

An ancient Egyptian priest who spoke his final words more than 3,000 years ago has been given a new voice thanks to a groundbreaking research project.

[By Andrew Hutchinson](#)

Thursday, 23rd January 2020, 5:00 pm



The Nesyamun mummy in the CT scanner at Leeds General Infirmary. PIC: Leeds Museum and Galleries/PA Wire

The sound of Nesyamun, whose mummified remains are on display at Leeds City Museum, has been recreated following seven years of work by academics at Royal Holloway, University of London, University of York, and Leeds Museums and Galleries.

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Using precise measurements taken using detailed Computed Tomography (CT) scanning of the mummy, the team of experts was able to create a 3-D printed version of his vocal tract.

The printed replica then enabled them to accurately synthesise the vowel sound Nesyamun would have made during his life, meaning the once high-ranking Egyptian priest, incense-bearer and scribe can now be heard for the first time in more than three millennia.

Professor David Howard, from the Department of Engineering at Royal Holloway and John Schofield, Professor Joann Fletcher and Dr Stephen Buckley all from the Department of Archaeology at the University of York, started the project in 2013.

The team transported Nesyamun from Leeds City Museum with Katherine Baxter, Leeds Museums and Galleries' Curator of Archaeology, overseeing the move.

They also used a CT scanner at Leeds General Infirmary to check to see if the significant part of the structure of the larynx and throat of Nesyamun remained intact.

Katherine said: "Nesyamun is one of the most well-known and recognisable exhibits in our entire collection, and generations of visitors have been captivated by both his fascinating story and his incredibly well-preserved remains.

“This remarkable research project and the pioneering technology and ingenuity it has employed means we can actually hear a sound from Nesyamun for the first time in 3,000 years. There is so much potential for us to connect with him and understand his life in a way which at one time we never would have thought possible.”

Nesyamun lived during the politically volatile reign of pharaoh Ramses XI (c.1099–1069 BC) working as a scribe and priest at the state temple of Karnak in Thebes - modern Luxor.

Because of his status, he was permitted to approach the statue of Amun, Egypt’s chief state god, in the sacred inner sanctum of Karnak’s sprawling temple.

The cause of Nesyamun’s death is unknown, but it has been suggested that he may have died following a severe allergic reaction.

His voice was an essential part of his ritual duties which involved spoken as well as sung elements. Ancient Egyptians believed that ‘to speak the name of the dead is to make them live again’.

Professor David Howard from Royal Holloway, University of London, said: “I was demonstrating the Vocal Tract Organ in June 2013 to colleagues, with implications for providing authentic vocal sounds back to those who have lost the normal speech function of their vocal tract or larynx following an accident or surgery for laryngeal cancer.

“I was then approached by Professor John Schofield who began to think about the archaeological and heritage opportunities of this new development. Hence finding Nesyamun and discovering his vocal tract and soft tissues were in great order for us to be able to do this.

“It has been such an interesting project that has opened a novel window onto the past and we’re very excited to be able to share the sound with people for the first time in 3,000 years.”

Professor Joann Fletcher of the Department of Archaeology at the University of York, added: “Ultimately, this innovative interdisciplinary collaboration has given us the unique opportunity to hear the sound

of someone long dead by virtue of their soft tissue preservation combined with new developments in technology.

“And while this has wide implications for both healthcare and museum display, its relevance conforms exactly to the ancient Egyptians’ fundamental belief that ‘to speak the name of the dead is to make them live again’.

“So given Nesyamun’s stated desire to have his voice heard in the afterlife in order to live forever, the fulfilment of his beliefs through the recreation of his voice allows us to make direct contact with ancient Egypt by listening to a voice that has not been heard for over 3000 years, preserved through mummification and now restored through this pioneering new technique.”

The research is published by Nature.

Nesyamun’s mummified remains as well as his decorative outer coffin, painted with scenes from the famous Book of the Dead, can be seen in the Ancient Worlds gallery at Leeds City Museum.