



THREE COFFINS WITH MUMMIES FROM THE GRAECO-ROMAN CEMETERY AT GAMHUD IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM – PRELIMINARY REPORT¹

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ABSTRACT: The National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American cultures holds in its collections three coffins with mummies from the earliest Austro-Hungarian excavations at Gamhud. Recently, both coffins and mummies have been the subject of multi-disciplinary scientific research. The present paper represents a preliminary report on the outcomes of the project.

KEY WORDS: Gamhud – mummies – coffins – Graeco-Roman Egypt

The collections of the Ancient Near East and Africa Department of the National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures include three coffins [with mummies] (inv. nos. P 622³, P 623 and P 624) from the excavation of the first Austro-Hungarian mission in Egypt at the Middle Egyptian site of Gamhud (Fig. 1) carried out in 1907. The coffins and mummies have recently been surveyed as part of a scientific project of the National Museum funded by means of an internal grant. The project represents an attempt to update our information concerning the coffins and mummies in question, assembled during the processing for publication in the 1970s of all mummies and complete coffins in Czechoslovak public collections, now using the best available methods and approaches, such as computed tomography and stable isotope analyses.⁴

¹ The article was written as part of the project „Coffins with Mummies from the Graeco-Roman Cemetery at Gamhud in the Collections of the Náprstek Museum“ (Internal Grant of the National Museum, 2009–2010).

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³ Only the skeletal remains have been preserved from the mummy (cf. below).

⁴ On 31 May 2009, a computed tomography investigation was performed on the mummies in the Mediscan Diagnostic Center, Šustova 2, Prague 4 – Chodov by Jiří Bučil, Lubica Oktábcová, William Pestle and Eugen Strouhal. Stable isotope analyses has recently been carried out on tissue samples from the mummies in the laboratories of the Field Museum of Natural History by William J. Pestle. The outcomes of both researches are to be made available in the course of 2010. Simultaneously, multidisciplinary research is being carried out on the coffins as well.



Figure 1 Surroundings of Fashn

Introduction

The excavations at Gamhud were headed by Tadeusz Smoleński (1884–1909)⁵, a talented young Polish Egyptologist from the University of Krakow (then in Austria-Hungary) and student under Gaston Maspero, and sponsored by Philip Back (1862–1958), a rich Hungarian merchant with extensive business enterprises in Egypt, who wanted Hungary to be enriched with Egyptian antiquities.⁶ In 1906 the two men initiated excavations at the site of Sharuna on the eastern bank of the Nile near Fashn in Middle Egypt, where they

⁵ Maspero 1909; Szymańska 2001.

⁶ Györy 2007: 906.

discovered the late Old Kingdom tomb of Pepiankh Khua and his wife Merut⁷ and a small temple built by Ptolemy I Soter I (305–285 BCE) and Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BCE).⁸ In the course of their works, a local man from the village of Gamhud, on the opposite bank of the river, discovered a hitherto unknown cemetery. He allied himself with an antiquarian from Bibeh and together employed several Bedouins to illegally excavate the cemetery. Two of the workmen reported the excavations to the antiquities office at Miniya. Before local authorities could stop the illegal activities, the looters had plundered two or even three tombs. Gaston Maspero, then the head of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, sent a telegram permitting Smoleński to excavate the cemetery immediately.⁹ Smoleński began archaeological work on 5 March 1907. However due to his health problems he was forced to terminate his participation on the dig on 26 March. The direction was then given over to Ahmed Bey Kamal of the Egyptian Antiquities Service. Kamal finished the excavations within seven days (on 2 April 1907) and prepared the finds for shipment to the Cairo Museum. However, when Smoleński returned to Gamhud between 15 November 1907 and 5 February 1908, he came across many antiquities left by Kamal on the site.

Once the coffins arrived in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, they were divided into two parts. One remained in Egypt, while the other was handed over to Philip Back. Back donated five coffins with mummies to the Court Museum (now Kunsthistorisches Museum) in Vienna, three were given to the Academy Collection (now Archaeological Museum) in Krakow and the rest was supposedly sent to the National Museum in Budapest.¹⁰ After 1934, the coffins and mummies sent to Budapest were separated from each other. While the mummies stayed in the collections of the National Museum, the coffins were moved to the Museum of Fine Arts.

History of the Prague Collection

As no coffin from the Naprstek Museum's collection¹¹ matches Kamal's description, we can be positive that they originate from the part of the excavations directed by Smoleński. The coffins in the Naprstek Museum collection are among the "bulk coffins", even though they display great variety in their shape, construction and, last but not least, in their decoration.

Only in the case of one coffin with a mummy (P 622)¹² is the provenance known. The coffin with a mummy was bought by Prince Johann Coudenhove-Kalergi in an antiquarian shop in Berlin to be placed among in his collections at the chateau of Poběžovice. On 12

⁷ Smoleński 1907.

⁸ Smoleński 1908.

⁹ Kamal 1908: 1–2.

¹⁰ Győry 2007: 908–909.

¹¹ Cf. Onderka – Maříková Vlčková – Mynářová 2008; Verner 1982.

¹² Cf. below.

¹³ Strouhal – Vyhnánek 1979: 57.

¹⁴ Cf. Strouhal – Vyhnánek 1979: 45, 53; Verner 1982: 288, 293.

¹⁵ Kamal 1908: 1.

¹⁶ Győry 2007: 908.

August 1948, the coffin was confiscated under the Constitutional Decrees of the President of the Republic (the so-called “Beneš Decrees”) and transferred to the Náprstek Museum. On 29 December 1970, in the course of reconstruction works in the chateau chapel, the mummy, jammed into a wooden coffin, was discovered in a cache, where it was likely placed shortly before the end of World War II. Given the high degree of deterioration, an autopsy was performed on the damaged mummy on 16 March 1971. The skeletal remains as well as fragments of bandages were later transferred to the Náprstek Museum.¹³ It has not been possible to trace back how the two remaining coffins with mummies (P 623, P 624) came to the collections of the Náprstek Museum.¹⁴ Whether the Prague coffins originally belonged to Back’s share from the discoveries or were initially bought in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo is not known.

Cemetery at Gamhud

The Graeco-Roman cemetery was “half an hour’s” walk to the west from the village of Gamhud (cf. Fig. 1).¹⁵ It formed a semicircular band in the desert covering an area of approximately 480 by 120 metres. Two basic types of tombs were distinguished within the cemetery. The central area was destined for poorer people who were buried directly in the ground, while the margins of the cemetery were reserved for richer burials dug into the flat ground. Despite the fact that the cemetery had been looted already in ancient times, many valuable objects were preserved until Back’s and Smoleński’s excavations.¹⁶ Altogether 70 coffins were discovered on the site, 43 of them by Smoleński, the remaining 27 by Kamal.¹⁷ Kamal’s coffins were described in detail in the final report that he published in the *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte*¹⁸, but Smoleński’s coffins were never published by their excavator, who died suddenly on 29 August 1909.¹⁹

Coffins

Kamal divided the coffins into three groups.²⁰ Niwiński put the classification of the coffins in more precise terms and Győry amended the three types by adding the *qeresu* coffins to the classification (cf. Table 1).²¹

Kamal 1908	Niwiński 1986	Győry 2007
Bulked coffins imitating stone sarcophagi	Bauchsäрге	Bulked coffins
Coffins imitating New Kingdom mummiform coffins	---	Mummiform type
Ordinarily-worked coffins made of narrow panels	Dreiecksäрге	Romboid coffins
---	<i>krsw</i> -Typus	<i>Qeresu</i> coffins

¹⁷ Kamal 1908: 5.

¹⁸ Kamal 1908: 12.

¹⁹ For a more recent publication of a Gamhud coffin from the Krakow collection cf. Szymańska – Babraj 2001.

²⁰ Kamal 1908: 12–13; Győry 2007: 911–915.

²¹ Győry 2007: 914.

The Gamhud coffins from the collection of the Náprstek Museum were first examined by Verner, who published all the complete coffins and a select number of the most interesting fragments of coffins from the Czechoslovak public collection in his monograph *Altägyptische Särge in den Museen und Sammlungen der Tschechoslowakei*.²² However, Verner was unable to identify the site of the coffins' origin, even though he refers to Kamal's final report for the sake of typological comparison.²³ Strouhal had been the first one to recognize the common origin of at least two out of three Gamhud coffins in the collection²⁴ and his correct hypotheses were taken over by Verner.²⁵ The Gamhud origin of the coffins was first established by the present writer in 2008²⁶ thanks to consultations with Hedwig Győry.²⁷

DIMENSIONS	P 622a	P 623a	P 624a
Length	195 cm	192 cm	192 cm
Width	57 cm	57 cm	61 cm
Depth	49 cm	40 cm	37 cm
Pedestal	47 x 49 x 13 cm	44 x 40 x 22 cm	39 x 40 x 16 cm
Thickness of wood	6 – 8 cm	9 – 10 cm	5–10 cm

Coffin P 622a

The bulk coffin made of sycamore wood (*Ficus sycomorus L.*)²⁸ (cf. Pl. 1, 2, 3, 4) consists of a lid and a bottom. It has a robust anthropomorphic form with a dominant head and a rather small square pedestal under the feet. The lid, as well as the bottom, seems to be made of three wooden planks (one in the centre and one on each side) and several additional smaller boards in the feet and pedestal areas. This particular area of the coffin was treated by restorers in the past and it seems likely that some missing pieces were replaced by modern material.²⁹ The coffin has a tripartite wig painted dark blue (or possibly originally black). The rather huge face (in relation to the rest of the coffin), which looks more female than male, distinguishes the coffin from any other known specimen from Gamhud. The face is painted a light colour. The rest of the coffin, except for separated registers with decoration or inscriptions, is covered with old pinkish paint, typical of Gamhud coffins.³⁰

²² Verner 1982.

²³ Verner 1982: 290.

²⁴ Strouhal – Vyhnaněk 1979: 54 (“the surprising similarity”).

²⁵ Verner 1982: 289 (“Seiner Form und Dekoration [P 623] nach ähnelt er dem Sarg Nr. P 624a (Náprstkovo muzeum, Praha).

²⁶ Onderka – Maříková Vlčková – Mynářová 2008: 54.

²⁷ Personal communication with Hedwig Győry, 2007.

²⁸ Březinová – Hurda 1976.

²⁹ In the past, the bottom and the lid were fixed together by means of fixed modern pegs replacing the original ancient ones, which prevented the present writer from surveying the construction techniques in detail. The pegs are to be removed as part of ongoing conservation works.

³⁰ Cf. Küffer – Siegmann 2007: 176–183.



Plate 1



Plate 2

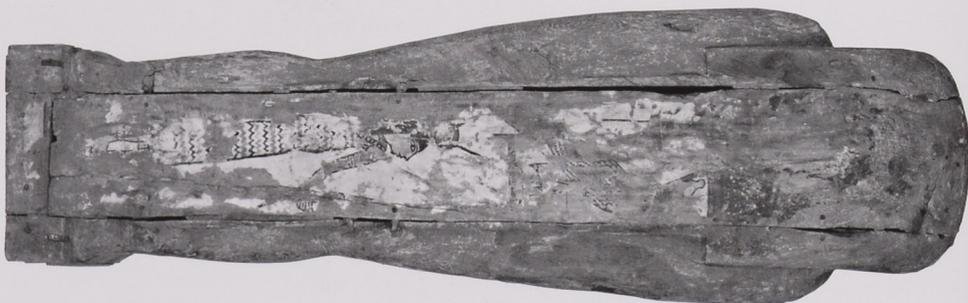


Plate 3

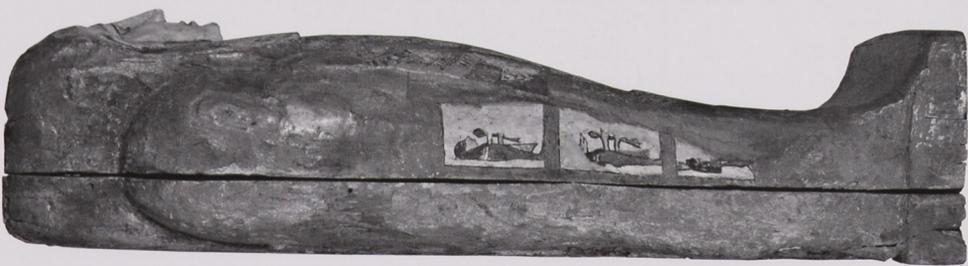


Plate 4

Ears are shown above the wig. Gamhud coffins never possess a beard. The lid of the coffin is decorated with a broad *wesekh*-collar consisting of 16 rows of beads; five of them limit themselves only to the space between the two front parts of the wig. The clasps are made in the shape of a colorful falcon's head decorated with the sun disks. Under the depiction of the collar there is a depiction of a kneeling pterophoric Isis (as the goddess is identified by two inscriptions on both sides of her head; Txs. 1-2) with her wings spread and a solar disc on the top of her head. Under this there follows a scene with a depiction of the mummy of the deceased placed on a lion-shaped embalming table under which there are four canopic jars with lids in the form of the human and animal heads of the sons of Horus (Amset, Hapi, Duamutef and Kebehsenuf). Under the mummification scene is a register with six columns of a badly-preserved text, only parts of which are legible (cf. Pl. 5).³¹ Unfortunately, the name of the coffin's owner is not preserved. The right and left sides of the lid have three almost square registers on each side. The upper two show mummiform sons of Horus and the lower ones kneeling female divinities (right side: Amset, Duamutef and Isis; left side: Hapi, Kebehsenuf and Nephtys). On the back pillar of the coffin's bottom are two uneven registers with decoration. The smaller upper one shows a falcon with the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt on his head. The larger lower register shows a goddess (Isis or Hathor) with the Hathoric crown on her head and a sceptre in her hand. She wears a long dress decorated with a water pattern combining black and red colours.³²



Plate 5

³¹ Cf. Verner 1982: 284.

³² Cf. Verner 1982: 281–282.



Plate 6



Plate 7

Coffin P 623a

This bulk coffin made of sycamore wood (*Ficus sycomorus* L.)³³ (cf. Pl. 6, 7) consists of a lid and a bottom. It has a robust anthropomorphic form with a suitably sized face and a moderate square pedestal under the feet. The lid, as well as the bottom of the coffin, was made of a single piece of solid wood. The coffin has a tripartite wig painted black (or possibly dark blue). The female face is quite carefully painted. Special attention should be paid to the pointy rendering of the eyelashes. The decoration of the lid is limited to the front part, while the sides remain undecorated. The coffin has a broad *wesekh* collar consisting of a minimum of 14 rows (of beads) of fairly varied patterns. Six of them are limited only to the space between the two front parts of the wig. The clasps are made in the shape of colourful falcon heads decorated with sun discs. Under the depiction of the collar there is a depiction of a kneeling pterophoric goddess with a sun disc on her head, accompanied by three columns on each side possibly intended for texts or inspired by them. However, the columns are filled with red water patterns. As there is no text giving the name of the goddess it is hard to say with certainty which goddess this is. Normally, we would identify the deity with Nut, but, as the previous specimen has shown, this is not necessarily the case. The now badly-damaged space beneath the depiction of the goddess was once filled with a mummification scene. Under this scene the decoration continues with the text area. It includes one column of text surrounded by two decorative columns (the inner one filled with rings and the outer one with water patterns) on each side. The totally illegible text likely included an offering formula and the name of the deceased. On the back pillar of the coffin's bottom is a depiction of the goddess Isis, clearly distinguishable by the attribute – the throne sign – placed on her head. She wears a long dress decorated with a water pattern combining black and red colours.³⁴

Coffin P 624c

This bulk coffin made of sycamore wood (*Ficus sycomorus* L.)³⁵ (cf. Pl. 8, 9) consists of a lid and a badly damaged bottom. It has a robust anthropomorphic form and a fairly small square pedestal under the feet (in comparison with previous specimens). The lid is made of a single piece of wood, while the bottom of two flanks. The coffin has a tripartite wig painted black. The face is painted white. The nose, likely made of a separate piece of wood, seems to have been reattached to the face. The remaining surface of the coffin, with the exception of the registers with decoration on both parts of the body, is painted the original dusty pink colour. Due to the bad state of preservation, the number of lines of beads in the broad *wesekh*-collar is hard to ascertain. The clasps of the collar have not been preserved. Under the depiction of the collar there is a depiction of a kneeling pterophoric female goddess (cf. above) with her wings spread and with a sun disc on her head. Under this there follows a scene showing the mummy of the deceased placed on the lion-shaped embalming table under which four canopic jars with lids in the form of the human and animal heads of the sons of Horus (Amset, Hapi, Duamutef and Kebehsenuf)

³³ Březinová – Hurda 1976.

³⁴ Cf. Vermer 1982: 288–289.

³⁵ Březinová – Hurda 1976.

are placed. The register is surrounded by two columns with water patterns. The text register is organized similarly to the one on the previous coffin (P 623a). It includes one column of text surrounded by two decorative columns (the inner one filled with rings and the outer one with water patterns) on each side. The partly preserved text starts with an offering formula (*ḥtp-dj-nsw wsjr ḥnty-jmntjw nb 3bdw ...*)³⁶ and likely contained the name of the coffin's owner. The decoration does not extend on the sides of the lids.



Plate 8



Plate 9

³⁶ Cf. Verner 1982: 296.

Comparison of the coffin's construction and decoration

LID DECORATION	P 622a	P 623a	P 624a
Side decoration	Sons of Horus Isis and Nephtys	Absent	Absent
Outline of mummification scene	Striped edge	Columns with water patterns	Columns with water patterns

BOTTOM DECORATION	P 622a	P 623a	P 624a
Goddess	Hathor / Isis	Isis	Hathor / Isis
Attribute	Hathoric crown	Throne (st-sign)	Hathoric crown with twostrich feathers

CONSTRUCTION	P 622a	P 623a	P 624a
Lid	3 planks	Single piece	Single piece
Bottom	3 planks	Single piece	2 planks

The above comparison of the decoration and measurements of the coffins clearly shows that P 623a and P 624a (both of an unknown provenance) represent closely related specimens of Gamhud coffins in the chronological line.

Mummies

Two mummies (P 623b, P 624b) were examined by means of standard radiology, then the best available technique, by Eugen Strouhal, the former head of the Ancient Near East and Africa Department, and radiologist Luboš Vyhnánek between 1971–1974. The outcomes of their research were published in the monograph *Egyptian Mummies in Czechoslovak Collections*, in 1979, which also included results of an autopsy carried out on the third mummy.³⁷ The research on the mummies was supported by the C₁₄ dating analyses carried out on the samples from the mummy wrappings. In 2009 the two mummies were surveyed by means of computed tomography; however, the results of the research will only become available during 2010. The following paragraphs summarise the outcomes of Strouhal and Vyhnánek's research, representing the starting information of the present research. The results of the earlier research provided some very surprising data and suggest that only one of the mummies would belong to the coffins from Gamhud (cf. Table 2).

³⁷ In connection with the above-mentioned project, the two mummies were surveyed by means of computed tomography in the Mediscan Diagnostic Center, Prague; cf. Bučil – Oktábcová – Onderka 2009.

Inv. No. P 622b (Strouhal – Vyhnánek 1979, cat. no. 18)

”Originally a mummy, now a skeleton of a 20–30 year-old man, almost without pathological findings... The dating of the coffin from the end of the Saitic until the beginning of the Greek period^{SIC} is not at variance with the ascertained mummification techniques.”³⁸

Inv. No. P 623b (Strouhal – Vyhnánek 1979, cat. no. 15)

“This considerably damaged mummy is a 30–40 year-old woman (?) in whom it has not been possible to prove pathological changes. The data on mummification techniques are so fragmentary that they do not allow exact dating... The funeral rite and the high radiocarbon date of the mummy wrapping do not, however, correspond to the dating of the coffin. An alternative scenario – that an older mummy was put into a new coffin - has to be taken into account.”³⁹



Plate 10

³⁸ Strouhal – Vyhnánek 1979: 60.

³⁹ Strouhal – Vyhnánek 1979: 54.

Inv. No. P 624b (Strouhal – Vyhnánek 1979, cat. no. 11)

“The mummy (Pl. 10) of is a 50–70 year-old woman with a number of pathological findings. The dating of the coffin (Greek Period) does not agree with the mummification techniques and funeral rite which are quite typical of the Third Intermediate Period. Radiocarbon dating confirmed the same period, most probably 21st Dynasty. The possibility that an older mummy was put into a newer coffin has therefore to be taken into account.”⁴⁰

Inv. No.	Sex	Age at Death	Dating
P 622b	M	20–30 years	Greek Period
P 623b	F	30–40 years	C ₁₄ dating of the wrappings 1691±163 and 1641±127 BCE Second Intermediate Period to early New Kingdom
P 624b	M	50–70 years	C ₁₄ dating of the wrappings 1028±144 and 978±124 BCE Third Intermediate Period

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⁴⁰ Strouhal – Vyhnánek 1979: 47.

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