

# 1 - Brief History of the Abraham Papyri

The Book of Abraham is one of the most important scriptures in our Standard Works. Not many of our teachers use the Book of Abraham very much. It is the only illustrated book in our Standard Works. Other than looking at the three facsimiles, the Book of Abraham is hardly ever referenced. The Book of Abraham contains one of the three creation epics described in our scriptures. We have Genesis, of course, and Moses 1-5, as the *Inspired Version*, which was used as the basis for the narrative in the very first endowment in the Nauvoo Temple. The other creation epic or drama is reenacted in our modern day Temples. Of the three sources, Abraham is the best in my opinion. Each of these creation epics depicts a different point of view, and in my opinion, Abraham's record is the most correct. It is unfortunate that this is the one hardly anyone reads or looks at. The thinking is: they have Genesis (Moses) and they have the Temple narrative, so Abraham is hardly ever read or studied. Joseph Smith quoted more from the Book of Abraham in the last years of his life than from any other source. His basic doctrines and the things he taught in Nauvoo before his death were based on the things he learned in the Book of Abraham and from the inspiration he received from the *Papyri* obtained in Kirtland back in 1835.

The Book of Abraham is important also because at the end of the first chapter, Abraham writes: “...*I shall endeavor to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity that shall come after me.*” (Abr 1:31) We are Abraham's posterity. We are told in chapter 2 of Abraham that whosoever accepts the Gospel becomes the posterity of Abraham:

“... for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and *shall be accounted thy seed*, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father;” (Abr 2:10)

For some teachers within the LDS community and even among those outside our community the Book of Abraham and the *Joseph Smith Papyri* have become troubling because a modern translation of the papyri seems to be different than what we have in the Book of Abraham. What needs to be kept in mind is that the Church does not have everything Joseph Smith had. The eleven fragments found in 1967 and now possessed by the Church represent (barely) one-tenth of what Joseph obtained in Kirtland. The church does not have it all, and we should not expect those fragments to contain what Joseph came to understand. As students of the Book of Abraham, we also need to realize that the Book of Abraham did not come forth from a translation as much as it did from revelation. Joseph called his writings from ancient records “translations,” no matter the source, if they once existed as a record. It was essentially all by revelation if what he provided came from an ancient record, or once existed as an ancient record, since he did not have the training or knowledge to translate it any other way. He got it the same way Moses received the *Book of Genesis*. When Moses came out of Egypt he did not possess any records that he could copy in order to provide the “*Book of Genesis*.” Moses received his information by revelation. Yet the *Genesis* text is a translation from ancient records, even if Moses did not himself possess them. Moses provided his record the same way Joseph Smith did — by revelation. Whether it is the Book of Mormon, the parchment hid up by John (D&C 7), Joseph's “*Inspired Version of the Bible*,” or the record from the Book of Abraham, they are all considered “translations,” because an ancient record that once existed has been rendered into English through the inspiration of God. It could not have been accomplished any other way because Joseph did not possess the knowledge to do a word-by-word translation from languages that to that time had not even been cracked. The papyri that came into Joseph's possession provided the catalyst for Joseph to go to the Lord and inquire about those great prophets who were in Egypt.

We know that Abraham, Joseph (the son of Jacob), and Moses were all in Egypt. Joseph Smith also translated the Book of Joseph, along with the Book of Abraham. The papyri obtained from Michael Chandler in Kirtland were the catalysts that led to the translations of the Book of Abraham *and* the Book of Joseph. Only two-thirds of the Book of Abraham was published. Joseph had not prepared the last section of Abraham nor the Book of Joseph for publication before his death.

### **Kirtland, July 3, 1835**

On July 3, 1835 a man came to Kirtland with a wagonload of mummies. His name was Michael H. Chandler. He had been trying to sell these mummies for a while. When he was in Harrisburg, Pa, he had six mummies, but by the time he arrived in Kirtland, he had only four mummies left. He had heard that a man lived in Kirtland who could translate ancient records, and he ended up taking some of the papyri to Joseph Smith. Joseph kept those papyri for three days. On July 6<sup>th</sup>, Joseph put up \$800, and two other brethren each put up \$800, thus the mummies and the papyri were purchased from Mr. Chandler for \$2,400. Mr. Chandler then took the \$2,400 and purchased a farm just outside of Kirtland. He then brought his wife and eleven children to Kirtland where they settled. Mr. Chandler stayed on that farm for the rest of his life and was buried in a plot just outside the city.

Mr. Chandler had a rather large cabinet or box that had multiple drawers built in that could hold or display the unrolled papyri. Joseph said those papyri could cover the floor of the parlor in the Mansion House in Nauvoo. What the church owns could fit on a regular office desk, but the original documents were much more extensive.

According from an article in the Messenger and Advocate, Oct, 1835, this is how the church came to possess the mummies and the scrolls (interspersed with my commentary):

These records were obtained from one of the catacombs in Egypt, near the place where once stood the renowned city of Thebes, by the celebrated French traveler Antonio Lebolo, in the year 1831.

There are two cities: Luxor is located on the east bank of the Nile, and Thebes is on the west bank. Luxor is a city of the living and Thebes is a necropolis, or a city of the dead.

Antonio Lebolo is French but is from the city of Castellemonate, in Northern Italy, at the base of the Italian Alps. Lebolo had worked for Napoleon when Napoleon conquered Northern Italy, and he also worked for Napoleon's Consulate General in Egypt.

He procured license from Mehemet Ali, then Viceroy of Egypt, under the protection of Chevalier Drovetti, the French Consul, in the year 1828;

Mehemet Ali became the local ruler or Viceroy of Egypt after Napoleon left Egypt, and he was under the protection of Drovetti, the French Consul. Ali was actually Turkish, and not being Egyptian, he really did not care how many antiquities he gave away to other governments, as he was solidifying relationships with the Consuls or Ambassadors from these other countries.

Drovetti plays an important role in the acquisition of the mummies because of his relationship with Lebolo and Mehemet Ali. Drovetti and Lebolo were both Gendarmes in the French Army and had both

worked for Napoleon's army when he came into Northern Italy. Drovetti had found favor with Napoleon after saving the life of Napoleon's father-in-law in a battle. Drovetti lived in a town only 3 kilometers from where Lebolo lived. Drovetti hired Lebolo to become his personal antiquities collector, and at the same time, Lebolo ventured off and acquired his own antiquities to sell later, all under the protection and permission of Mehemet Ali. Drovetti gave his collection of antiquities to the embassy in Cairo, but Lebolo kept his personal collection in Thebes.

[Lebolo] employed 433 men four months and two days, (if I understood correctly, Egyptians or Turkish soldiers,) at from four to six cents per diem, each man; entered the catacomb June 7th, 1831, and obtained eleven Mummies . . . . On his way from Alexandria to Paris he put in at Trieste, and after ten days illness, expired. This was in the year 1832. Previous to his decease, he made a will of the whole to Mr. Michael H. Chandler, then in Philadelphia, Pa. his nephew, whom he supposed to have been in Ireland. Accordingly, the whole were sent to Dublin, addressed according, and Mr. Chandler's friends ordered them sent to New York, where they were received at the custom house, in the winter or spring of 1833. In April of the same year Mr. Chandler paid the duties upon his Mummies, and took possession of the same. Up to this time they [the mummies] had not been taken out of the coffins nor the coffins opened.

There were more mummies found in the catacomb, but Chandler is speaking specifically about these eleven mummies. This is all in our Church History: History of the Church, Vol 2, p 235, 236, 348-350. See Also Messenger and Advocate, Vol 2 (Oct 1835 - Sept 1836, Vol 2, Dec, 1835 No 15, p 232-237.

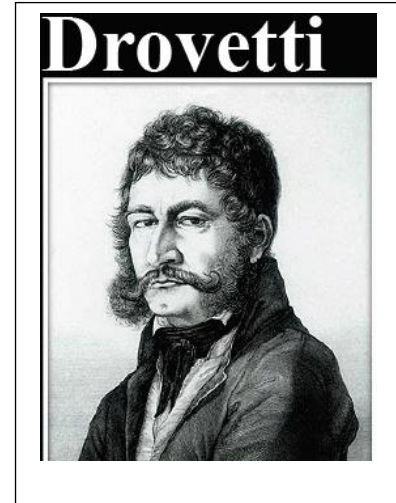
This was the story as Joseph and Oliver Cowdery got it from Michael Chandler. Here, now, is the rest of the story:

### **The Rest of the Story**

Drovetti, the Consul General is the key to the story. There was a man by the name of Belzoni with whom Lebolo worked in Thebes. Belzoni was nicknamed the strong man Egyptologist. He was a big man at 6 feet 7 inches. His hometown was near Venice, Italy. In 1803 he went to England. There he married an English woman and they both joined a traveling circus. While working in the circus he performed feats of strength. He could pick up six people and walk around holding them on his arms, three on each side.

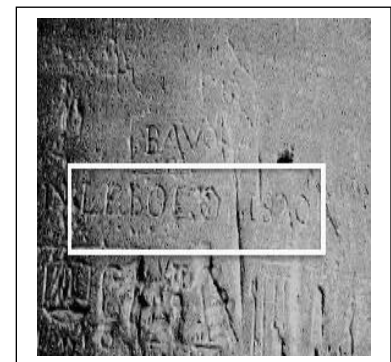
He wanted to do something more with his life, and also being somewhat of an engineer, he went to Egypt to help create an irrigation system in Cairo. When he realized he wasn't going to change their irrigation methods he then began to collect his own antiquities.

**Group Picture with Drovetti and possibly Lebolo behind.**



Belzoni actually worked for Henry Salt, who was the English Consulate General. He was doing the same thing for Salt that Lebolo was doing for Drovetti—collecting antiquities for their employers and also for themselves! Both Lebolo and Belzoni competed with each other over who could tie up all the antiquities in a given area before the other. On one occasion there was a confrontation between “Lebolo's renegades” (Belzoni's term for them) and Belzoni's workers. Belzoni, being a very strong man, picked up one of Lebolo's workers by his ankles and swung him around, using his body as a club to fight off Lebolo's workers. It's a great story! We don't know what Lebolo looked like, but we have seen his graffiti carved into some of the antiquities still remaining. The tomb that Lebolo used to store his personal collection is still standing, and in that tomb one can still see his name etched into the sandstone within the tomb.

If you were to go into the large pyramid in Giza, the Cheops Pyramid, and squeeze up into the King's Chamber, you would also see Belzoni's name carved into the stone in the chamber. His name is in there because he was the one who first opened that pyramid. Belzoni was also the first to open the Abu Simbel Temple.



Keep in mind that at this time the discipline of archeology did not exist. Today we would call them tomb robbers or grave robbers, but at that particular time the science of archeology did not exist. Lebolo, Belzoni, Rifaud, and Cailliaud were the leading excavators / discoverers of Egyptian antiquities at this point in time.

**What happened to the Mummies after Joseph Smith?**

A number of years ago I was asked to assist H. Donl Peterson in research on the Book of Abraham because of my background in ancient languages. Working for the Religious Studies Center at BYU, I

spent years working to find out the answer to the questions surrounding the mummies, the Joseph Smith Papyri and the Book of Abraham.

Sydney B. Sperry went to New York to determine when the mummies arrived in New York and tried to track them after Joseph's death. After spending some three months in New York, he found no information on the mummies. Since Sperry's efforts produced no concrete results, he remained doubtful that there had ever been eleven mummies!

The only way to find information about past events is to read all of the newspapers published at that time period. One would have to read all the newspapers to see if Chandler had been showing the mummies anywhere, or where they might have arrived in the first place. Knowing that Sperry had gone to New York, I decided to go to Philadelphia. While in that city, I discovered a newspaper repository for the east coast right across the street from the Philadelphia Library. This repository had papers that dated back to Colonial times. They also had back issues of papers from New York, Baltimore and Philadelphia. In this repository I found sixty-two (62) news articles about these mummies coming into the United States! From these articles I soon realized that what Chandler had told Joseph and Oliver about the eleven mummies was true. Eleven mummies did arrive, and upon taking possession at the customs house, he opened one of the coffins to see if anything of value was contained therein. That proved futile—he found nothing. So now he had ten mummies to transport and display during his travels. He left New York with ten mummies, went to Philadelphia, sold two of them to the Academy of Science. Possibly two other mummies were acquired by the Masonic Lodge. By the time he got to Baltimore and then Harrisburg he had six mummies. These mummies were put on display in a museum in Baltimore. The following advertisement was found:

“The citizens are respectfully informed that the manager has recently received from the vicinity of Thebes, the celebrated city of ancient Egypt, six strangers, illustrious from their antiquity, a thousand years anterior to the advent of our blessed Savior and contemporary to the first sovereigns of Israel, namely Saul and David. They are by no means insignificant inspiring the public's patronage in the present day from a country then unknown and whose trans-Atlantic ancestors were in a period of gloom, idolatry and paganism. All are invited: Adults: 25 cents Children: half-price.”

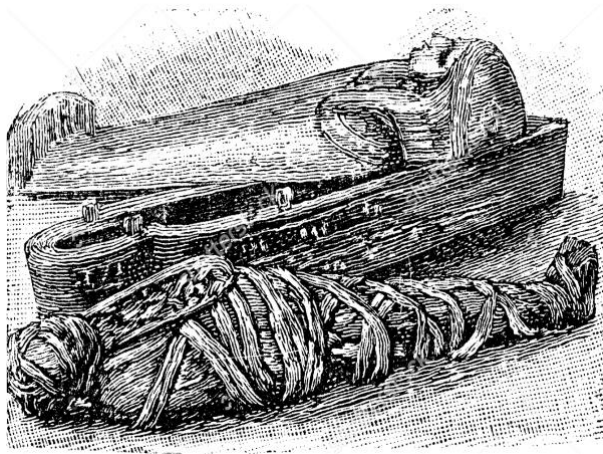
From the *US Gazette*, Philadelphia, 3 Apr 1833:

“The largest collection of Egyptian mummies ever exhibited in this city, is now seen at the Masonic Hall . . .

“They were found in the vicinity of Thebes, by the celebrated traveler Antonio Lebolo and Chevalier Drovetti, General Consul of France in Egypt.

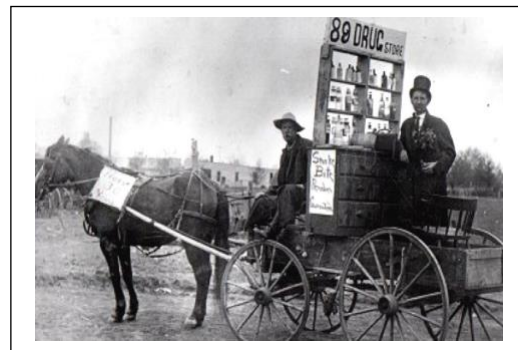
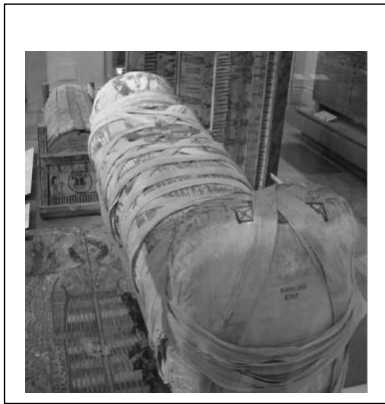
“Some writings on papyrus found with the mummies, can also be seen, and will afford, no doubt, much satisfaction to amateurs of antiquities.

“Admittance 25 cents. children half price.”



All along, Chandler is showing the mummies and trying to sell his collection of mummies. By the time he gets to Kirtland he has four left. I have not proven he was a Mason, but he seemed to frequently display the mummies in Masonic lodges. The research is still open on this point.

Below is a photo of a sarcophagus seen in the British Museum. Can you imagine having 10 of these? He would have needed two to three wagons to transport these things. This mummy was also found by Lebolo.



After Joseph's death, Emma and Lucy Mack Smith gave the mummies and the papyri to Joseph's brother, William. He tried to make money with them the same way Chandler did by taking them on the road in wagons. He charged 25 cents for adults and twelve and a half cents for children

William was not very successful in his traveling show so he ended up selling the artifacts to a man named A. Coombs, who had a riverboat museum. Coombs traveled up and down the Mississippi River showing his curiosities all over the place. Coombs wasn't making money any more successfully than William Smith or Chandler, and eventually the mummies and the papyri were sold to the St. Louis Museum. This museum ended up selling them to the Chicago Museum sometime before Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern that began the great Chicago fire. For years the assumption was that all of the mummies and the papyri were destroyed in the Chicago fire.

However, it was discovered that before Coombs disbanded his riverboat museum, he allowed his workers to choose items they wanted from the antiquities as payment for their services. There was a woman by the name of Alice Heusser who chose some the Joseph Smith Papyri. Alice moved to Long Island, New York, where she remained until her death sometime before the First World War.



The Remains of the Chicago Museum

Before her death she tried to sell the papyrus to the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Because of the uncertain times due to the war, the Met chose not to purchase it. After the war, and after Alice Heusser's death, her son John Heusser approached the Met with the papyrus one more time. This time they did purchase the papyrus for \$350.00.

When I examined the Museum records of this transaction, there was a memo in the file regarding the purchase of these fragments. The memo was from a man who was present when the fragments were brought in the first time, and he remembered “a round one” also being part of the fragments. As a good researcher I decided to call all of the Heussers in Long Island to see if anyone was related to Alice or John Heusser. I did find a family, but they had no idea their grandma ever owned anything Egyptian.

In 1967, Professor Aziz Atiya, an expert Coptic Historian and expert in Islamic and Crusade Studies was visiting the Met, and while perusing their Egyptian files, came across a folder containing a series of Egyptian fragments. One in particular looked a lot like Facsimile #1 in the Pearl of Great Price. He called some LDS friends at the University of Utah where he had visited and been made aware of the Book of Abraham and the facsimiles. They called N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency and informed him that some fragments from the Joseph Smith Papyri had been “discovered” and were filed away at the New York Metropolitan Museum. In all there were eleven different fragments in that particular collection.

To prevent the fragments from falling apart, Joseph Smith had glued the fragments to pieces of paper. On the back of one of these fragments, on the paper, one can see a plot map of the city of Nauvoo. This proved these were the fragments Alice Heusser got from A. Coombs.

When the General Authorities become aware of the existence of the papyri, they of course wanted to purchase them from the Museum. There was a problem with that proposal. The Museum could not sell any artifact for more than they paid, or they would no longer retain their non-profit status. They didn't want to sell them to the Church for \$350, and they knew the Church would pay just about anything for them. Again, Aziz Atiya, because of his relationship with the Church and with the museums,

universities, and the Department of Antiquities in Egypt, assisted the Church in acquiring the Joseph Smith Papyri fragments.

How was this feat accomplished? At this particular time, Egypt was building the Aswan Dam, and when completed, the waters behind the dam (in Lake Nasser) would rise and cover many of the temples and other archeological sites of the ancient Egyptians. An example is the famous dismantling and relocation of Abu Simbel Temples....Shown below is a temple for Ramses and his wife in Abu Simbel.



There was a desperate need for assistance in saving these antiquities. The United Nations became involved as well. I had the opportunity to sit down with Professor Atiya in his Cairo office to learn the facts about the assistance he and the Church gave to save the Dendur Temple.



The Temple  
at Dendur

Because of his assistance and additional assistance from the Church, the Met traded the Joseph Smith Papyri for the Temple at Dendur. It was dismantled and brought to New York and reassembled in a newly donated wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. If you visit the Met's Egyptian collection, this temple will be the first thing you see in the atrium that was built especially for its display.



As mentioned previously, The Book of Abraham has become a target for the critics within the non-LDS community. Even today, many who are falling away from the Church point to the Book of Abraham (because of questions about its authenticity) as one of their reasons for leaving. In my opinion, they are leaving because of a lack of understanding. When I was working in the Religious Studies Center, the critics argued that there was no will that established a relationship between Chandler and Lebolo. “Since there is not much information on Lebolo, maybe he did not exist, or Chandler either,” they argued.

When I was given the assignment by the Church, it took me two summers to prepare to go to Europe, and when I finally went, I was there for almost eight months.

## Research Questions

Was there a will? Was Michael H. Chandler a nephew of Lebolo? How did Michael Chandler get the mummies? How many mummies came into the US? When and where did Lebolo die? Where, why, and how was Lebolo able to work in Egypt? Are there records of Lebolo's artifacts and discoveries? What was the trail of the Mummies to NYC?

My focus was on Michael Chandler and the trail of the mummies from New York to Kirtland. We needed to determine when the mummies came into the US and from where. The New York Custom House had burned so there were no records from there. Yet the Met had the JS Papyri in 1967. I decided to follow the trail of Chandler, a claimed nephew of Lebolo, who said he was from Ireland, and who claimed that the mummies went to London and Dublin before he received them in New York.

I was working in the Religious Studies Center in the Pearl of Great Price Department, and before that I was in the Old Testament section. A lot of Chandler's background had to be established. I knew he came from Ireland so I learned how he got into the United States. I did his genealogy here in the US and in Ireland and in London. I even did his wife's genealogy. The research demanded this type of work and effort.



Next I focused on Antonio Lebolo. In order to determine who might have known Lebolo, I read all of the diary accounts of those who went into Egypt from 1790 – 1835 in all of the major museums and their library collections (British Museum and Library, The Louvre, and the Vatican Library and Museum).

I traveled to Lebolo's home territory, starting in Northern Italy: Castellemonate, Turino, Venice, Trieste, and then to Rome, Cairo, and Luxor. I even located the tombs that Lebolo excavated in Egypt.

From Provo I traveled to New York, then to Philadelphia, and from there to Ireland (Dublin). I even went to Liverpool, but just for fun because the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price was published on 15 Wolton Street, but I only found a vacant lot with two concrete steps leading up to it. I then ventured into London to try to track how the mummies came into the United States, whether by Chandler or Lebolo. I searched in Oxford, Paris, Rome, Jerusalem, Luxor, Cairo, and Thebes. This all took about 8 months!