

## BECOMING REALITY: THE FIRST MUSEUM OF MUMMIES IN SPAIN

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**Abstract.** During the restoration works of the old church of the Assumption of Our Lady in 2011, better known as “The Piquete”, in the village of Quinto (Zaragoza, Spain), the remains of 70 individuals were discovered. Of these, 32 had been preserved naturally due to the environmental conditions of the

ground. These mummies date between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In order to investigate them and to create a place for their conservation and display, the project of the “Museo de las Momias de Quinto” was founded, the first and unique institution of its kind in Spain.

**Keywords.** Mummy museum. Natural mummies. Quinto. Zaragoza.

## INTRODUCTION

The town of Quinto is located close to the city of Zaragoza, in north-eastern Spain. According to the census of October 2019, the population of Quinto is 1966 inhabitants, and the main economic revenue of the town is based on the agricultural and livestock sectors, since the proximity of the Ebro river favors all kind of crops.

“El Piquete” church is located on the top of a hill, dominating the whole village, and is and has been one of the most strategic locations for many kilometres in this area. Dating back to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, the building was designed in the Mudejar style, and received some enlargements in later eras (Fig. 1).

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the town of Quinto was in the front line and the church provided shelter for the population, but unfortunately its strate-



**Fig. 1.** The old church of the Assumption of Our Lady, better known as “El Piquete” (Photo credit: Antonio Jardiel).

gic location was also a perfect target for the enemy artillery which caused severe damage to the building. In the post-war period, the abandoned and damaged church was closed down, and another one was build near to the Town Council of Quinto inside the village, that was inaugurated in 1950.

The old church of the Assumption of our Lady, once deconsecrated, was acquired by the City Council of Quinto, in order to restore it and found a research centre there, focussing on Mudejar art in the region of Aragón, which then surprisingly led to the discovery of mummies and the subsequent new plan: to create a mummy museum here.

The reconstruction of the building did take place in four different stages. The first one was to restore the Mudejar style tower (1983). The reconstruction of the outer walls started in 1989, in the second phase, and the works ended in 2003. In 2010 began the third phase, which was the most complex one. Since the building had been used as a barn after the war, a concrete floor had been put in, that now needed to be removed, to reach the original floor and to install a heating system underneath it. Soon, coffins with human remains began to appear, forcing the reconstruction work on the building to come to a halt.

## HOW THE “MUSEO DE LAS MOMIAS DE QUINTO” CAME TO LIFE

In 2011, 70 individuals (adults and children) were discovered in the central nave (Fig. 2), of which, at least, 32 were mummified. It is a natural preservation, by the environmental conditions of the ground. But not all of the mummified bodies were in the same condition. Some of the coffins did contain only skeletonized remains, others had some remains with parts of preserved soft tissue, and even completely preserved individuals.

15 of the mummies discovered in 2011 (7 adults and 8 children) were selected to be part of the permanent exhibition of the Museum. As the mummies and their clothing were completely covered by sand, dust, and remains of necrophagous insects (*exuviae*) (Fig. 3), it was necessary to clean them thoroughly, using a controlled vacuum cleaner, at low power, without using any chemicals, but covering the nozzle with tulle, so no small objects were lost during the process. This intervention allowed as well for an anthropological study of these mummies, and some samples were taken, from both, the mummies and their funeral attire, in order to carry out more detailed analyses later. The study of the clothing helped to date the 15 individuals chronologically from the ends of the 18<sup>th</sup> until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> cen-



**Fig. 2.** Archaeological intervention carried out in the central nave of "El Piquete", in 2011, to recover the mummies (Photo credit: Antonio Jardiel).





**Fig. 3.** Mummy PQ.44. A-C: Before cleaning process. B-D: Final results. (Photo credit: Mercedes González).

ture, which was corroborated by the information obtained in the registers of death, guarded in the local parish archives, and in the Archbishopric of Zaragoza, who were consulted by the chronicler of Quinto.

To ensure the preservation of the mummies, 11 showcases (7 for adults and 4 for children), with a passive climate system control, thus not needing any type of electrical current to operate, were designed by Bloquitech, and manufactured by Fotoprisma, two Spanish companies with abundant experience in this sector. It was quite a challenge to develop a mechanism that allowed the attractive display of the mummies, while guaranteeing their protection and conservation due to the low budget available. In addition, a hermetic drawer, made of stainless steel, was installed inside each of the wooden bases of the showcases, to place some chemical products to ensure the good preservation of the mummies, if that would prove to be necessary in the future.

As part of the anthropological and paleopathological study of the mummies, four of them (one adult female and three children) were taken to the Royo Villanova Hospital, in Zaragoza, where experts performed computerized tomography (CT) scans, in November 2015. In addition, some microbiological, histological and chemical analyses have been carried out to obtain more complete information on



**Fig. 4.** Museum of the Mummies of Quinto. A: Chapel of Saint Ana. B: Archaeological pit in the central nave (Photo credit: Mercedes González).

how the lives of these people were. Some of the results obtained have already been presented in special congresses and scientific journals.

With the discovery of the human remains, and especially the mummies, a new plan was designed, to convert “El Piquete” into the first mummy museum in all of Spain, with a unique feature: the mummies are exhibited in the same place where they have been exhumed (Fig. 4). The main objective of the museum is to present, promote and to better preserve the cultural heritage of Quinto.

In the third year since its inauguration, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2018, the *Museum of the Mummies of Quinto* has already been visited by more than 19,500 people, not only from Spain, but also, from different places in Europe, South America and North America (Fig. 5).

As this project was laid out as a living exhibition, with continuous growth and change, a multimedia program is being designed, as well as a series of interactive exhibits using the latest technologies such as holograms, 3D printed replicas of some mummies (for blind people), and children's workshops for the little ones are created... all of this, in order to enhance the visitor experience.

Thanks to the results obtained with the Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), many alterations in the subsoil of “El Piquete” were detected, in the main altar and in the side chapels, which will lead to new archaeological excavations in the nearest



**Fig. 5.** Guided tour at the Museum of the Mummies of Quinto, in the summer of 2019 (Photo credit: Mercedes González).

future, in order to recover all that new anthropological material with which to increase the current permanent exhibition, and will help to better understand the past of the people of Quinto.

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