

HOW IS IT THAT CHINCHORRO HAS BECOME PART OF THE WESTERN SWEDISH CULTURAL HERITAGE?

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In 1924, the Swedish researcher Carl Skottsberg took a collection from South America to the museum of ethnography in Göteborg. Among the artifacts in this collection were the so called "twin mummies" from Arica, Chile, excavated by Max Uhle. After being exhibited for many years, the twins were banished to storage. During filming that took place in storage at the end of the 1980s, the twins' heads were crushed. In 1994 the twins were moved to the Studio of the Western Sweden Conservators Trust (SKV). That was the beginning of extensive work between the Studio and the ethnographic museum, with mummies and human remains in general, and the twins and Chinchorros in particular.

Key words: Chinchorro mummies, Max Uhle, conservation.

En 1924 el investigador sueco Carl Skottsberg llevó una colección de Sudamérica al museo de Etnografía en Göteborg. Entre los artefactos de la colección estaban las llamadas "momias gemelas" de Arica, Chile, excavadas por Max Uhle. Después de muchos años de exhibición, las gemelas se perdieron en la bodega. Durante una filmación en la bodega a fines de los `80, las cabezas de las gemelas fueron aplastadas. En 1994 las gemelas fueron trasladadas al Studio of the Western Sweden Conservators Trust (SKV), lo que marcó el comienzo del trabajo extensivo entre SKV y el Museo Etnográfico con momias y restos humanos en general, y las gemelas y Chinchorros en particular

Palabras claves: Momias chinchorro, Max Uhle, conservación.

The Studio of the Western Sweden Conservators Trust (SVK) is a regional studio for conservation of cultural heritage. The studio was established to execute interventive and preventive conservation and to be a resource centre for the museums in the region. The studio also offers its services to private collections, public art, archives, churches etc.

The story begins with Carl Skottsberg who was a biologist and was in charge of the Swedish expedition during 1916-1917, working with a biological survey of the Chilean Pacific Island. He visited Arica in May 1917. Skottsberg obtained permission for some excavations for the purpose of collecting artifacts for Swedish museums. About 250 objects were excavated, all now in the possession of the Ethnographical museum in Göteborg. Carl Skottsberg was persuaded by Erland Nordenskjöld to prepare a paper about the collection for the 21st congress of Americanists in Göteborg 1924.

In Skottsberg's collection from Arica the most curious object was the twin mummies. They had been found shortly before Skottsberg's arrival. Different circumstances contributed to the discovery of the remains of the twin mummy. The twins came to light when the sand blew away, and water percolated through the sand bank, from a leaking tank behind the officer's kitchen. They were somewhat damaged and were described as incomplete.

Upon arrival in Göteborg to the Ethnographic Museum in 1919, the mummies received an acquisition number. Since then they have been a part of western Swedish cultural heritage.

The twin mummies were delivered to SVK in 1995. Treatment was requested due to damages that probably could be attributed to lack of proper storage conditions. My work started by looking through the early documentation. The description of the mummies had to be gleaned from [Skottsberg's paper from 1924](#) because of the damages. Their length is 45 cm and width is 20 cm. The skull of the right body was crushed, the forehead and the upper parts of the orbits were missing, as were the legs below the knee. The head of the left body was intact but is otherwise badly damaged except where it is protected by the right arm of the body on the right. The right arm and leg are gone and only the thigh of the left leg is preserved.

My intention was to examine systematically the mummies and their belongings in the original box. A sort of excavation began in the laboratory. The box was divided into four minor areas named A, B, C and D. The left child was referred to as mummy A and the right was referred to as mummy B. The areas were separated by a white string. Some x-ray photos were taken as documentation of the damage.

Total crushing of the skulls was evident, but from the x-rays it is possible to see that they have an inner framework. The cavities are refilled and sticks, 10-15 cm long, are introduced to stabilize the body and limbs. Sticks are introduced in the thighs to fix them to the trunk. It is also possible to compare the x-ray with the description made in 1924. This is how they are described in the latter. Each child has been embalmed separately. The opened skull of mummy B shows the brain cavity filled with a dark reddish brown substance. After part of it had been removed two sticks came to light running down through the neck. A wig of black human hair, arranged with a median parting covers the vertex, disappearing below the enveloping layers. Over the face is a 3-4 mm thick oval mask of grey substance, perforated with holes indicating mouth and eyes.

I started to remove the pieces of the oval mask. The pieces are so fragile that they would crumble to powder if you press too hard when glueing them together. The wig had also fallen apart and pieces had to be identified and removed to find out if there was any possibility of restoration.

In order to try to determine the age of the children I extracted pieces of the mandible, consisting of teeth or what would eventually become teeth. These were examined by an odontologist. From the mandible from mummy A it is possible to learn how its structure has been built up. The surface layer is probably manganese paint with resins in between. In that layer you can see fibres probably from camelid. Below this layer there is a greyish cement. The next layer consists probably of manganese paint applied directly on to the mandible. In the mandible there is a tooth. On the greyish cement and even on the manganese paint there is copper corrosion. On top of the greyish cement there is a bigger tooth. It has been placed there before the surface layer was added because there are remains of probable manganese paint both on the tooth and on the greyish cement.

From the tooth inside the mandible from mummy A the odontologist has estimated the age to \pm 3 months old. That result is in accordance with the result from 1923 when an osteologist from x-ray photos estimated their age to 2 or 3 months. From a tooth inside

a part of the mandible from mummy B the result from the odontologist gives the same result as for mummy A, \pm 3 months old.

From a small piece from mummy A we have established the presence of a sculptured ear covered with manganese paint. At this stage we decided to take some samples from the manganese paint. Because now we had become certain that the binding medium in the manganese paint is a resin. A cross-section of manganese paint shows manganese paint and resin but we can not see any trace of skin!

In Skottsbergs article it is argued that the wig was painted red. For examination we used a piece from the wig of black human hair that has been placed on the skull of mummy A. But as far as we can see from examinations using different microscopes we cannot find anything indicating red or reddish paint. From outside the wig you can see what has been described as a brown clay paste.

A textile fragment was found in the sand from area C. It is formed of a single element, a variation of buttonhole looping which forms a different appearance on the two faces of the fragment. On a piece from mummy B area D at the inner side you can see twisted strings of fibres arranged in a pattern. It looks like a sort of plaited work or braiding. There is also what has been described as a brown paste of clay mixed with a filamentous powder probably of camelid fibres.

After examination and conservation of the twin mummies all examined parts have been put in place again. The glue that has been used for conservation of masks and wigs is paraloid B-72, 10% in acetone. In the sand I have rediscovered a model harpoon with a stone tip and a wooden stick, flattened. The belongings are now back in position as described in Skotts-berg's article. On the back of the mummies the covering with rushes is still intact. The rushes are fastened in both a parallel and longitudinal manner with totora strings. In [Dr. Bernardo Arriaza's book "Beyond Death"](#) you find these mummies described in "Table 1, Chinchorro mummies found to date" as found in Arica, complex type of mummies, with a reference to [Skottsberg 1924](#). But there is a question-mark at associated Museum. This question mark can now be erased. Unfortunately no radiocarbon dating has been done yet, but it is in the works. There is also an interest in knowing whether the mummies are twins or not. For this reason some pieces of thigh-bone and a tooth from each mummy have been removed and sent to a laboratory for DNA-analysis. We have no results to present so far because the contamination of the bone affects the analysis. If they not are twins, the question will remain, why are they buried together?

Last but not least was the preventive conservation. A storage case was made for the mummies to protect them. The original box is covered with acid free paper and cotton ribbons and the case is made of pinewood with a lid of acrylic glass. For the moment there are no plans to exhibit the mummies at the Ethnographic Museum. On the other hand, it would certainly be difficult to describe the Chinchorro culture without displaying a mummy.

The discussion of whether to exhibit human remains or not has only just started in Sweden. In my opinion the ethnographic museums in particular should initiate discussions on the delicate subject of how to handle human remains.

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