Unpublished Anthropoid Coffin at Beni-Suief Museum No. 1248: Renaissance of the Glory of the 26th Dynasty

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Abstract

During the 26th Dynasty, kings took a clear approach to restoring the Old Kingdom’s past glory. This article is dedicated to the publication of an unknown Late Period coffin discovered at Ihnasyia during a Spanish excavation, currently stored at the Beni-Suief Museum. The study intends to compare the style of the decorative scenes of this coffin with other Late Period coffins, discussing the major similarities and differences. This article was developed using analytical and comparative approaches based on document and picture analyses. Religious scenes on the coffins were analyzed and major features emerged. These features are compared, and the results are discussed in the article. The authors conclude that this coffin dates back to the 26th Dynasty, its design and drawings imitate the Old Kingdom’s style of stone coffins, and it is distinguished by its archaism and renaissance depiction of past glory.

Keywords: Coffin, Beni-Suief, Ihnasyia, Renaissance, 26th Dynasty, Late Period

Introduction

The coffin at the Beni-Suief Museum appears to be like most of the coffins manufactured in the Ihnasyia region during the Late Period (Figs. 1 and 2); they are distinguished by low quality, as well as inadequate implementation of scenic imagery. Table 1. It was discovered in the sediments at Ihnasyia’s cemeteries, which had risen to importance as a religious or political center by the time of the Third Intermediate Period (1069–747 BCE). There is no doubt that the coffin served as a shelter for the deceased’s safe journey. As an alternative tomb rather than a container. Therefore, they were adorned with paintings and decorative scenes that assured the deceased would unite with Osiris and Re, who could then raise him from the dead. As a result, starting the Old Kingdom and continuing to the end of the Late Period, coffins generally served as an alternative tomb rather than a container. Therefore, they were adorned with paintings and decorative scenes that assured the deceased’s safe journey.

The Late Period coffins enclose valuable information about the Egyptian social structure, economic system, religious rituals, fashion, and art. All this information would be insufficient to date the time period of any coffin. Due to the Egyptians’ pride regarding their coffins, they developed religious or artistic features over time. Archaism in ancient Egyptian art had appeared during Late Period for the sake of restoring past glories via artistic depiction. The scholars have variously referred to this as “Archaism”, “Renaissance,” or “Restoring”; all these conceptions aim to clarify and interpret the art of the Late Period, which adapted ancient traditional designs and then added some innovative aspects to the same designs to create a hybrid style that combines tradition and novelty. There is no doubt that archaism in art was found in the Late Period anthropoid coffins, specifically the 26th Dynasty, which preferred to adapt all the traditions of earlier glorious Old Kingdom art while also developing these forms of art to suit the time. 1


2 Ihnasyia flourished in ancient Egyptian history, but at different times, such as the First Intermediate Period, when Heracleopolis became the principal city of Lower Egypt and exercised control over a large portion of the region. Moreover, Heracleopolis regained prominence during the Third Intermediate Period. More information can be found at W. E. A. Budge, An Egyptian hieroglyphic dictionary: with an index of English words, king list and of theogonic list, London, (1877).


6 Coffins created during eras of collapse and weakness were distinguished by a local tendency and religious rituals that were not widely practiced and were not shared with the rest of the areas due to inadequate contact between them. By the end of the Middle Kingdom, coffins of elites became anthropoid to hold the mummy and this innovation was accompanied by new styles of art and rituals; Cooney argued that elites who owned coffins through history dating to prosperous times include Dynasties 4–5 of the Old Kingdom, Dynasties 11–12 of the Middle Kingdom, Dynasties 18–19 of the New Kingdom, Dynasties 22–26 of the Late Period. For the first time during the New Kingdom, the anthropoid coffin style was designed based on gender; the male coffin was designed with upright head-foal and branches, while the female coffin was distinguished with wigs and modeled breasts; for more information see; K. M. Cooney., Coffins, Cartonnages and Sarcophagi. A Companion to Ancient Egyptian Art, 1st edition, (2015), 207–50.


Table 1: General Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>PT 638 a, b, c, d-639 a and chapter 178 BD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>His father is called DA Hr and his mother Isetweret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions</td>
<td>Height: 178 cm, Width: 33 cm, Depth: 29 cm, Width of face: 30 cm, Width of foot: 31 cm, length of foot: 32 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provenance</td>
<td>Excavated at Sediment El Gebal-Ilmusayya Beni-Suief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current location</td>
<td>Museum of Beni-Suief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration number</td>
<td>No. 1248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Sycamore wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status of preservation</td>
<td>Good, except some parts of lid and inscriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>Late Period, 26th Dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parts of coffin</td>
<td>It consists of two main parts: lid and floorboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headdress</td>
<td>Tripartite black hair wig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewelry</td>
<td>wsx n bik broad collar extends approximately 6 cm along the chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions</td>
<td>Four columns from PT 638 a, b, c, d-639 a and chapter 178 BD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Anthropoid coffin decorated in polychrome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
- **PT**: Pyramids Texts
- **BD**: Book of the Dead

Figure 2: The coffin (No. 1248) at the Beni-Suief Museum, side view of the anthropoid coffin and the mummy. (Photo credited to the authors)
Unpublished Anthropoid Coffin at Beni-Suief Museum No. 1248: Renaissance of the Glory of the 26th Dynasty

In order to protect the mummy within the coffin, the four sons of Horus\(^\text{14}\) are represented on both sides of this anthropoid coffin. On the left side of the anthropoid coffin, there are two representations of Hapi as a baboon (Fig. 4 [F]) and Qebehsenuf with a falcon head (Fig. 4 [G]), while on the right side, there are two representations of Imseti with a human head (Fig. 5 [I]) and Duamutef with a jackal head (Fig. 5 [H]).

Decoration Analysis

The whole coffin was colored in yellow (polychrome) in addition to layers of linen and plaster to produce the white color; it had been called snf, and also dSr symbolizing both sunlight and gold. The yellow color is usually used to color the face of the deceased to symbolize his union with the sun god.\(^\text{15}\) The method of attaching the lid to the coffin’s floorboard evolved in the New Kingdom; it depended on rectangular recesses offset by wooden pegs. This technique had become modest and imprecise by the Late Period.\(^\text{16}\)

The artist has tried to clarify the facial features of the coffin and other details such as the wig, eyebrows, and cosmetic lines around the eyes. The eyes are painted in dark blue, while the face and ears are polychrome, and the pupils are painted in black. The gold and dark blue colors recall chapter 172 of the Book of the Dead, which refers to the deified form of the deceased. Goddess Maat is represented spreading her wings in order to embrace the mummy. She is portrayed on the coffin’s chest to protect the deceased during his journey to the afterlife and during his judgment. The artist colored the figure of the goddess in green, which was mentioned in the ancient Egyptian language as wAD, referring to agriculture and green crops. Besides, the green color had a symbolic meaning of regeneration, renewal and growth, which is why god Wsir was often represented in green. Therefore, the green color was used to decorate the sides of the coffins as an indication of the deceased’s union with god Osiris.\(^\text{17}\)

The left side of the coffin includes two representations of Hapi and Qebehsenuf. Hapi is represented with a baboon head in a standing stance without any ornamentation, while Qebehsenuf is depicted with a falcon head below Hapi (Fig. 4). The right side...

\(^\text{14}\) In ancient Egyptian religion, the “Four Sons of Horus” were a group of four gods. They were basically personifications of the four canopic jars that came with mumified bodies. The stomach (and small intestines), liver, large intestines, and lungs were all removed, embalmed, and stored separately, for more information see M.


\(^\text{16}\) H. Gauthier., “Cercueils anthropoids des prêtres de Montou:” CG 41042–41072, Tome I, Le Caire (1902). 82. fig. 35.

of the coffin includes two depictions of Imseti with a human head and Duamutef with a jackal head 24 (Fig. 5). It is worth noting that the artists painted both gods, Qebehsenuf and Duamutef, in red, while Hapi and Imseti were painted in green. The coffins of elites after the end of the New Kingdom have the four sons of Horus represented on both sides of the lid, in addition to the two protective goddesses, Isis and Nephthys. 25 Unfortunately, the inscriptions which surround the shape of the four sons of Horus are unclear, but the authors depend on previously dated coffins; they confirming that the typical decorations of coffins of elites during the Late Period depict both goddesses. Nut just once while goddess Maa’t in several poses on coffins because they played an important role in helping the deceased in the afterlife. 30

God Anubis is depicted in human form with the head of a jackal, and his body is covered in black, dressed in a short robe, while in his right he holds the wAs scepter of power. God Osiris 22 appears in his mummy form, wearing the Atf crown. His name is in front of his head, while the sycamore tree appears at his feet, with goddess Nbt-Ht standing behind him. She extends her right arm toward her brother Osiris. On its left arm she has the signs of power, wAs and life, ANKH. Behind her is the embalming god Anubis in the form of a mummy with a jackal head, with his name appearing in front of his head. Goddess Nut spreads her wings on the chest area of Coffin Beni-Suief No.1240. This is one of the most spectacular scenes pictured on human wooden coffins, showing goddess Nut depicted kneeling on her right foot, spreading out her feathered wings. She is depicted on the chest of the deceased for the purpose of protection, and holds in both hands the Maa’t feather, sign of justice, for the purpose of guaranteeing justice and freeing of the deceased’s voice in the afterlife. Besides, goddess Nut was crowned with the sun disk, which had a feather of Maa’t inside it. 5

For this, the figure of the goddess Nut 32 depicted on the lids of late-age sarcophagi was regarded as tantamount to the fixed icon that ancient Egyptians patronized, with its arms hanging even over the body of the coffin. The viewer imagines that she is embracing the deceased, believing in the ability of that universal idol to grant him rebirth. In the afterlife, the sun comes out of its womb in the form of a scarab beetle, marking the birth of a new day. The authors believe that the ancient Egyptians resorted to portraying cosmic deities, such as the deities Re 25 and Nut, on the chest area of coffins which protect the deceased during the afterlife, but this is based on a partial breakdown of fixed religious concepts and values during the Late Period, as cosmic deities became surrogates for the guardian deities, who were responsible for protecting the deceased in the afterlife. 33 The inscriptions on the coffin (No. 124B):

There are four vertical columns of Hieroglyphs that are quoted from Pyramid Texts 638a, 638b, 638c, 638d, the spells were incorporated later into the last part of chapter 178 of the Book of the Dead (BD).

10 During the 26th Dynasty embalmers of the elites began to preserve all viscera of the corpse, while the canopic jar became empty, J. Assmann, Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt, Islamic Center University Press, (2003), 357; Grenier, R., “Mummification,” In Regine Schulz; Matthias Steidel eds., Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs, Cologne: Koelnmann, (1990): 466–461.

19 The registrar of the Beni-Suief Museum mentions incorrectly that this is the representation of Goddess Isis, but the authors had pointed out in the paper that this is a representation of goddess Nut with their dozen hatched head.


30 Translation

(1) “Word spoken by Osiris…… Son of your dja her, (2) he was born from lady of the house his wet your mother Nut spreads herself over you in her name of Sheba pet. (3) She causes you to be a god without enemies against you in your name of god. (4) She defends you from all evil things in her name khnum-sweet. You are the eldest of her children, Geb is satisfied with you, he has loved you, he has (……) he has (……)”

31 Textual analyses

The Pyramid Texts are thought to be sacred originals that were only used by kings during the Old Kingdom before being transferred to coffins and made available to all during the Middle Kingdom. This, in turn, evolved by the New Kingdom into the Book of the Dead, which was widely distributed on papyri, as well as coffins of individuals and kings; it was considered the holy book of ancient Egypt. By the New Kingdom, it was widely used on individual coffins and continued to be popular in the Late Period. It is worth noting that during the Saite Period, coffins were inscribed with spells and supplications originated from the Pyramid Texts. This lead the authors to believe that it has a political connotation that revolves around the kings of this family’s interest in restoring the past and returning to its origins in ancient Egyptian civilization, believing that doing so would restore the Egyptian nation’s lost glory among nations. The use of the Pyramid Texts alongside the BD is tangible evidence of the ancient Egyptians’ interest in returning the Saite Period to its Old Kingdom cultural roots.


In general, the texts on the coffins of the Late Period's elites were divided into sections. The first section included Pyramid Texts, the BD, and hymns of Re.29, all written on the floorboards that had surrounded the deceased during his journey to the afterlife. The second part consisted of religious books depicting the night journey in the afterlife, such as the Book of Imduat, Gates, Caves, and Earth. The formula §145§, which was related to the formula §156§, was written under the coffin lid and translated as

Translation

"Praise be to you, O Ra, O Supreme Being, O strong. He who unites with his body is the one who worships his gods. While He crosses into his hidden cave. You are the justified Osiris invokes Ra. You are the healed, fierce body of Osier.32"

Translation

"Hknw n.k Ra qA sxm XAt f.f tram. d w n d f n x f x n x f, m w n R sn. m k n k n Hr. k m n XAt Wp sn n Ra t w t it XAt Wp sn n Ra t w t it "

Conclusion

This coffin, No. 1248, is part of a group of individual coffins manufactured in the Bnuayt cemetery and has been kept at the Beni-Suef Museum. The authors were able to date it clearly because it closely resembles other coffins from the 26th Dynasty in terms of the design of the anthropoid having square shoulders, as opposed to coffins from the New Kingdom or the Third Intermediate Period. 26th Dynasty coffins are notably decorated using the concept of archaism, wherein artists attempted to restore the Old Kingdom's past glory. It is known that the Saite Dynasty kings were interested in representing art and encouraged the Old Kingdom's art. The upper parts of 26th Dynasty coffins (shoulder to end of chest) were rectangular in shape. The coffins were influenced by the Old Kingdom's rectangle-shape design. The coffin was carved without arms or hands, which was a distinctive feature of the coffins during the Late Period. Moreover, during the Saite Period, there was a special copy of the BD used for coffins of individuals. We must keep in mind that many factors, such as social, economic, and regional factors, have influenced the design and decoration of the coffin. For example, coffins made for people in the Theban region differ from those made for people in the Bnuayt region. As a result, the coffins of individuals discovered at Bnuayt during the Late Period were notable for their inaccurate and low-quality decoration. The technique of attaching the lid to the coffin's floorboard, which relied on rectangular recesses offset by wooden pegs, was developed in the New Kingdom. During the Late Period, this technique became more precise and comprehensive. While studying many coffins dated to the 26th Dynasty, clearly this coffin dates to the 26th Dynasty as well, and more specifically, from the late 26th Dynasty. The 26th Dynasty coffins were distinguished by the use of materials to strengthen the poor quality of wood; these materials were a mixture of linen and papyrus rolls that include a layer of plaster which was used for drawing on. The layers of linen and papyrus were then adhered with resin gum. Plaster coated linen first appeared in the New Kingdom and continued to spread throughout the Late Period. Since it has inexpensive material value and ability to create mummy forms, the white mortar surface also contributed to the design as an excellent canvas for creating outstanding scenes. During the Late Period, all coffins had presentations of the four sons of Horus. As a result, they appeared as canopic vessels under the deceased’s funerary bed at times and as full deities on both sides of the coffin at other times. Their role had been known since the Old Kingdom via Pyramid Texts, and each of them was known to protect a part of the human body. The first figure is Imuty, who was entrusted with protecting the liver alongside the deceased's consort, whereas QbHsnwf was depicted with the head of a falcon protecting the intestines alongside his role in protecting the sA, or the deceased's body, and his place in the coffins was often on the left side. Hapy appeared on the coffin's left side with the Kibbursu and he was assigned the lungs' protection. The authors note that the artist of this coffin did not adhere to what was prevalent in individual coffins during the New Kingdom or the Late Period in terms of placing gods on the coffin or coloring them with symbolic religious colors. Finally, during the Sais Period, coffins were inscribed with spells and supplications from the Pyramid Texts, a matter that led the authors to believe that it has a political implication that crystallizes around the kings of this family’s interest in restoring the past and returning to its origins, that is, the ancient Egyptian civilization, believing that this matter will restore the Egyptian nation’s lost glory among nations. The use of Pyramid Texts alongside the BD was tangible evidence of the ancient Egyptians’ interest in the Sai Period return to its Old Kingdom civilizational roots.

Translation

"Chanting by the healer or justified, your mother Nut spreads over you in her name in the hidden sky, giving you your survival as a god against your enemies everywhere you go there”