

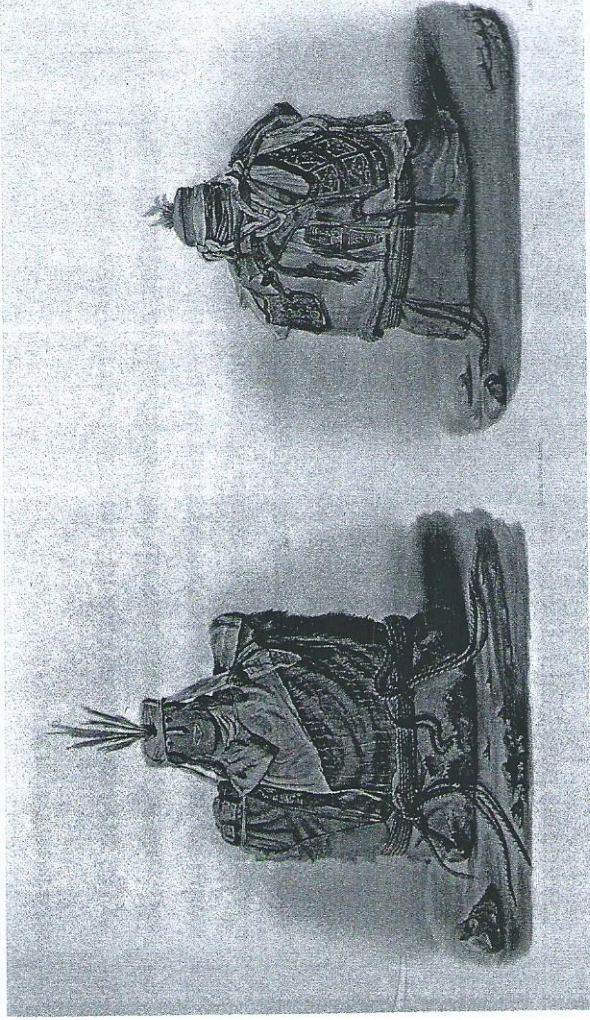
It is not evident what kind of connection we in Britain today have with the dead. Most of the millions who visit the British Museum every year come up the front steps to the main entrance. Few notice, as they move through the classical columns of the portico, that they pass on their right a memorial to Museum staff who died in two world wars (see p. 83). Their names are carved into the Portland stone, along with the familiar words, 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them.' It is a pattern found in public buildings across the country. In schools and railway stations, in corporate offices and clubs, usually somewhere near the entrance, the names of those who died in the two world wars are written in stone, with the same exhortation to all who enter: to remember them. It is less and less clear how many do so – and even less clearly articulated, is why they should.

Once inside the Museum, however, visitors soon encounter completely different ways of imagining and conducting the relationship between the living and the dead: not praying for them, not merely remembering them, but conversing with them on a regular basis – and not just as spirits, but in person, with the ancestors themselves physically present.

Jago Cooper, head of the Americas section at the Museum, has in his charge a number of bundles wrapped in dull brown cloth, each one a metre or so long, carefully packaged and tied.

*These are mummy bundles from Peru, containing the remains of ancestors of the people that live there today. Inside each bundle is a mummified body, meticulously prepared and wrapped in textiles. It is a practice which went on for more than 6,000 years in Peru and northern Chile, and it enabled these ancestors to play a posthumous role in society completely different from any that we in Europe could imagine for our forebears – or for ourselves.*

Because of the arid desert conditions which preserve dead bodies naturally, the practice of making mummies was widespread not



Peruvian mummy bundles topped with a 'portrait' of the ancestor, as illustrated in the 1880s

x Gewebe

just in Peru, but throughout the Andes, and it appears to be at least as old as the much better-known tradition in Egypt. After death, the soft tissue would be removed and the body usually placed in a crouching position before being wrapped. The ancestors in the British Museum bundles were probably mummified some time around 1500, not long before the practice ceased as a result of the Spanish conquests. The textiles have faded to a dull brown, but it is just possible to see that the blankets were once brightly striped, with an elaborate fringed edge: the pattern and colouring would have indicated both the status of the dead (inevitably only the elites were preserved) and the region from which they came. In addition, many of the mummy bundles had painted faces – schematized portraits – attached to them, so that when they were sat upright, there could be no doubt that these were still in a sense real people, honoured as individuals long after their death.

In this book we are looking mostly at objects, and what they can tell us about belief. But these mummy bundles are categorically not objects. They are dead people – the Museum tries to treat them with the respect paid to them by the Peruvians themselves

x of firms

Antford mummy

(conversion)

x in detail, fastidiously

From 1880s

would be