

The Egyptian collection of Museu de História Natural da Universidade do Porto

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The Egyptian collection of the Museu de História Natural da Universidade do Porto has about one hundred objects offered by the Museum of Berlin in 1926 in exchange for antiquities from ancient Mesopotamia, taken from a German ship anchored in the Tagus river during the First World War.

Taking advantage of Portugal's neutrality, the steamship *Cheruskia* (Hamburg-Amerika Linie) took refuge in the Tagus bringing on board a varied load, among which were more than 400 cases with Assyrian antiquities found in excavations in Mesopotamia by the German archaeologists of the Deutsche Orientgesellschaft in ancient historical places of Assyria. In February 1926 the Portuguese government captured the vessels from German and Austria anchored in the Tagus (about 70) and, according to one letter of 1916 from the British ambassador in Portugal, Sir Lancelot Carnegie, the *Cheruskia* was carrying «448 cases of antiques from Basra», the port in the Persian Gulf.

During the war, Imperial Germany tried to assure the good conservation of the objects confiscated by the Portuguese government, using for this purpose the Spanish embassy in Lisbon, which in turn established contacts with the Portuguese authorities. Knowing of this,

the British ambassador sent a letter to the Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Augusto Soares:

«When the war broke out the German steamship *Cheruskia* on her way from Basra to Hamburg took shelter at Lisbon, and had among other cargo 448 cases of antiques from Basra on board. It appears that the German authorities are very anxious that these cases should not fall into strange hands and are willing to pay £10.000 in order to have them stored in a safe place until the war is over. This large sum of money which the Germans are prepared to pay for the safety of these cases naturally arouses suspicions as to their contents and I have been directed to suggest to the Portuguese Government that it might be well to have them examined with the view of ascertaining what they actually contain.»

In 1917 and 1919 some cases were opened by the customs authorities of Lisbon in order to inspect its contents, after which the minister of Education at that time, António Nobre, ordered that the cases were sent to the Universidade do Porto, with the intention to organize an archaeological museum in which to display the Assyrian antiquities.

Between the end of the war and 1925 a lively debate rose between those who wished the Assyrian objects to remain in Portugal and those who defended its return to Germany, until they finally reached an agreement through the intercession of the Assyriologist Walter Andrae: the antiquities were to be returned to Germany and, in exchange, the Museum of Berlin would offer Egyptian antiquities to Portugal, among others from different cultures.

In 1926 about 130 objects evoking the Egyptian civilization arrived in Portugal, from a sarcophagus with its respective mummy to small amulets, which were given to the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. Later, this Faculty was closed and the objects were transferred to the Faculdade de Ciências, where they were exposed for some years in inappropriate circumstances.

The exhibition of the objects

The idea to organize a permanent exhibit with the Egyptian objects from the Museu de História Natural, with its respective catalogue, was conceived in the scope of the commemoration of the one hundred years of the Universidade do Porto which took place in 2011, with the devoted efforts of the President of the Centennial Commission, Professor Luís Valente de Oliveira, and the personal interest of the academic authorities, starting with its dean Professor José Carlos Marques dos Santos and the dynamic action of Professor Manuel António Janeira, vice-dean of the University.

The exhibit, organized in ten thematic areas ranging from Pre-History to the Greco-Roman age, evokes the artistic and utilitarian production in ancient Egypt where, for over 3000 years, bloomed one of the most notable civilizations in mankind's history, based on the belief of an eternal life.

This collection was exhibited according a criterion of thematic-chronological order, inspired by the Egyptian collection of the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia in Lisbon, which is the largest of its kind in Portugal. The option took into account the fact that practically all the great epochs in the history of ancient Egypt were represented in the academic collection from Oporto, starting with the long prehistoric phase, here well illustrated by terracotta pots, necklaces and palettes for cosmetic use. Some containers date from Early Dynastic Period (1st and 2nd dynasties) or the Old Kingdom (3rd to 6th dynasty), and a lithic fragment can be assigned to the 5th dynasty (reign of Sahure). From the remarkable period that was the New Kingdom (18th-20th dynasties) there are many testimonies in the collection, from objects of adornment and cosmetic related, to several scarabs and funerary statuettes. Between the New Kingdom and the Late Period lies the unstable phase that was the Third Intermediate Period (21st-25th dynasties), during which some of the funerary statuettes (known by the designation of *ushebtis* present in the collection were made. The Late Period (26th-30th dynasties), well represented in the collection

by amulets, canopic jars, funerary statuettes (*ushebtis*), figurative bronzes (some of which may already be of the subsequent ptolemaic period) and a figurine of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, which is a syncretic representation of three gods much revered at the time.

As for the Greco-roman Period (3rd century BC to the end of the 5th century AD) there are terracotta statuettes, one anthropoid coffin, two human mummies, one funerary mask of golden cartonage and another of painted stucco, lucernes and a lantern.

The Egyptian collection of the Museu de História Natural da Universidade do Porto, with its one hundred objects, testifies to the varied artistic and utilitarian production of one of the most notable civilizations that mankind ever knew, making of Oporto's collection one important teaching exhibition available to the public. The collection is totally composed by Egyptian antiquities which once belonged to the Museum of Berlin and were offered to Portugal in 1926, after a long process of contacts. The list elaborated by the German museum, with the title «Nach Portugal im Austausch für die Assurfunde gegeben», registers a total of 134 objects, but today there are only 104, so 30 are missing, with no one knowing the reasons for its disappearance. This sad fact may have occurred when the objects were in the Faculdade de Letras do Porto, or later in the Faculdade de Ciências.

The importance of the collection

In Portugal there are more than a thousand Egyptian objects distributed by several public and private collections, as well as several objects belonging to private collectors. Most of these collections is already published in books and journal articles, deserving righteous highlight for their undoubted quality, the fine Egyptian collection of the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian (whose catalogue was published in 2006, presenting the forty exhibits and the objects in the reserves), which was accompanied by an English edition (*Egyptian Art*), and the one from the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, which is the biggest in Portugal, with more than 500 objects, from which 300 are in

exhibit (but whose catalogue is sold out). The collection of the Museu da Farmácia, that soon will have a section in Oporto, is still in a stage of preparation, foreseeing the acquisition of a few more objects to add to the hundred pieces that are exposed. In Lisbon there is yet another fine Egyptian collection in the Museu da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa, but it is still being studied and is inaccessible to the public.

For a country like Portugal, that has never had tradition in the Egyptological studies and never had major areas of excavation in Egypt (unlike many European countries who have been there since the nineteenth century), the relative historical and scientific value of the Egyptian collection of the Museu de História Natural da Universidade do Porto can satisfy our pedagogic and didactic needs. Moreover, although the collection has been exposed until a few years in inappropriate conditions and without any support catalogue, the objects were seen by many visitors, most notably students from various levels of education who certainly have seen clarified and consolidated part of their knowledge about the ancient Egyptian civilization.

The historical and scientific value of this collection also justified that it was exposed to the public for a few months in an exhibition organized by the Casa-Museu Teixeira-Lopes, in Vila Nova de Gaia, but since no Egyptologist was linked to this project the ephemeral experience resulted in a small, regrettable and disappointing catalogue, with many errors.

As for the value of the collection in the international context, it is evident that it can not be compared with the great collections of famous museums with Egyptian objects in Europe and the U.S.A., but some of the figurative bronzes from the small collection in Oporto, as well as some funerary statues and scarabs from this college collection are amongst the finest in the Egyptian collections in Portugal.

The exhibition of Egyptian antiquities that in September 2011 was inaugurated in the beautiful building of the Rectory, within the commemorations of the centenary of the Universidade do Porto, has already been visited by a significant number of people, and among them abound classes of various levels of education. To continue this

success it has been developed effective action on divulgation of the room where the objects are exposed, either in the media or in the schools, along with a greater diffusion of other facilities and resources of the Museu de História Natural.

At the same time it would be advisable to promote the catalogue that was published to accompany the exhibition, describing all of its objects, making it within reach for the visitors. It is well worth the effort to spread this interesting collection, which contributes, with their counterparts in public and private collections, so that in Portugal there are more than a thousand objects evocative of ancient Egypt, almost all already studied and published, in a project that the Instituto Oriental da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa has undertaken since 1990.

The exhibits

Having as methodological model the permanent exhibition of Egyptian antiquities at Lisbon's Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, the University collection from Oporto was organized in ten groups, with the particularity that the funerary statuettes' section was separated, since it was considered to be the iconographic symbol of the entire collection. In the presentation of the objects is indicated their respective number as in the catalogue, titled *A Coleção Egípcia do Museu de História Natural da Universidade do Porto* (Oporto, 2011).

I. Ceramic vessels

The ceramic vessels in the collection are all from Egypt's pre-historic times (4th millennium BC), and they witness an intense production of vases, bowls and jars for ordinary use and also to be placed in tombs, for use in the afterlife.

The Pre-Dynastic Period is mainly represented in Egyptian collections around the world by ceramic vessels, palettes and several adornments. In the particular case of the collection from the Museu

de História Natural da Universidade do Porto, this early period is documented by 16 objects including ceramic vessels (cat. 1-7), some of them with handles imitating ropes (cat. 10-12), bowls (cat. 8-9), jars (cat. 13-14), a small vase with a thinned base (cat. 15) and a blacktop vessel (cat. 16).

II. Stone vessels

The stone vessels made in ancient Egypt are countless. They come in all shapes, sizes and materials, and sometimes they are inspired by their ceramic models. Examples of small vessels made of marble and alabaster can also be found in the exhibition.

From the long and remarkable historical period that was the Old Kingdom, there are three stone containers in the Egyptian collection from Oporto: a small marble vase (cat. 17), a jar of travertine (cat. 18) and a beautiful travertine vase (cat. 19), remembering the visitor that the peak of stone containers' manufacture was the 3rd dynasty, the beginning of the age of the great pyramids (Old Kingdom). The pedagogical sense of the exhibition circuit has led to clarify that the type of material used to manufacture the two containers of the exhibition, travertine and not alabaster (calcite) as was appointed in previous studies.

III. Peripheral models

The connection between Egypt and the neighbouring regions of Nubia and Syria-Palestine promoted the contact with different models, like the Nubian blacktop vessels (from Kerma culture) and the Syrian vessels represented on a lithic fragment from the time of Sahure (5th dynasty).

The reign of Thutmose III (New Kingdom) marks the rise of Egypt and the beginning of its claim as a great power of its time, confirmed by the domain of a large part of Syria-Palestine and Nubia. This king will also be the exponent of the fight against the periphery of the country

of the Two Lands in the north and in the south. This Egyptian craving for domination of the border regions can be illustrated by two blacktop vessels of Nubian origin (Kerma C) from the collection (cat. 20-21).

From the Old Kingdom, found in the funerary temple of King Sahure, in Abusir, came a prominent fragment of the collection, reproducing Syrian vessels, attesting to the commercial relations which then existed between Egypt and the regions beyond the Sinai (cat. 22).

IV. Everyday objects

Many of the objects in this group were found in tombs, as it was thought they would be very useful in the afterlife. Some examples include palettes, necklaces, a bracelet, a comb and a mirror, illustrating a festive ambience, completed with a New Year flask.

There are 12 objects, amongst which are the typical slate palettes in geometrical or animalistic form (cat. 23-25) and pebbles for the grinding of various products used in face painting such as galena and malachite (cat. 26-27), two necklaces of agate, carnelian, faience and other materials (cat. 28-29), a bracelet (cat. 30), an instrument for working linen (cat. 31), a wooden comb (cat. 32), a New Year flask in faience (cat. 33) of the Late Period (26th dynasty), and a bronze mirror (cat. 34) from the New Kingdom.

V. Funerary statuettes

The funerary statuettes were placed in tombs so that they could work in the afterlife, instead of the deceased. Until the 10th century BC (21st dynasty) they were known as *shabtis*, and later as *ushebtis*. They were made from several materials, like wood, stone and faience.

There are 20 objects, starting with four wooden funerary statuettes, one of them made to the official Buken (cat. 35-38). Dating from the 21st Dynasty are a few specimens (cat. 39-43), made for Nesi, Iymut, Nesiakhet and Nesipapernub, which are among more than one hundred of this period existing in Portugal, and yet another which can

be dated to a phase between the 23rd and the 25th dynasties, with the name of Pacherienisit (cat. 44).

The collection from Oporto displays significant examples of funerary statuettes from the Late Period, known as *uchebtis* (to differentiate them from previous funerary statuettes called *shabtis*), some of which show the characteristic «saite smile» which appeared at the time: it is the case of the faience funerary statuette of Pacherientaihet (cat. 45); of two statuettes made for Horudja (cat. 46-47); one for Djedhor (cat. 48); one for Horiretaa (cat. 49); of two statuettes without inscriptions (cat. 50-51); of one one with an unreadable name (cat. 52); of one for Psametek (cat. 53) and finally, one for Djedptahiuefankh (cat. 54).

In Portugal there are funerary statuettes in almost every public and private collections, being the largest number in the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia and in the Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa, being noteworthy the best example in bronze from the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian (Hesmerref), the best example in stone from the Museu da Farmácia (Hui) and the best wooden one from the Solar Condes de Resende, in Canelas (Minemai).

VI. Amulets

Small and much appreciated objects of great magical nature that represented the gods, sacred animals and hieroglyphic signs. They had small holes so they could be worn by both the living and the dead, therefore, showing up in great numbers in tombs.

There is no collection of Egyptian antiquities in Portugal, public or private, however modest it may be, which does not exhibit these characteristic images, and the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, with its eighty examples, can give a reasonable idea of the variety of objects used for over 3000 years, as can be seen in the Egyptian collections of the Museu da Farmácia, the Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis (Oporto), at the Solar Condes de Resende, in Canelas, among others.

There are 13 objects in this unit: a headrest made of stone (cat. 55), a stone *udjat* eye (cat. 56), a heart of stone (cat. 57), a lapis-lazuli *djed*

pillar (cat. 58), a faience *uadj* symbol (cat. 59), a faience *menat* counterweight (cat. 60), a faience white crown, the usual symbol of royalty (cat. 61), and figurines of deities as Ptah (cat. 62), Sekhmet (cat. 63), Isis breastfeeding her son Harpocrates (cat. 64), Taweret (cat. 65), Bes in double figuration (cat. 66), as well as a ring with the image of Horus Child, Harpocrates (cat. 67).

VII. Scarabs

The scarabs, which evoke the resurrection, are among the most typical objects of ancient Egypt, and some are inscribed with magical symbols, names of kings and gods, or with the 30th chapter from the «Book of the Dead», which deals with the final judgement of the deceased.

The collection has 11 scarabs, one scaraboid with a flowery symmetrical decoration which can date from the reign of queen Hatshepsut (cat. 68), and three evoke the famous king Thutmose III with his fourth name of Menkheperre (cat. 69-71), two specimens with animalistic forms (cat. 72-73), a faience scarab with an inscription that shows the name of Nebmaetre, which was the forename of Amenhotep III (cat. 74), and three specimens in different types of stones like quartz (cat. 75), and diabase (cat. 76), a faience scarab without inscriptions of the Late Period with holes for adjusting the wings (cat. 77), and one heart scarab (*ib*) with an inscription at the base, showing the chapter 30 of the «Book of the Dead» (cat. 78).

Other scarabs of Egyptian origin are present in Portuguese public and private collections, like the one at the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia (with different specimens); at the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian (winged faience scarab); at the Museu da Farmácia, or at the Museu Condes de Castro Guimarães (Cascais), several specimens with inscriptions; in the collection of the king D. Luís exposed in the Castelo de Vila Viçosa (Fundação da Casa de Bragança), with a winged specimen, in painted wood; at the Casa Municipal de Cultura da Câmara Municipal de Gaia (Solar Condes de Resende), five specimens, some of them

with inscriptions; and we should mention the heart scarabs belonging to the Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis and the Sam Levy collection, with versions of the Chapter 30 of the «Book of the Dead».

VIII. Mummification

The belief in eternal life led to the preparation of the bodies, which were mummified, embalmed, and placed inside sarcophagi, along with funerary masks and viscera jars, as well as other materials, like small statues of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris.

This fundamental group includes 8 objects from the Late Period and Greco-roman Period, like a statuette of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris in painted wood (cat. 79), more complete than a similar specimen from the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, an anthropoid coffin of polychrome stuccoed wood made for Pakharu (cat. 80) with its human mummy (cat. 81), and yet another female mummy without coffin which is not exposed to the public (cat. 82), two alabaster vessels of viscera (cat. 83-84) and one of ceramic (cat. 85), and a golden carton-nage funerary mask (cat. 86).

In Portugal there are coffins of the 21st dynasty in the museum of the Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa (offered by the Egyptian government in 1893, from Deir el-Bahari), two at the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia (one of the Third Intermediate Period and the other of the ptolemaic dynasty) and another at the Museu Arqueológico do Carmo (Associação dos Arqueólogos Portugueses).

One can see canopic jars in the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Museu da Farmácia and Museu da Vila Viçosa (collection of king D. Luís), and funerary masks at the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, with the best exemplar at the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian (in golden silver).

IX. Figurative bronzes

In Egypt there was an intense production of bronze objects in the Late Period, from the 7th century BC onwards. They depicted gods like

Osiris, Neith, Isis breastfeeding Horus Child and the enthroned Horus Child, as well as sacred animals like the Apis bull.

The thousands of bronze statuettes that exist today in Egyptian collections date from the Late Period, mainly representing the gods that at the time were subject to greater veneration: the famous triad of Osiris, Isis and Horus, Thoth and Ptah, Bes, Anubis, and goddesses Bast and Neith, the sacred bull Apis, among others. The collection of the Museu de História Natural da Universidade do Porto has five of these bronze statuettes representing Apis (cat. 87), Horus Child (cat. 88), Isis breastfeeding Horus (cat. 89), Osiris (cat. 90) and Neith (cat. 91).

Also, the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian and the Museu da Farmácia have several bronze figurines depicting some of the major Egyptian deities worshiped in the Late Period and Greco-roman Period.

X. Greco-Roman terracotta

In a late stage of the Egyptian civilization, when the Greeks and the Romans ruled the country of the Nile, many terracotta figures of Osiris, Isis, Horus Child and Bes were produced, in addition to lucernes and portraits expressing the classic Roman realism.

In exhibition are 12 objects that testify to a great production of terracotta figurines and objects, besides three terracotta lucernes (cat. 92-94), a woman's head in terracotta (cat. 95), and terracotta statuettes representing several deities: Horus Child (cat. 96), Isis-Demeter (cat. 97), Osiris in canopic form (cat. 98) and the popular god Bes (cat. 99). Add to that a figurine of a dog in terracotta (cat. 100), a lantern (cat. 101), a beautiful female portrait in painted terracotta (cat. 102) and finally a Coptic strainer (cat. 103).

There are good examples of terracotta figurines at the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia and in several private Portuguese collections.

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Figures



Fig. 1. The building of Reitoria da Universidade do Porto and Museu de História Natural.



Fig. 2. Three funerary statuettes in faience (Late Period).



Fig. 3. Sarcophagus of Pakharu, in painted wood (ptolemaic period).



Fig. 4. Necklace in agate, carnelian, faience and stone (Nagada, pre-dynastic period).