Embodying the Goddess: The Practice of Tattooing in Ancient Egypt

While tattooing is increasingly popular in anthropological research, it is rarely discussed in bioarchaeology owing to the infrequent identification of tattoos in human remains. This is particularly true in dynastic Egypt, where physical evidence of tattooing is limited to a set of three female Middle Kingdom mummies from Deir el-Bahri. However, during the 2014-2015 mission of the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale at Deir el-Medina, our team identified the first and only mummy to have Egyptian figural tattoos, with over 20 separate tattoos placed along the arms, neck, and shoulders. This talk presents the first and only images of these tattoos, while also providing new evidence for religious practice in New Kingdom Egypt. This mummy comes at an opportune time as bioarchaeologists and archaeologists alike develop more rigorous theoretical approaches to the body. Tattooing is particularly important to furthering these studies as it enables us to consider active social choices in the formation of a permanent identity over the course of a lifetime. As I discuss the practices of tattooing in this case study, I closely consider how this mummy pushes the boundaries of how bioarchaeologists theorize the body.