In 2005, "virtual autopsies" done with CT scans allow archaeologists to see ancient Egyptian mummies in detail without unwrapping them. Already, the scans have been used to determine mummies' ages--and the cause of King Tut's death.

Keywords
Under Wraps: Unraveling Ancient Mummies with Virtual Autopsies

BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:
The ancient Egyptians were big on preservation. It's thanks to them we have the mummies, the sealed history, of another age. But finding out more about these ancient people has meant unraveling history, quite literally. Until now. There is a way to look without touching, and it is now all there to see. Our report tonight from NBC's George Lewis.

GEORGE LEWIS reporting:
In Southern California, a unique meeting, ancient mummies and 21st century medical technology. The mummies are getting their pictures taken using the very latest techniques in CT scanning. The kind of thing that's used to perform full body scans on living people.

Mr. PETER KELLER, PhD (Bowers Museum President): It's pretty amazing. So the detail is just extraordinary. And be able--to be able to s--see the mummy in its entirety, and all of a sudden, just start unwrapping it, going down through the mummy and seeing every little detail, including amulets and--and other things that were put into the case with the mummy.

LEWIS: The public will be able to see the mummies and the computerized images starting Sunday at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California.

The mummies are part of a collection of Egyptian antiquities from the British Museum. This is the first time a group of them have been examined using today's computerized X-ray scanning techniques. Earlier this year, a team in Egypt scanned the body of the ancient ruler King Tut and laid to rest an old rumor about him that he was murdered. The scan showed he died from natural causes.

Dr. M. LINDA SUTHERLAND (Radiologist): The value of scanning mummies is to perform a virtual
autopsy without damaging or touching or unwrapping the mummy.

LEWIS: And in Southern California, as these latest scans are analyzed, the experts are beginning to solve some other mysteries, such as the age of this small mummy, originally thought to be an infant. The highly detailed images of the child's teeth showed it was no longer a baby.

Dr. DANIEL WEISSBERG (Radiologist): The secondary molars were about to erupt so we're able to tell this individual was probably four to five years old.

LEWIS: The ancient Egyptians were mumified in hopes of becoming immortal. They had no idea they'd achieve electronic immortality thousands of years later and thousands of miles from home. George Lewis, NBC News, Santa Ana, California.