

# ANCIENT EGYPT ON THE TAGUS

*Antiquities in Lisbon*

by Lucy Gordan-Rastelli

Photos courtesy the  
Museu Nacional de Arqueologia

The Egyptian collection at Lisbon's National Archaeology Museum (Museu Nacional de Arqueologia) does not compare in quality with the magnificent treasures at the same city's Gulbenkian Museum; or in size — with only 560 artifacts<sup>1</sup> — to other major European collections; but



The Jerónimos Monastery, site of Lisbon's  
Museu Nacional de Arqueologia.

Photo: The Portuguese National Tourism Office, NYC

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no other collection in the world is housed in a comparable edifice — both for its history and its magnificence. Founded in 1893 by the distinguished ethnographer and philologist José Leite de Vasconcelos (1858-1941), since 1903 the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia has been located in the west wing of the Jerónimos Monastery, in Lisbon's park-filled waterfront Belém district, along the Tagus River. Leite de Vasconcelos was the first of its up-to-now seven directors, not retiring until 1929. In addition to the Egyptian collection, the Museum counts a total of some 40,000 objects, in collections devoted to the Stone, Bronze and Iron ages, ancient Rome, the Visigoths, Arabs and Middle Ages. Unlike the Egyptian collection, most of the artifacts in the other collections were actually found on Portuguese soil.

One of Lisbon's most prominent monuments and in 1983 classified by the UNESCO — with the nearby Torre de Belém — as a World Heritage Site, the Jerónimos Monastery, was built on the site of the Ermida do Restelo, a hermitage founded by Henry the Navigator around 1450. It was here that in, 1497, Vasco da Gama (1469-1524) and his crew of 170 men spent the night in prayer before their departure for India and here that the great explorer is buried.

Started in 1502 on the orders of King Manuel I (1515-1520), to commemorate da Gama's successful return in 1499 (but with only 55 of his 170 men) and to be the burial place of the Portuguese royal family, the existing structure soon became the house of prayer for all sailors leaving and returning to Lisbon. Over the centuries, besides da Gama and several members of the Portuguese royal family, the great poet and recorder of Portuguese explorations Luís de Camões (1527-1570); the poet and playwright Almeida Garrett (1799-1854); writer historian Alexandre Herculano (1810-1877); President Teófilo Braga (1843-1924); President Óscar Carmona (1869-1951); and poet and writer Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) have been buried here.

Funded by a five-percent tax on eastern spices, the monastery's construction in Manueline style took fifty years. Two centuries later, although most of Lisbon was destroyed and ap-



*Middle Kingdom terra cota offering plate of unknown provenance.*



*3rd Intermediate Period gilded-wood uraeus, of unknown provenance.*

proximately one-third of the population (some 100,000 people) killed by the Great Earthquake (measuring around 9 on the Richter scale) and the subsequent fires and a tsunami on the morning of November 1, 1755, the Monastery survived without too much damage. However, when the building became vacant in 1833 because of the abolition of religious orders in Portugal, it began to deteriorate and almost collapsed, until it was restored as home to the Maritime and Archaeology Museums. The Museu de Arqueologia was for several centuries the dormitory of the monks and today is most famous for its metalwork dating to the Bronze and Iron ages, which is the specialty of Dr. Luís Raposo, director since 1995.

Since 1993 — when it was “modernized” — the Egyptian collection has been housed in a small windowless ground-floor area divided into what one could describe as three cramped rooms and a corridor. The 309 artifacts on permanent display are organized both chronologically and thematically in fourteen sections: sculpture, daily life and the Afterlife, in state-of-the-art display cases, but with explanations only in Portuguese. The day I visited, Dr. Raposo was ill, but I was most fortunate that Professor Luís Manuel de Araújo, a consultant to the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia and Portugal's most distinguished Egyptologist — who had shown me around the Gulbenkian's Egyptian collection (see *Kmt* 19:4) — was willing to fill in for Raposo.

“The core of the collection here at MNA,” de Araújo told me, “is about 200 artifacts acquired by French-born Princess Amélie (1865-1951), the last reigning queen of Portugal, during a Mediterranean pleasure cruise — highly criticized for its luxury — which included several stops to Egypt, in 1903. While in Cairo she and her two sons were the guests of Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, who presented her with a gift of Egyptian antiquities for the king of Portugal's private collection.”

On May 22, 1886, soft-spoken, socially-active and artistic, Amélie married Prince Carlos of Portugal (1863-1908), who became King Carlos I on October 19, 1889, but who was assassinated along with his heir, Prince Dom Luís, by members of his bodyguard on





*Gilded & painted cartonnage funerary mask, of Ptolemaic date & unknown provenance.*



Basalt bust of an unknown Late Period or Ptolemaic king, of unknown provenance. Considered one of the "stars" of the MNA collection.



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Top, Gilded linen-&-chalk funerary sandal of Late Period or Ptolemaic date & unknown provenance, from the Duke of Palmela Collection; above, New Kingdom terra-cotta funerary cone from the Sheikh abd el Gurna necropolis, Luxor; below, Limestone criosphinx of probable New Kingdom date & unknown provenance, donated to the MNA by the Duke of Palmela.



February 1, 1908. Queen Amélie — who was sitting next to her husband in the carriage — was surprisingly unharmed and saved the life of her younger son. He became King Manuel

II the next day, but was deposed by a military coup on October 10, 1910. On her departure for a life of exile in France, ownership of the royal family's Egyptian artifacts reverted to the state.

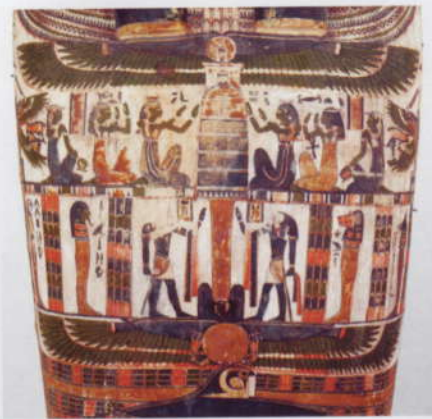
The former queen returned to Portugal only once, in 1945.

A year before her exile in 1909, Leite de Vasconcelos, the Museu's director, had attended the World Archaeological Congress in Cairo and brought back about seventy artifacts, on display here. They are mainly Predynastic stone tools and ceramics from Graeco-Roman Egypt. They had been given to him by Evaristo Breccia, the Italian director of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria. The majority of the rest of the MNA collection was donated by the last Duke of Palmela,<sup>2</sup> by banker and collector of antiquities António Bustorff Silva<sup>3</sup> and Francisco Barros e Sá,<sup>4</sup> among others. "There are about eighty pieces of unknown origin," de Araújo told me. "For these and many others we do not know where they were excavated in Egypt. These two serious historical lacunae, the cramped exhibition space, the lack of explanations except sketchy ones, my beautiful, but never translated, catalogue, now out of print," continued de Araújo, "are the weaknesses of this collection. There is also very little jewelry, none of which is gold. Generally speaking it is a modest, but very interesting collection. The pluses are that, firstly, our collection is by far the largest in Portugal; and that, secondly, it is a good teaching collection, as every period of ancient Egyptian history is represented, from Prehistoric to Coptic. We may not have the quality of the artifacts of the Gulbenkian, but we have a much wider spectrum, including items of daily life and mummies. We have flint tools from the Mesolithic Era. Objects such as pallets, pottery, mace heads and flint knives illustrate the Predynastic Period. There are also a number of stone vases, pottery and objects of daily life, such as sandals, combs and jewelry from the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom. We have more artifacts from the New Kingdom than other historical periods."

According to Professor de Araújo, the three stars of MNA's collection are:

△ Although of unknown provenance, the basalt bust of an anonymous (because of no inscriptions) pharaoh, dating to the Late or Ptolemaic period. "We know he was a pharaoh," said Professor de Araújo, "from the iconography. He is wearing royal headdress and has a hole where the uraeus should





Left & detail above, Late Period painted-cartonnage coffin containing the mummy of the priest Irtieru, of unknown provenance.

Right & detail below, Ptolemaic painted-wood coffin of a priest of Min, Pabasa; from Akhmim & a donation to the MNA by the Duke of Palmela. Within a cartouche shape on the top of the coffin lid & basin is a depiction (detail) of a scarab with two sun disks.

The two coffins are considered "stars" of the Museu Nacional Arqueologia collection.



be. There are implantation traces for his beard, for the necklace usekh and of bracelets. This bust was certainly the upper part of a full-length statue."

△ A lavishly decorated anthropomorphic coffin of a priest of Min, Pabasa, made of wood, with a covering of painted and varnished plaster, from Akhmim, dating to the Ptolemaic Period; a donation of the Duke of Palmela. "Pabasa was a semati," said de Araújo, "that is the 'god dresser'. The text on the coffin shows only the name of the deceased; there are no titles or mentions of any particular place."





Inside its upper and lower parts, it contains a mummified body, one of the three belonging to the MNA collection,<sup>5</sup> covered by a linen sudarium. The interior of the coffin is also covered in linen, but is without any decoration or inscription. "The face on the coffin," explains the Museum's website, "with well outlined features and an expressive gaze, is surrounded by a wig with parallel stripes falling over the chest, which rests on a large floral necklace with several turns, painted with several motives, with special reference to the habitual presence of stylized lotus flowers. It bears an Osiric goatee, painted black. On the head, interrupting the striped decoration, there is a cartouche decorated with a sacred beetle, which pushes two solar disks. The profuse range of themes on the upper covering divides itself in several registers of mythological character, separated by a frieze of small colored rectangles and vegetal elements. The lower half presents a long hieroglyphic text extracted from the Book of the Dead, with four vertical columns on each side, separated from each other by black lines. The back is illustrated by a vertical hieroglyphic inscription painted on the great pillar djed, whose top ends in a humanized ankh sign."

▲ Another elaborately decorated anthropomorphic cartonnage coffin<sup>6</sup> of the priest Irtieru, of unknown provenance. According to de Araújo's catalogue, it dates to the Late Period, the Twenty-seventh to Thirtieth dynasties, while an article by Álvaro Figueiredo — "The Lisbon Mummy Project<sup>7</sup>: The employment of non-destructive methods in mummy studies" from the Museum's website — dates it to the Third Intermediate Period (1070-712 BC), and probably to the Twenty-second Dynasty (948-743 BC).

The deceased within can be identified, thanks to an inscription "painted vertically along the front of the coffin, between the legs." Figueiredo — an anthropologist and PhD candidate at University College London — goes on to give the following lengthy description of the object: "The head of the anthropoid coffin wears a large black wig, framing the face which is painted red brown and once wore a false beard (now lost). A large floral pectoral is depicted on the chest and shoulders. The body of the coffin is covered with representations of funerary deities arranged horizontally



Above, New Kingdom granite falcon, of unknown provenance. Below, TIP painted-wood statuette of Nephthys, of unknown provenance.



and painted on a white background. The upper portion shows a stylized representation of the Osiris sanctuary at Abydos, surmounted by a winged solar disc,

crowned by two kachuti plumes. On both sides of the sanctuary are represented in two registers, the deities responsible for the protection of the body and its internal organs. In the upper register to the left are Isis and Selket, and on the opposite side, Nephthys and Neith. Thoth is represented in the second register to the left, followed by Imseti and Duamutef, and opposite Horus, who is followed by Hapy and Qebehsenuef. They all face towards the sanctuary in adoration.

"In the middle of the coffin is a large representation of a falcon with outstretched wings. The vertical inscription that stretches from this point down to the area between the feet of the coffin is surrounded on either side by large winged figures of Isis and Nephthys, first in human and then in bird form. The foot base of the coffin was closed by a wooden board with a painted representation of the Apis bull in its centre.... The back of the coffin is almost entirely covered by a large djed pillar painted on a white background and surmounted by a portion of the body of Osiris. The hieroglyphic inscription identifies him as 'Osiris, Lord of Busiris'."

Other highlights of the MNA collection are 128 ushabtis, fifty-six of which are on display; the mummies: three human (including Pabasa, inv. 213) and six animals; as well as a sandstone canopic vessel containing organic matter. According to Figueiredo, "The second human mummy (Inv. 215) is an unnamed individual bearing a cartonnage mask and dates to the Ptolemaic Period. It is still fully wrapped in linen bandages with a painted shroud decorated with a short htp di nsw inscription and representations of Isis, Nephthys and the Four Sons of Horus. The external wrappings are unfortunately damaged in the area of the right shoulder and feet."

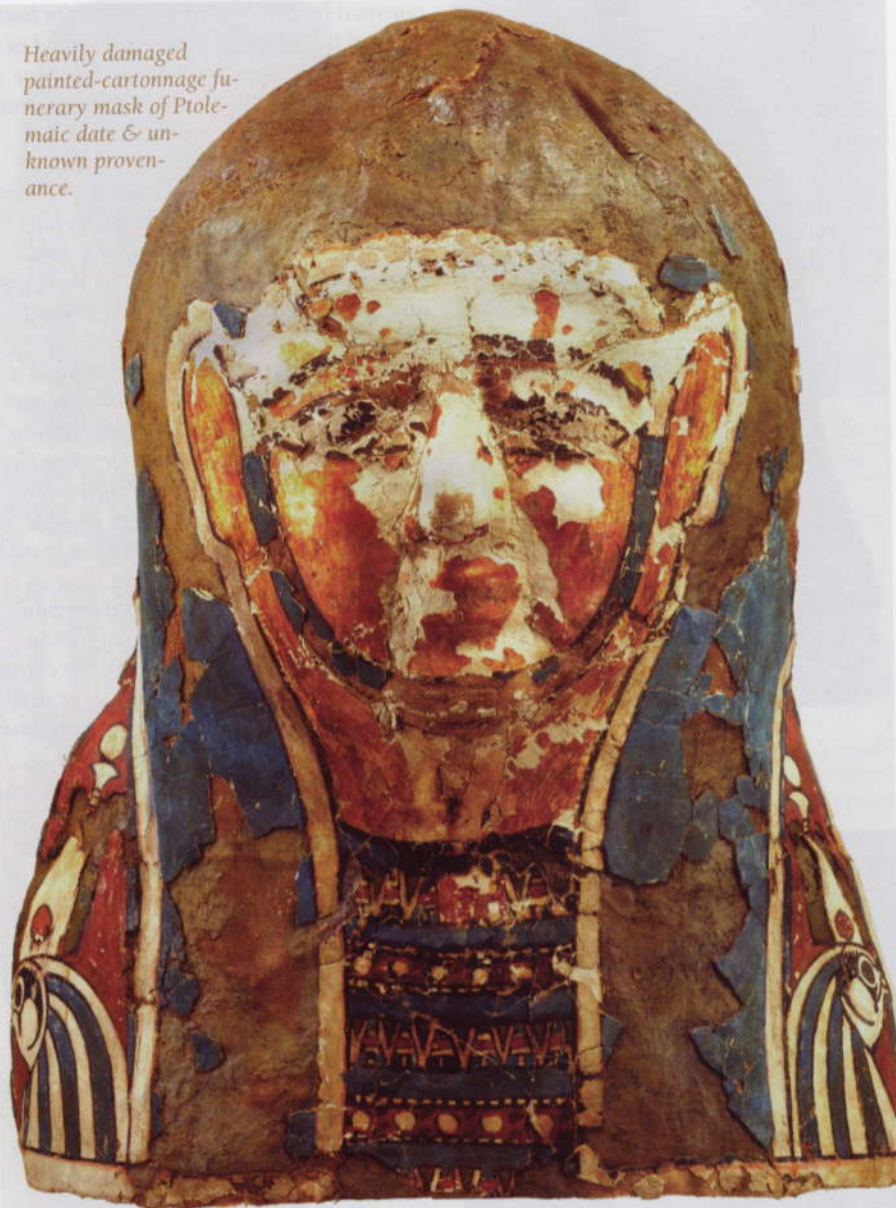
"Although we have never done a CT-Scan, because we do not have the funds, it is also probably a man," de Araújo told me during our tour. "We can see the place for his beard."

Again according to Figueiredo's article, "the canopic vase (inv. 221-222), made of sandstone with traces of black paint, dates to the Late Period. Its human-headed lid represents Imseti, one of the Four Sons of Horus.... Organic material of a black appearance, probably remains of internal organs, is still preserved in the interior of the vessel."

The animal mummies are four young crocodiles and two birds. "One



Heavily damaged painted-cartonnage funerary mask of Ptolemaic date & unknown provenance.



of the crocodiles (MNA 231)," Figueiredo writes, "still has some resin impregnated linen bandages intact, while the other three (MNA 232, 233, 234) appear to have been unwrapped in the recent past. They date to the Graeco-Roman Period...and may have come from Kom Ombo, a cult center dedicated to the crocodile god Sobek."

As for the birds, Figueiredo writes: "The bird mummies include a wrapped falcon (MNA 230), and a sealed pottery coffin (MNA 235) that probably contains an ibis. The falcon mummy, which dates from the Late or Ptolemaic Period has lost part of its outer wrappings and seems to have been mummified in a standing position, in a manner resembling representations of Horus and

other bird deities. The pottery coffin resembles specimens from the catacombs at Tuna el Gebel (Hermopolis), which — like the ibis — was sacred to the god Thoth." "It is quite unusual," Professor de Araújo told me, "to have a mummified animal still in its sealed pottery coffin."

Lisbon's six animal remains seem to have been mummified as votive offerings — a popular practice at special cult centers, from the Late Period onwards. "They were buried," Figueiredo tells us, "in catacomb-like structures sacred to the deity with whom they were associated.... The catacombs at Tuna el Gebel are thought to contain over four million bird burials." With regard to the animal mummies, it is particu-

larly important to establish their cause of death, to be able to determine whether they were reared, killed and mummified to become votive offerings. Figueiredo also writes that during the Nineteenth Century "fake" bird mummies were often sold to foreign travelers.

Located at Praça do Império and easily reached from downtown on Tram 15, the Museum is open from Wednesday through Sunday, from 10 AM-6 PM and Tuesday 2 PM-6 PM; it is closed on Monday, Tuesday morning, Easter, May 1st, Christmas and New Year's Day. Admission: 3 euros. The Museum also houses a good library specializing in archaeology, which is open Tuesday-Friday, from 10 AM-12:30 PM and 2-5 PM. For more information tel. 011-351-213620000, or click on its excellent multi-lingual website [www.mn-arqueologia.pt](http://www.mn-arqueologia.pt)

#### Notes

1. Professor de Araújo wrote me in an email dated June 18, 2009: "The Museum has never bought any Egyptian objects. They are all public or private donations. The most recent donation is the Collection Barros e Sá in 1987."

2. The fifth Duke of Palmela, Sir Domingos Maria do Espírito Santo José Francisco de Paula de Sousa Holstein-Beck (1897-1969) and his descendants donated about eighty artifacts to the collection in the mid-Twentieth Century.

3. Besides being a banker and an art collector, António Júdice Bustorff Silva (1895-1979) was a close friend and deputy minister of the dictator Salazar. His art collection, housed on his estate "Quinta do Hilário," was one of the most famous in Portugal during the first half of the Twentieth Century. His ancient artifacts, mainly Roman, were donated to the Portuguese State Administration in 1969 and integrated into the collection of the National Archeological Museum that same year.

4. Francisco Theotónio de Barros e Sá (1896-date unknown) was a well-known art collector, especially of Portuguese silverware. An advisor of the Museu Nacional Arqueologia, he bequeathed his ancient artifacts to the Museum in 1969. Among the hundreds of ancient artifacts he bequeathed, eighty are Egyptian and arrived at the Museum in 1987.

5. The catalogue and website both report, and Professor de Araújo confirmed in an email dated June 18, 2009, that the coffin of Pabasa (Inv. 213) contains a mummy; but this contradicts what is reported in Figueiredo's article: that the collection houses two mummified human bodies, one in the coffin of Irtieru (Inv. 217) and one in a display case on its own (Inv. 215), with no coffin.

6. Like the coffin of Pabasa (Inv. 213).

7. In an email dated June 18, 2009, Professor de Araújo told me that the Mummy Project started in 2005 is still ongoing, but that its scientific findings — such as the sex of the mummies, although they are presumed male; any chronic diseases suffered by the mummies when alive; the causes of their deaths; their ages at the time of their deaths — have not been published as yet.

**About the Author** Lucy Gordan-Rastelli is a free-lance writer resident in Rome and special European correspondent to the Journal.