smith on account of the importance <which attached to> of the record which were <accidental> found enclosed in <the breast of> one of the Mummies, from translations by Mr Smith of the Records these Mummies were found to be the family of Pharo King of Egypt. they were kept exclusively by Mr Smith until his death & since by the Mother of Mr Smith notwithstanding we have had repeated offers to purchase which have invariably been refused until her death which occurred on the fourteenth of ~~May last~~ this month.

Nauvoo	L. C. Bidamon
Hancock co Ill May 26	Emma Bidamon [pencil:] former wife of Jos. Smith Joseph Smith [pencil:] son of Jos. Smith ¹⁶

¹⁴ Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., "Mormons in Hancock County: A Reminiscence," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 64 (Spring 1971):38, emphasis retained.

¹⁵ "Family History of William Andrew Bills, Sr.," as cited in McConkie, *Remembering Joseph*, 357.

¹⁶ Bill of Sale, May 26, 1856, original in LDS Church History Library. The bill of sale was first published in "The Mormon Prophet's Mummies," *Daily Missouri Democrat*, June 12, 1857, St. Louis, Missouri.