

BODY, COSMOS AND ETERNITY

NEW RESEARCH TRENDS IN THE
ICONOGRAPHY AND SYMBOLISM OF
ANCIENT EGYPTIAN COFFINS

Edited by

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Foreword

This volume, edited by my friend and colleague Rogério Sousa, is part of the scholarly ferment which has wheeled around the subject of ‘coffin’ during the last twenty years. Its magic and religious evaluation identifies it from time to time as body container, but at the same time substitute body for the deceased, a maternal womb in which the regeneration will occur, a microcosm, tomb, funerary temple, as well as a conduit to the dead, a powerful tool activated by means of the Opening of the Mouth ritual.

The history of the study of coffins has from time to time given special attention to a single aspect, such as elements of style, typological investigation, iconography, identification of texts and their variants, their prosopography.

The application of the most modern analytical techniques in the study of material goods has unquestionably opened new horizons for reflection and revolutionised the approach to archaeological data: ‘*The study of ancient Egyptian material and technology is a vibrant one*’.¹

One cannot disguise the fact that the coffin was linked to an important industry which involved not just the deceased and his or her family, but also the entire community.

The process which led to the construction of a coffin and, in a second phase, its decoration and ‘architectonisation’,² represents a cultural dynamic fundamental for the very survival of ancient Egyptian society. No separation can be made of these two phases, equally ‘creative’, in the production of what the Egyptians regarded as the most important object manufactured for burial.

Up until now we have lacked a real understanding of the procedure of coffin manufacture in its complexity, as also the location of the workshop where the coffins were produced.

The *Vatican Coffin Project*, which at the moment sees the collaboration of the Vatican Museums with the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden and the Louvre Museum, is part of this new range of study, looking to evaluate the craft traditions: the craftspeople were those appointed to ‘translate’ and transpose the philosophy of life and death also on the sides of a coffin. At this point, are we speaking of ‘artists’, ‘artisans’, or ‘craftsmen’? Different workshops certainly existed, does this mean that each of them worked for their own commissions?

The identification of the species of wood used for the coffins of the Third Intermediate Period, carried out by Victoria Asensi Amorós as part of the *Vatican Coffin Project*, has added an important step forward determining the continuity of use, and the introduction or abandonment of certain species; and also to understand the dynamic inside the workshop of the re-use of wooden materials.

Numerous experiments on the construction of a coffin, using ancient techniques and the reconstruction of ancient Egyptian pigments have also produced interesting results. The *Sarcophagus Project* of the Armenian Egyptology Center has worked for years on this aspect.

The funerary arts are first and foremost material products, which have a precise social and economic value, besides their symbolic, magical and religious values. Kathlyn Cooney’s research into ‘the cost of death’ has recovered a fundamental aspect of this question, the socio-economic aspects of crafted material culture: Egyptian art as *commodities*.³ Why, how, where, when and at what price were funerary objects produced, and what value did they have for the Egyptians themselves?

Cooney’s research has also confirmed a vast scale of the re-use of coffins during the 21st Dynasty. Modern investigative techniques, such as Terahertz technology and CT-scanning, are able to confirm her intuitions and observations.

This aspect of re-use and recycling cannot be underestimated and opens up a whole series of new reflections on the social and economic value of funerary art within Egyptian society.

Running parallel to this during the past few years has been great activity in the study of the coffins in museum collections. A deeper understanding of these objects from the symbolic and religious point of view, united with that of their construction and painting technique will also open new perspectives for their conservation and restoration.

¹ NICHOLSON, P. T.; SHAW, Ian, eds. (2000) - *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*. Cambridge: University Press, p. 1.

² WALSEM, R. van (1997) - *The Coffin of Djedmonthuiufankh in the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden. Technical and Iconographical/Iconographical Aspects*. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut Voor Het Nabije Oosten, p. 358-361.

³ K. M. COONEY, *The Cost of Death. The Social and Economic Value of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Art in the Ramesside Period*, EU 22, Leiden 2007.

The *First Vatican Coffin Conference* has thrown light on just how much scientific investigations on coffins are being conducted alongside textual-iconographical study in museums scattered throughout the world, from the British Museum to the National Museum in Warsaw, from the Civico Museo di Storia e Arte in Trieste to the collection at Tulane University in New Orleans, from the Museo del Vicino Oriente of the Sapienza University of Rome to the Fitzwilliam Museum, from the Lyon collection to the McManus Museum in Dundee, just to name a few. I would like also to mention the *Swiss Coffin Project*, as well as the collaboration between C2RMF and the Egyptian Department of the Louvre Museum on the studies of coffins and *cartonnage* cases, and also the collaboration between the Laboratorio di Diagnostica of the Vatican Museums and the Rijksdienst voor Culturele Erfgoed in Amsterdam with the Egyptian Department of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden for the study of the coffins from the Bab el-Gasus *cache*.

This *cache* is also the subject of study of *The Gate of the Priests Project*, directed by Rogério Sousa. The aim is the reconstruction of the original composition of the tomb. It is an international project held in the University of Coimbra, which sees the collaboration of the University of Leiden, the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, the University of California – Los Angeles, and the Vatican Museums.

Projects for the identification and collection of coffins scattered through minor collections are also important. We remember the *Egyptian Coffins Project in the Provincial Collections of the United Kingdom Project* (ECPUK) of Aidan Dodson and the cataloguing of coffins in the minor collections of France by Alain Dautant.

It is obviously not possible here to cite all the projects, including those being undertaken by individual scholars, which contribute to the expanding horizon of coffin studies. The winning formula is however that of ever greater international collaboration, and that on a global scale with teamwork marked by regular meetings for honest comparisons.

The most recent studies have simply further underlined the complexity of the argument: '*The history of the central component of the funerary equipment has still to be written*'.⁴

Alessia Amenta
Vatican Museums

⁴ van Walsem, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

Introduction

In February 2013, the *Symposium Body, Cosmos and Eternity: the Symbolism of Coffins in Ancient Egypt* convened at the historical building of the University of Porto to debate conceptual frameworks underlying the contemporary study of Egyptian coffins. Egyptian tomb structures always revolved around two main sets of concerns: while intending to create a magical context for the protection of the corpse, they also aimed at the social and cosmic integration of the deceased. Rising from the close association with the depiction of the mummified body, the anthropoid coffins soon absorbed a rich mythological imaginary related to the constellation of Nut, the mother goddess of the sky supposed to give birth to Osiris, and evolved continuously, integrating larger and more complex sets of beliefs, mirroring the increasingly bolder use of coffins in the funerary rituals. It was this complex set of beliefs involving the coffin as body container and, at the same time, a microcosmos where the introduction of the deceased in the realm of eternity was minutiously depicted, that I proposed to explore in this series of *symposia*.

In spite of their archaeological importance, the study of Egyptian coffins has remained greatly overlooked during most part of the 20th century. Dr Andrzej Niwiński, Dr John Taylor and Dr René van Walsem figure amidst the first authors who began the scientific study of Egyptian coffins. Dr Andrzej Niwiński's remarkable contribution for the perception of the yellow coffins as an extremely valuable documentary corpus speaks for itself. His exhaustive inventory of objects showcases how the dispersion of the Egyptian antiquities by museums all over the world presents such serious problems for the systematic study of coffins. Dr John Taylor on the other hand has been focused on the coffins of the 22nd-25th Dynasties, thus broadening up quite significantly the documentary corpus undergoing systematic analysis. Last but not the least, Dr René van Walsem's views on the architectonisation of coffins have greatly contributed to reveal the importance of our conceptual framework to understand the development of coffin decoration in terms of a coherent system of information fully exploring the limits of its own complexity. His methodological procedures, based on consistent terminology and rhythm of description, provide a solid ground for the description of coffins.

These remarkable contributions have been the core of contemporary research on Egyptian coffins and became an important source of inspiration for the scientific community as a whole. During the last decades, studies on Egyptian coffins have known a considerable growth, particularly those concerning the publication of catalogues. Dr Alessia Amenta, who kindly accepted to write the 'Foreword' of this book, gifted us with an excellent overview of the new trends of research on coffin studies.

During the last decades, contributions from technical and socio-economic studies have paved the way to raise the awareness of the scientific community for the complexity of the social aspects revolving around coffin production. Having been responsible for the documentation and publication of the coffins of Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa (Eighth Lot of Bab el-Gasus) I realized how important it is for the future research on Egyptian coffins, particularly those dating to the 21st Dynasty, to ground the description of these objects on theoretical concepts. In fact, the discussion on the concepts and methods is crucial for the future of coffin studies.

The team involved in the first edition of the *symposium* included colleagues actively engaged in the exploration of these questions, as Dr Rune Nyord, Dr René van Walsem and Dr Kathlyn Cooney, each one developing new conceptual frameworks or methods for studying Egyptian coffins. On the other hand, the *symposium* also aimed at the presentation of studies on specific collections, objects or archaeological finds. Contributors such as Dr Alain Dautant and Dr Luís Manuel de Araújo presented studies on this field.

With the three editions of the *Symposium Body, Cosmos and Eternity* I do hope that it had contributed for the debate on iconography and symbolism of Egyptian coffins. The results of this experience encouraged me to go further ahead with an editorial project specifically concerned with this subject. The idea to create a publication specifically dedicated to the emerging trends of research in this particular area imposed itself quite naturally. With this goal in mind I have addressed to other colleagues working in this field of studies, inviting them to join our Project. Dr Éva Liptay, Dr Cássio de Araújo Duarte, Dr Cynthia May Sheikholeslami, Dr Jonathan Elias, Dr Carter Lupton, Dr Alexandra Küffer, Dr Anders Bettum and Elena Paganini gracefully accepted our invitation and contributed to this volume with studies that fully illustrate the diversity and vitality of contemporary research in this particular field of Egyptology.

Following our original purpose the studies of this volume are presented in two main parts. The first part is dedicated to the studies related to the symbolism or social significance inherent to the use of coffins, while the second part is dedicated to the studies on museums's collections, archaeological finds or coffins's description.

I am deeply indebted to all contributors who generously gave me the opportunity to publish the results of their research, as well as to the University of Porto and to CITCEM who gave me the financial and institutional support for the organization of the three editions of the *Symposium*. I am also grateful to Dr David Davison who supported this publication from the very first moment.

The editor,
Rogério Sousa