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# Early Travellers and the Animal ‘Mummy Pits’ of Egypt: Exploration and Exploitation of the Animal Catacombs in the Early Age of Travel

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## Résumé

During the early age of travel (16th to the early 20th century AD), a curious burial phenomenon known simply as the ‘*mummy pits*’ became a popular tourist attraction; known to contain a multitude of both human and animal mummies, these ‘pits’ were a source of souvenirs for centuries. The animal ‘mummy pits’ were particularly attractive to early travellers, as animal mummies were viewed as portable and affordable relics which encapsulated both the exoticism and unique intrigue of the land of the Nile.

The first animal ‘pits’ to be rediscovered were the ‘bird pits’ at Saqqara which contained the potted mummies of the ibis. Later, other catacomb sites such as the ‘*wolf pits*’ at Asyut and the ‘*crocodile mummy pits*’ at Maabdeh became popular with tourists and provided a steady supply of souvenirs right up to the early 20th century. Although travellers were drawn to these ‘pits’ largely because of their interest in acquiring souvenirs, the pits also offered them the opportunity for adventure and the formulation of entertaining anecdotes to be shared with the folks back home, explaining the sustained popularity of these burial places over several centuries.

Despite their historic popularity, very little is known of the animal catacombs before the investigations carried out by modern archaeologists. Although there are numerous animal mummies in museum collections around the world today, many are unprovenanced or are labelled simply with notary information, a reflection perhaps of their perceived value at the time as mere ‘objects’ of curiosity. Initially collected and valued as exotic keepsakes, these animal mummies were later also used in the manufacture of paper and fertiliser. By the mid-late 19th century, because of the damage sustained by these burial assemblages during centuries of rifling by relic-hunters, many catacomb sites were considered of little value to collectors of antiquities and deemed of little ‘scientific’ interest to early archaeologists. The subsequent exploitation of the animal catacombs for the manufacture of ‘mummy products’ formed from their bones and wrappings, has unfortunately led to the loss of a significant amount of archaeological data. However, accounts left by early travellers together with archival material and newspaper reports provide us with valuable information and offer clues as to the appeal of animal mummies as souvenirs, the methods by which early collectors acquired them as well as the nature of the history of our knowledge and understanding of these burial places over time.

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This paper presents an overview of the encounters, perceptions and exploitation of the animal catacombs of Egypt in the early age of travel, as well as the value of the information which can be gleaned from the study of early travel literature.