

The Heritage of Egypt

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*The history, archaeology,
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in this issue:

Egyptian Discoveries
in Swiss Museums
Alexandra Küffer

3



Pharaoh Faseekh
Dylan Bickerstaffe

12



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The Restoration
Graffiti in the Tomb of
Tuthmosis IV, KV43.
Stephen W. Cross

9



Medicine in Ancient
Egypt
Abdelhalim Nureldin

15



Egyptian Discoveries in Swiss Museums

Alexandra Küffer

In the 19th and early 20th centuries several coffins and mummies were brought from Egypt to Switzerland. For the first time, these specimens have now been the subject of an extensive study by Egyptologists and physicians. The following article gives a summary of the joint project and presents one of the most remarkable burial equipments preserved in Swiss museums.

The wonders of Egypt

By the middle years of the 19th century, Europe had fallen under the spell of Egypt and its wonders. Fascinated by the archaeological remains along the Nile, many countries acquired antiquities that laid the foundations of now world-famous museum collections. In Switzerland too, Egypt became increasingly popular. But being a small country without any diplomatic mission in Egypt at that time, the acquisition of antiques took place on a more modest scale. Nevertheless between 1820 and 1930 nearly thirty coffins, some with their mummies came to Switzerland. Dispersed all

over the country most of them had never been studied in depth nor fully published (fig. 1). This regrettable situation motivated the two Egyptologists Alexandra Küffer and Renate Siegmann to initiate the “Swiss Coffin Project” in 2004. Its objective was to assemble the most remarkable pieces in a publication in order to make these nearly forgotten treasures accessible to a wider audience. In the following years, twenty-two coffins from sixteen Swiss museums underwent a detailed and careful study (fig. 2); seven mummy masks were also included in the research. As eleven coffins still contain their mummies, the Egyptologists joined forces with the team of the “Swiss Mummy Project” under the direction of Thomas Böni and Frank J. Rühli for the medical examination of the bodies. The results of this interdisciplinary study were published by Küffer and Siegmann 2007 in a volume entitled “Unter dem Schutz der Himmelsgöttin. Ägyptische Särge, Mumien und Masken in der Schweiz” (Under the Protection of the Sky Goddess. Egyptian Coffins, Mummies and Masks in Switzerland) with contributions by Böni and Rühli.

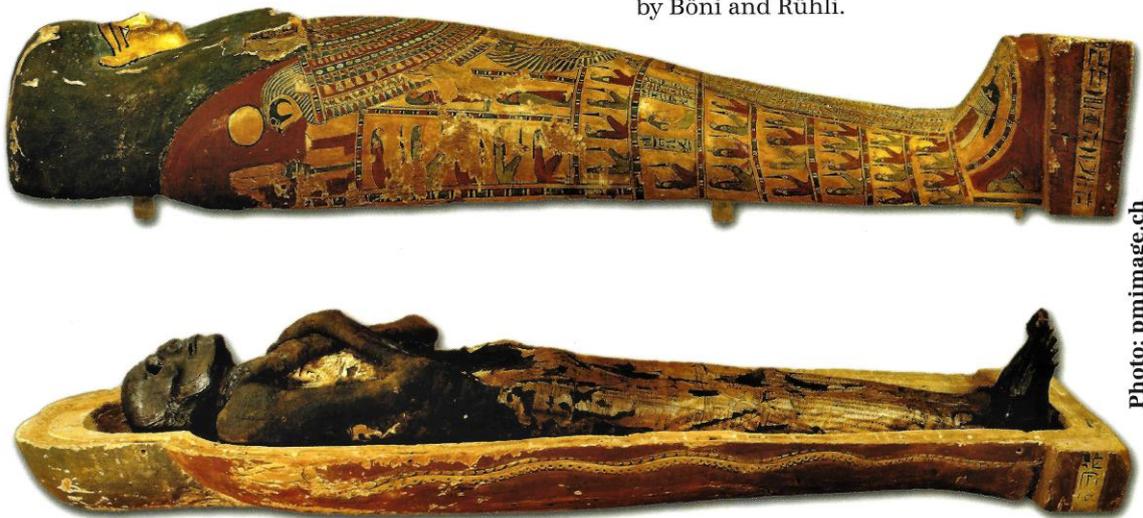
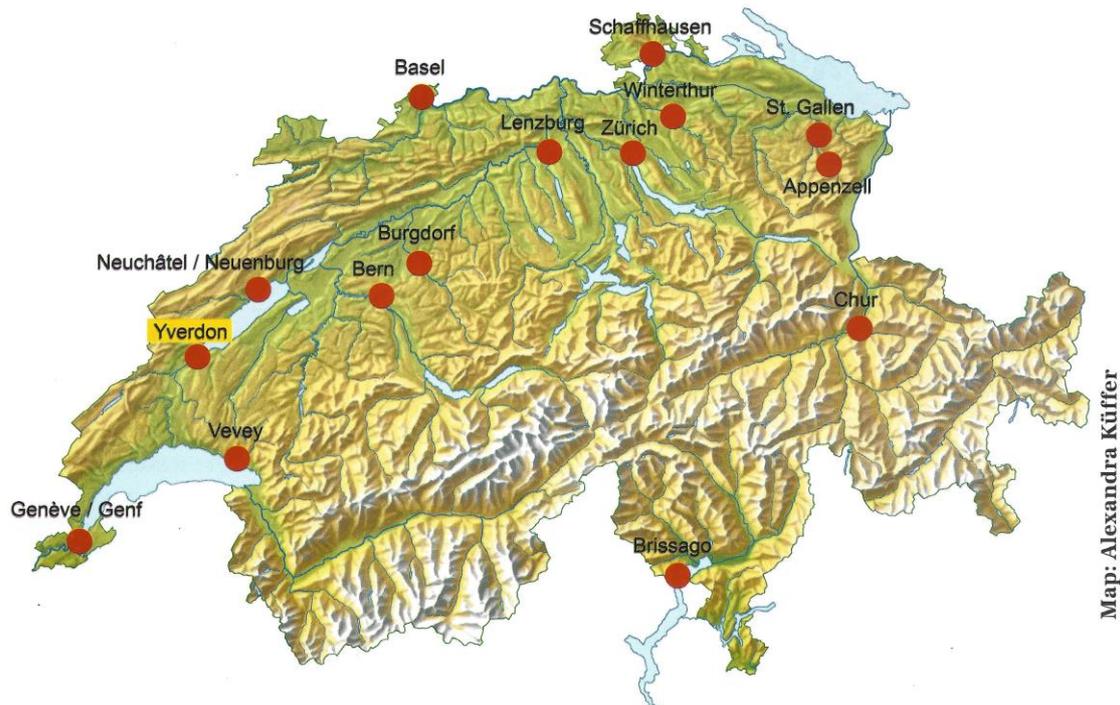


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Fig. 1: The well preserved coffin and mummy of the Egyptian priest Nes-Shu in the museum of Yverdon, Switzerland, dates from the third century BC. and is the most complete burial equipment from ancient Egypt in a Swiss museum.



Map: Alexandra Küffer

Fig. 2: Map of Switzerland with the location of the museums that participated in the “Swiss Coffin Project”. Marked in yellow is Yverdon, a town in the French-speaking part of Switzerland where the coffin and mummy of Nes-Shu have found their final resting place.

Forgotten treasures

All of the coffins described in the book date from the first millennium BC, a period of Egyptian history that is still relatively unknown to the public and therefore represents a particular interest. The studied material offered a good opportunity to outline the development of the coffins and the changes in their decoration during that period. It showed that the coffins of the first millennium BC represent the culmination of centuries of evolution. Their images and inscriptions created a sacred environment protecting the mummy and ensuring the well-being of the deceased in the afterlife. The coffins as one of the most important items of funerary equipment give us precious insights about the mortuary beliefs of the ancient Egyptians.

The detailed analysis of the coffins and their comparisons with similar pieces in foreign museums made it possible to identify their provenances. The majority comes from the large cemeteries of Western Thebes and Akhmim,

where important discoveries were made in the second part of the 19th century. Hundreds of coffins and mummies were taken from their ancient surroundings and the funerary equipments subsequently dispersed among various collections around the globe.

Not only the coffins themselves but also their acquisition stories turned out to be very interesting. Most of them were presents to their home towns given by Swiss citizens living in Egypt. Due to the cotton boom, quite a few Swiss had moved on the Nile by the mid 19th century and settled mainly in Alexandria and Cairo. In 1866, there were for instance at least sixteen Swiss trading companies located in Alexandria. These emigrants always stayed much attached to their home country and, whenever possible, offered generous presents to their home towns or villages. Coffins and mummies represented items very much in demand at that time, so they soon became favourite souvenirs from Egypt.

Fig 3: Edwin Simond Bey (1856 – 1911), whose family originally came from Yverdon, worked in Egypt as an Agronomist and had a passion for archaeology. 1896 he offered the coffin of Nes-Shu with its mummy to the museum of his hometown.



A gift from the Nile

One of the most outstanding pieces that were studied in detail for the first time in the course of the “Swiss Coffin Project” is the coffin of Nes-Shu in the museum of Yverdon, a town located in the French-speaking part of the country (fig. 1). Together with its mummy it came to Yverdon in 1896 as a present to the town museum given by Edwin Simond (fig. 3). Simond was born in Australia in 1856. A few years later his parents moved to Egypt and he grew up in Alexandria. The Simond’s family originally came from Yverdon where Edwin completed his studies. In 1879 he was back on the Nile working for the “Land Mortgage Company of Egypt”. As an Agronomist, he travelled all over Egypt and soon developed a passion for archaeology. He even took part in several excavations and left most of

his finds to the museum of Alexandria. In recognition of his merits the khedive Taufiq awarded Edwin Simond the honorary title of Bey in 1887. As a further sign of esteem and on special recommendation of the khedive, the coffin of Nes-Shu was presented to Simond a few years later. He decided to donate this precious item to the museum of Yverdon, home town of his family. Coffin and mummy arrived there in July 1896 and were welcomed by the mayor with an official ceremony during which the mummy was unwrapped in front of the crowd by three specially invited doctors. The arrival of an ancient Egyptian in Yverdon was a big event and made a deep impression on the local population. For weeks “this wondrous piece” was the main subject in the local newspapers. Up to that day, the coffin and mummy of Nes-Shu have remained very popular among the inhabitants of Yverdon.

A coffin with a certificate

The coffin of Nes-Shu is remarkable in several ways. Consisting of the intact coffin, its mummy, the mummy mask and the Cartonnage elements that were covering the body as well as a funerary papyrus and amulets for magical protection, this coffin ensemble is the most complete burial equipment from ancient Egypt in a Swiss museum. Furthermore the site where it was



Photo: pmimage.ch

Fig 4: The sky goddess Nut, outlined very carefully in black and then painted in bright colours, figures prominently on the coffin lid. The text above her wings mentions the names and titles of Nes-Shu and his parents.



Photo: pmimage.ch

Fig. 5: The mummy mask of Nes-Shu is made of Cartonnage consisting of pressed layers of linen glued together, coated with gesso and painted. A winged scarab holding the sun is depicted above the head symbolizing the eternal cycle of life.

found and the year of the discovery are known without any doubt. They are attested by a document now in the museum's archive of Yverdon which was written by Gaston Maspero, director of Antiquities and Bulaq museum. According to it, coffin and mummy were found in the necropolis of Akhmim in 1885 during excavations carried out under the direction of Maspero himself. Name and titles of the coffin owner are mentioned several times on the lid (fig. 4). It is a man named Nes-Shu ("belonging to Shu", the god of the air) who was working as a sema-priest responsible for clothing Min, the god of fertility. The names and titles of his parents are also known: His father Nes-Min ("belonging to Min") was a sema-priest as well. Nes-Shu's mother Isis-weret ("Isis, the great one") is called "mistress of the house" and "musician of the god Min".

Surrounded by divine beings

The anthropoid coffin is made of wood which was stuccoed and painted in bright colours on yellow and red ground. The face on the lid is gilded and the head adorned with a voluminous wig. The figures and symbols were outlined very carefully in black paint, probably with a fine rush pen, whereas the inscriptions seem to have been applied more casually. The rich decoration of the coffin surface shows the typical iconography seen on many Akhmim coffins of the Ptolemaic period. A prominent figure on the lid is the sky goddess Nut spreading her wings over the deceased's body and thus protecting him (fig. 4). The lower part of the lid is occupied by a central inscription arranged in vertical columns. The text is known as "spell of Nut" in which the goddess symbolically becomes the divine mother of the deceased and is asked to lay down upon him keeping away all evil spirits. This spell had already appeared in the Pyramid Texts and marks a revival of older traditions. Surrounding the inscription is a multitude of guardian deities arranged in rows and holding knives. Together with the long serpent depicted on the coffin case, they form a characteristic iconographic feature on the coffins from Akhmim.

In Ptolemaic times it became common to cover the mummy with a mask and decorated plaques of cartonnage which were placed over the wrappings for additional protection. Except for the leg covering and the foot case, all Cartonnage elements from Nes-Shu's burial equipment are preserved. Among them, the mask with its gilded face and rich colours is a particularly beautiful item (fig. 5).

Magical protection for the mummy

The body of Nes-Shou is covered from the chest to the feet with a funerary papyrus that was wrapped in the bandages (fig. 6). Unfortunately, during the unwrapping of the mummy in 1896 a big part of the papyrus was torn off. The pieces were later reassembled and put under glass plates. Today only the lowest layers remain in their original position on the body of Nes-Shu. But as can be seen on the broken edges, the papyrus originally consisted of thirteen



Photo: pmimage.ch

Fourteen amulets had been placed inside the bandages of Nes-Shu for magical protection. Four of them were removed during an earlier examination. The two human-bodied deities and the heart amulet are made of blue-glazed faience; the falcon is made of gilded wood.



Photo: pmimage.ch

Fig. 6: Almost the whole body of Nes-Shu is covered with a funerary papyrus. It had been folded several times and placed inside the bandages. Originally, it must have been more than ten metres long.

In addition to the funerary papyrus, fourteen small amulets had been placed inside the linen bandages of Nes-Shu (Fig. 7). Four of them were removed during an earlier examination of the body and ten still remain inside the wrappings. Among them is a finely executed scarab, a figure of the goddess Isis and a sistrum, a musical rattling instrument decorated with the head of the goddess Hathor.

All the elements of Nes-Shu's burial equipment served but one main purpose: Covered with magical spells and images, they created a miniature cosmos in which the deceased, surrounded by protective deities, could safely pass on to the hereafter being reborn to eternal life.

Eternal life far from home

The examination of Nes-Shu's mummy by Thomas Böni and Frank J. Rühli from the "Swiss Mummy Project" gives us some interesting information about the physical condition of the Ptolemaic priest. Nes-Shu died around the age of fifty years which, in terms of personal age, makes him the oldest ancient Egyptian in Switzerland so far. The majority of the bodies examined in the course of the "Swiss Coffin Project" had died between twenty and forty years old. Even if it hasn't been possible to determine the immediate cause of death, we know that Nes-Shu suffered from severe pain in his right shoulder due to osteoarthritis. Further, arteriosclerosis was diagnosed in both legs and we can assume that in the last years of his life Nes-Shu had difficulties walking around.

Undoubtedly, the Egyptian coffins and mummies in Swiss museums represent a wonderful opportunity not only for the scientists but also for the visitors. Besides being among the most attractive of Egyptian antiquities, they allow us to have a fascinating insight into the beliefs about the afterlife of one of the greatest civilisations ever known.

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