

In 1988, a group of amateur spelaeologists *Groupe d'Études et de Recherches Souterraines du Liban* discovered naturally mummified bodies in the *Asi-l-Hadat* grotto, situated in the *Kadisha* valley (mount Lebanon, 1300 m altitude).

In November 1994, the National Museum received five mummies of children, the remains of two adult women, as well as the objects found on the burial site. All the bodies were discovered wrapped in cotton shrouds with one to three layers of textile per mummy. They were all undressed except for one. Their clothing was received by the museum in January 1995. The mummies, dating from the 13th century, vary in degree of preservation with some being little more than bones and pieces of dry skin, while others are better preserved. They were buried in the grotto at about 40 to 80 cm in depth in sandy soil with hardly any organic content. The multiple layers of textiles in which they were wrapped as well as the soil conditions probably facilitated the process of rapid natural desiccation, allowing moisture to evaporate while buffering changes of relative humidity. The objects found on the site include: fragments of pottery, wooden combs and spoons, copper alloy rings and coins, iron nails and buckles, pieces of cotton thread, a leather belt, iron spearheads and fifteen manuscripts written in Arabic and Syriac.

The mummies are presently stored in the museum basement in a monitored environment at 35% relative humidity. Skin samples were taken for analysis to detect the presence of fungus and bacteria. One mummy na-

med *Hadata*, which is still clothed, has been X-radiographed and the results show that the body is badly damaged. From the X-radiographs, the child appears to have been well nourished and the bones indicate that she or he suffered from no traumatic illnesses. The facial bones of this mummy have collapsed and therefore the dentition is difficult to see. However, from the dentition on the X-radiographs it appears that the child was aged about two to four years. In order to prevent further deterioration of the mummies, it is important that they are kept in a stable environment with low relative humidity (30-40%), temperature 15-19 c and in low levels of light and ultraviolet. In the long term, it is planned that the mummies will be stored in an inert atmosphere cases, similar to those devised by the Getty Conservation Institute for the Pharaonic mummies in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. The mummies are very fragile, therefore it is proposed that they are mounted on a permanent support so that only the support is handled. In this way, further examination such as Computerized Tomography (CT Scan) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) may be carried out to try to discover the pathology of mummified tissue.

The museum favors the use of reversible treatment techniques that do not interfere with the integrity of the mummies. We are aware that the treatment and display of human remains poses many ethical questions, and will do our best to stay in keeping with local traditions and beliefs.



Thirteenth century naturally mummified human child from Asi-l-Hadat