

AN OSIRIS-SHAPED PAPYRUS SHEATH IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: This article revisits and expands upon Břetislav Vachala's 1981 study of a wooden Osiris-shaped papyrus sheath from the collections of the Náprstek Museum. It incorporates newly discovered information regarding the object's provenance and provenience. The object has been dated to the Twenty-first to Twenty-second Dynasties (ca. 11th–10th centuries BCE) and classified as Subtype II-D according to Raven's typology. A particularly exceptional feature of the sheath is the sagittal division of the Osiris figure, intended to facilitate the insertion of the scroll into the statue. Typically, such statues were sawn transversely.

KEYWORDS: Egyptian funerary equipment – Osiris-shaped papyrus sheath – Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statues

Introduction

Forty-four years ago, in 1981, Břetislav Vachala (1952–2020) published an article in the *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* titled *Ein Papyrusbehältnis in Osirisgestalt aus dem Náprstek Museum* (An Osiris-shaped Papyrus Sheath in the Náprstek Museum).² Vachala selected the object for publication as part of his broader plan to document the entire set of Osiris-shaped papyrus sheaths and Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statues held in the Náprstek Museum's collections³ – a project that, unfortunately, was never realised. The present article revisits and updates Vachala's study, incorporating newly acquired information regarding the object's provenance and provenience.

Previous research on the object

The papyrus sheath [Fig. 1] entered the Náprstek Museum's collection in 1969 as part of a large-scale transfer of antiquities from the Prehistory Department of the Museum of History to the newly established Ancient Near East and Africa Department at the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Culture.⁴ Both the Museum of History and the Náprstek Museum are divisions of the National Museum of the Czech Republic.

In its new departmental context, the object was registered under Inv. No. P 1691, while its earlier number – 397 – assigned to it during its time in the Prehistory Department, has been preserved in three places on the object itself.

The piece was first thoroughly documented in the Classical Archaeology Inventory of the Prehistory Department in 1924. The entry in the registry included besides a textual description a drawing [Fig. 2]. The original entry, written in ink by a museum employee untrained in Egyptology, described the item as:

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² Vachala 1981.

³ The Náprstek Museum is the only institution in the Czech Republic in possession of this type of Egyptian statues.

⁴ Náprstek Museum, Accession No. 30/1969.

Two-part hollow wooden statuette, coloured red and white, with a protrusion for insertion into the base. Height = 59 cm. Traces of bright green colour on the face and ears. It includes a wooden stand. Dimensions 34 × 14 × 8.5 cm.⁵

The entry was later revised by Jaroslav Černý (1898–1970) during his research on Egyptian objects in the Classical Archaeology Collection in the mid-1920s. He added some notes written in pencil: He identified the wooden statue as representing the god ‘Osiris’⁶ and dated it to the ‘Twenty-first to Twenty-second Dynasty’.⁷ Černý’s signature also appears in the second column on the left-hand page of the inventory register.

At some point, an unidentified person also added a short note to the entry on the edge of the left page of the inventory making an incorrect statement that ‘[Cat. No.] 397 [was] a part of a wooden door 31’.⁸ The person likely interpreted the statue base as a piece of a door frame with a pivot hole. What the number ‘31’ at the end of the note means remains unknown.

In 1965, the object was included in Miroslav Verner’s unpublished dissertation titled *Veřejné sbírky staroegyptských památek v ČSSR (Public Collections of Ancient Egyptian Antiquities in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic)*.⁹

Sometime after 1969, Eugen Strouhal (1931–2016), the first curator of Egyptian and Nubian antiquities at the Náprstek Museum, incorrectly revised Černý’s identification, replacing Černý’s ‘Osiris’ with the syncretic deity Ptah-Sokar-Osiris. Strouhal’s note was written with a pencil as well. However, Strouhal dropped his wrong identification of the statue when preparing the object’s inventory card in the Náprstek Museum, ultimately identifying the deity again as Osiris.

The object was described in detail for the first time in 1981 by Vachala,¹⁰ who classified the piece using the typology set by Maarten J. Raven.¹¹ He assigned the Prague specimen to Raven’s Type II, more specifically Subtype II-D.¹² According to Raven, Type II statues span chronologically from the beginning of the Nineteenth Dynasty (possibly even the late Eighteenth Dynasty) through the Twenty-first or Twenty-second Dynasties (circa 13th to the 9th century BCE), which was the dating that was adopted by Vachala for the Prague specimen.¹³

Černý dated the piece more precisely to the second half of the type’s chronological span, namely the Twenty-first to Twenty-second Dynasties, undoubtedly based on his expansive knowledge of Egyptian material culture in general, and the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period antiquities in particular. A fair number of comparanda were available in Egyptian collections in both Egypt and the West, although their publications appeared only later.¹⁴ The statue has a slightly corpulent appearance, which was likely caused by the presence of the cavity inside the statue. In terms of shape, the statue from the funerary equipment of Djedmutiusankh (Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Inv. No. JE 29316)¹⁵ is a close parallel.

⁵ The Czech original reads: ‘Dřevěná soška dvojdičná dutá, červeně a bíle kolorovaná, s výstupkem pro zasazení do podstavce. V = 59 cm. K tomu patří podstavec dřevěný. Rozměry 34 × 14 × 8.5 cm.’

⁶ ‘Osirida’ (genitiv).

⁷ ‘XXI.–XXII. dyn.’

⁸ ‘397 část dřevěných dveří 31’.

⁹ Verner 1965, p. 276.

¹⁰ Vachala 1981.

¹¹ Raven 1979.

¹² Vachala 1981, p. 215.

¹³ Vachala 1988, p. 215. Dating according to Aston (1991, p. 107): 1300–1000 BCE.

¹⁴ See Raven 1979, p. 262 with further references; also Aston 1991; Enany 2021.

¹⁵ Enany 2021, pp. 166–173.



Fig. 1. Osiris-shaped papyrus sheath; NpM, Inv. No. P 1691. (Photo: Jiří Vaněk).



Description of the statue

The Osiris-shaped papyrus sheath from the collections of the Náprstek Museum [Pls. 1–3] was made of (local Sycamore) wood. Its surface is covered with a layer of polychrome decoration, applied over a thin layer of stucco. This decoration is now largely abraded and obscured by a layer of patina. Several wooden pieces of the figure and its base are missing, and some of the surface sealant elements appear to have fallen out.

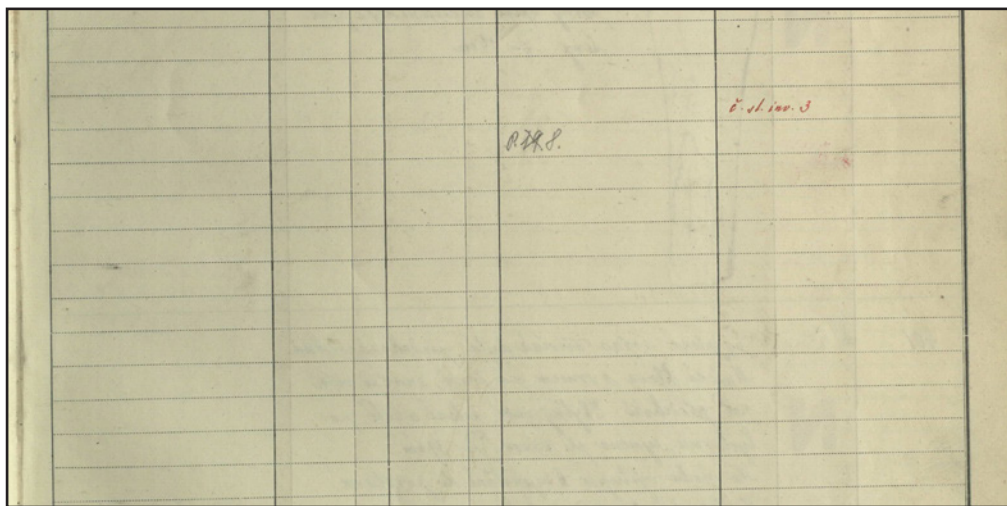
Today, the object consists of two main components: a stand (w. 147 mm, d. 339 mm, h. 83 mm; [Pls. 4–5] and two halves [Pls. 6–7] – right and left – of the Osiris figure (h. 615 mm). A protruding tenon beneath the figure's feet fits loosely into a perforated opening in the base (75 × 95 mm). The sagittal cut of the statue is unusual, as statues were typically sawn transversely to separate them into front and back halves

The size of the tenon is smaller than the size of the opening in the base. This is likely due to secondary changes done on the object in connection with its examination, or possibly with the attempt to extract the papyrus scroll from its inside without splitting the statue in half. The latter suggestion may also explain the opening [Pl. 8c] on the rear side of the tenon.

Inside the statue is a cavity that runs from the neck down to the tenon [Pl. 7]. Its purpose was to house a papyrus scroll (with spells of the *Book of the Dead* or the *Book of Amduat*),¹⁶ which is now missing. Once the papyrus scroll was placed inside, the two halves of the figure were joined together by means of a small wooden block at the top of the inner cavity and two wooden pegs. One peg was hammered in at the head end and the other at the foot end of the statue's halves. The location of pegs may be identified as darker colour spots on both sides of the statue. The joint between the two halves of the statue was likely sealed by the stucco which covered the rest of the statue, making the joints virtually invisible.

The statue's head was adorned with the *atef*-crown (*ꜥtꜥ*), composed of the White Crown of Upper Egypt flanked by ostrich feathers. Although the feathers are now missing, vertical depressions approximately 60 mm in length remain on each side of the crown, indicating where the feathers were once attached [Pl. 2–3].

¹⁶ Raven 1979, p. 260, no. 82, p. 286, no. 249.



↖↑ **Fig. 2.** The entry in the Classical Archaeology Inventory of the Prehistory Department describing the Osiris-shaped papyrus sheath Inv. No. P 1691 (originally Inv. No. 397; *above and left*).

The exposed parts of the face, including the ears and neck, were painted green – though the pigment now appears bluish due to ageing. Facial details may have been outlined in black, and the sclerae likely painted white. Around the neck and extending over the shoulders is a wide collar (*wsh*), with traces of painted beads visible. A painted tassel (*m'nh*) [Pl. 8d] of the collar is also depicted on the back of the figure.

The upper part of the body is painted red, which may indicate that it was nude, as suggested by Raven,¹⁷ or covered in a reddish shroud. The lower part is painted white; the colour likely represents the mummy wrappings. A strip of red cloth is tied over the statue's belly; the long ends of the strip hang from a knot on the belly down to the shins.

The plastically rendered hands are crossed over the chest. The right hand holds a flail (*nhz*) [Pl. 8b], while the left originally held a crook (*hkr*) [Pl. 8a]. The sceptres are painted only. The crook is very faded; its best-preserved part is the curved top resting on the right shoulder.

The top of the base was originally inscribed with four lines of hieroglyphics. The writing, which is unfortunately completely illegible today, ran from right to left. The individual lines are separated from each other by red dividers. The background of the lines of text were painted yellow [Pl. 4].

Attempts to identify at least some of the hieroglyphic signs remain highly speculative. The text must have been in this bad condition already by the time Černý studied it some 100 years ago, as he added no additional information about it to the entry in the inventory.

Raven maintains that this kind of statue usually 'have a vertical column of inscriptions on the front of the body and on top of the base'.¹⁸ Vachala provided an explanation for the absence of the frontal inscription on the Prague statue in view of the sagittal cut, dividing the statue into two halves, through the centre of the sculpture.¹⁹

¹⁷ Raven 1979, p. 261.

¹⁸ Raven 1979, p. 262.

¹⁹ Vachala 1981, p. 214.

Provenance

In the second paragraph of his article, Vachala stated that the ‘origins [of the objects] are unfortunately unknown, and there are also no further details regarding the nature of the acquisition of this piece.’ Indeed, the Náprstek Museum possessed no records concerning the history of the piece before 1969, which would be copied on the object’s inventory card. However, the inventory of the Classical Archaeology Collection still contains a highly valuable piece of information. The last column of the right page of the inventory contains a reference to some ‘old inventory number 3’ [Fig. 2].²⁰

As it turned out, the old inventory number occurs on the list of Egyptian antiquities in the catalogue *Archeologické sbírky v muuseum království Českého v Praze* (Archaeological Collections in the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague), which was published in 1863.²¹

According to the catalogue, in 1863 the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia, later the National Museum, kept 113 Egyptian antiquities, which were displayed in two different showcases. The beginning of the list of objects in the first showcase, which was in the grand hall of the museum, reads as follows:

1) Female mummy in two well-preserved coffins. 2) Sarcophagus [...]. 3) Wooden statuette with an enclosed papyrus stub. 4) Wooden board with depictions and hieroglyphs. These three precious things were donated by His Serene Highness Prince Francis Colloredo-Mansfeld, who brought them with him from Egypt.

Prince Colloredo Mansfeld did not donate all the antiquities he brought from Egypt to the Museum of the Bohemian Kingdom but kept a set of four canopic jars (currently with two lids missing) inscribed for Herudja in his private collection.²²

It is without a doubt that the papyrus sheath in question is identical to Cat. No. 3 of the 1863 catalogue, as no other object registered in the Classical Archaeology Inventory corresponds to the quite accurate description the 1863 catalogue provided.

On the other hand, it is not exactly clear how to interpret the information that ‘[t]hese three precious things were donated by [...] Colloredo-Mansfeld’. Is the mummy and the coffin counted as one, despite being numbered separately, or did the mummy form no part of the prince’s donation? The author considers the former possibility more likely with respect to the way the 1863 catalogue was structured and composed. In most cases, at first, objects forming a single donation were enumerated, followed by the names of their donors.

²⁰ ‘st[aré] inv[entární] č[íslo] 3’ (Old inventory number 3).

²¹ *Archeologické sbírky v muuseum království Českého v Praze*, 1863, pp. 80–81.

²² Onderka 2022, pp. 166–170.

Provenience

As with the papyrus sheath, the other items from amongst the four pieces have been identified in the present-day Ancient Near East and Africa Collection. The mummy (Cat. No. 1) is that of an adult woman (Inv. No. P 634);²³ the 'sarcophagus' (Cat. No. 2) is currently known as the so-called Prague coffin (Inv. No. P 621),²⁴ while the 'wooden board' is a stela with the Decree of Osiris for Asetemakhbity (Inv. No. P 1636).²⁵ Both the coffin and the stela have a well-established Western Theban provenience.²⁶ The same provenience is also likely in the case of the Osiris sheath under discussion, as suggested by similar pieces discovered in Western Thebes.

Conclusion

The wooden Osiris-shaped papyrus sheath housed in the Náprstek Museum, which was first published by Břetislav Vachala in 1988, belongs to Raven's Subtype II-D of Osiris-shaped papyrus sheaths and Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statues. It dates to the Twenty-first to Twenty-second Dynasties (11th–10th century BCE). The present examination has clarified the object's provenance and provenience. It formed part of a donation by Prince Francis Colloredo-Mansfeld, who acquired it during his visit to Egypt in 1845–1846 and donated it to the museum in 1847. The piece likely originates from Western Thebes, as do other objects from the same acquisition.

²³ Onderka, Jungová et al. 2016, pp. 48–53 with further references.

²⁴ Onderka, Jungová et al. 2016, pp. 146–149 with further references.

²⁵ e.g. Onderka 2007.

²⁶ See footnotes nos. 22–24 above.

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Acknowledgements

Photographs by Jiří Vaněk.



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