

# A PAINTED WOODEN PECTORAL OF KING RAMESSES III

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When the painted wooden tablet shown in the accompanying illustration was brought to the Museum a few months ago by a member of the armed forces recently returned from Upper Egypt, it was accepted as a well-preserved but otherwise undistinguished example of a type of funerary object already familiar from the time of the New Kingdom and the Late Dynastic period. Over nine inches in length, it is a rather large specimen of the shrine-shaped pectorals often found lying on the breasts of bandaged mummies or represented on the exteriors of anthropoid coffins. Most of the extant examples are of faience or gilded wood and are adorned with various devices—a large heart scarab, figures of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys, the canine animal of the god Anubis, or, as here, the deceased Egyptian worshipping or making offerings to a god. All have the rectangular shape, the cavetto-and-torus cornice, and, at times, other details which make it clear that they represent a small temple or shrine, an amuletic device suggesting the presence of a protective divinity and altogether suitable as a frame for the sacred emblems or scenes that appear on them. Usually these plaques are fitted at the top with rings whereby they could be suspended from a cord or a bead necklace, or are pierced with holes by means of which they could be tied or sewn to the wrappings of the mummy.

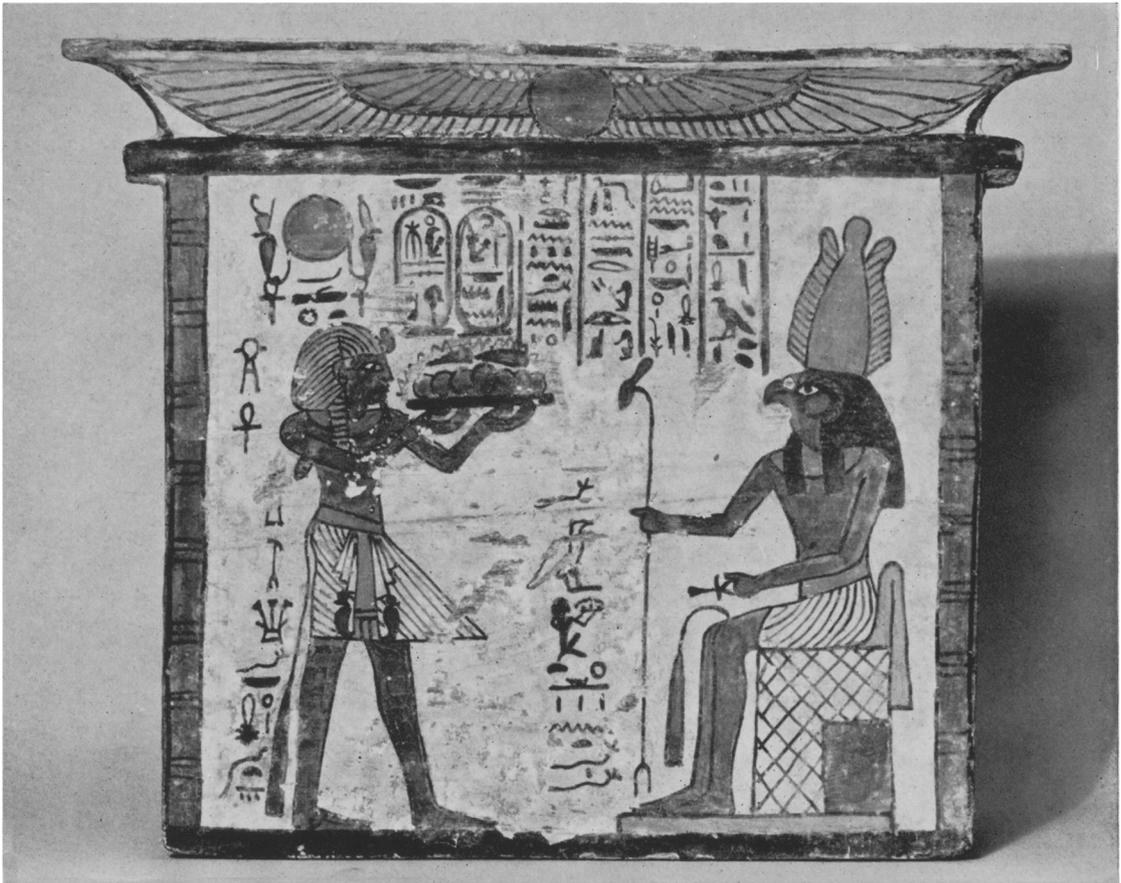
The pectoral illustrated is of sycamore or some similar coarse-grained, native Egyptian wood. The cornice is carved from a separate piece of wood, joined to the top of the main panel by means of dowels and glue. Three small holes, equally spaced along the rear upper edge of the pectoral, run diagonally downwards through the top surface and out the back. The front and sides of the plaque are covered with a thin coating of fine white

gesso and painted in four colors: dark red, green, black, and white.

The painted scene portrays a king of Egypt in the act of presenting a tray of fruits or vegetables to the falcon-headed god of the dead, Sokar-Osiris, who holds in his right hand the *was*-scepter of “well-being” and in his left hand the symbol of “life.” The pharaoh is identified by the inscription above his head as “the Good God, who makes the monuments of his father, Amun Rē<sup>c</sup>, the Lord of the Two Lands, User-ma ʿet-Rē<sup>c</sup> Mery-Amūn, Lord of Appearances-in-Glory, Ramesses, Prince of Heliopolis”—in other words, Ramesses III of the Twentieth Dynasty, who ruled Egypt from 1198 to 1166 B.C. The pious deed is described by the short vertical text between the figures: “Bearing offerings to his father,” and is acknowledged by the god with the following stereotyped words of assurance: “I cause thy lifetime to endure, like Rē<sup>c</sup>, that thou mayest be king over the land, like Horus, son of Isis.” Behind the king is written the usual wish: “May all protection, life, stability, and well-being be around him, like Rē<sup>c</sup>, forever.” Above these words appears the sun disk with pendent *uraei* of the solar divinity Behdety.

All this is commonplace enough—perhaps even a little dull. There remain, however, four questions regarding our recent acquisition which require a good deal of answering and which are going to lead us a long way out on a rather amusingly brittle limb.

In the first place, there is some reason to question the authenticity of this pectoral. The wood seems a little heavy for a piece which presumably lost its last vestige of sap about three thousand years ago; and, when examined, both the back and front surfaces of the panel were found to be caked here and there with a hard, sandy deposit, which may have been



*King Ramesses III offering to the god Sokar-Osiris. Painted wooden pectoral, probably made in the Twenty-first Dynasty, about 950 B.C. Rogers Fund, 1945*

accidentally acquired but which is a well-known “antiquing” device of the modern Egyptian forger. The tonality of the colors, too, seems not quite consistent with what we have come to identify as the normal ancient Egyptian palette; but this is not an altogether valid objection as ancient colors vary considerably in tone. The draftsmanship is certainly not in the best ancient Egyptian tradition, but neither is that of many well-authenticated monuments of the later dynasties, with some of which the drawing seen here compares very closely. Without dismissing any of these technical and stylistic criticisms, it seems, on the other hand, almost impossible to ascribe to a modern forger the complete and natural accuracy of all the details of the clothing and accessories of the figures and, above all, the

flawless, assured, and evidently rapid writing of the long and correct inscriptions. The over-elaborate but wholly correct determinative of the word “bear” in the vertical text between the figures precludes the possibility that we are dealing with a slavish copy of a stock inscription; and the only slip in all the texts—the substitution of  $\overline{\text{—}}$  for  $\text{—}$  in the first cartouche of Ramesses III—is an error of which a Late Dynastic scribe, as we know, was only too capable. The worst that can be said of our plaque is that, if it is a modern “reproduction,” it is an astoundingly accurate copy of an ancient pectoral by an accomplished student of ancient iconography and calligraphy.

The ownership, date, and provenance of this pectoral (or of an original from which it may have been copied) present some interesting

possibilities. Since King Ramesses III is the only Egyptian represented or mentioned on the piece, it is natural to assume that the pectoral was made for him and, as a funerary object, was associated more or less intimately with his burial. The quality of the panel, however, is obviously inconsistent with what we should expect of the tomb furnishings of a pharaoh whose vast mortuary temple at Medinet Habu alone bespeaks wealth and power rarely surpassed in the annals of Egyptian history. Moreover, the style of the painted scene is a great deal more representative of the second-rate funerary art of the Twenty-first Dynasty than it is of works produced in the royal ateliers of the late New Kingdom.

This in turn leads us to an idea regarding the provenance and use of the pectoral which, though hardly susceptible of proof, is irresistibly seductive. In the Twenty-first Dynasty, owing to a widespread outbreak of tomb robbery which they were apparently unable to control, the priest kings of Thebes moved the bodies and what remained of the coffins and other belongings of their royal predecessors of the New Kingdom from the latter's own tombs in the Valley of the Kings to a secret cache in the cliffs behind Deir el Bahri. In nearly all cases it was found necessary to renew the torn wrappings of the royal mummies and in many instances to provide coffins, labels, and other essential items for the protection and even for the identification of the venerated remains. These restorations, carried out in a wholesale manner and with what meager facilities were available at the time, naturally did not attempt to duplicate the splendor of the original burials of the kings.

Ramesses III in many respects fared better than most of his royal companions in the cache. Two shrine-shaped pectorals of gold and gilded wood, perhaps salvaged from his own tomb, were laid on the breast of his mummy, which was rewrapped in fresh linen sheets and bandages. Unfortunately, the identifying label,

inscribed on the wrappings, was written on one of the inner layers of linen and was not visible on the outside of the mummy as restored. Further confusion was occasioned by the fact that, as his own coffins had been shattered, the king was then enclosed in an uninscribed and thoroughly shoddy cartonnage case of Twenty-first Dynasty manufacture, and this, in turn, was jammed into the enormous anthropoid coffin of Queen Aḥ-mose Nofret-iry of the early New Kingdom. Most of the other kings and queens in the cache were readily identified in modern times by inscriptions on the exteriors of their coffins or mummies; but for many weeks prior to the unwrapping of his mummy the cartonnage case and body of Ramesses III were assumed to be those of the queen in whose coffin they were found.

The royal cache, first seen by archaeologists on July 6, 1878, had been found seven years earlier by a native of the village of Kurneh, who, during the very considerable interim, had removed and sold to anyone who would buy them as many small objects associated with the royal mummies as he could carry away and dispose of without detection by the authorities. It was, in fact, the appearance on the market of a number of inscribed wooden labels, bearing the names of kings and queens of Egypt, that aroused the suspicions of Gaston Maspero, director of the Egyptian antiquities service, and led to the discovery of the cache itself.

Having worked ourselves thus far out on the limb of archaeological speculation, we may as well go the whole way and suggest that the wooden pectoral illustrated on page 68 (or its original, if it is a copy) was one of the many objects from the royal cache so disposed of; that it was made about 950 B.C. on the occasion of the reburial of the royal mummies; and that it was once attached, partly as a funerary ornament and partly as an identifying tag, to the exterior of either the cartonnage case or the rebandaged mummy of King Ramesses III.