

The Lost Egyptian Antiquities from Wilanów

Kacper Laube

NATIONAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2474-4795](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2474-4795)

ABSTRACT

This paper concerns a group of eight lost ancient objects, most likely photographed at Wilanów Palace in the 1940s. These artefacts almost certainly belonged to an old collection of antiquities, part of which has survived in the Museum of King Jan III's Palace in Wilanów. The lost objects include figurines made of stone, bronze and probably faience. Photographs of these lost antiquities, preserved in the archives of the National Museum in Warsaw, have never been published before. The artefacts they document are discussed here in detail for the first time, which constitutes an important contribution to research on the Wilanów collection. The author analyses their identification and dating, linking some of them to items listed in the 1867 inventory of the Natolin Palace.

KEYWORDS

Wilanów, Natolin, war losses, Egyptian figurines, funerary figurines, ancient bronzes, Wilanów palace, Museum of King Jan III's Palace, National Museum in Warsaw, collection of ancient art, Egyptian sculpture, collection of Egyptian art

The Lost Egyptian Antiquities from Wilanów

Kacper Laube

NATIONAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-2474-4795](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2474-4795)

The collection of Egyptian antiquities from the Museum of King Jan III's Palace in Wilanów currently consists of 36 small objects dated to the first millennium BC, including figurines of deities, rulers and private individuals. In 2015, they were analysed and described by Aleksandra Majewska (1943–2022), a long-time curator of the Egyptian Collection at the National Museum in Warsaw.¹ Her book also contains a brief mention of preserved photographs of Egyptian objects, the fate of which, after being photographed in the 1940s, remains unknown. This group has not been discussed in previous academic literature and is presented here for the first time.

The Egyptian Collection in Wilanów

The collection of ancient artefacts housed in the Wilanów Palace, opened to the public in 1805, was founded by Count Stanisław Kostka Potocki (1755–1821), known as the 'father of classical archaeology in Poland'. In Wilanów, he amassed a fine collection of Greek vases² and an impressive group of ancient marble

objects.³ Furthermore, according to surviving accounts, in 1786, he conducted amateur excavations in Nola, a small town in the Kingdom of Naples.⁴ The history of Egyptian antiquities that found their way to the Wilanów Palace dates back to 1827, when the first mentions of such objects appeared in literature. They were extensively discussed by Majewska, who drew upon previously unpublished information from palace inventories.⁵ During the Second World War, the Egyptian antiquities, along with other artefacts from Wilanów, came under German occupation administration, but no war losses have been reported among them so far.⁶ In 1946, the set of Egyptian objects from Wilanów was transferred to the National Museum in Warsaw,⁷ where it remained until 2017, when it was returned to the Museum of King Jan III's Palace. The artefacts are now on permanent display in the so-called Cabinet of Antiquities. The surviving collection misses some Egyptian objects listed in earlier inventories and publications discussed by Majewska: a bronze figurine of a frog with a human head, two child mummies, a faience figurine of a monkey and

six scarabs.⁸ These antiquities could have been lost or incorporated into other collections before 1939. In contrast to this group of items, the artefacts discussed in subsequent sections of this paper can, with a certain degree of caution, be classified as wartime losses.

Forgotten Photographs from the National Museum in Warsaw

Majewska's book includes a brief mention of unpublished photographs of Egyptian artefacts from the Wilanów collection. According to the researcher, these were most likely taken by Zofia Tomaszewska between 1941 and 1942, while she was photographing Greek vases from the Słubice collection, part of the Wilanów holdings.⁹ However, it is also possible that the artefacts were documented in 1945, before they were transferred to the National Museum.¹⁰ Additionally, Majewska noted that it was impossible to determine whether all of the lost artefacts had originally belonged to the Wilanów collection, since objects from other collections may have ended up in Wilanów as part of the so-called restitution campaign following the Second World War.¹¹ Considering that the photographs of Egyptian artefacts were preserved alongside images of Greek pottery and share nearly identical backgrounds, it is almost certain that they were taken at the same time, between 1941 and 1942. According to Majewska, 20 out of 31 small photographs depict 18 artefacts from the collection that was transferred to the National Museum in 1946,¹² but she was unable to identify the objects in nine other photographs (five figurines of deities, three *ushabti* figurines and a figurine of a Roman warrior).¹³ Upon re-examining these photographs, I discovered small notecards annotated by Majewska in 2013, indicating which objects were not sent to the National Museum in 1946 and are therefore considered lost.

My analysis shows that, in fact, 23 of the 31 preserved photographs depict 21 objects that remain in the collection. Majewska's error stemmed from misidentifying two funerary figurines in photographs III.4 and XLII.7 as lost, whereas they have survived in the Wilanów collection under inventory numbers

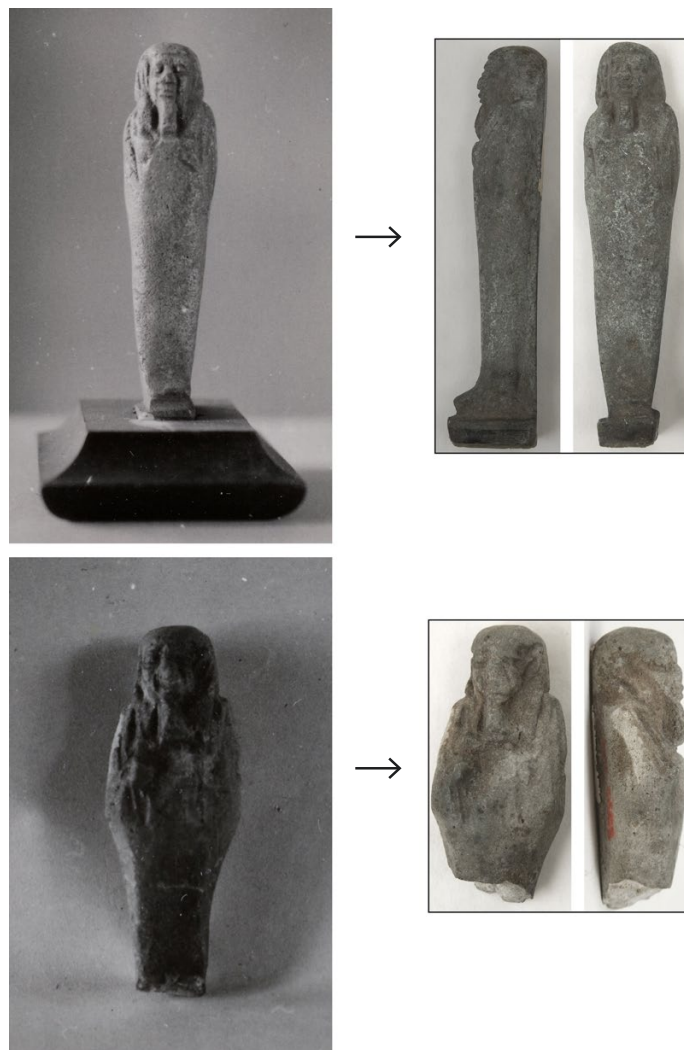


fig. 1 Photographs of funerary figurines and their corresponding objects kept at the Museum of King Jan III's Palace in Wilanów; photograph III.4 corresponding to object Wil.5466 and photograph XLII.7 corresponding to object Wil.5463 photo National Museum in Warsaw and Museum of King Jan III's Palace in Wilanów

Wil.5466 and Wil.5463 (fig. 1).¹⁴ What is more, Majewska wrongly believed that a figurine of Nefertum, shown in another photograph (XLI.7), was still part of the collection. Thus, it must be concluded that the photographs actually represent eight lost artefacts (six figurines of Egyptian deities, one funerary figurine, and a figurine of a 'warrior').¹⁵ Below is a list of these objects:

- A) Mummy-shaped funerary figurine (fig. 2-A), probably made of calcite, depicting a figure wearing a tripartite wig with arms crossed and concealed under a shroud, from which only the hands placed on the chest are

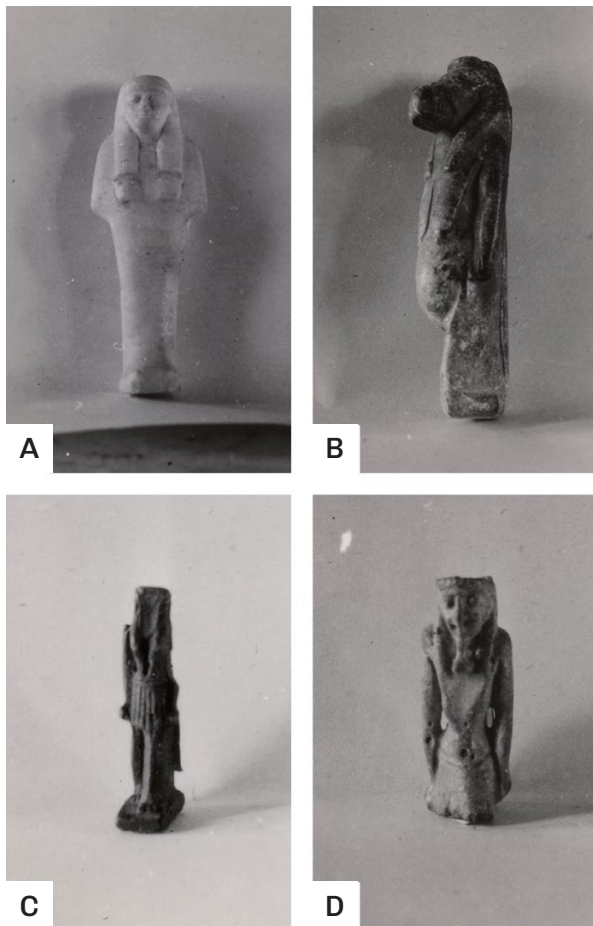


fig. 2 Lost artefacts: A – funerary figurine (photograph XLII.4), B – statuette of Taweret (photograph XLII.1), C – figurine of an unidentified deity (photograph XLI.11), D – figurine of Nefertum (photograph XLI.9)
photo National Museum in Warsaw

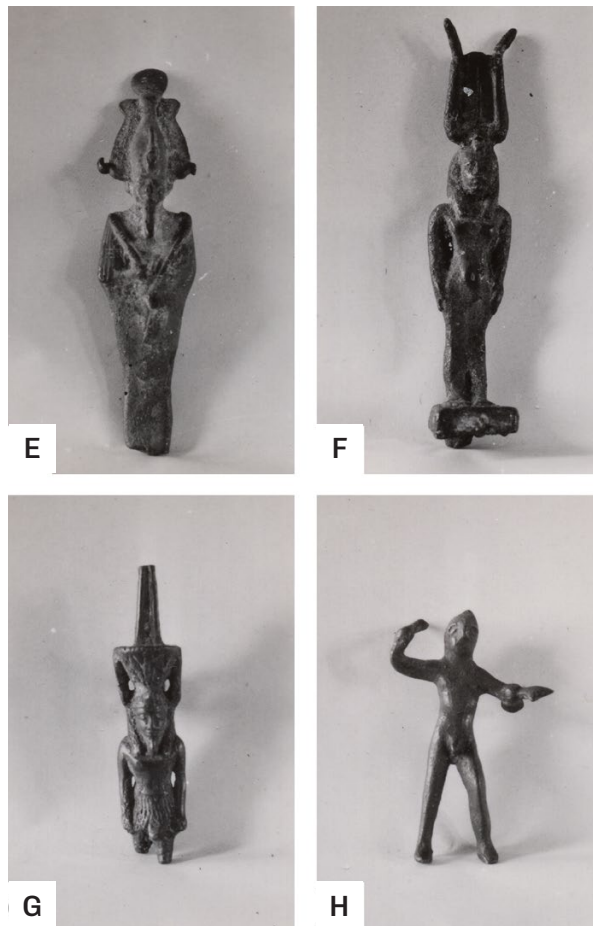


fig. 3 Lost artefacts: E – figurine of Osiris (photograph XLII.8), F – figurine of Hathor or Isis (photograph XLI.5), G – figurine of Nefertum (photograph XLI.7), H – figurine of Hercules (photograph XLI.6)
photo National Museum in Warsaw

visible. The figurine most likely featured an engraved or painted inscription, though this is entirely illegible in the surviving photograph. The object dates to the Eighteenth or Nineteenth Dynasty.¹⁶

- B) Stone statuette of Taweret (fig. 2–B) represented as a pregnant female hippopotamus standing on the hind legs of a lion, with human arms positioned along the sides of the body. The figure has sagging breasts and her head features a tripartite wig crowned with a cylindrical headdress. Indentations on the side of the figurine suggest the presence of a protective symbol *sa*, depicted as a knot, which is typical of Taweret's iconography. The statuette likely dates to the Late or Ptolemaic Period.¹⁷

- C) Figurine of an unidentified deity (fig. 2–C), probably made of stone or faience, depicts a human figure wearing a loincloth, with the left leg stepped forward and arms positioned along the sides of the body. The figurine likely dates to the Late or Ptolemaic Period.
- D) Fragment of a figurine depicting Nefer-tum (fig. 2–D), probably made of stone or faience. Nefertum is depicted wearing a loincloth, a tripartite wig and a beard; his arms are positioned along the sides of his body. The figurine likely dates to the Late or Ptolemaic Period.
- E) Bronze figurine of Osiris (fig. 3–E) in the form of a mummy, wearing an *atef* crown

topped with a solar disc and adorned with a uraeus and ram's horns. The figure is wrapped in a shroud, with hands emerging from slits in the fabric, positioned one above the other without crossing (Osiris is holding the crook and flail – *heka* and *nekhakha*). The figurine likely dates to the period of the Twenty-fifth to Twenty-seventh Dynasties.¹⁸

- F) Bronze figurine depicting Hathor or Isis (fig. 3–F)¹⁹ standing on a rectangular base, with a tenon protruding from underneath. The figure's arms are positioned along the sides of the body, while on its head is a tripartite wig adorned with a uraeus and crowned with tall cow's horns, between which are two feathers (a solar disc may have been placed at their base). The figurine likely dates to the Late or Ptolemaic Period.

- G) Fragment of a bronze figurine of Nefer-tum (fig. 3–G) depicted with his left leg stepped forward. The bearded figurine wears a loincloth and has arms positioned along the sides of the body. On its head is a tripartite wig, probably adorned with a uraeus, topped with a lotus-shaped crown from which two joined feathers emerge. The wig is additionally connected to the lotus crown by two opposing *menat*-counterpoises. The figurine was most likely created in the Late or Ptolemaic Period.

- H) Bronze figurine of Hercules (fig. 3–H),²⁰ depicting a naked man standing with his legs slightly apart. The figure raises his right hand, wielding a club, and has what likely is a lion skin draped over his left shoulder. This type of representation is known as Hercules in a combat pose (*Ercole in as-salto*). The figurine was probably made in an Italian workshop between the second

and first centuries BC.²¹ No ancient bronze objects of non-Egyptian origin survive in the current Wilanów collection, and the figurine may have been acquired by Stanisław Kostka Potocki during his stays in Italy or even the amateur excavations he conducted there.

Some of the lost antiquities can, with a certain degree of caution, be linked to items listed in the 1867 inventory of the Natolin Palace, which includes at least 44 Egyptian objects, at the time kept in the *étagère* of Countess Aleksandra Potocka (1818–1892). These artefacts were at least partially brought from the Wilanów Palace and later returned there.²² One example is a missing funerary figurine that might theoretically correspond to one of the items described in the inventory as a 'reclining plaster mummy' or 'stone mummy'.²³ Another example is the figurine of Hercules, which could correspond to the object described as a bronze figurine of a naked man with a raised hand on a black marble pedestal.²⁴ Given the lack of more precise information, Majewska was unable to match these descriptions to specific objects from the preserved collection. Additionally, two of the missing artefacts (the statuette of Taweret and the figurine of an unidentified deity) bear labels on the reverse, but the inscriptions there are not visible.

The above discussion of the lost ancient objects from Wilanów offers a chance for their future identification. One ought to hope that their inclusion in scholarly literature, along with further archival research, will make it possible to establish their exact provenance and subsequent fate. This, in turn, could aid in their recovery and reintegration into the collection displayed in the Cabinet of Antiquities at the Museum of King Jan III's Palace in Wilanów.

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska

NOTES

- ¹ Aleksandra Majewska, *Zbiory egipskie w Wilanowie* (Warsaw, 2015). See also a commemorative text about the author: Monika Dolińska, 'Aleksandra Majewska (10 kwietnia 1943 – 30 kwietnia 2022) / Aleksandra Majewska (10 April 1943 – 30 April 2022)', *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie. Nowa Seria / Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw. New Series*, no. 12(48) (2023), pp. 294–299.
- ² Witold Dobrowolski, *Wazy greckie Stanisława Kostki Potockiego. Próba rekonstrukcji kolekcji* (Warsaw, 2007).
- ³ Barbara Tkaczow, 'Lapidarium wilanowskie', *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, vol. 14 (1970), pp. 471–479.
- ⁴ See, e.g., Mario Cesarano, 'Stanisław Kostka Potocki e gli scavi archeologici a Nola', in *Archeologia, Letteratura, Collezionismo. Atti del Convegno dedicato a Jan e Stanisław Kostka Potocki – 17–18 aprile 2007*, eds Elżbieta Jastrzębowska, Monika Niewójt (Rome, 2008), pp. 174–202.
- ⁵ Majewska, *Zbiory egipskie...*, pp. 19–49.
- ⁶ No ancient artefacts from Wilanów are listed in the published catalogue of wartime losses of ancient artworks: Grażyna Mizera, *Straty wojenne. Sztuka starożytna. Obiekty utracone w Polsce w latach 1939–1945*, vols 1–2 (Poznań, 2000).
- ⁷ A total of 38 artefacts were transferred, of which 36 are Egyptian objects, while the remaining two are a bronze Chinese *yongzhong* bell (Wil.5439) and a stone handle of unidentified cultural affiliation (Wil.5459).
- ⁸ See n. 5.
- ⁹ Majewska, *Zbiory egipskie...*, p. 47. The materials in question are preserved in the Archive of the Collection of Ancient Art at the National Museum in Warsaw (file no. V.5: Wilanów Deposits). The surviving photographs are largely incomplete and are stored in five small envelopes, each labelled with the negative roll number and the number of photographs.
- ¹⁰ Majewska, *Zbiory egipskie...*, p. 47.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² One of the photographs (III.6) depicts the aforementioned Chinese *yongzhong* bell.
- ¹³ Majewska, *Zbiory egipskie...*, p. 47, n. 134.
- ¹⁴ A comparison of a contemporary photograph of object Wil.5463 with its preserved archival image reveals that since being photographed in the 1940s, the figurine has lost its lower fragment, which has not survived.
- ¹⁵ Due to the lack of extant documentation, the descriptions of the discussed objects have been based solely on the surviving photographs. Furthermore, precise dating is possible only for some artefacts, while for others, the dating remains approximate due to the absence of visible inscriptions, the corrosion covering the surface of the bronze figurines and the poor quality of the preserved photographs.
- ¹⁶ In light of Hans Schneider's typology of funerary figurines, the artefact should be classified within group VB1, which is primarily dated to the 18th–19th Dynasties. Figurines from this group depict a mummy-shaped figure without a beard, with hands that do not hold any amulets – Hans Diederik Schneider, *Shabtis: An Introduction to the History of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Statuettes with a Catalogue of the Collection of Shabtis in the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden*, vol. 1 (text) and vol. 3 (tables) (Leiden, 1977), pp. 187–190, fig. 22.
- ¹⁷ Due to the absence of visible inscriptions, dating the statuette in question is challenging. However, considering that the vast majority of stone representations of Taweret were produced during the Late Period and the Ptolemaic Period, the Wilanów statuette should likely be dated to one of these two periods. Various statuettes and amulets of Taweret have previously been studied by Georges Daressy as part of his publication cataloguing the collection of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo – Georges Daressy, *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du musée du Caire Nos. 38001–39384: Statues de divinités*, vol. 1 (text) and vol. 2 (tables) (Cairo, 1905–1906), pp. 284–296 (CG 39145–39203), PL. LV.
- ¹⁸ Osiris's rounded face and slightly downturned lips appear to evoke the style of the 25th Dynasty, when Egypt was ruled by

Kushite kings. However, due to the quality of the preserved photograph and the corrosion covering the surface of the figurine, such precise dating remains uncertain. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to date the figurine broadly to the period between the 25th and 27th Dynasties. It is also worth noting that similar figurines, depicting Osiris wearing the *atef* crown topped with a solar disc and adorned with feathers and horns, have been found in large numbers among figurines dated to the 27th Dynasty. These were discovered at the temple of Osiris at the site of 'Ayn Manâwir in the Kharga Oasis, where their context suggests that they were not votive offerings but objects used in ritual practices – Florence Gombert-Meurice, 'Thousands of Osiris: the archaeological contexts of the bronzes found in the temple of 'Ayn Manawîr and at the Serapeum of Memphis', in *Statues in context: production, meaning and (re)uses*, ed. Aurélia Masson-Berghoff (Leuven, 2019), pp. 197–207, British Museum Publications on Egypt and Sudan, vol. 10.

¹⁹ Due to the absence of inscriptions that would allow for precise identification, the

figurine should be described as depicting either Hathor or Isis. However, it is worth noting that in the past, Daressy identified representations of this type with Hathor, as one similar figurine bore an inscription with her name – Daressy, *Catalogue général...*, p. 248 (CG 38979), PL XLIX.

²⁰ Unlike the artefacts described above, the figurine in question is not of Egyptian origin. However, it seems justified to include it in this publication alongside other lost ancient objects.

²¹ A comparable analogy can be found in a figurine discovered in the sanctuary of Hercules at Alba Fucens, which was part of a votive deposit dated to the period between the mid-2nd c. and the early 1st c. BC – Maria Cristina Biella, 'I bronzi votivi dal santuario di Ercole ad Alba Fucens', *Archeologia Classica*, vol. 68 (2017), p. 495 (fig. 4: object no. 1.a.18).

²² Majewska, *Zbiory egipskie...*, pp. 39–46, 172–179 (Table II).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 172 (Table II: nos 9–10).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174 (Table II: no. 34).

REFERENCES

- Biella Maria Cristina, 'I bronzi votivi dal santuario di Ercole ad Alba Fucens', *Archeologia Classica*, vol. 68 (2017), pp. 487–517, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26600510?seq=1> [retrieved: 28 Oct. 2024].
- Cesarano Mario, 'Stanisław Kostka Potocki e gli scavi archeologici a Nola', in *Archeologia, Letteratura, Collezionismo. Atti del Convegno dedicato a Jan e Stanisław Kostka Potocki – 17–18 aprile 2007*, eds Elżbieta Jastrzębowska, Monika Niewójt (Rome, 2008), pp. 174–202, <https://pan.pl/rzym/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2023/05/Conferenze-123-Archeologia-letteratura-collezionismo-E.-Jastrzebowska.pdf> [retrieved: 28 Oct. 2024].
- Dobrowolski Witold, *Wazy greckie Stanisława Kostki Potockiego. Próba rekonstrukcji kolekcji* (Warsaw, 2007).
- Gombert-Meurice Florence, 'Thousands of Osiris: the archaeological contexts of the bronzes found in the temple of 'Ayn Manawîr and at the Serapeum of Memphis', in *Statues in context: production, meaning and (re)uses*, ed. Aurélia Masson-Berghoff (Leuven, 2019), pp. 197–207. British Museum Publications on Egypt and Sudan, vol. 10.
- Majewska Aleksandra, *Zbiory egipskie w Wilanowie* (Warsaw, 2015).
- Schneider Hans Diederik, *Shabtis: An Introduction to the History of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Statuettes with a Catalogue of the Collection of Shabtis in the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1977).

Kacper Laube is an archaeologist and graduate of the Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw. Since 2022, he has worked as an assistant at the National Museum in Warsaw's Collection of Ancient Art, where he is currently an assistant curator. His research interests span the cultural landscape of archaeological sites in the Egyptian Nile Delta and the history of collecting Egyptian antiquities in Poland.