

# THE ST.GALLEN DECLARATION LET SHEPENESIS RETURN HOME!

“May, when they mourn you daily, say:

May you enter your grave in peace!

Your tomb is eternity.”

*INSCRIPTION ON HARMACHIS’S TOMB*

**LET US ALL SIGN THE ST. GALLEN DECLARATION FOR SHEPENESIS.  
LET ST. GALLEN RING IN A NEW ERA OF CULTURAL RESPECT AND  
EXCHANGE!**

She is famous across the land – the Ancient Egyptian mummy in possession of the St. Abbey Library in St. Gallen. Displayed, unwrapped to the chest in a glass case, alongside her two sarcophagi in the baroque hall of books, she is for many the main attraction of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, which draws some 150,000 visitors a year. Besides Shepenesis, the Abbey Library holds 170,000 printed books and 2,000 original mediaeval manuscripts, including the Abrogans, the book containing the earliest known German-language rendition of the Lord's Prayer.

After numerous in-depth investigations, the mummy was identified as Shepenesis (ancient Egyptian for “in relation to Isis”), daughter of a priest and member of the spiritual elite between 700 and 650 BC. She died around the age of 30-40 and was buried in a family tomb in the necropolis of Thebes (modern Luxor). At that time the region where St.Gallen now stands was still unsettled territory and the Christian religion had not yet been founded. It took another 1500 years, during which time the Roman Empire would rise and fall, and Europe would be thrown into confusion by the migration period, before monks in the Abbey Library would create their first copy of the Bible.

Another 1000 years were to pass before the mummy and her richly painted sarcophagi arrived in Switzerland. Grave robbers had found her in Egypt after the country was plundered by the French and English armies and sold her to a French businessman. He in turn donated it to the then mayor of St. Gallen, who gave it on loan to the Abbey Library. The mayor repeatedly urged the Catholic Administration for the purchase, who is therefore the owner of the mummy to this day.

Again and again, from various counterparts, the public display of Schepense has been criticised. How could St. Gallen have been proud of this acquisition? Grabbed from her tomb by grave robbers, sold in Paris and given away to St. Gallen, unwrapped in the Abbey Library and exposed to the gaze of millions of tourists, Schepense is a constant moral irritation in this place of spiritual knowledge and high culture.

This thoughtless – if not to say predatory and disrespectful – condition should not be accepted in a cultural metropolis like St. Gallen! We are calling for an amendment:

- **OUT OF REVERENCE.** Shepenesis is a ritually embalmed and entombed woman. As Sylvia Schoske, former director of the Egyptian Museum in

Munich, writes, according to ancient Egyptian philosophy, “the exposure of an embalmed corpse is tantamount to its damnation.” And it is hard to disagree with Ms. Schoske when she continues: “It should be self-evident for us to respect the ancient Egyptian’s sense of awe for the dead body.” The case of Shepenesis not only violates the taboos of ancient Egypt, but also of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim burial rites. The rectification of the current conditions means showing long due respect, which stands in tradition of the monastic history and heritage in St. Gallen.

- **FOR LEGAL REASONS.** Countless lawsuits and petitions have been launched in recent years to fight for the return of looted ancient Egyptian art such as the Rosetta Stone, once taken from Egypt by the British army. We are joining numerous scholars, scientists, Swiss and Egyptian organisations and individuals taking up these efforts. Shepenesis’s existence in Switzerland marks an ongoing colonial injustice. Under the day’s power relations, Egypt had no real authority to control what happened to its cultural heritage. Although the Abbey Library made efforts to trace the provenance of the mummy as far as possible, and the purchase by St. Gallen was formally legal, the fact remains: Shepenesis’s journey began with a grave robbery.
- **FOR ECONOMIC REASONS.** St. Gallen and Thebes are not so different as one might think: The Christian Middle Ages and ancient Egypt invested far more than all later cultures in the afterlife. For thousands of years, ancient Egypt’s cult of the dead and belief in the afterlife devoured over half the gross national product. These accounts exist – like the churches and manuscripts of the St. Gallen monastery district – in the pyramids, the countless cult objects and, of course, the mummies. Shepenesis, “Switzerland’s most famous mummy”, who for 200 years has contributed decisively to the Abbey Library’s fascinating appeal, drawing 150,000 visitors annually, is a considerable factor in the tourist economy.
- **OUT OF HUMILITY.** Putting the naked body of Shepenesis out of sight would also mark a long overdue symbolic act of cultural humility – an end to the arrogant European conviction that all earlier civilizations’ ideas and hopes can be annulled or declared obsolete and worthless. It would mean committing to a different concept of progress, based no longer on appropriation and exploitation, but on admission of mutual dependency and enrichment overcoming all cultural and temporal boundaries.

**WE PIN DOWN:** For almost 200 years, the public display of Shepenesis has cast a pall of cultural theft and ignorance over the St. Gallen monastery district, one of the spiritual homes of mediaeval Christian culture. The temple must be cleansed! The dead are not capital; ancient religious practice is not a chamber of horrors. The exploitation and looting of Egypt and many other colonies, in which Switzerland, too, was and still is regrettably involved, can be stopped by taking a different, more civilised approach that is more congruous with both cultures.

**WE DEMAND:** Solidarity with the dead! Let Shepenesis return home! To this end, we are calling on St.Gallen to consider the following:

- **A PLACE FOR THE DEAD!** Together with all the parties concerned – the Abbey Library, the Catholic Administration, the city and canton of St.Gallen, UNESCO, our associates and advisers in the fields of cultural history and religious studies, and cooperating Egyptian organizations, individuals, authorities and scholars – we will set up a work group to devise plans for returning Shepenesis to her spiritual homeland by the end of 2023, present them to the responsible authorities for approval and bring the relevant issues into the public arena.
- **LET SHEPENESIS REST IN PEACE!** In the meantime, as a temporary, minimum solution, we call for the dignified handling of her body. The mummy should only be exhibited in her (closed) sarcophagus. Alternatively, a photo documentation could be shown while Shepenesis herself and her sarcophagi are kept in an appropriate place, such as the crypt of the monastery, alongside the remains of the St. Gallen monastery’s founders.
- **EXCHANGE RATHER THAN APPROPRIATION!** By taking the mummy, St. Gallen has stolen, albeit unintentionally, a key spiritual artefact from another high culture. Why don't we provide compensation? By lending or even donating a famous St. Gallen manuscript, such as the Abrogans, to an Egyptian museum? St. Gallen should take the lead and send St. Gallen spirituality abroad – to stop stealing and start exchanging globally! Respectfully, generously, and transparently! Let’s take this chance to start cultural exchange now!
- **A FRANC FOR DIGNITY!** The costs for working out the temporary solutions for Schepense can be covered by the prize money from the Great St. Gallen Culture Prize 2022, a total of 30,000 francs. The additional costs can be covered by the city and canton of St. Gallen: by donating one Franc for Dignity from each entrance ticket to the Abbey Library – 5 percent of the entrance fee – to the Shepenesis fund for cultural exchange and debate!
- **AN EXAMPLE FOR THE WORLD!** The Abbey Library along with Shepenesis and her sarcophagi is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Back in 1978, UNESCO adopted a Charter for the Restitution of Looted Cultural Property. Shepenesis clearly falls under the regulations of this charter. We call on all UNESCO member states to support the “St. Gallen Declaration for Shepenesis”. The cooperation of the Abbey Library will show the world an innovative example of fair and respectful interaction between cultures.

Shepenesis was once a gift to St. Gallen, a gift which St. Gallen could never rest assured with. It has proven the truth of the old proverb “Ill-gotten gains never prosper”. This appeal is also intended as a gift, one to bring goodness and prosperity – by turning liability into dignity!

**LET US MAKE ST. GALLEN ONCE AGAIN THE VISIONARY HOME  
OF A NEW GLOBAL CULTURE!**