



Dr. Luís Raposo
Director

editorial

"Visit the National Museum of Archaeology (MNA)"

Still today, many people know the National Museum of Archaeology (MNA) as "Doctor Leite de Vasconcelos' Ethnological Museum" or simply as "Belém Museum". There are good reasons for that. On one hand, for decades, this museum was the only institution of its kind in Belém, concretely in the Jerónimos Monastery, to where it was transferred (from the Lisbon Academy of Sciences building) in the early 20th century. It became the national intelligentsia's pole including names as Leite de Vasconcelos, Félix Alves Pereira, Vergílio Correia, Luís Chaves, Guilherme Gameiro, Francisco Valença or Stuart Carvalhais. On the other hand, in 1893, when José Leite de Vasconcelos founded the Museum, he intended to develop a global ethnological dimension, joining past and present, material and symbolic, in a kind of "Museum of the Portuguese Man". In the sixties one abandoned partially this historical designation, expressing the course the institution had followed in the meantime under the direction of Manuel Heleno, when knowledge specialization and separation led to an overwhelming increase of the archaeological collections with great disadvantage to the ethnological component.

Because of this long history, of which it is very proud, the present-day Doctor Leite de Vasconcelos' National Museum of Archaeology proves to be the main museum of archaeology in Portugal and one of the most important of its kind internationally. Its vast collections, divided in much diversified theme nuclei, cover all the historical periods from the first territory settlers to the foundation of the Portuguese nationality.

Particularly well represented are the successive Prehistory periods. Such is the case of the knapped stone implements and fauna remains from open-air settlements and Palaeolithic caves or rock shelters, especially in the Tejo Valley and Rio Maior. In addition, we refer the human skeletons of the Mesolithic shell mounds from the Sado River, the ceramics and votive objects from Neolithic burial caves as Escoural in Montemor-o-Novo, the content of the grave goods from hundreds of Alentejo and Beiras' dolmens, the magnificent sets of idols and other limestone objects of the Estremadura Copper Age from rock cut tombs. The Protohistory is present in ceramics collections and metal objects from fortified settlements named "castros" and from necropolises where we can find evidences of regular contacts with Mediterranean peoples, as the famous Greek vases found in Alcácer do Sal. Some of the Museum's emblematic items date from this period: the granite warrior statues from the northern Portugal, called "Lusitanian", which, duly or not, have been identity symbols of the Portuguese culture. The amazing collection of archaic jewellery displayed in the room "Tesouros da Arqueologia Portuguesa" (Treasures of Portuguese Archaeology), surely one of the most remarkable of its kind in Europe, attracts connoisseurs and numerous tourists interested in historic themes to Portugal and to Belém. The Roman Period remains represent another large nucleus of this Museum's collections. They include materials recovered in villae (Torre de Palma in the area of Monforte or Milreu in Faro, with remarkable collections of mosaics and sculpture), in industrial centres (such as the Tróia factory centre, specialized in fish paste production) and in urban centres (among which are to stand out some of this period's most important findings in Lisbon's downtown). Less represented are the Post-Roman periods. However, some inscriptions and Early-Christian architectural elements are worth mentioning, above all the Islamic materials' expressive nuclei. The latter will be on view during the next months, in the theme exhibition the Museum promotes annually, currently consecrated to "Islamic Portugal: the last traces of the Mediterranean". Finally, the acquisitions, donations or legacies' result, composed mainly of foreign collections, joins the ones coming from Portuguese territory. Such is the case of part of the Former Portuguese Royal House's archaeological collections and of the Mediterranean basin's different pre-classical and classical civilization nuclei, of which a precious set of "Egyptian Antiquities" stands out.

As in any archaeological museum of this kind, to possess merely vast and important collections of artefacts would not be enough. The archaeologist differs from the antiquarian because his focus is not the objects, but the historical contexts they may evoke. It is necessary to "make the mute

objects speak". To accomplish this, the National Museum of Archaeology possesses powerful research means and edits several publications among which its centenary journal, "O Arqueólogo Português" (The Portuguese Archaeologist). The contact with the stored collections, study rooms, laboratories, library and other internal services constitutes another learning-enriching trajectory. Only that way would it be possible to understand what goes on behind-the-scenes before displaying a piece in a showcase. It is our wish that this site may constitute a powerful tool at the service of such a discovery. However, we do not share the vision of a world where virtual reality can replace the material one. Therefore, we look forward to seeing you soon, either watching our exhibitions or using this page as an informative instrument of the multiple programmes in which we regularly bring to the knowledge our collections and services' "hidden side". So, see you later. Visit us as soon as possible. Read the information about future events on this page. Maybe as soon as the International Museum Day, on 18th May 2002.