



ANCIENT EGYPT IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM  
COLLECTION

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*The Department of Prehistorical and Ancient Near East and Egypt was formed in the Náprstek Museum in 1969, as the sole body of its kind in the Czech Republic specializing in systematic collecting, preserving and public presentation of prehistorical and ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern objects.*

First documents of journeys made by Czechs to Egypt date from the 16th and 17th centuries. The travels of Martin Kabátník, member of the Czech Brethren congregation in the town of Litomyšl, were described in his book, *Cesta z Čech do Jeruzaléma a Egypta* (The Voyage from Bohemia to Jerusalem and Egypt), which was published in Litomyšl in 1539. In 1608 Prague saw the publication of a work by another nobleman and traveller, Kryštof Harant from Polžice and Bezdrůžice, entitled *Cesta Kryštofa Haranta z Polžic a Bezdrůžic a na Pecce z království Českého do Benátek, odtud do země Svaté, země Judské a dále do Egypta, a potom na horu Oreb, Sinai a svaté Kateřiny v pusté Arábii* (The Voyage of Kryštof Harant from Polžice and Bezdrůžice from the Kingdom of Bohemia to Venice, thence to the Holy Land, Judea, and farther on, to Egypt, and then to Mount Oreb, Mount Sinai and Mount of Saint Catherine in the barren land of Arabia). The book was illustrated by woodcuts made after Harant's own drawings.

Very busy missionary activities were carried out in Egypt from the 17th century by the Bohemian chapter of the Franciscan order. In the 18th century two of its members, Josef Jakub Římař and Václav Remedius Prutký, saw to the drawing up of itineraries containing, among other things, commentaries on and descriptions of ancient Egyptian monuments in Giza, Saqqara and Thebes.



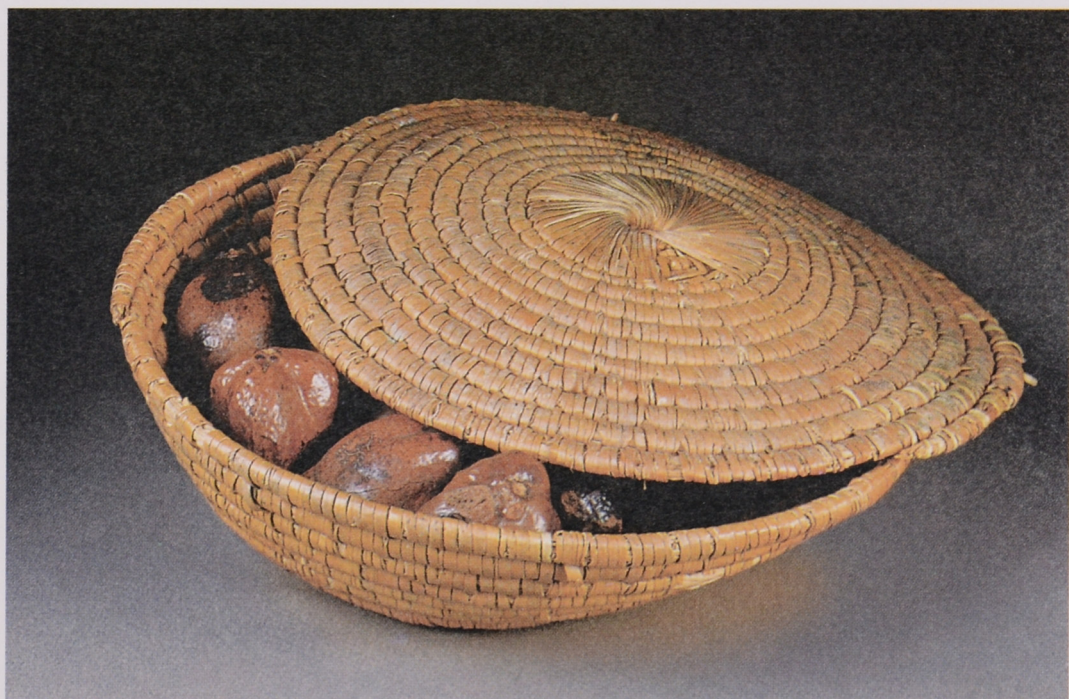


Ptah-Sokar-Usir. Wood, Late Period.

Objects coming from ancient Egypt began to reach private collections on the territory of today's Czech Republic in the 18th century, when they were brought in chiefly by members of the aristocracy. Some items were brought from Egypt by 19th-century explorers, including **O. Palmeh**, **J. Zounek** and **A. Hrdlička**.

In the 20th century the Náprstek Museum's ancient Egyptian collection was enriched by gifts from the French Oriental Institute in Cairo (IFAO). Working with the French institution was **Jaroslav Černý (1898 - 1970)**, who was the first Czech Egyptologist to take part in archaeological excavations in Egypt. In 1937 the French institute, in appreciation of its good collaboration with Černý, presented to the Museum objects unearthed in the west-bank side of Thebes, at Deir el-Medina, a village inhabited in antiquity by labourers and artists working on the pharaohs' rock tombs in the Valley of Kings. Thanks to that gift the Náprstek Museum now owns comprehensive bodies of items, including notably objects of everyday use: ceramic and limestone ostracas with figure motives and/or text, vessels, papyri, foodstuffs, parts of furniture, and statues of Egyptian deities. The underworld is represented by objects deposited in the grave alongside the dead at the time of burial: coffins, cloths, jewels, sandals, amulets, and burial statuettes.





Basket with fruit of the palm dum. Papyrus fibre, New Kingdom, Deir el-Medina.



Jackal. Wood, New Kingdom – Late period.



Since then, further ancient Egyptian items have been acquired by the Náprstek Museum in the form of gifts. Among major donators have been this country's leading Egyptologists: directors of the former Czechoslovak Egyptological Institute of the Charles University **František Lexa (1876 - 1960)** and **Zbyněk Žába (1917 - 1971)**, as well as the previously mentioned Jaroslav Černý. Meanwhile the museum's collection was supplemented by further objects coming from Deir el-Medina; a fine assortment of stone tools from prehistorical and early historical periods of the Egyptian empire; and ostraca and other objects of daily and posthumous use. A significant collection of stone industries was donated to the museum by **Evžen Strouhal (b. 1931)**, long-time curator of its Department of Prehistorical and Ancient Near East and Egypt.

Due credit for its share in the building of the Museum's ancient Egyptian collection ought to be given to the Czechoslovak (currently Czech) Egyptological Institute of the Charles University, which was founded in 1958. In the 1960s it was involved alongside other specialized bodies and individuals in a project conducted by UNESCO in Nubia, with a view to salvaging local ancient monuments from destruction by the floodwaters generated by the newly constructed Aswan High Dam. The waters of its retention lake were then supposed to flood a vast territory south of the Nile's first cataract, reaching deep into today's northern Sudan. The area concerned, i.e., land along the banks of the river Nile, had been central to life ever since the ancient times. However, scholarly research was not as busy there at that time as it was in Egypt, the region's various localities remaining on the fringes of interest of explorers and scholars alike. The awareness of the fact that the flooding of that enormous area would cause the irretrievable loss of all traces of its ancient history, activated scholars from all over the world, who set out to study, document and even relocate ancient temples and burial sites, chart settlements, and copy inscriptions on rocks. A team of specialists commissioned by the then Czechoslovak Republic documented and researched a stretch of land more than 100 kilometres long along the Nile. In the process, experts led by Professor Žába worked at Wadi Kitna and Kalabsha, and localized a „lost“ temple at Tafa. Upon the completion of the salvage project, the Egyptian government presented this country with part of the archaeological material excavated by the Czechoslovak expedition (ceramic and glass vessels, fabrics, foodstuffs, working tools, burial items, reliefs, and miscellaneous anthropological material).



Approximately one-third of the Náprstek Museum's anthropological collection is formed by objects found during archaeological excavations at the pyramid field in Abusir, a locality situated 35 kilometres to the south-west of central Cairo, between the more famous localities of Giza and Saqqara. Since the late 1960s the Czech (formerly Czechoslovak) Egyptological Institute has been active at Abusir, where it moved after the completion of the Nubian salvage project. From the very beginning, its workers had a good deal of luck. To this day they have managed to find and study several private tombs of royal family members and top state officials, as well as pyramid complexes erected for kings and queens, with preserved funeral outfits and articles used by temple priests in the discharge of their everyday duties in obsequial temples.

Under a previously negotiated distribution scheme, the Egyptian government apportioned to the Czechoslovak Republic, represented by the latter's Egyptological Institute, the tenth part of all objects unearthed during each of the excavation seasons. Thus obtained compound collections are currently in the care of the Náprstek Museum. The various objects come from the archaeological excavations car-



Anthropomorphic coffin with mummy. Late Period – Ptolemaic Dynasty, Akhmim.





Cat. Bronze, Late Period.

ried out on the sites of the funerary tomb (*mastaba*) of the Vizir Ptahshepses (25th c. B.C.); the pyramid complex of the Queen Khentkaus (26th c. B.C.); the pyramid complex of the Pharaoh Raneferef (24th c. B.C.); the *mastaba* of the Princess Khekeretnebtj; and the *mastaba* of the Prince Neskauhor (25th - 24th c. B.C.); as well as other private tombs dating from the Old Kingdom (28th - 22nd c. B.C.) and from the Late Period (8th - 4th c. B.C.). The corpus consists mainly of objects deposited in the tomb alongside the deceased person (sacrificial vessels, coffins and their components, wooden statues of the prince and princess, textiles, miniature stone and metal tools, playing pieces, faience tablets, seals and sealing sticks, ceramic utility vessels and papyri).

The Náprstek Museum has no permanent exhibition gallery devoted to its ancient Egyptian collection. That notwithstanding, it has kept it accessible to the general public through various short-term exhibitions. One of the most recent displays, staged in 1997, was entitled „The Land of Pyramids and Pharaohs.“ Other shows organized by the Museum in the preceding period have included „Nubia“ (1967); „Mummies of Ancient Egypt“ (1971); „Enigmatic Nubia“ (1975); „In the Tomb of an Egyptian Princess“ (1980); „The Art of Ancient Egypt“ (1982); and „Builders of Tombs for the Kings of Egypt“ (1992).