



HANA VYMAZALOVÁ, ZDENĚKA SŮVOVÁ

A STORY OF AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MOUSE

ABSTRACT: This contribution presents an interpretation of a unique discovery of a mouse burial, which was found inside the sarcophagus of an Egyptian priest, Neferinpu, dating to the third millennium BC. The careful placement and linen covering of the mouse seems to indicate that it was an intentional artifact within the burial of the priest. Interpretations of this find lead us to the religious symbolism of mice and shrews in ancient Egypt, associated with the solar cult. The symbolism and importance of shrews and mice in the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians is well documented from later periods of Egyptian history, when they were often mummified and placed in little coffins.

KEY WORDS: Ancient Egypt - Abusir - Fifth Dynasty - Neferinpu - Mouse - Shrew

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, a Czech archaeological expedition to Egypt, headed by M. Bárta, working at Abusir South, explored the tomb of the priest, Neferinpu, dating to the second half of the third millennium B.C. (Bárta *et al.* 2014). Neferinpu's burial was found intact and among other artefacts that were placed with the deceased in his sarcophagus, a skeleton of a rodent was identified. Even though remains of rodents are sometimes found in burial chambers where they died after feeding themselves on offerings, Neferinpu's rodent shows specific features indicating that this case is somewhat different.

The tomb of the priest, Neferinpu

The name of the owner of the explored tomb means "Anubis is accomplished" (Gourdon 2007: 354.5), referring to Anubis, the jackal god of cemeteries.

Neferinpu lived in the Fifth Dynasty and was buried in the time of King Djedkare around 2400 BC. He was a priest and held many administrative titles associated with service to the king (Bárta *et al.* 2014: 8–9).

The tomb of Neferinpu was located at the necropolis of officials of the Old Kingdom state in Abusir South, a few kilometres to the south of the pyramid complexes of the Fifth Dynasty rulers (see also for instance Bárta 2001, Bárta *et al.* 2009, 2010). It was a typical mastaba-tomb with a rectangular superstructure and outside walls built of limestone blocks and slightly inclined. In the west part of the tomb, burial shafts were dug for the members of Neferinpu's family. In the east part of the tomb, a corridor chapel was located, to which the relatives could come and bring offerings for the deceased. They placed the offerings in the chapel in front of the niches with so-called false-doors through which, according to

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the ancient Egyptian beliefs, the spirit of the deceased moved between this and the other world. The limestone false-door of Neferinpu was placed in the southernmost niche in the west wall of the chapel, and it was decorated with inscriptions and reliefs, showing the deceased enjoying his offerings, and naming all his important administrative and priestly titles (Bárta 2012, Bárta *et al.* 2014: 64–69).

The burial of Neferinpu

Just to the west of Neferinpu's false-door, the southernmost shaft was prepared for his burial. It was 9m deep and interestingly at the bottom of this shaft, two burial chambers were found. Usually, shafts contained only one burial chamber most often located to the west of the shaft; however, in this shaft one chamber lay to the west and another chamber to the east of the shaft. The western burial chamber

contained a large limestone sarcophagus and was robbed in antiquity. The other chamber to the east of the shaft was discovered intact; it most probably belonged to Neferinpu himself (Bárta 2012, Bárta *et al.* 2014: 28–38). The entrance to the room had been closed some 4500 years ago by a wall made of stone blocks and mortar, covered with a layer of plaster, which imitated the surrounding walls of the shaft. The chamber contained an undisturbed burial in a simple limestone sarcophagus and many objects of burial equipment that the ancient deceased believed would be used in his afterlife, including for instance beer jars, model vessels and canopic jars (Bárta 2012, Bárta *et al.* 2014: 28–38, 94–104).

At the moment of discovery, the sarcophagus was intact, its lid resting on the bottom part, and sealed with pinkish plaster on all four sides. Inside a body of a man was found, covered with a mud body-shelter that



FIGURE 1. The mouse covered with linen, found in the tomb of Neferinpu in Abusir South (Photo M. Frouz).

was meant to restore the natural shape of the desiccated body, and possibly also symbolise renewal (for a schematic drawing see *Figure 2*). The deceased was adorned with beads on his arms and ankles and had a simple necklace of semi-precious stones around his neck. A wooden sceptre in his left hand and a long wooden staff lying along his left side were signs of the status of an ancient Egyptian official. In addition, a wooden headrest and a small vessel of Egyptian alabaster were found near the head of the deceased (Bárta *et al.* 2014: 38, 98–102).

The rodent burial in the sarcophagus of Neferinpu

Among the finds inside the sarcophagus was also the skeleton of a small rodent (*Figure 1*; Bárta *et al.* 2014: 180–181). The little body was arranged between the knee of the deceased and his wooden staff. It was lying on its side in the north-south direction along the body of Neferinpu, with its head to the south (to the feet of the deceased) and its tail to the north (to the head of the deceased). Enlarged photographs of the rodent taken *in situ* at the moment of discovery showed remains of interwoven threads on the lumbar region and underneath the head, which indicates that its body was originally wrapped in a piece of cloth. In front of the nose of the rodent a small stone of a regular rectangular shape was found, which might have been an amulet (?). In addition, the animal's cervical spine was clearly separated from the rest of the spine. Even though we cannot entirely exclude that the spine was damaged *post mortem*, there is a possibility that the animal might have died of a broken neck and that its

death could have been intentional (for this common method of killing animals see Ikram 1995).

The arranged position of the rodent seems to indicate that the rodent was placed in the sarcophagus after its own death. In our opinion it seems highly unlikely that the mouse entered the sarcophagus accidentally and died there. The following reasons lead us to believe that this rodent burial was intended to be part of the tomb equipment.

- a) There were no signs of any food offerings detected within the sarcophagus, which might have attracted the animal's interest;
- b) The lid of the sarcophagus was carefully sealed with pinkish gypsum mortar on all four sides, preventing any unwanted disturbance of the burial of priest Neferinpu;
- c) The carefully arranged position of the animal's body appears not to be accidental and shows no signs of hiding, expectable in a stressful situation;
- d) Covering or even wrapping of the body with a piece of cloth, and possibly an amulet placed in front of its nose.

The question however remains, what might have been the reason for an ancient Egyptian priest to include a rodent into his own burial. A zoological examination was necessary to proceed with the interpretation of this interesting find.

METHODOLOGY

The remains of the rodent were collected together with the remains of Neferinpu and were kept in the

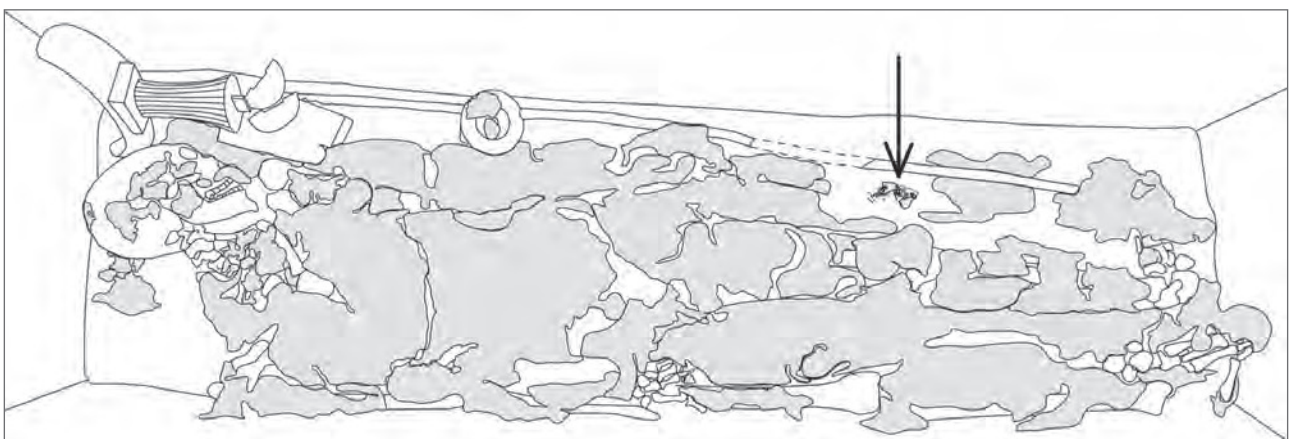


FIGURE 2. Drawing showing the position of the mouse between the body of the deceased and his wooden stick (drawing H. Vymazalová).

storerooms of the expedition on site, until its examination was possible. The remains of this rodent were unfortunately badly damaged when the expedition storerooms were looted during the Egyptian revolution of January 2011. The little skeleton was broken into numerous pieces, the skull was badly damaged and some parts of the body were completely missing. Thus, the determination of the species was rather difficult, and was carried out on the basis of the preserved parts of the skeleton as well as high-resolution photographs taken in 2007 *in situ*.

The possible candidates

It appears that the remains were of a small rodent species of the subfamily Murinae (mice and related). Three species corresponding to the size of the examined remains can be found in recent Egypt (Hoath 2003): the House Mouse (*Mus musculus*) recorded in Egypt as far back as the Neolithic times (Osborn, Osbornová 1998: 46); and two species of spiny mice, the Cairo Spiny Mouse (*Acomys cahirinus*), and the Golden Spiny Mouse (*A. russatus*). Owing to the ancient date of our rodent and to the contacts of the ancient Egyptian with the neighbouring areas, other Murinae species known from the North-African area were further taken into consideration, namely, the Algerian Mouse (*M. spretus*) and the Wood Mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*).

The mouse of Neferinpu

The cranial characteristics were first examined from high-resolution photographs of the rodent taken *in situ*. The level of development of supraorbital and tempoparietal ridges etc. (Osborn, Helmy 1980: 285) clearly excluded our rodent from the genus *Acomys*. In addition, dental and mandible comparison was undertaken from the fragments of the skull and the teeth, which revealed a close similarity with the genus *Mus*, namely with the species *Mus musculus*. The specification is supported also by ethological and ecological determination: the House Mouse is the most synanthropic species of all those mentioned above, and unlike the Algerian Mouse or the Golden Spiny Mouse, it seems to be a good candidate to be associated with humans.

The specimen was an adult – according to the wear patterns on the molars it could have been one to two years old. No visible marks indicating that the animal was tamed or kept as a pet were found, but this is sometimes difficult to determine in bigger mammals, let alone in the case of a broken and incomplete rodent

skeleton. Concerning body size, the specimen was a little bit bigger than the average present-day House Mouse.

MICE IN ANCIENT EGYPT (AND THE ANCIENT WORLD)

The unusual discovery in the sealed sarcophagus in the tomb of Neferinpu in Abusir South raised questions concerning the possible significance of a mouse in this ancient Egyptian tomb, and existing parallels to this find. The circumstances of the find indicate that the body of the small rodent was placed intentionally in the sarcophagus alongside other important artefacts. It thus represents part of the equipment that the deceased owner considered important for his afterlife or for his journey to the netherworld.

In Ancient Egypt, some animals are known to have had specific symbolism. They were associated with gods and some were even mummified, such as the crocodiles of Sobek, the bulls of Ptah and the falcons of Horus to name but a few. In addition to these larger and well-known animals, shrews appear to have been revered in ancient Egypt. Statuettes of shrews and also numerous mummified little bodies are known from Egypt, above all from the Late Period. The shrew mummies were often placed in tiny coffins, which were sometimes decorated with an image of shrews on their lids (Figure 3). In addition to the coffins, numerous linen packages are known which contain dozens of shrew bodies



FIGURE 3. A shrew-coffin from the Late Period (Photo M. Megahed).

wrapped together (Ikram 2004: 46, 48, 2005: 225). A close examination of these finds however revealed that some of the packages contained mice bodies instead of shrews. Even though in the Egyptian texts shrews and mice were clearly distinguished by the expressions *amamw* (shrew) and *pnw* (mouse), or even *hetjes* (lesser Egyptian jerboa) in reality their general features are very similar. Mice are found more frequently than shrews around human settlements, and it seems likely that the precise zoological distinction between mice and shrews was not important to the ancient Egyptians, and therefore mouse mummies were as good as shrew mummies. Similarly, other ancient cultures did not distinguish between mice, shrews and other similar species, either. For instance, the "vahana" (deity's mount) of the Hindu god Ganesha is depicted as a mouse/rat/shrew (Martin-Dubost 1997: 231–244), and it seems that the precise species was also not important.

The ancient Egyptians observed large numbers of mice coming out of the Nile mud after the inundation

when the soil was moist and the sun was strong, which perhaps led them to believe that mice were a spontaneous product of the Nile mud (for instance Dawson 1924: 83). This idea was recorded in the works of antique authors (Pliny, Lib. IX, cap. 84) and occurred until medieval times (for instance Stillingfleet 1702: 17). Based on this appearing of mice after the inundation, the ancient Egyptians associated mice with fertility, renewal and resurrection, and therefore also with the solar cult.

Other ancient cultures also associated mice with gods and cults; for instance, Apollo Smintheus was shown with a mouse in his hands on coins from Alexandria Troas; Strabo wrote about a statue depicting this god with his foot resting on a mouse, and Aelian mentions that mice were kept in his sanctuary (for the Sminthian legend and mice see: Leaf, Strabo 1923: 240–245). In this context, the mice refer to disease; generally speaking, to the Greeks and Romans shrews were evil.

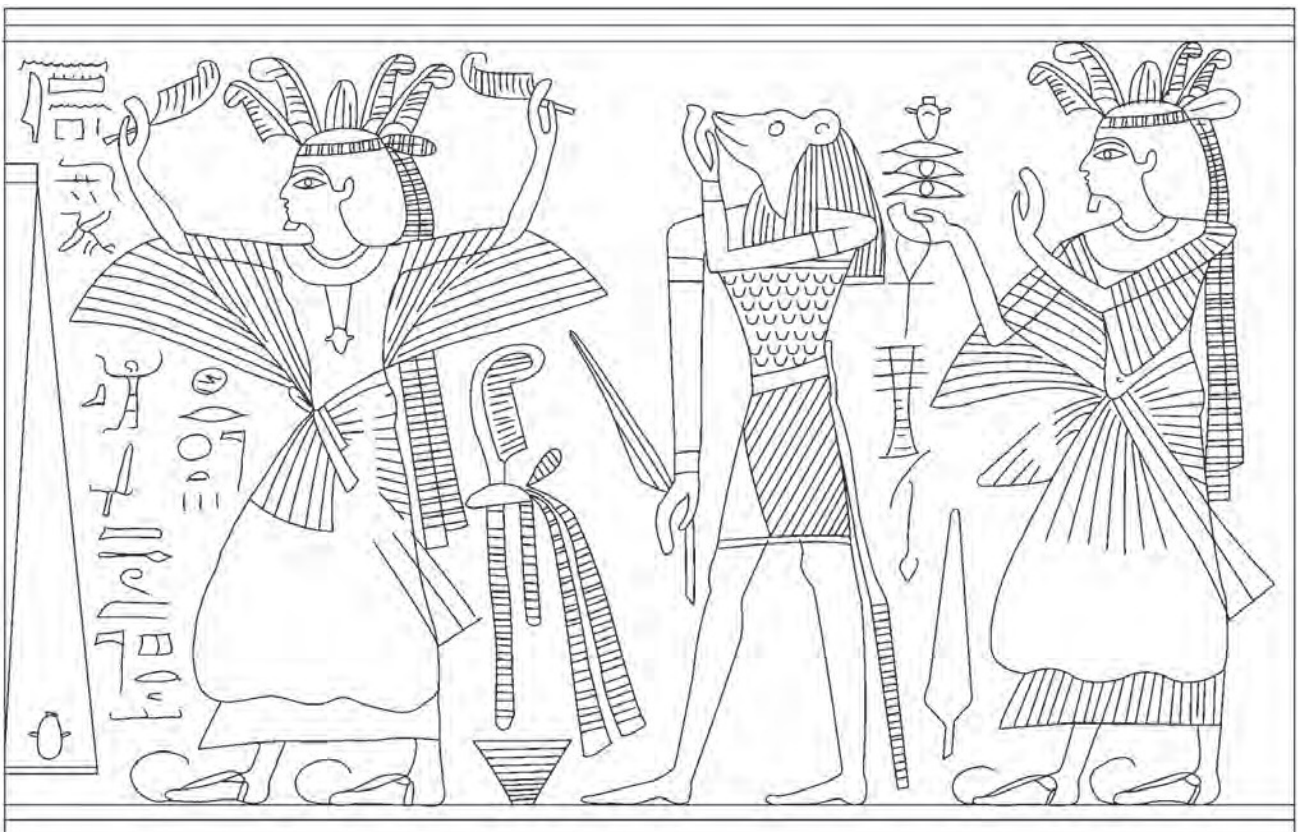


FIGURE 4. Picture of a figure with the head of a mouse in the judgement scene of a Book of the Dead from the Third Intermediate Period (drawing H. Vymazalová).

While a similar negative attitude can be traced in Egyptian sources (Vernus, Yoyotte 2005: 628–629), mice and shrews are also connected with solar cult, which was rather significant (see also Osborn, Osbornová 1998: 27). Shrews and mice are most active at night, hence they symbolised to the ancient Egyptians the nocturnal aspects of the sun god, while the day sun was represented by the ichneumon, which is active during the day (Brunner-Traut 1965: 122, Osborn, Osbornová 1998: 92). Both of these species were therefore mummified (Ikram 2005). In funerary contexts, the night journey of the sun was moreover associated with the journey of the deceased into the afterlife, which was of utmost importance to the Egyptian people since times immemorial.

Since shrews have excellent hearing and a very good sense of smell but very poor sight, the Egyptians associated them with the god Harkhentykhem (Horus the foremost of Khem) as his sacred animals. This god was associated with Khentyirty (Lord of the Two Eyes) (Hart 1986: 96, Wilkinson 2003: 203, Janák 2005: 48–49) who appears already in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts and was considered a protector against snakes. According to ancient Egyptian belief, Khentyirty stood by the side of the solar god Re in his fight against Apophis, a snake demon disturbing the world order. In this respect it is worth mentioning that shrews eat insects and worms, and a shrew catching a worm could represent a small-scale symbolic version of the fight between Khentyirty and Apophis. Khentyirty was a sky deity who cyclically lost and restored his sight (heavenly stars). He was a patron of the blind and harpists (who were often blind), and from the Middle Kingdom on he was sometimes described as having no eyes (or even no face). Therefore, from the New Kingdom on, his name was sometimes altered to Khentynirty (Lord without the Two Eyes) (Janák 2005: 81, 90–91).

In the Book of the Dead, a funerary text serving as a guidebook for the deceased, the shrew also occurs in association with the journey of the deceased to the netherworld. The text is accompanied by vignettes, which sometimes depict a shrew that helps to lead the deceased through the darkness of the Duat (the Netherworld). Such depictions of a man with the head of a mouse/shrew feature in several copies of the Book of the Dead dating to the Third Intermediate Period (pCairo SR VII 11496 of the 21st Dynasty, pCairo CG 40017 and pLouvre E17401 of the Third Intermediate Period).

The divine figure with the head of a mouse/shrew features in the scene of judgement, where the

deceased's heart, which was believed to be the seat of the mind, is weighed on the scales to determine if the deceased was a good or bad person (see *Figure 4*). This judgement of the deceased was closely connected with the ritual of the opening of the mouth, during which the senses of the deceased were restored for the afterlife (Taylor 2001: 190–192). In these scenes, the creature with the head of a mouse/shrew accompanied the figure of the deceased who holds in his /her hand the symbols of two eyes, a mouth, and a heart. The role of the figure with the head of a mouse/shrew thus seems to be connected with the restoration of the senses of the justified deceased (i.e. a deceased who succeeded in the judgement). This is further emphasised by a gesture: the figure with the head of a mouse/shrew touches his snout with his hand. The same gesture can be found in the vignettes in the Book of the Dead, typically associated with spells of the restoration of a person's speech. The figure with the head of a mouse/shrew is described in the papyri as one of the "Great Gods, Lords of the Duat" and no specific name is given to it. That said, we can perhaps connect this depiction with the god Khentyirty mentioned above who, like Re, helps the deceased to overcome all the dangers of the journey and reach eternal life.

Herodotus mentions in his *Histories* (2. 141) a statue of King Sethos holding a mouse in his hand from the temple of Hephaestus (at Memphis). A. Wiedemann (Bates 1908: 448) interpreted the statue as the god Khnum whose attributes included a mouse and who was closely associated with the ancient Egyptian belief in resurrection and fertility.

The ancient Egyptian religion was closely associated with magical practice which also made use of shrews, owing to their association with the sun, renewal and resurrection. Parts of the shrew's body were mentioned among magical agents in a demotic papyrus from the third century AD, now split in two parts kept in Leiden (I.383) and London (BM 10070), respectively. Spells 13/11–13/12 and V.32/2–32/13 contain instructions which recommend using various parts of the shrew's body for different purposes, with the heading "*(Using) a shrew and what is it good for*" (Lexa 1925: 143, no. XX). For instance, the shrew's heart could be used in order to win praise. To win the love of a woman, a dry powder produced from the body of a shrew was to be drunk mixed with human blood. To achieve negative results, such as the death or blindness of an enemy, a shrew's gall was to be used.

A FANCY MOUSE OR A TICKET TO THE AFTERLIFE?

There are several possibilities of interpreting the mouse burial in the sealed sarcophagus in Neferinpu's tomb. The mouse could simply be his beloved pet, which accompanied its master to his afterlife. Pets were often depicted on the walls of tombs from the time of the Old Kingdom but these scenes usually included dogs and monkeys rather than rodents. Pet burials are known from ancient Egypt but they also most often include dogs (for instance Boessneck, Driesch 1982: 17, Fig. 4, Hartley *et al.* 2011). Mice were kept as pets in other cultures, though; for instance, fancy mouse has a long tradition in China, and is attested in written evidence as early as 1100 BC (Erya, chapter 19). Neferinpu as a mouse-loving master cannot be excluded in the case of our deceased; however, no clear evidence confirms this possibility.

It is also possible that the mouse burial had a specific religious meaning for Neferinpu. The religious significance of shrews (sometimes apparently replaced by mice) for the journey to the afterlife is well attested in the Third Intermediate Period and in the Late Period. The concept of renewal of sight and other senses and the god Khentyirty, associated with shrews and ichneumons, occur already during the Old Kingdom in the Pyramid Texts.

Should the discovered mouse be connected with this concept, it has no known Old Kingdom parallel. It is, however, possible that finds similar to our mouse burial have been overlooked, have not been recorded by their excavators, or have been interpreted as intrusive finds (see e.g. Boessneck 1988: 61–64). For instance, a shrew, African grass rats, an ocellated skink and many Gibbium spider beetles were found together with numerous other animal remains in the burial chamber of a tomb at Elephantine (8449: tomb NE28 from 2300–1800 BC, see Boessneck, Driesch 1982: 15–16). The shrews and rats were found among fragments of linen in one of the coffins. It seems that they fell in the tomb and their excrements indicate that they could have survived in the coffin for some time perhaps thanks to the offerings placed in the tomb for the deceased (Boessneck 1988: 61). Similar finds are also known from the Abusir necropolis where the tomb of Neferinpu (with the mouse) was located. In his case however, the mouse could not climb and enter by itself to the carefully sealed sarcophagus, and moreover, the sarcophagus contained nothing that it could have been interested in eating.

One interesting case seems to deserve more attention; it is the mummy of Wah dating from the Middle Kingdom, which was unwrapped by a team of scholars. The mummy wrappings contained numerous amulets and cultic objects. A mouse was found in one of the layers of bandages. This unusual find was briefly mentioned by Winlock who supposed that the mouse had been killed by one of the embalmers during the bandaging process (Winlock 1940: 257). Interestingly, a lizard and a cricket were also found, both in the same layer of the mummy wrappings. The find is generally interpreted as a coincidental penetration of those animals into the mummy wrappings during the process of mummification (Winlock 1940: 257), which ideally lasted seventy days. However, it should be noted that the mouse had been placed by the knee of Wah – like Neferinpu's mouse –, and we could entertain the possibility that Winlock's mouse was no coincidence but an intention of the priests. Also lizards undoubtedly had religious associations in the minds of the ancient Egyptians. They were considered to be manifestations of Atum and were associated with Horus and the embalming of Osiris (Vernus, Yoyotte 2005: 334, see also Boessneck 1988: 112–114, Dunand, Lichtenberg 2005: 168). Even though the available evidence does not allow us to claim with certainty that the animals from the mummy wrappings of Wah were placed there intentionally, the religious associations are undoubtedly interesting and worth mentioning.

The mouse from the sealed sarcophagus in Neferinpu's tomb most likely was of specific significance to the deceased. The connection of shrews/mice with the idea of renewal and fertility (mice being born of soil) corresponds to the funerary context where the deceased was placed in his tomb and rituals were performed for him to overcome the moment of death and restore his life in the other world. The association between the mouse/shrew and the restoration of sight (god Khentyirty) might even indicate that our deceased suffered from an eye disease or blindness. Eye diseases and blindness were very common in ancient Egypt and there were many causes for them, including parasitic diseases (for instance *Trichinella* and *Toxoplasma*). Even though an anthropological examination of the bones from the sarcophagus revealed that the deceased had suffered from many problems, a physical disorder, such as sight problems could not be attested on the skull. The wooden staff which was placed by the side of the deceased together with a sceptre referred to his social status rather than his physical condition. It is,

therefore, impossible to either confirm or reject this suggestion.

All aspects considered, we cannot say with certainty whether the mouse from the sealed sarcophagus in Neferinpu's tomb was a reference to the funerary or solar cult; a statement about the tomb owner's health, or indeed his beloved pet and companion on the journey to the afterlife. In any case, it is a most intriguing find.

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Hana Vymazalová
 Zdeňka Šůvová
 Czech Institute of Egyptology
 Faculty of Arts
 Charles University in Prague
 nám. Jana Palacha 2
 11638 Praha 1
 Czech Republic
 E-mail: hana.vymazalova@ff.cuni.cz
 E-mail: zsuvovala@gmail.com