Abstracts

Ancient Egyptian coffins: craft traditions and functionality

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BP Lecture Theatre, British Museum

Egyptian coffins have been the subject of much recent investigation, as newly discovered examples have come to light and many specimens in museum collections have been documented, published and discussed.

These areas of study have brought significant new insights into the production of coffins and have thrown light on the often complex symbolic functions which they were meant to fulfil. In this two-day conference, leading specialists will discuss the circumstances in which coffins were made, considering workshop practices and regional variability. They will also present analyses of the coffins’ iconography and inscriptions to explain their functional role as ‘structured compositions’. This will involve considering coffins individually and also as components of larger conceptual entities, in which the mummy, the burial chamber and the tomb itself all had specific meanings.
New results from the CT scanning of a coffin
Alessia Amenta, Musei Vaticani

This paper presents the recent results of 3D and VRT (Volume Rendering Technique) CT analyses of a mummy-board from the Third Intermediate Period in the Vatican collection (inv. 25022), carried out using Siemens Definition Dual Energy apparatus.

It is the first experiment within the Vatican Coffin Project for the study of the constructional techniques at the same time as that of the painting techniques used on a decorated wooden artifact. These analyses have allowed a complete reading of the techniques used for constructing and assembling the mummy-board, showing very interesting aspects.

In the light of these results the CT scan (Computerised Tomography) reveals itself as fundamental for the study of the re-use of wooden artifacts, and also for an understanding of the economy of the re-use of wood within a carpenter’s workshop in ancient Egypt.

At the same time a study of the identification of the pigments based on their density was established. This is still work in progress, which has initiated a series of experiments in order to be able to ‘read’ the pictorial stratigraphy by means of various filters on the CT scan.

An example of a rare 22nd Dynasty cartonnage type and some reused 21st Dynasty yellow coffin fragments from TT 65
Fruzsina Bartos, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

The analysis of the excavated coffin and cartonnage finds from TT 65, located on the north-east hillside of Sheikh Abd el-Gurna, verifies the consecutive re-use of the originally 18th Dynasty tomb during the whole Third Intermediate Period. This paper will show some examples of the re-use of 21st Dynasty yellow coffins, on the one hand by replastering the surface and on the other hand by reusing the wood itself, on the inner side of which the earlier draft drawings still can be seen.

However, the main focus of the paper is fragments of an uncommon cartonnage type dated to the 22nd Dynasty. Beside the usual delicate painted decoration, a plastically modelled decoration appears on them as well, through which the main motifs are emphasized. While this decorative feature gives special interest to the cartonnage, it presents difficulties of documentation. The greater part of the decorated surface of the fragments was covered with some kind of hard, white gypsum-like material, which – from the pattern of its distribution on the pieces found – appears to have been present when the cartonnage was in an intact state. Comparing the fragments with two other examples of this type of cartonnage, we can come to the conclusion that they were probably made by the same workshop.
The principle of nesting in elite burials and religious art
Anders Bettum, University of Oslo

The use of multiple coffins in ancient Egyptian elite burials, stacked inside one another like Russian matryoshka dolls, has fascinated a steadily growing audience for centuries. However, scholarly explanations for the phenomenon have been put forward only recently. In a recent PhD study on the subject, it was necessary to look beyond the coffin, beyond the tomb and even beyond Egypt for parallels and fruitful guidelines for interpretation. It became apparent that nesting and wrapping are not restricted to coffins and mummies, but can be regarded as a principle for the organization of certain types of space in cultures around the world. In ancient Egypt, these principles were thoroughly integrated in Egyptian religious art and architecture from the earliest times.

From the Middle Kingdom, nested space becomes synonymous with the inaccessible and hidden part of Cosmos, i.e. the Netherworld, where the dead would live forever in perfect harmony with the divine machinery of nature. Still thought to be bound by the rules of cosmic order (ma’at), the blessed souls would become manifest by the arrival of the sun god at night, and fall back into the inertia of the coffins at his departure in the morning. This eternal pendulum between manifestation and reconstitution is seen everywhere in the coffin decoration.

This paper demonstrates the use of the ‘nesting principle’ in various contexts, and explores the implications of this new knowledge of nesting to topics such as coffin decoration, funerary rituals and the mythical environment of the Netherworld.
Coffins from the Kings' Valley
Susanne Bickel, University of Basel

Recent research undertaken by the University of Basel Kings’ Valley Project has brought into focus the intensive use of the Valley of the Kings for individuals other than pharaohs during several periods. Over a hundred people were carried to rest in this remote area between the reigns of Thutmosis III and Amenhotep III, among which were at least thirty members of the royal family recently identified in KV 40.

The investigations on this phenomenon also led to a reassessment of the hypothesis that EA 39 – the ‘Belmore sarcophagus’ – might originate from this area, an assumption that has, however, to be questioned.

Whereas most of the 18th Dynasty evidence is very fragmentary, the discovery of KV 64, in 2012, brought to light an intact burial of a lady of the 22nd Dynasty. The massive reuse of the necropolis during this period is also confirmed by KV 40. Very few undisturbed 22nd Dynasty burials are known so far, and KV 64 therefore offers the rare opportunity to study an entire burial situation as a 'structured composition', involving measures for reappropriation of the tomb as well as the disposition of the burial items and the conceptual interrelation between the coffin decoration and the wooden stela.

Coffin recycling: funerary culture in a time of economic crisis
Kara Cooney, University of California

For most of its history, Egyptology has looked upon tomb robbery and funerary arts reuse as aberrant, regressive, and abnormal. Documents like the Tomb Robbery Papyri have reinforced that mindset. In their literature, the Egyptians themselves repeatedly describe the ideal burial situation as a stone house in which the ancestors reside for eternity, supported by income-producing lands set aside in an endowment to pay for priests and provisions in perpetuity. Current research on 21st Dynasty coffins is attempting to normalise the recommodification of funerary arts – at least during a time of crisis – as a creative negotiation that prioritised the coffin’s value of ritual over the value of perpetual use. Coffins were often recycled.
The coffin and tomb of the King’s Daughter Nubhetepti-khered
Wolfram Grajetzki, University College London

The intact tomb of the ‘king’s daughter’ Nubhetepti-khered at Dahshur, found by Jacques de Morgan in 1894, serves as an example for a late Middle Kingdom burial belonging to a member of the royal court. In this paper, all objects placed in her tomb will be presented, and their individual meanings within the context of the burial discussed. Meat offerings secured the eternal food supply for the princess. Royal insignia found in a special box are most likely the actual items used, and sometimes broken, in the rituals performed at the mummification. The short inscriptions on the coffin relate to the same rituals, and add the specific motif of the placement of the princess among the stars of the night sky. Most of the items near beside or on the embalmed body of the princess identify her as the god Osiris, king of the Underworld. It will be argued that the essentials of her burial equipment are already attested in 6th Dynasty royal inscriptions, and that they are still part of royal burials in the Third Intermediate Period. The burial equipment of the king’s daughter would therefore preserve for us in three-dimensional form the basic elements of royal mummification and burial rites. The ritual items were deposited in the burial for eternity only in the late Middle Kingdom for a select group of people at the royal court.

The iconography and function of Atum on stelae and coffins of the 25th–26th Dynasties
Hisham el-Leithy, Ministry of Antiquities

In the Third Intermediate and Late Period wooden stelae were usually placed in the burial chamber with the coffin and the mummy. With the beginning of the 22nd Dynasty, wooden stelae became an essential element of funerary furniture in the tombs of the elite. The wooden stelae were often the only funerary furniture accompanying the deceased in the tomb, as found recently in an intact tomb (KV 64) dated to the 22nd Dynasty.

This paper will highlight and connect the scenes on the Theban wooden stelae with scenes on coffins. The religious iconography of the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period wooden funerary stelae symbolized a microcosm of the universe and integrated the heavenly sphere with the earthly realm. The central scene, in which either solar or Osirian concepts dominate, illustrates a transitional stage in which the mortal encounters the divine and the deceased is shown making an offering before a deity. This central scene may depict the successful conclusion of the judgment scene and be based on Spell 125 of the Book of the Dead, or it may be related to the solar aspect of the afterlife. After this, the deified deceased was identified with the Creator God or the Great God, who embodied both solar and Osirian aspects.

The lid of the outermost coffin displays a standard sequence showing the weighing of the deceased’s heart (on the viewer’s right). This all-important moment of judgment was supposed to determine whether or not the individual was worthy to enter the afterlife. As usual, a successful outcome is shown, and the ‘justified deceased’ is introduced to a number of deities. In contrast, on the wooden stelae, this judgment scene showed only the introduction of the deceased to either three gods or to a long series of gods, plus the sons of Horus.
Burial equipment from Akhmim in ancient and modern contexts
Éva Liptay, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

Among the coffins which can be linked with the mummies currently under examination in the mummy research project in Budapest there are three pieces from various periods of the first millennium BC which definitely originate from the necropolis of Akhmim/Panopolis.

In one case both the coffin and the mummified body associated with it proved to belong to the original (primary) burial equipment. In the other two cases, however, the mummies were placed in the coffins later. Clarifying the circumstances among which these mummies and coffins became associated with each other is a rather complicated task.

Although reuse of earlier burial equipment was customary in ancient Egypt, in these cases it cannot be taken for granted that the reburial took place during antiquity. It is equally possible that the coffin and the mummy have been matched in modern times by the art dealer who presumably hoped to sell a complete funerary ensemble more easily than an empty coffin. It is a well-known fact that this was a common practice among art dealers and collectors around the end of the 19th century, especially frequently in the case of coffins and mummies from Akhmim. This at first sight surprising amalgamation of coffins and mummies is primarily due to the consequences of the hasty archaeological survey of the site in the 1880s that was followed by the uncontrollable spread of the finds among countries and collections over the world. In the course of these events new, fictive groups were created or in other words a kind of modern reuse of burial equipment happened.

A fresh look at some Theban coffins from the late Middle Kingdom
Marcel Marée, British Museum

Little research has been done on coffins from Thebes made under Senwosret III and his immediate successors. Attempts at dating individual specimens have been hampered by the paucity of material, compared to the surviving record for the early 12th Dynasty. Dates proposed have rarely been more specific than the entire period of the late 12th and/or early 13th Dynasties. And yet, much greater precision can be achieved by studying the coffins in tandem with other epigraphic material produced in Thebes (but partly discovered at other sites). The hands that decorated the coffins have left their mark on very different types of objects, including statues and stelae. The paper explores this broader artistic context for a sample of well-known coffins. Not only do their artistic associations reveal their dates within specific reigns, we are also afforded an insight into the logistics of craft production for Egypt’s elite.
Entering a new world: *rishi* coffins and the osmosis of the rebirth machine at the end of the late Middle Kingdom
Gianluca Miniaci, University College London

In the Late Middle Kingdom objects in burial equipment focussed on rebirth themes, stressing an equation between the destiny of the deceased and either the fate of Osiris/king (Osirification regalia) or the condition of the newborn (faience figurines, ivory tusks). At the end of the Late Middle Kingdom, related to the political situation of the country, a new type of coffins appear, anthropoid in shape and decorated with stylised feathers, and so known in Egyptology by the Arabic term *rishi* 'feathered'. Together with the appearance of this coffin type, the composition of burial equipment and the structure of the tomb underwent a profound transformation, by which the previous figurative repertoire of rebirth gave way to a new imaginary world. Nevertheless, the theme of rebirth was not neglected: rather, the iconography of *rishi* coffins shows how it had simply moved from objects to the coffin itself, a pattern of osmosis between different media. The anthropoid shape and the feathered design underline a strong connection with the Middle Kingdom conception of rebirth. In this movement, specific object types were released from their previous function and became vehicles for new ideas.

The coffin decoration as theological expression of the idea of the universe
Andrzej Niwiński, University of Warsaw

The idea, according to which the coffin played for the deceased the role of the Universe was probably present in ancient Egypt since the very beginning of the production of coffins, as the decoration of early sarcophagi seems to hint at. It is very distinctly expressed in the texts and figures carved on the royal sarcophagi of the New Kingdom, with a predominant role of the concept of Nut symbolised by the lid and sometimes by the whole mummy-container. This concept was never given up, and in the 21st Dynasty and in the Third Intermediate Period the conceptual equation between the coffin and the Universe was much developed, which may be seen in various iconographic motifs and scenes painted both inside and outside the coffin. The most significant in this respect remain: pairs of scenes, complementary to each other, painted on the lid and on the bottom of the coffin case, on the walls above and below the recumbent mummy inside the coffin case, and the cosmological compositions on the left and right side of the mummy, on the exterior of the coffin-case. The present paper is intended to picture this, basing mainly on the 21st Dynasty material.
Observations on the mummy boards found in two Ramesside group burials in Theban Tomb -400-
Gábor Schreiber, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

Over the course of the clearing of Theban Tomb -400-, the mortuary monument of one Khamin, Scribe of the Treasury and Prophet of Maat in Karnak North, two Ramesside group burials have been found, which contained the interments of Khamin’s colleagues and subordinates, as well as their consorts and offspring. Based on the associated finds, especially the pottery, one may assume that all the burials had been deposited there within a fairly short period of time, in the later Nineteenth – early 20th Dynasty. Besides providing a general overview of the archaeological context and a discussion of the dating evidence, the presentation will focus on the mummy boards found in association with these burials. Taken as a sample of Theban coffin production between the reigns of Sethi II and Ramesses III, the material from TT -400- testifies to the concurrent use of different iconographies and techniques of production. The lack in this material of one particular type, i.e. the mummy board with an overall reticulate patterned dress, otherwise attested in another context of the el-Khokha cemetery firmly dated to the reigns of Ramesses III and his immediate successors, indicates on the other hand that this iconography was the invention of the later 20th Dynasty only.

Two family tomb groups of the 25th Dynasty from Deir el Bahari
Cynthia Sheikholeslami, independent researcher, Cairo

Two probably intact family tomb groups of the 25th Dynasty have been discovered in shafts within the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, but remain mostly unpublished. Edouard Naville, excavating for the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1894, found a shaft in the northwestern part of the hypostyle hall of the Hathor chapel containing the burial equipment of the Montu priest Djeddjehutyuefankh (now Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), his mother Nesmутaatenru (now Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and another woman Tabakenkhonsu, presumed to be his wife (now Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Emile Baraize, working on behalf of the Egyptian antiquities service restoring the temple, discovered a second intact shaft almost directly above the first, in front of the southern chapel of Hatshepsut, in 1933. This burial equipment, now divided between the Luxor Museum and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo, belongs to two priests of Montu, Padiamonet and Nespaqashuty, and a woman, Heresenes, who may be the mother of the latter. The Naville group may be dated somewhat earlier than the Baraize group in the 25th Dynasty. This paper will discuss what the two groups reveal about the composition of a family tomb, and the similarities and differences that may exist in nearly contemporary burial equipment from the same family tomb, as well as a range of styles for the 25th Dynasty Theban burial equipment belonging to the priestly elite.
Style and composition: a genealogical perspective on coffin decoration (21st Dynasty)
Rogério Sousa, University of Porto

During the 21st Dynasty, coffin decoration increased in complexity and innovative solutions, particularly in the context of the Theban necropolis. The strong innovative nature of these objects raises important methodological questions for the study of coffin decoration during this period. By adopting a topographic perspective on coffin decoration and a comparative approach for the study of each component we aim to understand the development of iconography during the 21st Dynasty within a broader ‘genealogical’ perspective. In this presentation we focus our analysis on the study of the decoration of the central panel of the lid in order to identify different styles in the pictorial work. Moreover, we can detect distinct principles of composition presiding over innovation and complexity during this period, suggesting that variability was mastered by means of systematic, consistent and relatively simple procedures that could have been used on the Theban workshops.

Beyond iconography: the Amarna coffins as archaeological, social and cult artifacts
Anna Stevens, British Museum

Between 2006 and 2013, the Amarna Project excavated nine decorated wooden coffins at the South Tombs Cemetery, the largest of Amarna’s burial grounds. Most are anthropoid, with scenes of offering bearers and columns of text on their walls, executed in yellow, red and blue on a dark background. The Amarna coffins help to fill a long-standing gap in known coffins from the late 18th Dynasty. But they are significant, too, as an assemblage from a non-elite cemetery, excavated under modern conditions.

This paper will offer an introductory survey of the Amarna coffins and explain their archaeological context. It will offer some preliminary thoughts on their relationship to the broader assemblage of burial goods from the cemetery, to the social and economic landscape of Amarna, and to the unique religious milieu of the period. Its aim is to explore how interpretive approaches drawn from artifact studies (life-history approaches, etc) and the contextualisation of cemetery assemblages within their broader urban landscape can enhance our understanding of burial containers as cultural artefacts.
Regional variations in the decorative programmes on coffins of the Late and Ptolemaic periods
Katharina Stövesand, University of Cologne

The aim of the paper is to analyse the different local traditions in coffin production of the Late and Ptolemaic Period by tracing chosen motifs in certain geographical regions. Coffins from Lower and Middle Egypt, especially evidence from the Memphite region and the Fayum area, have so far lacked scholarly attention and will therefore be the focus of research. They will be compared to southern centres of coffin production, namely Thebes and Akhmim.

For comparison, a thorough analysis of the pictorial programmes on coffins will be conducted, which comprises primarily a study of the figurative scenes. Moreover, a regional analysis of the textual and decorative elements as well as the colour schemes will be presented. Different types of coffins will be considered such as anthropoid, qrs-w-shaped and rectangular coffins.

The paper will discuss the hypothesis that coffins from the northern region of Egypt show a unique visual language, strongly opposing the view that coffin decoration was a highly centralised process co-ordinated by a single production centre (i.e. Thebes) and distributed in the form of a pattern-book. Thereby, a richer picture of ancient Egyptian material culture can be derived.

25th–26th Dynasty coffins: a symbiotic relationship between iconography and structure
Allison Williams, University of Liverpool

The tradition of nested coffins, the luxury of having more than one coffin placed within each other, as seen in the New Kingdom royal burial of Tutankhamun with his set of several shrine sarcophagi along with various gilded anthropoid coffins, was not abandoned in the Late Period. This tradition was continued with wooden coffins and new innovative structural features developed on their inner and outer coffins such as the pedestal base, back plinth and return of a vaulted top on sarcophagi. The iconography remained the central focus, highlighting themes on the inner coffins to surround the mummy and funerary rituals of the deceased while the outer sarcophagi focused on the realm of the burial and the funerary texts previously depicted on tomb walls. The rise of the use of the Book of the Dead as written text on inner coffins and the vignettes of the Book of the Amduat on outer coffins, suggests a relationship between the structural and iconographic corpora. Furthermore, it demonstrates that these coffin sets functioned as more than simple preservation mechanisms and represented tomb microcosms.