
**KUNST
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AN EGYPTIAN PUZZLE

RESTORING THE COFFIN LID OF BUT-HAR-CHONSU

Around 3 millennia after it was produced, the lid of the coffin of priestess But-har-chonsu is the focus of this small exhibition. Discovered in January 1891 in a rock-cut tomb in the Theban Necropolis, the coffin lid came to Vienna in the Kunsthistorisches Museum's Egyptian and Near-Eastern Collection as a gift from the Egyptian government. But the artefact's fragile condition meant it has never been on public display.

Between 2011 and 2014 the coffin lid was comprehensively restored at the Academy of Fine Arts' Institute of Conservation and Restoration. The exhibition documents this complex and fascinating procedure, showcases a number of innovative

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solutions, and offers insights into the painstaking work of conservators.

“We feel it is important to showcase both research on works in our collections by curators and conservators, and research projects in which we collaborate with other scholarly institutions”, said Sabine Haag, director-general of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. “Many visitors to the museum are particularly interested in the numerous activities that go on backstage. One way to showcase research in the museum are exhibitions that focus on a particular art historical topic or a specific area of research. Here, it is the restoration of an ancient Egyptian coffin lid that turned out to be a real *puzzle*”.

EXCAVATION HISTORY

In January 1891 the Egyptian Antiquities Department began excavations near the Mortuary temple of Hatshepsut in the Theban Necropolis. A villager told the director of the Antiquities Department about what might be the entrance to a still unknown rock tomb near the temple wall. The villager was a member of the local family who had discovered the celebrated cache of royal mummies two decades earlier – a rock-cut tomb to which priests from the 21st Dynasty (c. 1000 B.C.) had removed the sarcophagi, mummies and funerary equipment of the most important pharaohs of the New Kingdom (18th – 20th Dynasty, c. 1569 – 1081 B.C.) to preserve them from desecration and looting.

The newly discovered rock tomb at Deir el-Bahari turned out to be another cache – i.e. a mass grave to which a large number of mummies had been moved for safety. However, the mummified remains in this second cache were not those of royalty but of Twenty-First Dynasty priests and members of their families.

Known as Bab-el-Gasus (“Gate of the Priests”), this second cache was accessed from an eleven-metres-deep tomb shaft that led down to a ninety-three-metres-long corridor that opened onto two chambers and a staircase, which led to a second, fifty-three-metres-long corridor. Numerous coffins were stacked on top of each other along the walls of the corridors and in the two chambers. In total, this rock-cut tomb contained 153 coffins (101 of which were double coffins, i.e. they comprised an inner and an outer coffin) and a wealth of funerary equipment.

Because of the huge size of this find the Egyptian government decided to present a number of countries, among them Austria, with some of the newly-discovered coffins and funerary goods.

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Among other things the Kunsthistorisches Museum received several coffin ensembles comprising outer coffin, inner coffin and mummy board, as well as the cover of the outer coffin of the priestess But-har-chonsu. We do not know what happened to the lower part of her coffin; we may, however, assume that there were some mix-ups when the artefacts were packed as the inner coffin of But-har-chonsu's sarcophagus ended up in Switzerland.

In 2014 by the University of Coimbra/Portugal initiated an international research collaboration named "The Gate of the Priests Project" to reinvestigate the extensive finds from Bab el-Gasus.

ON THE RESTORATION

The complex analysis and restoration of the coffin lid took three years to complete and was carried out at the Academy of Fine Arts' Institute of Conservation and Restoration in Vienna in the context of a thesis and a project on which three students collaborated.

First, we studied the condition of lid of the outer coffin, the fragments of the detached foot part stored with the coffin in the museum's depot, and the polychromy. In order to determine both original production techniques and present condition the materials of the coffin lid – e.g. pigments, binding media and fillers – were carefully analysed. The results formed the basis for determining the conservation strategy and the working concept for all subsequent interventions.

There were several problem areas: conservators began by identifying the original locations of detached fragments, taking into consideration the equalizing layer comprising different levels of Nile silt. The latter first had to be stabilized or filled, missing pieces in critical areas reattached and seams patched. In some places the wood, which had been badly weakened by woodworm beetles (anobiidae), had to be stabilized.

In order to work on the corpus of the coffin lid a flexible support was devised and constructed, which allowed access to the artefact from all sides.

After cleaning the entire surface (including polychromed areas), the coffin lid was returned to its original shape; it comprises individual planks, some of which had become detached over time and had been wrongly reattached using glue and pegs.

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A particular challenge was removing the synthetic resin used as glue in the earlier restoration, and reattaching and stabilising some of the planks with ancient pegs as the planks had been erroneously staggered in the earlier restoration. The conservators used specially designed carbon fibre pegs – unlike the ones used in the earlier stabilization intervention they do not damage the original substance and can be removed easily without leaving any trace.

Returning the coffin lid to its original shape also allowed us to reattach the detached foot-part.

The exhibition is curated by:

Regina Hölzl, Director of the Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern Collection

Irene Engelhardt, conservator of the Ancient Egyptian and Near-Eastern Collection

Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

Wolfgang Baatz, Head of the Institute of Conservation and Restoration

Anke Schäning, the Institute of Conservation and Restoration

Nanke C. Schellmann, the Institute of Conservation and Restauration

Academy of Fine Arts Vienna

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PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

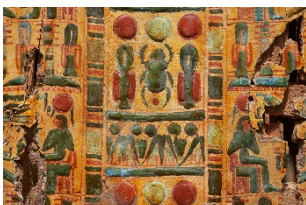
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Lid of the outer coffin of But-har-chonsu, priestess of Amun
3rd Intermediate Period, late 21st/early 22nd Dynasty (1081–910 BC)
Western Thebes, Deir el-Bahari, »Bab el-Gasus« (rock-cut tomb)
Wood, intermediate layer, textiles, pastiglia (>pastework<), pigment, varnish
Excavated in 1891
presented by the Egyptian government and inventoried in 1893
203,5 x 68 x 45,5 cm
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Egyptian and Near Eastern Collection
© KHM-Museumsverband



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Lid of the outer coffin of But-har-chonsu, priestess of Amun (detail)
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Condition of the coffin lid before restoration;
incompletely assembled body (left), dismantled parts of the foot (center)
and loose fragments (right)
© Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien



Gluing the complex inlaid segment at the foot end of the coffin lid
© Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien



Proposal (left) for and (right) implementation of a flexible construction
to provide access to the lid from every angle while protecting it during
disassembly and realignment of component parts
© Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien



View of Deir el-Bahari
x marks the entrance to the Bab el-Gasus tomb?
Photo: Christian Hölzl (2005)



Transporting the coffins
Drawing after M. Émile Bayard
ÖNB/Wien, 510.497-D.49.1891,1, April 4, 1891
© ÖNB/Wien

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OPENING HOURS AND ENTRANCE FEES

Tuesdays – Sundays, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m., Thursdays until
9 p.m.

June, July and August open daily!

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Adults	€ 14
Vienna Card	€ 13
Concessions	€ 11
Children under 19	free
Group ticket (p.p.)	€ 11

Buy your online-tickets at:

<https://shop.khm.at/en/ticket-shop/>

CATALOGUE

The exhibition catalogue focuses on the artefact, how and where it
was found, and especially on its restoration.

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