

REPORTS/OPINIONS

Dušan MAGDOLEN*

The Ancient Egyptian Coffin in the Slovak National Museum: a preliminary research report. (Plates 1 – 2)

In the collections of the Natural History Museum of the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava there is a precious and unique artefact from ancient Egypt: a mummiform coffin,¹ which by means of acquisition is related to the mummy located inside. The Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences initiated an Egyptological examination of this artefact and with the abovementioned museum signed a written contract on mutual cooperation, the aim of which is the detailed scholarly examination and evaluation of the artefact. The preciousness and uniqueness of this coffin is based on the fact that of all the ancient Egyptian artefacts in state collections in Slovakia, this artefact has a rich textual decoration with the widest range of hieroglyphic inscriptions. Upon the basis of information known thus far, in the 19th century the coffin and mummy were brought from Egypt to be part of the private collection of curiosities and antiquities of Dr Daniel Schimko, a Protestant priest and a native of today's Podlužany, who later on taught at the Theological Faculty in Vienna. In his testament he bequeathed his collection to the Evangelical Lyceum in Bratislava. After the Second World War the coffin and mummy came into the possession of the Slovak National Museum (SNM).

The coffin and mummy were examined in the 1970s by Czech scholars, who were researching ancient Egyptian artefacts in the former Czechoslovakia.² The Egyptological examination of the coffin from the Natural History Museum of the SNM was undertaken by Miroslav Verner. The final results of his work were made public as part of the international Egyptological project *Corpus Antiquitatum Aegyptiacarum* (CAA) in the form of a catalogue which contained

* This report is published within the grant project VEGA 2/0141/12.

¹ The Natural History Museum, Slovak National Museum, Bratislava, A 3219. I wish to express my thanks to RNDr. Alena Šefčáková, PhD. for her assistance and cooperation during my research in the museum.

² The anthropological material was investigated by Eugen Strouhal (STROUHAL, E. *Egyptian Mummies in Czechoslovak Collections*. In *Sborník Národního Muzea v Praze*, Prague, 1979, Vol. XXXV B, No. 1 – 4. Prague, 1979).

information on all the ancient Egyptian coffins in Czechoslovakia.³ At this time, this was one of the first pieces of research on ancient Egyptian artefacts of this type in the CAA project. The results of the research are summarized below.

The 183 cm long coffin is made of wood which was identified as *Tamarix articulata* V. upon the basis of a xylotomic analysis.⁴ The place of origin of the coffin could not be ascertained, but it is assumed that it could be from the area of today's Luxor. Upon the basis of the preserved original inscriptions, the coffin was attributed to a male owner named *Mrnbi*.⁵ The coffin was dated using relative chronology to the period of the 22nd to 26th dynasties⁶ (also see below). It is made up of two parts: a lid and a case. The lid and the case exhibit notable signs of damage and subsequent restoration. Both parts of the coffin on the surface contain remnants of the original coloured decoration on the exterior and interior. The coffin as a whole has the shape of a mummified human body with a right-angle base or pedestal in its lower part. The human head is decorated with a wig with straight locks of hair and a decorative streak at the level of the vertex of the head. The facial part has formed eyes, a nose and mouth. There is a formed and rather long so-called "false" beard with a supportive pillar at its rear connected to the bottom half of the lower jaw. The surface of the lid was originally richly decorated with various images. Under the neck on the chest there are vividly coloured remnants of the image of a large collar with floral and geometrical motifs. Below the collar contours of a horizontal register were identified which contained a painted scene, which, according to Verner, was impossible to identify. Approximately in the middle of the lid there are remnants of an image which captures a mummy lying on a bier formed into the shape of a bed with decorative lion-like elements. Under these, there are the beginnings of columns with damaged and incomplete hieroglyphic inscriptions. The fragments of the inscriptions can be recognized also on other parts of the coffin lid. At the level of the foot of the coffin it is possible to make out partially preserved images of a goddess with outspread wings crouching on the symbol *nbw*, which has been identified as Nut. On the sides below the wings there are remnants of hieroglyphic inscriptions arranged in short columns. The front of the base is damaged, but, according to Verner, the illustration there

³ VERNER, M. *Corpus Antiquitatum Aegyptiacarum*. Altägyptische Särge in den Museen und Sammlungen der Tschechoslowakei. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, 1982.

⁴ BREZINOVÁ, D., HURDA, B., Xylotomic Examination of Timber from Ancient Egyptian Coffins. In *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 1976, Bd. 103, pp. 139 – 142.

⁵ The transliterated transcription of the name *Mrnbi* is entered in Verner's publication with a question mark.

⁶ According to currently valid chronology, this is between 943 and 525 BC. See HORNING, E., KRAUSS, R., WARBURTON, D. A. (eds.) *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*. Leiden: Brill, 2006, pp. 493 – 494.

does not differ much from the motif which is on the sides: namely, a graphic combination of the hieroglyphic signs *nh*, *w3s* and *nb*. The image on the bottom surface of the base is described as a running bull (Apis) with the solar disc on its head, which is carrying the mummy of the deceased. In his publication Verner continues the description of the textual decoration on the interior of the lid and the case of the coffin. The text on the cracked surface of the lid and the case is partially damaged. On the interior surface of the lid of the coffin there is some text written in cursive hieroglyphs in 29 horizontal rows which are formed from horizontal lines. The text contains an offering formula addressed to the gods Osiris, Geb, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, Atum and Anubis, and statements by the sons of Horus. The lateral interior walls of the lid also contain an offering formula written in columns on each side. The internal surface of the case of the coffin is decorated with inscriptions in a cursive hieroglyphic script in 36 rows separated by horizontal lines. It contains an offering formula with the names of the gods Osiris-Khentyimentiu, Geb, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, Atum, Osiris-Onnophris, Ra-Horakhty and other deities, and statements by the sons of Horus. And here on the lateral sides of the interior there is a column in which there is continuous inscription. The text on the outer surface of the coffin case is not described in Verner's work. In the following commentary to the described inscriptions, Verner states that the coffin had two owners. The name of one of them is given in the inscriptions in the interior of the coffin, whereas the name of the other is only on the outer surface of the coffin.⁷ The name on the interior is transcribed as *Mrnbi* or *imy-r3 nb* (?), and his mother is given as the mistress of the house *Ibk*. The name of the second owner has been variously transcribed as *B3k*, *M-b3k*, *M3c-hrw-m-b3k* and *M3c-hrw-mr-m-b3k* (?). The mother of the second owner was the mistress of the house *N3-kn<.s* >?. According to Verner, the second owner of the coffin held a military rank, which is described in the transliterated text as *imy-r3 msc sn.wy rsy* (?). On the basis of the places of the occurrence of both men's names on the coffin (*Mrnbi* on the interior and *B3k* on the exterior of the coffin), Verner surmises that the first of the named owners was the original owner of the coffin. Further on, Verner states that the coffin is probably from the area of the necropolis at today's Luxor, as in the inscription there is the marking *imntt w3st*. In its shape and decoration, this artefact resembles coffins from the pre-Saite or Saite periods.⁸ In the following part there is a description of the coloured decoration and metric measurements. Importantly in the years 1974 – 1975 the coffin was conserved and restored. The autographic transcription of the texts and line drawings with the marking of the distribution of the inscriptions on the surface of the coffin and the black and

⁷ Its more exact localization is the outer side of the case of the coffin.

⁸ This assertion is followed by a reference to footnote 4, yet the content of that footnote is not present in Verner's work. See VERNER, M., CAA, p. 4/26.

white photographic documentation form the documentary part of Verner's study of the Bratislava coffin.

In 1985 the Polish Egyptologist Andrzej Niwiński,⁹ considered one of the foremost experts and creators of the typology of ancient Egyptian coffins, published a review of Verner's publication. In his review, Niwiński paid attention to the Bratislava coffin among others. While he supported the assumption that the coffin came from the area of today's Luxor, he also did not rule out that fact that the coffin could have come from the locality of Deir el-Bahri. In the temple complex of Queen Hatshepsut in the 1850s excavations were undertaken by J. B. Green and V. G. Maunier. In this same area A. Mariette found anthropomorphic coffins approximately at the same time which became a part of the general catalogue of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.¹⁰ Besides from identifying the origin of the coffin, Niwiński also focused on determining its age. Verner demarcated the chronological scale for the Bratislava coffin as being between the 22nd and 26th dynasties. According to Niwiński, it would be possible to reduce this time scale by hundreds of years and locate its age to within one dynasty. Upon the basis of extensive comparative material, which contains a relatively reliable dating of the coffin, he excludes the 22nd and 23rd dynasties and leans towards the late 25th dynasty.¹¹ Niwiński did not directly examine the coffin and only worked with Verner's publication. While black and white photographs of the coffin formed a part of the published documentation, they, according to Niwiński, did not all have the desired quality which would have made a detailed study possible of not only the inscriptions but also the iconography. It is precisely the iconography here which Niwiński states "bleibt gewissermaßen benachteiligt ..."¹²

Upon the basis of the abovementioned contract on mutual cooperation between the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and the Natural History Museum of the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava, which was signed not only by the directors of both parties to the contract but also by the general director of the SNM and the chairman of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the initial phase of research into the ancient Egyptian coffin was undertaken from May to July of last year. One of its main aims was to process the basic documentation and gather data for future stages of research.

⁹ NIWIŃSKI, A. Zur Datierung und Herkunft der ägyptischen Särge. In *Bibliotheca Orientalis XLII*, September – November 1985, No. 5/6, pp. 494 – 508.

¹⁰ GAUTHIER, M. H. CGAE, Nos. 41042 – 41072. Cercueils anthropoïdes des prêtres de Montou. Tome 1 et 2. Le Caire, 1913.

¹¹ According to radiocarbon dating, the age of the samples taken from the Bratislava coffin were determined to be 517±257 and 629±265 BC. See ŠILAR, J. Radiocarbon Dating of some Mummy and Coffin Samples. In *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 1979, Bd. 106, p. 86.

¹² NIWIŃSKI, A. BiOr XLII, No. 5/6, p. 495.

First of all, the necessary conditions for research and the processing of the primary documentation were created. A substitute case was made for the safe transfer of the mummy from the original coffin,¹³ a work schedule was decided upon for research and the safe handling of the coffin. The current state of the artefact was determined and evaluated, potential risks were identified and the existing physical damages were documented. After opening the coffin and transferring the mummy, some small plaster fragments were found which had broken off from the interior decoration including the textual corpus. All places from which the fragments broke off were identified and a method for their restoration was recommended. In some places, bandages from the mummy had stuck to the surface over time and left dark spots. Due to this, the inscriptions in the central part of the coffin were damaged. In some places there were still some dried pieces of textile from the bandages on the surface which covered some of the hieroglyphic text and made it illegible. In these places the textile was carefully removed by mechanical means so as not to damage the text corpus, and then it was put aside and stored separately from the coffin and mummy. In most cases this approach allowed for the legibility and identification of individual hieroglyphic signs in places which had been before then marked as unreadable or damaged.

The next steps in the research into the ancient Egyptian coffin will primarily involve an iconographic and textual analysis of the gathered data and its evaluation. The processing of the documentation from the outer surface of the coffin lid, which originally had a rich ornamental decoration in combination with hieroglyphic inscriptions, will be among the first tasks of this research. With the use of existing comparative material, a reconstruction of the original decoration will be undertaken. The analysis and reconstruction of this part of the coffin will have a marked influence on the typological determination of the coffin and can help in specifying its age in relative chronological terms.

¹³ In this regard I would like to thank Mgr. Roger Dobberstein for his assistance in the making of the substitute coffin necessary for the safe storage of the mummy.

PLATES

Plate 1. The ancient Egyptian coffin
in the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava.



Plate 2. Examining the ancient Egyptian coffin
in the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava.

