

THE OTHER GOLDEN MASK

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When asked to conjure up a mental image of the glories of ancient Egypt, chances are what springs to mind is the iconic funerary mask of Tutankhamun, its golden face and lapis lazuli-lined eyes staring impassively across many centuries. What many may not realize is that there is a second, equally significant golden mask, originally discovered in 1939 in the tomb of Psusennes I (pronounced sue-sen-ees) of the 21st dynasty (1075-945 B.C.). This is the mask currently on display in the *King Tut* exhibition at Pacific Science Center. Taking place as it did at the start of the Second World War, the discovery was barely reported at the time and only recently has it enjoyed the fame and scrutiny it merits.

The story of the excavation is a fascinating tale of dogged determination in the less than ideal archaeological conditions of the Northeast Delta of Egypt. Pierre Montet, a French archaeologist, began excavations at San el-Hagar (ancient Tanis, about 80 miles northeast of Cairo) in 1929. This site covers some 290 acres and is formed by three sand hills, with a great temple dedicated to the sun god Amun situated on one of the hills to the north.

After spending 10 years systematically clearing the site, Montet discovered what is regarded as one of the richest finds in Egypt after Tutankhamun – a number of virtually intact royal burials. While clearing a series of Ptolemaic mud-brick workshops and artists' studios, Montet noticed a deep hole between two rooms, which excavation revealed to be a shaft made by robbers. Following it down, he found that it led to a four-chambered underground structure built of limestone and red granite



Funerary mask of Psusennes I
Photo by: Sandro Vannini

blocks. To his amazement, he found a number of stone sarcophagi comprising the remains of the burials of three kings and a prince from the Third Intermediate Period.

Montet suspected that he may have discovered part of a more extensive necropolis, and immediately set about exploring the surrounding area. His persistence paid off. On March 17, 1939 he climbed carefully down through the roof of another small, decorated tomb into a gleaming cave of wonders. His eyes slowly focused on a silver coffin with a falcon mask, and he realized two more mummies were laid out on either side. This part of the burial had been disturbed in antiquity, but further investigations brought to light two intact granite chambers, one containing the tomb of Psusennes I, the other of King Amenemope. Remarkably, continued excavation revealed the burials of two military officers in adjacent chambers, one of which contained grave goods to rival those of the kings buried close-by. In total, this complex housed no less than seven tombs.

The Tanis discoveries include many cups and vases, exquisite necklaces, bracelets and rings. Gold and semi-precious stones abound, but there are also a large number of silver items including Psusennes' famous silver and gold sarcophagus. The funerary mask is one of the masterpieces: the king's features are molded from a thin sheet of gold; his eyes and eyebrows defined by black and white glass paste. He wears the royal nemes headcloth, topped by a uraeus serpent with a sinuous body. The braided false beard and beaded necklace complete the picture of serene and timeless kingship.

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