

Ancient Egypt: Life and Death in the Valley of the Kings – an interview with Joann Fletcher and Stephen Buckley

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Ahead of Dr. Joann Fletcher's new TV documentary, 'Ancient Egypt: Life and Death in the Valley of the Kings', which is airing on BBC2 this Friday, we spoke to her and Dr. Stephen Buckley about their collaborative research on Egyptian mummification and their award-winning programme 'Mummifying Alan'.



Joann Fletcher and Stephen Buckley with Prof. Peter Vanezis (Far Left) and Maxine Coe (Far Right)

(Image Copyright: Dr. J. Fletcher / Channel 4)

You are both involved with the Mummy Research Group; how was it founded and how did you get involved?

Joann Fletcher: It was co-founded in 1999, when Don Brothwell and I got the opportunity to look at a Guanche mummy in Cambridge. Don had recently moved from the Institute of Archaeology in London, part of the University College where I'd also studied, to the University of York, and because I was in Yorkshire it seemed a natural thing to do. We both wanted to learn more about mummies, and many different

opportunities were coming our way, like research on Yemeni mummies, the Guanche and Egyptian material. Stephen [Buckley] was doing his PhD at Bristol, on mummification materials, and joined us soon afterwards. It is a very informal group; we work with people we are interested in, such as Gill Scott up in Newcastle at the Hancock Museum. They have quite a lot of mummified material in the collection, and not just Egyptian but also from other cultures.

Stephen Buckley: I also think that we realised we couldn't simply study mummies, but needed to use decent science within the research - to let the mummies tell us about who they were, and about the world in which they lived. There have been a lot of studies on mummies, many of them of mixed quality, some of it not so good. We felt that with Don, Joann, I and others, we could actually raise the level in terms of the quality of the research on mummies. It can be very interesting to people, but to actually really maximise the information there is and bring them to life is our main goal.

How does the science and Egyptology work together - between the two of you and within the Mummy Research Group?

Joann: Our work is very science-driven. The Egyptology is obviously applicable to interpretation of scientific findings when we are dealing with Egyptian mummies, but when we are dealing with mummies from Yemen, the Canary Islands, South America or Bog bodies for example then it's my role, in relatively minimal terms, to try to interpret the findings as far as I can. But there are no hard and fast rules. It is not like: "alright I want to look at this mummy; you tell me all the science and I'll then tell you whatever I can..." It is very science-led, and if I can add anything culturally to that, I try.

My speciality is hair, which does not necessarily involve its scientific analysis, which is what Stephen does as a scientist. I tend to focus more on the cultural side; how the dead in any culture were prepared for burial, what was seen as important within that culture. If you deal with pre-literate societies, as is the case with most of the cultures we look at, we only have the human remains to tell us about those specific people - how they viewed their world, how they wanted to appear within their world, and although the term 'personal adornment' may seem to trivialise it, that is often really all we have. We have the physical remains of that person, and how they and their relatives wanted them to be for eternity. With mummified remains, you often have the hair, the nails, the skin, sometimes with tattoos and so forth, so you get a far more rounded picture.

For example, with one of the bog bodies we studied, we found an Iron Age 'hair fixative' product. It was Stephen's science that was able to pinpoint that the material was there, since it is not visible to the naked eye. So I then had to go away and think: "what does it mean, on a body of this age, and from this part of the world?". In this case it needed to be cross-referenced with the Latin source material, after which I then try to interpret and understand it. It is a very fluid relationship I guess; we all throw our ideas in the ring

and, because it is an informal group and we all know each other pretty well, it is very easy to do that. Nobody feels like “professor so-and-so says this, therefore I can’t question it”. If you’re having a meeting down the pub it doesn’t really matter, you know the people and it’s all very informal. It is really the best way forward for us. I would think that is pretty much an accurate view of how it is.

Stephen: One of the things that make us different is that we recognise the need to at least try to overlap, even if that is just asking 'daft' questions. The science on its own can be quite limiting if that is all there is; so we want to avoid what tends to be the case in archaeological science, which is ‘nice science’ on archaeological material, but not really answering questions that are of interest to archaeology. We are all about knowing the context and understanding the full background.

To elaborate on the previous example of the bog body, we thought “well he’s got this hairstyle, how is he maintaining it? Let’s look at that”. It is the science that shows it, it doesn’t have an agenda. It is having the intelligent questions to which you can apply the science, but also recognising the limits, which isn’t always the case in archaeological science.

Knowing what we can and can’t do is crucial. For instance, ancient DNA in Egypt is highly problematic because you are unlikely to get it, even in Egyptian mummies. Recognising that problem, which is something we are working on at the moment, is obviously part of what the Mummy Research Group is about. It is hopefully interesting, exciting and engaging, but also credible, which is important to us.

What projects were you involved with before ‘Mummifying Alan’ - any that stand out to you?

Joann: ‘Mummifying Alan’ was on-going for about 8 years, and a direct follow-on from the KV35 project, or the ‘Nefertiti Project’ as it has often been misidentified.

Stephen: We have been doing many different things.

Joann: Basically we have mainly been researching 18th Dynasty mummification in Egypt to try to better understand it, and which we are still doing. The ‘Mummifying Alan’ project and the so-called ‘Nefertiti Project’ are little highlights along the way of a much bigger project. This even has applications as to how one can interpret the way the Valley of the Kings was used as a burial ground at this time. It is very revealing, since we are using mummified remains to help interpret a landscape; and it is how these royal mummies ‘worked’ for the ancient Egyptians. If you can get into the ancient Egyptian mindset, to try to work out what they were trying to do with all these things, it begins to make a lot of sense.

For me, it is this lifelong obsession with the 18th dynasty, how best to understand it through the remains of the people that were not just the rulers, but also the officials and the ‘normal’ people, the workers, etc. That is just within Egyptology, I mean, beyond that with the Yemeni remains for example, there are obviously a completely different set of questions for which we are trying to find answers...

Stephen: It is useful to know the road you have gone, in terms of the projects, what you have been involved with.

Joann: You try and name them all [laughs].

Stephen: In my case, I have been involved in excavations in the Valley of the Kings, beginning with tomb KV39, since the early 90s, and in which Jo became involved with as well. It was work carried out alongside my Masters degree, the chemistry of mummification, as well as my subsequent PhD. We have also done projects on the Yemeni mummies, which are very interesting to compare and contrast with Egyptian mummies in terms of what they used and how they used it. So there are similarities to some extent, but differences too.

Joann: That is true also of the Canary Island Guanche mummies that we have been working on...

Stephen: That is right. Jo was working on those in 1999, and I would like to...

Joann: The Yemeni examples and the Canary Islands' examples are vastly apart in terms of distance, but Egypt is the constant factor that clearly inspired both of them - there are a lot of connections. Part of the fascination is finding the different links, and how it all ties together; for example, finding out if there is any documentary or archaeological evidence suggesting that any of these cultures were linked. As we push mummification studies further, widening them out, we see that there are far more connections that we could ever have possibly thought. The more we find out, the more we realise what we still have to find out.

It's gone from my original interest in pure Egyptology and human remains, including hair, to being greatly expanded by meeting Stephen and working with Don and everybody here. All of our interests meshed together in a very expansive way. It is just sort of trying to juggle and keep all the balls in the air at any one time.

Stephen: Before the 'Mummifying Alan' project and all the research we were doing for that, it was as Jo said, keeping all the balls in the air, since we were also looking at South American mummies as well as Egyptian which were also filmed as part of a TV series for the History Channel. And it was quite revealing by just using the appropriate science. Science needs to be seen as a set of tools to find out about who they were, how they were, how they saw themselves.

Joann: Yes, the South American mummies project, another ongoing project, is really fascinating, and completely different to mummified remains we have seen in the Old World, in Egypt and so forth. Totally independently manufactured, and yet a lot of the remains were brought back to museums across the North of England, which means we have a really rich set of appropriate collections in the UK. I've also done a couple of seasons in South America: one in 1998 in Peru and then in 2000 in Peru and Chile. That really ignited another area of interest for me. We've really got to go back, as it is just a subject area in itself. We should try and limit ourselves, but it seems impossible as we find it all too interesting.

Stephen: Many of the mummies are actually very misunderstood; I think that is the other interest. Finding out what they are about, why they are there and how they got there. And the reality is often very different to the perception.

Joann: Well who would you say is the most famous mummy? I mean who is the most famous ancient Egyptian?

Stephen: Tutankhamen.

Joann: Exactly - but do people know much about his mummy, or how it was produced? No! It is still shocking that this is the case, even now, with all that has been written in journals and books and put on TV programmes - it still remains very misunderstood. There is still this nonsense that he was hastily prepared and they used too much preservative material in the case of his remains. But if you look at him in a continuum of 18th dynasty royals, it all makes perfect sense. You can almost predict how it is all going to pan out and how these individuals were prepared, which again 'Mummifying Alan' flagged up - you can see the processes that lay behind it.

Stephen: Both the in-depth cultural background and the in-depth science need to be understood together. The ancient science, the empirical science, and the modern science helped understand - really understand - what was going on. When that is possible, then patterns can become clear that have previously been missed. I think being very intense helps, just being interested and enthusiastic and recognising that the mummies can tell us so much, as long as we keep an open mind.

Joann: We also bring in experts from all kinds of different fields. One of the most brilliant people we have ever worked with was Nick Saunders, a lecturer at the University of Bristol, and what he doesn't know about South America isn't worth knowing! He is just wonderful and I could listen to him all day. I'd have loved to have been a student of his. He has talked so much about how to understand cultural implications behind a lot of the things we are finding with the South American mummies. I know a little bit, but it is a drop in the ocean compared to what Nick knows.

We constantly have to learn and study, we do not have all the answers, we just have the questions, and these people are able to fill in many of the blanks. We just love that. It is not really work, it is just great, and sometimes what we do feels very self indulgent.

What inspired you to undertake the 'Mummifying Alan' project, including the involvement of Channel 4 and all the rest that came out of it?

Joann: It was just a continuation of...

Stephen: Are we being controversial?

Joann: Go on then.



Stephen and Dr. Nick Saunders with a South American mummy (Image Copyright: Dr. J. Fletcher)

Stephen: We went down this road because we recognised that the significance was enormous. How did the Egyptians mummify their royalty and their pharaohs when the art was at its very best? It was completely different. They were clearly using a natron salt bath, not the dry natron that everyone thought, and that we had once thought. It was such a major story that it completely rewrote what we know and overturned what we thought. That was when we realised that it was going to be received in different ways by different people. Don Brothwell was the main person to really suggest that you need to mummify an actual human individual.

Joann: Yes, up to that point we'd been running the tests using pigs as a human proxy.

Stephen: It is very important to do an extensive set of experiments, which of course can't be done with a human, or shouldn't be done, at least not straight away. Once all of that was in place, we had people like Professor Sue Black and Professor Peter Vanezis, who all agreed with specialist staff at the Sheffield Medico-Legal Centre that a human body would be the ultimate test. As two people very familiar with Egyptology we also recognised that, although it was obvious to me as a scientist, that if it was going to work with pigs, it is going to work with humans, there were always going to be those who would have said "well it is not a human therefore it doesn't prove anything". We also recognised that there was a difference in scale, and therefore it would actually be justifiable to do it.

Joann: It was also a question of many discussions with the British Medical Association, specialist medical lawyers, etc. It is only once we got the green light to go ahead, when it was legally water tight, that we could really proceed.

Stephen: It is worth saying that the Human Tissue Authority, with whom we all dealt with, felt that it would be good to have Alan speaking on screen, which would make it absolutely clear that he wanted to be part of this, and the television side helped that. It also provided a well documented record, it being televised, creating an archive.

The other side is, sadly, that it wouldn't have been funded any other way. It overturned understanding and people tend to not like that. Academia is fine with small incremental changes, but if it is big then it is often resisted, not liked very much. It is as Max Planck said: "a new theory doesn't gain credence by convincing your peers, but rather those people dying and a new generation growing up with the new idea". He is absolutely right. That is what we were facing, which was emphasised by the fact when the research came out, a lot of very positive feedback and enthusiasm and support came from the medical community, but initially from Egyptology absolute deadly silence, not one word for a long time. It said it all; they didn't like the answer, but they knew they couldn't argue against it.

With the involvement of Don Brothwell and Sue Black, who are fantastic, and have dealt with mass war graves in many places, both agreed with the idea, as did Jo and I, that it is also very important to engage the public. It was a fortunate set of circumstances that all these people, fantastic people, including the BMA, said it was fine. Educationally, scientifically and ethically, it was all coming together.

Joann: Also the staff at the Medico-Legal Centre at Sheffield were superb. Without them we couldn't have done the project either. They had such faith in what we were doing and were wonderful throughout. It was also nice that they are in Yorkshire, that way the project remained in Yorkshire.

Stephen: Having the support of some of 'the great and the good' was obviously quite helpful with the nature of the project, especially one at the centre of ancient Egyptian culture, as it involved a lot of time and effort. The fact that we had for so long fundamentally misunderstood how it was done when it was at its absolute zenith was actually, we felt, quite important. The Egyptians were doing clever things for clever reasons, and it was for them very symbolic too.

In terms of it being the appropriate road to go down it was very much the case that as long as the volunteer and their family were happy about that, this project would be able to contribute to science, to medical science, microbiology and forensic pathology. It was all very much of interest to Peter Vanezis who is a Home Office pathologist. It does remain the case that in general there is often little real understanding of how the body falls to pieces in a variety of circumstances, because environmental conditions can be so different and therefore have such an impact on how that happens. Something like this was a bit different and was likely to be of interest to forensic pathologists as well.

Joann: Don't forget the human point of view - we are all going to die, but it is how we and our families cope with that. I think that from a bereavement point of view it has been very useful and helpful on so many levels. That has been a big part of this whole project, to try to understand why people would use mummification to preserve their dead, and that is a fundamental question. It is the desire not to lose that person, physically at least, and that makes a lot of sense. The evidence we do have from different cultures reveals how they treated their own dead.

Also in terms of people wishing to donate their own bodies after death, the overwhelming positivity of this project is the rise in the number of people wanting to donate their bodies for scientific and archaeological research. That is being done now through Kings College, where Alan is, in their Gordon Museum of Pathology. He is there with them; they are looking after him, and his body is part of this amazing museum that has so many world firsts, like an early X-ray machine, the world's first stethoscope... All of these amazing medical breakthroughs, and now Alan, there in pride of place. Having him in the Gordon Museum means that he is part of teaching and research by medical students at Kings, at Guy's [Hospital] and at St. Thomas', which is what he wanted; he actually said that if he could be either in a museum or be a part of medical research that would be great.

And so with this you've got everything, because he is there, he's wrapped, he's safe, he is in a completely protected environment. The people who are around him are medical people, who understand the huge contribution he and his family made, and also what the whole project means. It has gone way beyond what we could ever have imagined, and Alan managed to take us all with him, way beyond Egyptology - lovely subject that it is - and answer some fundamental human questions which are relevant to all of us. We are constantly learning, and it is all thanks to Alan really.

Stephen: Kings College have made it very clear that students from Guy's [Hospital], St. Thomas' and Kings will indeed be taught by this research - Alan is part of their training, which is really quite nice. Research on Egyptian mummification has been going on for a long time in various guises, but it's been so useful to focus on the actual mummification process, on the mechanics and actual practicalities of it.

I think what this programme also highlighted, which I think is quite useful, was the human side, because the reality was that the Egyptian embalmers knew that they were mummifying real people with families, and possibly knowing them as well. That aspect of it was very real, in some ways it was highly appropriate that we should actually make that part of the approach that we took, as then it was directly relevant. It actually helped us understand some of the crucial details of how they did it. They were left to lie at state, for three days, for example, before the internal organs were removed, that is quite clever; to leave the organs in and still preserve the body and yet they did.

Joann: It is only when you have a human body in front of you and you can watch it over that 70 day period, all the changes it goes through, and all of which allowed us to try and see how the Egyptians would have interpreted it, and what it all meant to them. There are only tiny little clues that they have left us, since they never wrote down the details of mummification. There are only the many subtleties and nuances that the project set out for us. So it is all about pulling something into focus.

Stephen: It just shows that you can't beat actually doing it, because Jo can contradict me, but I think it is fair to say that Egyptology, as a subject, has tended to look at Egyptian mummification from afar [Joann agrees], usually without getting too involved. Because of that there were these mysteries that had remained unanswered, in some cases for over 150 years. So by doing it, and this is true of this project, we have been able to see that some of the questions are quite easily answered when you actually do it yourself.

'Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret' has now been aired in Australia, the US and Canada. What were the reactions like there, were they the same or different from the UK?

Joann: The American version was hacked down to an hour... So although part of the point of doing this project was to show how a body decomposes, so featuring research carried out at the University of Tennessee's 'Body Farm' facility, American audiences were judged too sensitive to see what goes on at the Body Farm. So no maggots were shown in the US version for instance.

Stephen: I think the issue also is how the project actually developed. In the case of this project with Alan, he was the only person to come forward, probably because it was Channel 4 which is known for doing some 'interesting stuff'. What I think is very telling and crucial and very important is that he was the only one to come forward then, but since the programme went out we have had 15 people wanting to donate their bodies to me and Jo, which obviously can't happen, but it suggests that we have got something right. As Joann said, via Kings, we hope that their system for body donation can actually satisfy everyone, by having a medical connection but also an archaeological one, which is what the people wanting to donate their bodies do feel.

Joann: The British version of the programme was the complete thing. There were obviously masses that could have been included, but we had less than two hours, was it an hour and a half?

Stephen: It was an hour and forty minutes and that includes adverts, which would mean probably an hour and twenty-five minutes.

Joann: But the American version is much shorter...

Stephen: Yes, it was less than an hour, about 48 minutes.

Joann: It was ‘bullet points’ at best, and because it wasn’t an American body donor, I think some things might have been lost in translation.

Stephen: There are a number of issues, briefly going through the history. In Britain it has been received fantastically well. We have had so many people getting in touch saying “this is fantastic”. When it went out in Australia, there were few comments but all positive, and again saying “fantastic”. Then in America, still mainly positive actually, but there was also less understanding of what it was actually about, because it hadn’t really been explained. There is also the American academic Bob Brier who had mummified an anonymous body donor in the 90s - but the point here was absolutely crucial and central: he followed the received wisdom...

Joann: He used dry natron.

Stephen: He followed the received wisdom, whereas we overturned the received wisdom, completely turned understanding on its head, and those two are not the same. I think that came out, certainly in Britain, but in America ...

Joann: And because Bob Brier is American, the Americans said: “Ooh somebody from America did it first”. And yes, they did mummify somebody, but not in the way we did because we were replicating the 18th dynasty technique, by looking at Tutankhamen and his dynasty...

Stephen: So they did get it when this was explained, but only after the event.

Joann: Yeah, but it is frustrating that THAT wasn’t conveyed in the program. We put so much hard work in to it, over many years, but editors can often chop things down to a sound bite...

Stephen: Something was lost in translation when it was in North America, but what is interesting though; the only person who asked the right question, which was quite challenging in the sense that they were questioning what we were doing but was easily answered, was a Canadian... For the rest, it was received positively.

Joann: We were in Egypt when it was aired in America.

Stephen: Most of the comments were quite similar, but they don’t want to get too bogged down in cultural differences. To me it was that the Americans were saying: “wow, great, wonderful”, but just didn't get so deeply involved in what it was all about in the way in which people did in Britain, for example. I think that is in part due to the length of the program, but also partly the cultural differences. We sort of half expected that, but on the whole it has been received extremely well, I suppose, because 1: it answered a huge question; and 2: it was handled extremely carefully, as it should have been.



Joann and Tutankhamen's mask in the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, Cairo

(Image Copyright: Blink Television / Dr. J. Fletcher)

Did you expect to win a BAFTA for 'Mummifying Alan'?

Joann and Stephen: No [almost in unison].

What do you think made Alan a winner?

Stephen: Well I think with the Royal Television Award...

Joann and Stephen: That is the first one we got.

Stephen: Why I touch upon that one though, is not only because it was the first one, but it explicitly said that the reason why they gave it was because they saw it as 'groundbreaking science' and different, as opposed to Frozen Planet, which is very good, and Brian Cox with Stargazing Live, which is good too, but was largely discussion. They made a point of saying it was because 'Mummifying Alan' was actually new, challenging, groundbreaking, different, and obviously with Alan being himself, a fantastic character, undoubtedly. But it was the combination of that plus the big question; they certainly gave it for that reason.

Joann: I think Alan was basically somebody everybody could relate to, he was a genuine guy, he had a family, was a wonderful man and suffered from cancer, which a vast number of people in this country do. At every level people could identify with him, and what he and his family had to go through. I think the science was less scary when viewed through Alan's experience of it.

If it had just been the science, it would have been groundbreaking, but you wouldn't have had the human touch. If it had just been Alan, it would have been wonderful, but what would have happened after he died, what happens to anybody after they die? As we know only too well ourselves, it is a dreadfully sad time. However, you put the two together and it becomes rather more uplifting, and I think that was something that seemed to resonate with an awful lot of people.

Stephen: Yes, both strands were crucial to the work.

Joann: It all came together - human story, ancient Egypt, brilliant science, mix it all together; which was just amazing.

Stephen: Yes and I think the BAFTA was just a continuation from that. With the RTS award there was a little more introspection in terms of critical analysis, where as with the BAFTA, we won one and that is it.

Joann: There is another one we got recently...

Stephen: Yes, from the Association of International Broadcasters. But I think what is relevant is that, not so much with them but with the RTS, is that it was 'best science and natural history program'. With the AIB it was 'best science documentary'.

Joann: BAFTA was the 'specialist factual' category wasn't it, not science?

Stephen: BAFTA was 'specialist factual' and the science was clearly seen as crucial to this which was quite nice. Having said that, I would certainly say without Alan being Alan it wouldn't have won a BAFTA. It was those two things together. It was nice to actually hear people say that it was underpinned by high quality groundbreaking science, which is of course what the Mummy Research Group is all about, it is carrying on the philosophy.

As I said, Don [Brothwell] was the person to say you really need a human individual. He actually came down with me to the Medico-Legal Centre in Sheffield to see their staff quite some years ago now, and it took a long time to negotiate, but he was there at the start. And although he was then involved with his own large-scale research project [InterArChive], he still is a fantastic supporter.

Joann: He is just amazing; he always had faith in us.

Stephen: This is undoubtedly one of the biggest things we have done; it does fundamentally change understanding of Egyptian mummification as we know it. It is part of actually beginning to really understand what was going on. You still have people who fail to also understand that the Egyptian environment is very helpful. Yes, the Egyptians were very clever, but their dry environment was also crucial to long term preservation. Other researchers elsewhere in Europe are also doing experimental mummification, but by leaving samples in a normal environment they tend not to survive too well.

Joann: You need that complete absence of outside moisture.

Stephen: Otherwise mould is a problem. Hopefully this was part of redressing that balance and sharing how it can be done.

Do you think more documentaries like ‘Mummifying Alan’, where there is a combination of science and the human side attached to it, is needed in Egyptology or general History?

Joann: Yes, that is what we have started to do more of now as well.

Stephen: Yes I think so...

Joann: Looking at an ancient culture like Egypt, or whichever one we pick, to look at how it really was, we need to get away from purely concentrating on complex linguistics, esoteric religions or things of relevance to less than 1% of the ancient Egyptian population who were literate. Not doing another programme about King Tut and pyramids, unless it is going to fundamentally rewrite what we know about it. It has been done, so only do it afresh from the ground up.

Egyptology too often seems to tackle the same old subjects, the same stuff with a slightly different twist or a slightly different slant. There comes a point when you have to be able to apply it across the board and to tell people why it is relevant. It is lovely studying some of this stuff, but at the end of the day you have to ask of what relevance it is to the wider world and sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't.

Stephen: Yes, I think this will be good, being slightly cynical, as a drip-drip-drip-effect on Egyptology, which is the best you can do. There are a lot of people who will stick their heads in the sand, but I think by being both high quality, with very significant science, and doing the emotional side as well, it made it very difficult for people to criticise, and, therefore, they had to take it onboard. In Europe there has been quite a bit of interest in the programme, from Switzerland, Germany, etc. Yes it has been great that Europe has taken an interest as well, I have to say I thought it was probable that Britain and continental Europe were likely to be more engaged, and more interested, than places like North America. That is the nature of things. However, we couldn't be happier with how it has gone.

Joann: It is how comfortable you are talking about death anyway, because in North America there is often a lot of conservatism surrounding the whole death and burial process in modern America, so many people tend not to think about it.

Ancient Egypt is not the only culture that made mummies. Why do you think there is so little general awareness about mummies in other regions of the world?

Joann: Because few people have ever really looked at them in any detail.

Stephen: And politics...

Joann: Take the Chinese mummies for examples; a superb area for study, but I don't read Chinese. So with all the publications in Chinese, I am all at sea, I can't interpret them. Obviously this is effectively restricted information that I can't get access to. In the case of other cultures that made mummies, these are often only studied by their modern descendants, which is great but, unless it is all brought together in some form, you are always going to get a one-sided view. It is impossible to see how they all fit together, if everybody is doing their own area of research with no sharing of information.

Stephen: There is also to some extent a Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition that seems uncomfortable with intentional mummification, and that has meant there have been a lot of blind spots. There have been anthropologists from that tradition, particularly the first two. So according to them, South American mummies are all naturally preserved, which is absolute nonsense...

Joann: Yes, they keep saying that.

Stephen: There is a desire to want to see it that way and it fits in with this Judaeo-Christian-Islamic approach where you get the deceased in the ground as soon as possible, that is it. It is important because it does mean that quite powerful people - the anthropologists and the people they work with, the politicians who give them the funding - have encouraged understanding of mummies and mummification to often be poor in the past.

Joann: Even within Egyptology, some Egyptologists don't like mummies at all.

Stephen: I think that the reality is that a lot of cultures produced mummies. There has been anthropogenic input. They did such things because they cared for their dead, and no doubt in the case of relatives, loved them. Sometimes, it is actual proper mummification whereas other cases might be more like anointing the body. But the point is that people were actually comfortable with engaging with their dead loved ones – it was very much about care and concern.

In the case of one of the South American mummies we looked at for example, there was evidence for complex embalming using candelilla wax on the head and insect wax on the legs - bizarre stuff, but revealed by the chemistry since you can't tell what was used by simply looking, so to say. There is clearly some symbolism going on, that is something that we are continuing to work on, hopefully. It shows that these people were putting a lot of thought and effort into how they treated their dead.

If such mummy studies are done in the right way with sensitivity, which is crucial, then the information obtained can be very important and tell us something. But at the same time being very sensitive about how we approach any study of the dead, recognising that they were individuals at some time. You just need to make sure that you stay within that philosophy really.

Are you involved in any new projects and are you able to say anything about those projects?

Joann: Yes, we are working quite extensively with the Turin Egyptian Museum. They have the largest collection of Egyptian material outside Cairo. You can compare it to the British Museum, but the BM isn't exclusively Egyptian, whereas the Turin Museum is purely egyptological. Their mummy collection spans from predynastic to Roman times. They also have the intact burial group from the tomb of Kha and Meryt. Kha was the architect of Amenhotep III, Tutankhamen's grandfather. Kha and Meryt's tomb is wonderful, and was found intact in 1906 when the entire tomb contents were taken to Turin. Not only were we given permission to examine their mummies, but also study their grave goods and anything that would benefit from chemical analysis.

Then when we were in Egypt we were given permission by the Egyptian authorities to re-enter their tomb, which isn't usually open, and their tomb chapel which was equally amazing. The tomb chapel is built some distance from their tomb, which is why it was preserved and remained hidden for so long. That is one of the projects we've got on. It is so refreshing to deal with an individual that is not king-so-and-so, just a 'normal' guy that worked his way up through society. He started off as just one of the workmen at the worker's village of Deir el-Medina, but he certainly achieved great things, didn't he?

Stephen: He did.

Joann: Fascinating, so fascinating.

Stephen: Besides working with the Turin Museum, we are also working on animal mummies with a number of international collaborators.

Joann: We are also doing non-mummy projects, as well as standard archaeology, again all very fascinating. Since the late 1980s we've been looking at the connections between ancient Egypt and Yorkshire, including local museum collections and the actual people from Yorkshire who became Egyptologists, who aren't that well known but have had a significant impact on the subject.

It includes the town where I am from, Barnsley. I am very proud to come from Barnsley and among several Egyptologists from Yorkshire, one very prominent one came from the town. I'm currently researching his life and the tombs he excavated, and am delighted to say we are featuring him in Barnsley's first ever museum, which will open this summer. These are just a few projects we are involved with.

What do you think of Egypt's revolution and its current stance on its antiquity?

Joann: I think it is the start of a new dawn. New people overseeing the sites include a lot of young Egyptian Egyptologists. To see places like Medinet Habu and the Ramesseum under the control of female inspectors... terrific!

Egypt has recently been in the news with regards to some extremist groups stating that all remnants from ancient Egypt should be destroyed, how do you feel about that?

Stephen: It is old news in the sense that it has always been said quietly. What is new is that it is louder, but has always been there.

Joann: Some have claimed that if you knock out the tourist sites, the tourists will stop going, the income will stop and Egypt will be on its knees financially. So we can only hope that people keep going to Egypt. The Egyptian people themselves want visitors to keep coming to support the economy - and they deserve our support.

Many thanks to Joann Fletcher and Stephen Buckley for speaking to us.