

A STORY OF A STORK

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ABSTRACT: The Náprstek Museum, Prague, holds in its collection a mummy of a large bird. The mummy, along with other ancient Egyptian antiquities, was transferred to the National Museum in 1933 from the Esterházy manor in Tomášikovo, Slovakia. Originally, it was believed to be the mummy of a human child; however, examination through initially destructive and later non-destructive methods identified the object as a mummy of a stork, later of a sacred ibis.

KEYWORDS: animal mummies – collections history – museums of Czechoslovakia

Introduction

Amongst the animal mummies kept in the collections of the National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, is the mummy of a large bird, originally identified as a mummy of a stork (Inv. No. P 2501). It was first scientifically examined in the early 1970s by Eugen Strouhal (1931–2016) and Luboš Vyhnánek (1928–1999) in collaboration with the ornithologist Jan Hanzák (1923–1994) during their interdisciplinary research focused on the ancient Egyptian mummified material kept in the collections of former Czechoslovakia.² The mummy has been recently re-examined as a part of the ongoing project of the *Atlas of Egyptian Mummies in the Czech Collections*, and identified as that of an African sacred ibis.³

Provenience

The mummy, which is the subject matter of the present study, was originally kept, along with other Egyptian antiquities and their imitations, at the Esterházy manor in the present-day Tomášikovo (formerly Tálóš/Tállos), Slovakia. The petty collection was likely assembled by Mihály Antal Károly Mária Count Esterházy Baron de Galántha (1863–1906) during his visit to Egypt and Sudan in 1880–1881. It consisted of five objects in total: '[1–2] two casts of vessels (with lids in the shape of a human and an animal head). [3] A fragment of a painted cover of a coffin, [4] a bronze plate, [5] a small mummy.'⁴

On 20 February 1933, the set was transferred from the authority of the National Office for Protection of Monuments in Slovakia (*Státní referát pro ochranu památek na*

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2 Hanzák 1977, pp. 86–88, Pl. IV; Strouhal and Vyhnánek 1979, p. 137, Cat. No. 126.

3 See Onderka et al. 2016, pp. 9–14; Vrtalová and Onderka 2022, pp. 9–10.

4 Transcript from the accession records of the Prehistory Department; '2 odlitky nádob (víka v podobě lidské a zvířecí hlavy). Zlomek malovaného víka dřevěné rakve, bronzová destička, malá mumie.'

Slovensku in Czech), an agency of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment (*Ministerstvo školství a národní osvěty* in Czech), to the Prehistory Department of the National Museum in Prague.⁵ In the history of collecting of Egyptian antiquities in the Czech lands, the transfer of antiquities between the Czech and the Slovak parts of former Czechoslovakia was a rather exceptional occurrence.⁶

The pieces forming the Mihály Esterházy collection, were accessioned into the Classical Antiquity Inventory of the Prehistory Department. In the inventory, the mummy was mistaken for a 'child's mummy in wrappings'.⁷ In the past, mummies of large birds dating to the Late Period (747–332 BCE) were frequently misidentified as mummies of children. Their true determination was only possible if the mummies were unwrapped.⁸ At some point in time, somebody tried to identify the content of the mummy Inv. No. P 2501, too. A right front section of the head end of the mummy to the extent of 6 × 9 cm was cut out, later returned, and eventually fixed to its original location by a metal wire. The cut revealed a bird's beak which helped determine the mummified species.⁹

In 1969, the whole set left the Classical Antiquity Collection and was transferred to the collection of the newly established Ancient Near East and Africa Collection in the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures.

Out of the original five objects of the Mihály Esterházy collection, recorded in 1933 in the accession book of the Prehistory Department, four pieces could be identified in the collections of the Náprstek Museum: [1] The copy of a canopic jar with the lid in the form of a human head, modern imitation, Egypt or Europe, Inv. No. P 2055; [2] The copy of a canopic jar with the lid in the form of a baboon head, modern imitation, Egypt or Europe, Inv. No. P 2053; [3] The bird mummy, Greco-Roman Period (332 BCE – 395 CE), Egypt, Inv. No. P 2501; and [4] a facial fragment from a bulk coffin, Late Period (747–332 BCE), Egypt, Inv. No. P 1644.

The mummy Inv. No. P 2501 [Pls. 1–4]

A number of stork species have been attested through archaeological, as well as epigraphic evidence from pharaonic Egypt, namely the saddle-billed stork (*Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*), the black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), Abdim's stork (*Ciconia abdimii*), marabou stork (*Leptoptilos crumeniferus*), the yellow-billed stork (*Mycteria ibis*), and the open-billed stork (*Anastomus lamelligerus*).¹⁰ Most of the mummies were discovered at various sites throughout Egypt usually in association with a cult of either the sacred ibis or raptors.

Stork mummy finds are best documented in the case of the *Ibiotapeion* (i.e. the burial place of sacred ibises) at Tuna el-Gebel, the ancient city of Hermopolis Magna.

5 Accession No. NM 8/[19]33.

6 See Excursus below.

7 Inv. No. [NM] 703; '*Dětská mumie v obalu*'.

8 Ikram 2003, pp. 92–93; see also Ejsmond and Przewłocki 2014, p. 242.

9 Strouhal and Vyhnanek 1979, p. 137.

10 e.g. von der Driesch et al. 2005, p. 231; Wyatt 2012.



Fig. 1. Abdim's stork sitting on a wooden construction, Sudan, 1920s, Náprstek Museum, Af I 2706 (photo: Bedřich Machulka).

A number of stork mummies were discovered there, including those of white storks, black storks, Abdim's storks, and open-billed storks.¹¹

The mummy, which is subject to the present study, had been determined as that of an Abdim's stork [Fig. 1].¹² However, Jan Hušek¹³ has recently suggested that the mummy could be that of an adult African sacred ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*). Ibis mummies are known from multiple sites, the most notorious of them being Tuna el-Gebel with more than a million embalmed animals. Although raptors and monkeys are also present, ibises form by far the largest portion of these mummies.

The bundle (l. 52 cm) is wrapped in linen bandages that were arranged in a manner that resemble that of a mummified human child. In fact, the mummy can be described as an Osirian animal mummy with the tips of the feet, i.e. the distal end of the mummy, projecting forward. The projection consists of wads of cloth, wrapped around by bandages. The superficial layer of the wrapping was covered with one large piece of

11 von der Driesch et al. 2005.

12 Hanzák 1977, pp. 86–88, Pl. IV; Strouhal and Vyhnánek 1979, p. 137, Cat. No. 126.

13 Personal communication, 2023.

ochre-coloured textile that was tied with circularly wound strips in the leg area, and possibly originally also in other places. Impressions in the shroud suggest that originally, the entire mummy was wound in these strips, perhaps in a decorative manner. A coating of a dark brown substance, maybe oil or resin, was applied, but is now present only in remnants. The mummy bundle is distinctively damaged in two places; in the abdominal area, where fragments of feathers are visible through the abraded bandages and in the cranial area, where the wrappings were cut off for examination, and later reattached with pieces of wire.

CT-scanning¹⁴ revealed that there are up to 20 layers of the textile wrappings. The tip of the beak is broken off and inserted into the wrappings. The thoracic and abdominal cavities contain desiccated viscera and deposits of semi-opaque material. The wings and legs are flexed tightly towards the body. Details of the plumage are apparent. Dorsally (behind the head and the neck), a bone is encased within the surface layers of wrappings. This bone was probably inserted secondarily, as it does not seem to belong to the mummified individual.

Conclusion

The mummy Inv. No. P 2501 was originally identified to be that of a child. The true nature of the mummy was ascertained through invasive means some time before 1969, when a section of the mummy's cranial end was cut out and the head of the mummified bird was exposed. Investigation by means of the conventional radiography in the early 1970s identified the mummified species as an Abdim's stork. The recent revision investigations using computed tomography suggested that the mummy in all probability contains remains of an adult African sacred ibis. As we are absolutely ignorant of the archaeological context in which the mummy was found and the object itself does not provide any clear clue for its dating, the mummy is generally dated to the Late and the Greco-Roman Periods (747 BCE – 395 CE).

Excursus: Transfers of Egyptian antiquities between the Czech and Slovak parts of former Czechoslovakia

The transfer of the Mihály Esterházy collection from Tomášikovo to Prague represents one of few examples of transferring ancient Egyptian collections between the Czech and Slovak parts of former Czechoslovakia. The Mihály Esterházy case is the sole example from the interwar period; three more transfers occurred after World War Two had ended.

[1] In 1948, the palaeoanthropologist Emanuel Vlček (1925–2006) examined a child mummy,¹⁵ which was then kept in the attic of the High Tatra Museum in Poprad, Slovakia. Due to the policy of collection appropriation in former Czechoslovakia in the post-war period, the mummy was removed from the Poprad museum's collection and transferred first to the Archaeological Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Nitra, Slovakia, and later in 1958 to the Chair of Anthropology of the Comenius

14 For the methodology see Onderka et al. 2016, pp. 120–122.

15 Vrtalová and Onderka 2022, pp. 32–43, no. M 17.

University in Bratislava, Slovakia. In 1968, the mummy was eventually transported to Prague and accessioned by the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum – Museum of Natural History in Prague, Czechia.¹⁶

[2] In 1955, the High Tatra Museum in Poprad, based on initiative of the archaeologist Jaroslav Petrbock (1881–1960), handed a set of antiquities over to the Prehistory Department of the National Museum, totalling over one hundred items and including Egyptian pieces.¹⁷ The Egyptian antiquities are currently kept in the collections of the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures. Their provenience is unknown, but likely formed part of the same collection as the above-mentioned mummy.

[3] The third transfer went in the reverse direction, i.e. from Czechia to Slovakia. In 1955, the anthropologist Vojtěch Fetter (1905–1971) from the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the Charles University, Prague, arranged the donation of an adult mummy from the Faculty's Hrdlička Museum of Man to the Central Nitra Museum ('*Stredonitrianské múzeum*' in Slovak), later known as the Regional Museum of Natural History in Topolčany, Slovakia.¹⁸

The mummy originated from the excavation at Deir el-Medina carried by the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology in Cairo. The Institute donated to the Hrdlička Museum of Man altogether four adult human mummies,¹⁹ along with isolated parts of mummified human bodies and minor antiquities,²⁰ as an acknowledgement of contributions by Jaroslav Černý (1898–1970) and Jindřich Matiegka (1862–1941) to the exploration of the site in 1927.²¹

In 1964, the mummy became a part of the museum's anthropology display. In 1985, the mummy was transferred to the collections of the Museum of the Development of Social Consciousness ('*Múzeum vývoja spoločenského vedomia*' in Slovak), an ideological section of the Slovak National Museum focused on world's religions and atheism, which was closed as a result of the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Since 1990, the mummy has formed a part of the collections of the Slovak National Museum – Museum of Natural History (Inv. No. A7441).²²

Following the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia at the end of 1992, no calls for repatriation of the above-listed antiquities were raised. This might have been caused by the fact that the transfers went in both directions, and that transfers involved only a very limited number of objects. Collaborative nature of relations between Slovak and Czech institutions surely played an important role.

16 Vrtalová and Onderka 2022, pp. 24–25.

17 Accession No. NM 26/55.

18 Alena Šeřčáková (Slovak National Museum), *personal communication*, 20 June 2023.

19 Onderka and Jungová et al. 2016, pp. 54–59, no. M.7; 60–65, no. M.8, 66–71, no. M.9.

20 Onderka and Navrátilová 2012; Tomsová 2014; Tomsová and Schierová 2016.

21 Tomsová 2014, p. 60.

22 Alena Šeřčáková (Slovak National Museum), *personal communication*, 20 June 2023.

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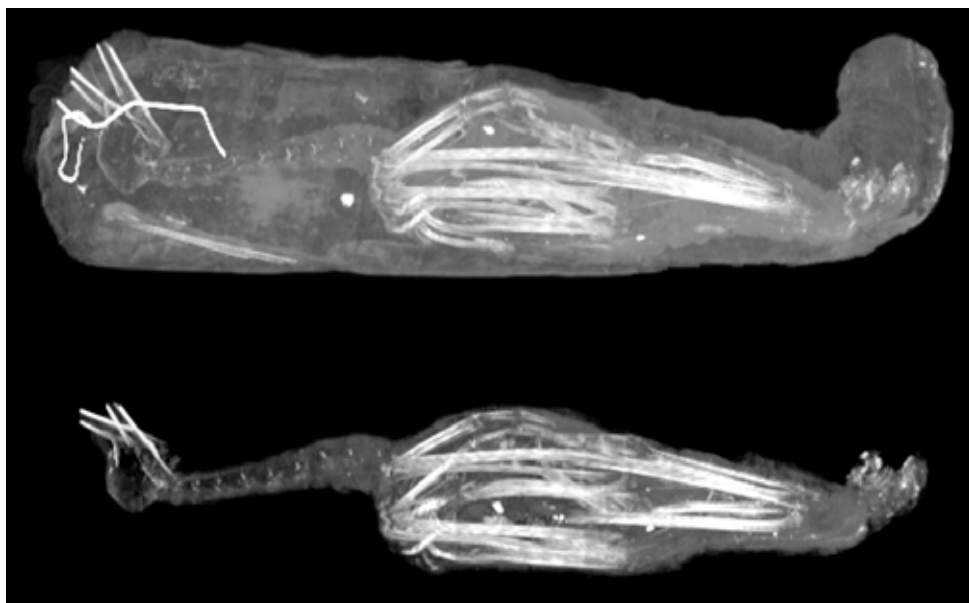
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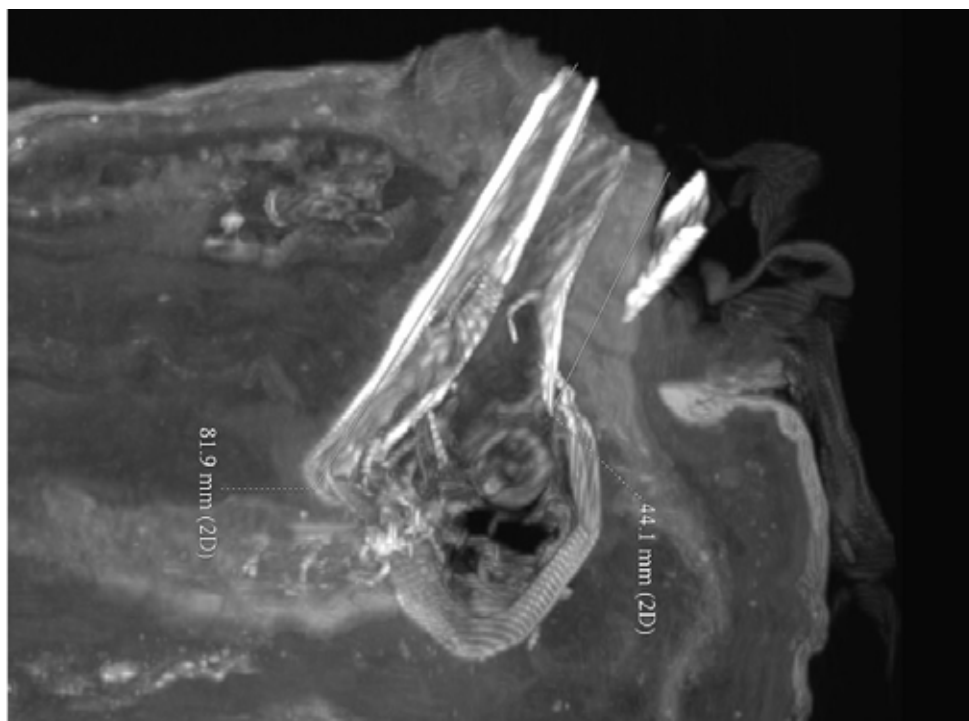
Pl. 1. Bird mummy from the collections of the Náprstek museum, Inv. No. P 2501, side view (photo: Jiří Vaněk).



Pl. 2. Bird mummy from the collections of the Náprstek museum, Inv. No. P 2501, top view (photo: Jiří Vaněk).



Pl. 3. CT scan of the bird mummy from the collections of the Náprstek museum, Inv. No. P 2501 (visualisation: Jakub Nekula).



Pl. 4. CT scan of the bird mummy from the collections of the Náprstek museum, Inv. No. P 2501, detail of the head (visualisation: Jakub Nekula).