

# **Black-and-gold howler monkey mummy from Argentina reveals possible shamanic role**

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Back-and-gold howler monkey (*Alouatta caraya*) dressed in rhea and heron feathers from Gran Chaco. Credit: *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* (2026). DOI: 10.1007/s12520-026-02442-4

Most nonhuman primate mummies originate from arid regions such as Egypt and northern Chile. However, a recent comprehensive report by Dr. Bernardo Urbani and his colleagues presents a primate mummy originating from subtropical South America. What makes this specimen so unique is that it is one of only two known primate mummies from South America, the other being a red howler monkey from Chile's arid Atacama Desert. Additionally, it is dressed in attire composed of indigenous textiles and rhea and white heron feathers, possibly indicating it may have held a ceremonial purpose. The study is [published](#) in *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*.

## **Known history of the mummy**

The mummy was acquired by the Museum of Archaeology at the Castle of Gottorf, Germany, in 1995. Prior to this, it had been housed at the Museum of Ethnography in Kiel, where it had been donated on May 28, 1892, by someone named Th. Lamp.

Not much was known about the mummy's provenance or purpose. According to the museum's inventory book and label attached to the mummy, the specimen originated from Gran Chaco and had been shipped from Montevideo (Uruguay) and was originally described as "A howler monkey from the Gran Chaco, Argentina. The local Amerindians keep many animals, including monkeys, near their huts. They stuffed this howler monkey and wrapped it in a woman's dressing gown made of

rhea, the South American ostrich, feathers" (translated from German).

Dr. Urbani states, "To my knowledge, there is no other South American primate mummy in any European collection."

The mummy had been dressed in a whitish cotton sash with rhea feathers attached to it, as well as a sash made of woolen threads and a collar made of either white Chacoan stork or white Chacoan heron feathers.

Previously positioned below the armpits, it was later moved and now rests around the mummy's neck.

In an effort to create a comprehensive characterization of this unique mummy specimen, the researchers conducted genetic, phenotypical, radiocarbon, and isotopic analyses, providing the most complete picture of this primate mummy, which had previously been completely unstudied despite its uniqueness.

## **Gran Chaco's primate mummy**

The mummy had been carefully prepared by a deliberate drying process; its body was stuffed with a straw-like wooden material, while its mouth was kept open to display its teeth, its nostrils were widened, and its eyes were removed. According to Dr. Urbani, "The removal of the eyes might be practical taxidermy by extracting soft tissues." Though why the nostrils were widened remains unclear.

Further analysis confirmed the specimen was a young male black-and-gold howler monkey (*Alouatta caraya*). Genetic analysis, isotopic studies, and ethnoprimate evidence suggest that the monkey likely originated in the Misiones-Corrientes region of Argentina, within the Gran Chaco. Interestingly, despite having previously been assumed to be an ethnographic object (contemporary Indigenous creation), radiocarbon dating indicated that the mummy died between 1475 and 1644 CE (late

pre-Hispanic to early Colonial times), making it a historical specimen.

It had likely been hunted or briefly reared by the indigenous peoples shortly before being mummified, likely for ceremonial purposes.

## **Purpose of the mummy**

Though no direct ethnographies explain the rationale for monkey mummification, ethnographies and mythologies do explain the cultural significance of black-and-gold howler monkeys to the indigenous peoples of Gran Chaco, which may have influenced the mummy's creation.

According to the Qom people, it was thought that humans could transform into monkeys and that shamans who kept howler monkeys as pets could gain tutelage from all howler monkeys and communicate with the wind, rain, clouds, and lightning. Additionally, it is said that masks made from the skins of howler monkeys were used in healing rituals.

Among the indigenous Guarani people, it was also thought that humans who broke moral rules were turned into howler monkeys, and howler monkeys who climbed trees could become human before the sun shrank and scorched them. It was also thought that the howler monkey's call, known as *karaja oporai*, was a prayer chant for newborns and ill people.

Considering the cultural and mythological significance of howler monkeys to the indigenous peoples of Gran Chaco and the fact that the whitish cotton sash adorned with feathers worn by the mummy was similar to those worn by the shamans of the Ishir people of Gran Chaco, it is likely that the mummy held ceremonial or shamanic significance and was created for ritual purposes.

Despite having been made centuries earlier, it ended up in Europe. Dr.

Urbani explained how this may have occurred, stating that, "As per the circulation of the mummy, the trail of 'Th. Lamp' reflects the intense 19th-century circulation of all kinds of ethnographical materials in the Río de la Plata and other parts of South America."

The study provides the first comprehensive scientific characterization of a primate mummy from subtropical South America. Likely created between 1475 and 1644 CE for shamanic or ritual purposes, it originated in the Misiones-Corrientes region of Argentina, providing valuable insight into the cultural significance of howler monkeys to the indigenous groups of Gran Chaco and providing new insights into an otherwise unstudied museum specimen.

According to Dr. Urbani, the examination of this mummified monkey specimen indicates that "the field of archaeoprimatology is fertile, and a future of new findings is envisioned."

**More information:** Bernardo Urbani et al, Inside a monkey with rhea feathers: Characterizing the nonhuman primate mummy from the Gran Chaco, South America, *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* (2026). [DOI: 10.1007/s12520-026-02442-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12520-026-02442-4)

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